Overfishing, the EU and boat refugees from Africa

Wednesday 16 January 2008: 11.00 by Helena Fort Europe. The gates are closing for (illegal) migrants (and refugees) who are trying to enter the EU using a variety of routes. We can of course close the ports of Europe in order to try and stop the many boat refugees who are trying to enter the EU countries, but this would be very inconsequent. You have probably heard the stories about the boat refugees from Africa who are trying to reach the Canary Islands, and for instance Malta or other countries. Unfortunately many people who undertake such journeys do not live to tell about it.

The EU is an accomplice of this course of events. As: we are dumping our subsidized agricultural products cheaply in other countries. One of the consequences is that farmers in particular are starving. Especially the African farmers are facing a difficult situation.

It also appears that - after we have depleted the fish in our own waters - we are now also emptying the African waters. This has been known for a longer time. But one of the consequences of this overfishing is that the African fishermen have nothing left but empty nets. And this means that these people have no income anymore. This results in, as you will probably guess: boat refugees who are looking for shelter in the EU.

I read an interesting article on this issue in the New York Times this week.

*Europe Takes Africa’s Fish, and Boatloads of Migrants Follow*

Over the past few years the fish population in Africa has seriously decreased. Overfishing is caused for the largest part by large, industrial fish trawlers from Europe which empty the waters in Africa by overfishing them. Because of decreased catches local fishermen have insufficient income to live on, so that a number of fishermen have moved elsewhere, and in a number of cases this means to Europe. The temptations of Europe have clearly increased as the fish population decreased. In the ‘small wooden boats’ which are well-known by now people are trying to reach Europe. In 2006 almost 31,000 Africans tried to reach the Canary Islands, in more than 900 boats. About 6,000 people died or have gone missing, according to the estimates of the UN.
By the way, I have not found an analysis of the numbers of boat refugees in the past years. From an article on the website of the World Channel it appears that the number of immigrants from Africa who tried to reach Europe decreased in 2007. The flow of boat refugees to the Canary Islands decreased by 60% in the first half of 2007. This was caused by the stricter control measures at the outer limits of the EU. It is a pity that this is not mentioned in the article in the New York Times. We will go into this more deeply later.

Ale Nodye from Senegal tells us that, in the past six years, he has barely caught enough fish in his nets to pay for the fuel for his boat. He started looking for other means of livelihood and became a captain of a small wooden boat with 87 Africans in order to make the journey to the Canary Islands. The journey was made in 2006. Unfortunately he and his passengers were arrested. His cousin died a little later, when he made a similar ‘trip’. Ale Nodye says is that he will make another attempt next time. Ale Nodye thinks that he could be a fisherman in Europe. ‘Life is better there. Here there is no fish left in the sea.’

In the article the situation in several countries is described (Senegal, Mauritania and Guinea-Bissau). The examples show that there is illegal fishing, insufficient inspection of the fishing, governments who are tempted to accept big money (the EU pays a lot of money for the heavily subsidized fishing vessels from Europe that are used to empty the waters in Africa), and insufficient attention for the interests of their own fishermen.

Not only the fishermen face the negative consequences of emptying the waters. The inhabitants themselves, who are dependent on fish as the most important source of protein, are facing the consequences. Some types of fish are so scarce now that the people with the lowest incomes can no longer afford them.

There has not been much development since the EU signed its first fishing agreement with a West-African country in 1979. The great economical advantages of processing and exporting catches remain primarily in European hands.

African governments spend development funds in the wrong way or they spend it on the most urgent needs, while the European people sometimes only commit themselves to promised projects. The harbour of Noudadhibou (Mauritania) for example, remains full of 107 ship wrecks eight years after the EU promised to clean the harbour and to remove the ships in order to help to develop the harbour.

Guinea-Bissau, a country with 1.4 million inhabitants, is an example of how things can go wrong. None has ever conducted an extensive research on the coastal waters in this country in the past 20 years. Sanji Fati extracted the enforcement of the fishing rules during the past two years.

When he accepted the job, there was no patrol ship to monitor the hundreds of pirogues and the many industrial trawlers, mostly of foreign origin. About 40% of the fish was caught without permits or breaking certain rules, and ship owners have consistently lied about their catches. Government observers were mostly illiterate, underpaid and easy to bribe. Mr. Fati has put more pressure on them, but he felt as ‘if he was waging a one-man war.’

Several months ago he quit his job. This gloomy picture has not stopped Guinea-Bissau and the EU from signing an agreement in May.

European boats are allowed to fish for shrimps, octopuses and tuna. In the next four years the agreement will pump 42 million dollars into a government that is months behind in paying salaries and is still recovering from a civil war.
Daniel Gomes, Minister of Fishing, is asked if his country will eventually be confronted with empty waters, to which he says: “This prospect is not out of the question. This could happen.” However, in Senegal an attempt is made to turn the tide. For the greatest part on the initiative of fishing communities, local coastal fishing as well as the trawlers will be better regulated. In the town of Kayar, the second fishing city of Senegal, an exclusive zone has been reserved for its own coastal fishing.

Senegalese civil servants are also offered negotiation training by organizations such as the WNF, so that they are better prepared to face the EU, which wants to conclude a new fishing agreement. Unfortunately this positive news is not mentioned in the article in the New York Times.

EU inhibits development in African countries through administrative procedures

It would be much better for developing countries if they could process and export much more fish themselves. But the European Union does not make things easy for them, in spite of agreements on paper to stimulate the foreign trade of developing countries.

Take for example the tuna factory on the Seychelles. 15 percent of the canned tuna that is imported by the EU comes from this factory. The Seychelles have their own tuna fleet, but the factory only buys tuna from European fishing boats.

The domestic tuna fleet does not comply with the exceptionally complex administrative ‘rules of origin’ of the EU for export from developing countries. Sad, but it gets even crazier. The Seychelles are not allowed to export swordfish to the European Union.

This is related to the extent of cadmium in swordfish. It is not dangerous, but it is higher than the EU’s established maximum for imported fish. The same swordfish, caught off the coast of the Seychelles under the flag of the EU, is allowed to enter Europe without any problems.

Fort Europe

Therefore it is clear that the EU is co-responsible for the fact that it gets more and more difficult for a number of African inhabitants to earn a decent income. Apart from that, the EU appears to be creating a fort. I have found more information about this issue in the earlier quoted article (of August 15 2007) of the World Channel: Asylum seekers suffer because of migration patrols.

The European external borders are guarded more strictly by joint sea and air patrols. Moreover, it appears that where Spain used to have a flexible admittance policy earlier, much harsher demands are made nowadays. These demands make it possible for Madrid to send boat refugees back to their countries. Spain now sends back a considerably larger amount of illegal immigrants than it did in the past years. This also applies to Italy, which has concluded a similar agreement with Libya.
As a result of the more precise monitoring and the stricter admission policies people take increasingly greater risks in order to reach Europe. As a result thousands of people drown or die of dehydration. Europe cannot really provide a solution for this humanitarian disaster. The only thing that Europe does agree on is closing off Europe. Or so claims Mr. Wijn of Refugee Work in the Netherlands in the earlier quoted article on the website of the World Channel.

This depressing picture is emphasized in another article: *Europe killing thousands of African boat people* (28 December 2007) where Europe is blamed for the number of people who die as boat refugees. According to the Aid Organizations thousands of West-African refugees perish because of the stricter border control. It is said that only 12,000 people have reached the Canary Islands from West-Africa. This fact shows that more refugees have drowned or died because of hunger or lack of fluid, as the ‘journey’ to the Canary Islands in rickety boats has become more dangerous and longer because of the patrols carried out by the EU (through Frontex). According to the writer of the article less boat refugees arrived on the Canary Islands in 2007 as compared to 2006.

Another consequence of the patrols and the stricter admittance rules is that some political refugees are unable to qualify for asylum, because they are sent back right away, without being ‘heard’. Refugee organizations believe that by extending the outer European border in the direction of Africa, a kind of buffer zone is created in North-Africa, where refugees are more or less birds of prey. An example is 400 refugees in Morocco who received the refugee status by the UN. “However, Morocco, which has signed the refugee treaty, does not provide them with the required papers. And so they are temporarily sent back to Algeria, sometimes under dire circumstances.” Or so I read in the article of the World Channel.

Overall, the EU itself and countries in the EU use continually stricter criteria for the admittance of refugees and migrants. A number of migrants are sent back and the borders are guarded more strictly. Only migrants useful to the economy, are said to be admitted to the EU countries. These are the so-called ‘Green Cards’, which are becoming more and more popular in the EU. Is this a solution for the ‘economical’ and political refugees in Africa? It seems to me that a great deal has to happen for this to be the case.

It would be interesting to investigate how many migrants from Africa are making attempts or have made attempts to reach the EU over the past years and how many of these migrants have in fact arrived in the EU. Where did they end up? It should also be investigated how many people did not survive the journey. Figures are available, but they are based on estimates. The reasons for leaving should be investigated. What are the push and pull factors? Also, a thorough analysis will have to be made of the executed development policy of for instance the EU in Africa and of the economical development of Africa. The position of the fishermen and the farmers in the African countries will have to be outlined as well. The role of the EU will have to be questioned too. In short, an investigation will have to be conducted which will provide more insight into the question how various factors can influence each other. To start with, this investigation could be limited to the countries in West-Africa.

Source:
http://www.vkblog.nl/bericht/178609/Overbevissing,_de_EU_en_bootvluchtelingen_uit_Afrika