

More than 130 dead after boat capsizes off the southern Italian island of Lampedusa

By Robert Stevens
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Hundreds are feared dead after a boat capsized off the southern Italian island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean Thursday morning.

The vessel was carrying as many as 500 migrants from Africa when it sank. Possibly hundreds more are feared to have perished, as only around 159 people were saved. Around 250 people remained unaccounted for by Thursday afternoon, hours after the ship sank. As the death toll passed 80, it was reported that more than 100 people still were in the water.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees spokesman Laurens Jolles said that the boat had set off from Libya and many of those on board were migrants from Eritrea.

The massive death toll follows that of 13 migrants who drowned while trying to reach Sicily earlier in the week.

According to various reports, a fire broke out on board before the boat sank about half a mile from Lampedusa. The *Times of Malta* stated, “It is understood that the blaze started when those on board lit a fire as a beacon to attract attention after their satellite phone failed.”

Britain’s *Channel 4 News* cited the Lampedusa mayor, Giusi Nicolini, stating that those onboard tried to get the attention of coast guards after the ship suffered engine failure.

Simona Moscarelli, from the International Migration Organisation in Rome, told the BBC that “at one point there was a fire on the boat and so the migrants moved, all of them, to one side of the boat which capsized.”

At around 7:20 a.m., a nearby fishing boat began to rescue people. Antonino Candela, a local emergency medical worker, told Reuters, “The first assistance was provided by people on pleasure boats who heard the screams.”

The official rescue team was initially reported to include four coast guard and police boats, as well as two police helicopters.

As the bodies were being recovered, they were laid out on the beach and harbour. Mayor Nicolini commented, “It’s horrific, like a cemetery, they are still bringing them out. The survivors are in a state of shock. They have been in the water since the early hours of the morning.”

Pietro Bartolo, a local doctor speaking to the Italian news agency ANSA, said, “This is a tragedy without precedent. In many years of work here I have never seen anything like this. We don’t need ambulances unfortunately, we need hearses. There are still hundreds missing.”

The *Daily Telegraph* reported, “The bodies of those who drowned have been taken to a hangar at the local airport because there is no more room in the local morgue on the remote southern Italian island, which has a population of around 6,000.”

Around 500 people were crammed onto a vessel reportedly just 20 metres (66 feet) in length. The ANSA agency spoke to one survivor, who said, “We left two days ago from the Libyan port of Misrata. We were 500 on that boat, we could hardly move. Three fishing boats spotted us during the crossing but did not rescue us.”

Over the last decade, many migrants and asylum seekers have died taking the same crossing from northern and western Africa to the southern coast of Italy, a key entry point to the European Union. Lampedusa is often the first port of call, as it is the closest Italian island to Africa. Since it is less than 115 kilometres (70 miles) from Tunisia, more than 200,000 migrants and refugees have passed through the island since 1999.

In the first six months of 2013, up to 8,000 Eritreans made the journey to Italy's southern shores, with a reported 40 having died on the way. This is the estimate of the United Nations refugee agency, and, since it is based solely on interviews with survivors of the crossing, the real figure is likely much larger.

On July 28, 31 of 53 passengers drowned when their boat capsized on the crossing from Libya to Lampedusa. Nine of the dead were women. The 22 people rescued were from several West African countries, including Nigeria, Benin, the Gambia and Senegal.

On August 11, six young Egyptians drowned while trying to swim 20 metres from a wooden fishing boat off the Lido Verde resort in Sicily. The victims were among more than 100 migrants who were travelling from Egypt and Syria when their boat ran aground on a sandbar.

Over the past months, there has been a vast increase in the numbers of asylum seekers attempting to enter Europe via this route. Many have fled in desperate attempts to escape persecution, civil war and a life of poverty. In a 40-day period during July and August of this year, the number of migrants doubled. According to the Italian interior minister, 8,932 migrants arrived between July 1 and August 10, with the total number of migrant arrivals for 2013 now standing at 17,167.

According to the United Against Racism web site, a total of 17,306 asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented immigrants died attempting to set foot in Europe between 1993 and the end of last year.

The US- and British-backed civil war in Syria has resulted in a mass influx of migrants attempting to enter Europe via Italy. On September 28, the Italian *La Stampa* newspaper reported, "Since the beginning of the year, 6,000 Syrians have arrived on Italy's Sicilian coast. Five hundred arrived last Friday afternoon in the town of Syracuse. One woman died during the voyage."

The newspaper reported that refugees from African countries are placed into refugee centres upon their arrival in Lampedusa, while Syrian refugees are sent to other camps on the main island of Sicily. In Trapani, "more than 100 migrants have been placed in a municipal gym, while in another town, Porto Palo, they are in the former fish market."

The Italian government moved rapidly to direct any

responsibility for the tragedy away from itself. Within hours, Italian foreign minister Emma Bonino said, "There is no miraculous solution to the migrant exodus issue. If there were, we would have found it and put it into action."

On Wednesday, a draft report [<http://website-pace.net/documents/19863/168397/2013-1002-RptMixedMigratoryFlows-EN.pdf/426bce45-1258-4773-b961-be69c5bb0f75>] from the Council of Europe human rights body said that Italy was "ill-prepared for a new surge of mixed migration on its coasts." It stated that the Italian government's system for receiving and processing migrants and asylum seekers is not fit for that purpose.

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