

Hundreds dead as refugee boat sinks in Mediterranean

By Martin Kreickenbaum
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Up to 700 refugees were on board a fishing boat that capsized 15 nautical miles off the Libyan coast on Wednesday. More than 200 are feared drowned. According to the Italian coast guard, around 400 people were rescued, while 26 bodies were recovered from the sea so far. One hundred refugees were below deck at the time and likely went down with the ship.

The small, overloaded fishing boat was caught in heavy seas and sent out a Mayday call. When the Irish coastguard ship LE subsequently approached the boat, several refugees apparently rushed to one side of the boat, causing it to capsize.

“It was a horrific sight,” said Juan Matias, coordinator of Doctors without Borders who was on the ship Dignity I, which also came to the assistance of the refugees. “People desperately clutching life belts, boats and anything, fighting for their lives among the drowning and those who were already dead.”

Dignity I received the call from the coastguard just as it was saving 100 refugees from another fishing boat that was in difficulty. “The fact that we were first called to assist this boat and then shortly afterwards sent to another one highlights the severe lack of resources available for rescue operations,” said Matias.

Wednesday’s tragedy was the first such mass drowning since 1,200 refugees lost their lives in a series of boat sinkings in April, prompting the EU to step up patrols on the Mediterranean and threaten air strikes against refugee boats before they left the Libyan coast.

Some 224,000 refugees have crossed the Mediterranean to Europe this year, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees announced Thursday. Italy has registered 97,000 boat refugees and Greece 91,000. One in three refugees traveling by boat comes from Syria, with other main countries of origin

including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia and Nigeria.

The death toll among those people desperately trying to reach Europe is shocking. On Tuesday, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) stated in Geneva that more than 2,000 refugees have lost their lives trying to reach Europe since the beginning of the year.

According to IOM, these figures confirm that “the route across the Mediterranean is the most deadly for migrants,” a development which has intensified over the last six months. In 2014, the attempt to seek protection in Europe from persecution and poverty cost 3,279 refugees their lives.

“It is unacceptable that in the 21st century people fleeing from conflict, persecution, misery and land degradation must endure such terrible experiences in their home countries, not to mention en route, and then die on Europe’s doorstep,” said IOM Director General William Lacy Swing.

Terrible incidents take place almost daily on the main route across the Mediterranean from Libya to Italy. On July 29, 14 refugees arrived dead in the Sicilian port of Messina, on a ship with 456 survivors. On August 1, a rescue ship from Doctors without Borders discovered five bodies on board a boat transporting 120 refugees.

The loss of life in the Mediterranean is not merely a tragic event, but a crime. The imperialist powers in Europe and the United States bear responsibility for the mass deaths of refugees at sea.

The number of refugees has dramatically increased over the past three years, according to calculations by the UN agency for refugees. Almost 60 million people were on the move in 2014, 40 percent more than in 2011.

The Syrian civil war, which was triggered by the United States and its Arab allies in 2011, and is still

raging, has driven more than 3.5 million people over the border. An additional 7.5 million people within Syria have fled their homes.

The NATO-led war against the Gaddafi regime in Libya, which began almost simultaneously, turned more than 1 million people into refugees. A further 500,000 refugees from Syria, Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia are marooned on the Libyan coast, which is now under the control of rival militias, desperately hoping for a place on a boat to Europe.

Hundreds of thousands were forced from their homes as a result of the imperialist wars and subsequent famine crises in the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia). The US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had disastrous consequences for the populations of both countries. In Yemen, the US-aligned Saudi Arabian regime's bombing raids on the country, using US supplied weapons, together with Washington's drone war, have forced countless people to flee.

In addition, there are numerous Palestinian refugees who lost their livelihoods in the Israeli war in the Gaza Strip and are effectively imprisoned by the closure of the border by the Israeli government, on one side, and the Egyptian military dictatorship on the other.

In western and central Africa, it is above all the neo-colonial policies of the European powers that have forced thousands to flee from Mali, Mauritania, Central African Republic, Niger and Chad in the face of wars and the plundering of these countries by European companies.

The European Union has responded to this humanitarian catastrophe by pulling up the drawbridge and expanding fortress Europe. The deaths of refugees on the EU's external borders are meant to serve as a deterrent.

In Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, and in the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, barriers several metres tall with razor-sharp spikes have been constructed to guard against refugees. In November 2013, the EU began the Eurosur programme for the surveillance of the Mediterranean with drones, satellites and reconnaissance aircraft.

Under pressure from the German government, the military mission conducted by the Italian government, which used warships to search for refugees throughout the Mediterranean, sending them back to Libya, was incorporated into Operation Triton, run by the EU

border agency Frontex. The EU states cynically declared that the Italian mission, known as Mare Nostrum, had encouraged too many refugees to travel to Europe.

In response to the two tragedies in April this year, the EU sent additional warships to the Mediterranean. However, these ships were not primarily to focus on rescuing refugees from the sea, but to wage war against "smugglers" as part of the EUNAVFOR Med mission and destroy refugee boats. In addition, measures were agreed to accelerate the process of deporting refugees back to Africa and the crisis regions of the Middle East.

At the same time, the fight against the "root causes" of migration, proclaimed by the EU, has been revealed as an effort to arm dictatorial regimes in Africa so that they could more effectively prevent their populations from fleeing. The German television programme Monitor reported that Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan and Egypt have been integrated more closely into the EU border management system through the training of their soldiers.

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