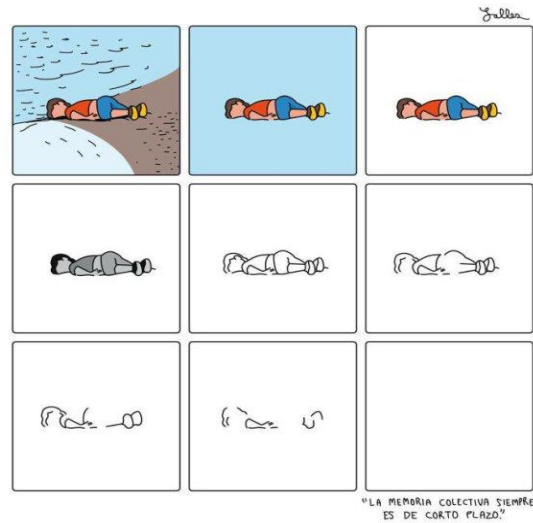


Rome, 18th July 2018



I recently saw this image on Twitter. There are few people, I think, who were not shocked by the original image of Alan Kurdi washed up on the shores of Turkey on 2nd September 2015. Yet the point made so succinctly by the cartoonist is that our collective memory fades quickly.

Were that not so, urgent efforts to create a coherent European migration policy might now be in evidence. Instead, yesterday, an equally distressing photograph on Twitter showed the bodies of a woman and child, fuel burns on the shoulders of the woman, found drowned by crew of Proactiva's *Open Arms*. The remains of a boat floated alongside them, as did Josefa, the sole survivor of the wreck. How did the boat come to be destroyed? Perhaps Josefa will be able to tell us, when she is finally permitted to set foot on dry land.



Everyone wants to stop deaths at sea. On the face of it, European countries recognise that the current approach to migration is not working, that Italy cannot shoulder the migration burden on its own and that reform is urgently needed. However, whilst member states wrangle over what that means in practice, the current Italian policy of closing ports and making it all but impossible for NGOs to carry out search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea is not stopping migrants from setting off from the shores of Africa. And so people continue to drown.

Statistics published this week by UNHCR and the Italian Ministry of the Interior<sup>1</sup> showed that the migrant “invasion” this year is five times smaller than in the same period (January – July) last year. The numbers coming have clearly reduced. However, the same data set shows that the number of dead and missing has actually doubled. This increase has occurred in a period when NGO boats have been impounded, NGO light aircraft used to locate boats in distress have been prevented from flying and the Libyan coastguard has acquired primary responsibility for co-ordinating SAR operations.

Not all Italians are comfortable with the current policies of the newly-formed government. Yesterday, outside the Ministry of the Interior, a silent flash mob stood with their hands aloft, hands painted red to symbolise the blood of those who continue to die at sea, blood which, it is suggested, is now on the hands of the government.



The default policy is that the Italian ports are closed to rescue boats. Perhaps surprising, then, that an offer was made for the *Open Arms* to disembark Josefa in Catania. Instead, the *Open Arms* is heading for Palma de Mallorca, a decision which the Minister of the Interior has suggested points to the NGO having “something to hide”. An alternative possibility is that Josefa has “something to tell” and that, in the current hostile climate, the NGO considers it safer all round for the *Open Arms* to head for a Spanish rather than an Italian port.

As matters stand, we do not have a functioning system for rescuing, disembarking and settling migrants across Europe. Instead, we appear to have a climate of hostility and mistrust, where collaboration has been replaced by accusation. What has happened to our collective memory of the little boy washed up on the shore who inspired so many to say that this should never happen again?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/64765.pdf>