Lampedusa Mayor Giusy Nicolini, SOS Mediterranee Win Unesco Prize

Judith Harris (April 19, 2017)



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ROME -- The UNESCO Houphouet-Boigny Prize for peace research went April 19 to Giusy Nicolini, mayor of the isle of Lampedusa, for her work in saving the lives of countless refugees and migrants. "Since she was elected in 2012, Nicolini has distinguished herself for her sense of humanity and her constant commitment in managing the refugee crisis and in their integration after the arrival of thousands on Lampedusa and elsewhere in Italy," said the jury motivation.

"To be awarded a prize with this motivation," she said in receiving the award, "gives us hope for solidarity in Europe, where a sense of humanity has not disappeared, even though this is a moment when borders are being closed and walls raised as people speak of an invasion that does not exist. In that way we ourselves are at risk of drowning together with the refugees and migrants who try to cross the Mediterranean Sea." Mayor Nicolini dedicated the prize to Gabriele del Grande, the brilliant

Italian journalist and film director who has been brutally imprisoned in Mugla, Turkey, for having interviewed Syrian migrants on the border there. Del Grande is still detained by Turkish police and at present is conducting a hunger strike.

Mayor Nicolini also had words of praise for Pope Francis, who made a pastoral visit to Lampedusa in July 2013 and placed wreaths in the water to honor those who had died. "He is the only one with clear ideas," said Nicolini on Rai Radio 3. "I hope that his teachings will illuminate the minds of the governers and of those Europeans who are to be voting shortly."

Mayor Nicolini shares the prestigious award with SOS Mediterranee, the European association which works to assist the needy in the Mediterranean Sea. Previous winners of the Prize, which was created in 1989, include, for their efforts in seeking peaceful solutions to crises, Nelson Mandela, Shimon Peres, Yasser Arafat and Francois Hollande.

One of those migrants who drowned en route to the northern shores of the Mediterranean was Hamedu Baji of the Gambia. The eldest child of a blind man, he was a gifted soccer player but, after graduating from high school, could find no job at home, yet had to support his family. As a result he set out across the Sahara desert for Libya. After two months he was able to find a boat to cross the sea in hopes of finding work, but en route he and two companions drowned. He was not alone: during Easter week at least 663 refugees and migrants drowned, mostly when their rickety rubber boats -- which have a limited life span in the best of times -- sank during the crossing, mainly from ports in Libya and elsewhere in North Africa.

Hamedu was a victim of the fair weather of the Easter week, which brought an upsurge of frail boats into the Mediterranean, with 5,000 arrivals over the holiday period. This brings the total arrivals during the first four months this year to around 27,000 -- 24% more than during the same period in 2016. Among them were at least 2,300 unaccompanied minors. According to the Ismu Foundation, which studies multi-ethnic issues, 176,470 recent migrants are now living in temporary quarters in Italy. Of these, some 121,000 have formally requested asylum, up 46% over 2015.

Clandestine immigration remains illegal. On April 12 the Italian Chamber of Deputies passed a new law, 240 to 176, which creates Centri di permanenza per il rimpatrio (Reception Centers for Repatriation), The new detention centers, one for every Italian region, are to be located relatively far f from large cities and town, and intentionally near transportation services so as to facilitate the return of undesired migrants to their homelands. (This requirement is not facilitated by the fact that many arrivals lack documentation showing their country of origin, in part because the traffickers steal their documents.) Those migrants accepted for asylum can, if willing, work without pay in "jobs of public usefulness," according to the new law.

The law creating detention centers has been widely criticized, however. A spokeman for the Italian branch of Caritas, Oliviero Forti, called it "a step backward" for weakening the level of protection for those legitimately seeking asylum. In the Senate, a bill was also introduced that would create channels for the regular entry for foreigners and which would allow legal migrants the right to vote in administrative elections. Promoting that bill is Emma Bonino, Italy's former foreign secretary and today the leader of the Radical Party. In an address to the Partito Democratico (PD) meeting in Turin March 16, Bonino said that "the migrants are a resource" and what is needed to deal with the problem are "original ideas."

Radical Party Secretary Riccardo Magi points out that those, like the vice president of the Chamber of deputies, Luigi Di Maio, who conflate immigration and crime, "would do better to document themselves on the facts: recent studies show that legal migrants in Italy are no more likely than Italians themselves to be involved in criminal activities."

On Wednesday a campaign was launched called "Ero straniero -- L'umanità che fa bene" (I was a stranger -- Humanity that does good), promoted by Oxfam Italy and a coalition of Italian mayors and citizen and church groups. "Ours is a battle for civilization," was one comment. "If we lose the values of our history, we will move backward 500 years. Accepting migrants is to respect humanity and human rights."

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