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## **ITALY SAYS CATHOLIC CHURCH, ALBANIA AND IRELAND WILL ACCEPT STRANDED MIGRANTS**

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South China Morning Post (26 August 2018)

Catholic bishops, tiny Albania and Ireland agreed to take the 140 migrants blocked aboard an Italian coastguard vessel, Premier Giuseppe Conte said on Saturday, announcing the end of 10-day stand-off over the asylum seekers but making clear an angry Italy could avenge a perceived lack of overall European Union solidarity by refusing to approve the blocs next multi-year budget.

In his role as head of a nearly three-month-old populist coalition government, Conte said Italy under current conditions doesnt consider it possible to express adhesion to a proposed budget that underpins a policy so incoherent on the social level.

Earlier in the week, some in the government threatened to withhold nearly 20 billion euros (US\$23 billion) in contributions to the EU if member nations did not volunteer to take the last group of rescued migrants reaching Italy.

Brussels sharply reminded Italy it was legally obliged to pay.

Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, who leads the anti-migrant League party, refused to let the migrants off the coastguard vessel Diciotti until other EU nations pledged to take the asylum seekers, most of them young men from Eritrea.

Just before Conte announced the dramas resolution, Salvini told party supporters at a rally in northern Italy that a Sicily-based prosecutor, Luigi Patronaggio, had put him under investigation for suspected abduction for refusing to let the migrants disembark.

If the prosecutor wants to interrogate me or even arrest me because I defend the borders and security of my country, Im proud of it, Salvini tweeted. Many of his supporters blame migrants for crime.

Earlier in the week, the governments rights office for detained persons concluded this week that the migrants were being unjustly held by the government.

Salvini took credit for convincing bishops to take many of the migrants. The bishops agreed to open up their doors, heart and wallet, he told the rally.

Fifty others of the 190 people rescued at sea on August 16 by the Italian coastguard were previously allowed off the ship, including all the minors and ailing adults.

A few hours before Contes announcement, Italian Red Cross ambulances waiting at dockside took

away six ill men, suspected of having tuberculosis, pneumonia or other infections, and seven of the 11 women who were still aboard.

Authorities had said the women recounted how they had been raped while in Libya for months, awaiting the opportunity to leave in migrant smugglers boats.

Four other women chose not to leave the ship because their husbands were blocked aboard.

The stand-off had prompted an impassioned appeal at the height of the stand-off Saturday by the UN refugee agencies chief, who asked Italy to let the migrants disembark and urged EU countries to take responsibility for the asylum seekers.

In Geneva, UN. High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said its time to end a race to the bottom on who can take the least responsibility for people rescued at sea.

He urged European countries to do the right thing and offer places of asylum for people rescued from the Mediterranean Sea in their time of need.

Foreign Minister Enzo Moavero Milanesi expressed appreciation for Albanias sign of great solidarity and friendship, his ministry said.

Albania, which is not in the European Union, saw thousands of its citizens flee to Italy across the Adriatic Sea aboard dramatically overcrowded rickety ferries and fishing boats in hopes of a better life in the 1990s.

Irelands foreign minister, Simon Coveney, confirmed the government had agreed to accept 20 to 25 migrants.

European solidarity is important and this is the right thing to do, the Irish minister said on Twitter.

Meanwhile, Sicily-based prosecutors took their investigation of the migrant stand-off to Rome. Prosecutor Patronaggio left without speaking to reporters after questioning two Interior Ministry officials at the Italian capitals prosecutors office, the Italian news agency ANSA said.

Prosecutors would have to seek permission from a special panel to question Salvini. As a lawmaker, Salvini also holds immunity from prosecution that could only be lifted by fellow lawmakers.

Italian Red Cross official Stefano Principato in Catania told reporters that Italys health minister had ordered an inspection of sanitary conditions for the migrants, who have been sleeping on the ships deck and coping with a baking sun and limited toilet facilities.

Doctors have said many of the migrants on the ship have scabies but more than a health emergency, it would be better to speak of a psychological emergency, Principato said.

Salvini has taken full responsibility for his ministrys actions and said any charges should be levelled against him personally, challenging the prosecutor to arrest him.

Separately, a group of charities appealed to a Catania administrative court on Saturday to order the migrants to be urgently disembarked.

The 5-Star Movement, the Leagues coalition partner, has so far backed Salvinis hard line, and its

Transport Minister Danilo Toninelli, who is responsible for the countrys ports, renewed the governments attacks on the EU.

Nobody can give lessons to Italy on its humanitarian efforts, he said. The government is only asking the EU give some sense to its own existence.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/2161366/sick-migrants-disembark-stranded-italian-boat-matteo-salvini>

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