

Capsized boats in Mediterranean leave 240 refugees dead

By Martin Kreickenbaum
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Two refugee boats capsized this week in the Mediterranean near the Libyan coast, leading to the deaths in a 48-hour period of about 240 people. This brings the total number of refugees who have died trying to cross the Mediterranean and reach Europe to 4,220, more than ever before in a six-month period. The European Union bears full, criminal responsibility for this massive loss of life.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, 31 refugees were rescued in the most recent incident. Statements made by the survivors indicate there were approximately 270 people on board the two dinghies. So far only 12 bodies have been recovered.

The two dinghies departed not far from the Libyan capital of Tripoli on Tuesday night. A few hours later, they capsized in the channel of Sicily, about 25 nautical miles from the Libyan coast. The rescue operation coordinated by the Italian coast guard, which included five ships, came too late to save most of the passengers.

Two severely injured people who survived the capsizing were transported by helicopter to Palermo, Sicily. The other survivors, most of whom came from Guinea in West Africa, were taken to the island of Lampedusa. A heartrending scene unfolded there, as reported by Pietro Bartolo, a doctor, in *Repubblica*, the Italian newspaper. At one point a desperate survivor showed Bartolo the photo of his child who was nowhere to be found after the disaster.

The mayor of Lampedusa, Giusi Nicolini, called the deaths “genocide.” “Humanitarian corridors must be set up immediately or else we will never stop counting the dead,” he said.

This most recent refugee catastrophe follows on the heels of a series of incidents in the central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy over the past few weeks. On October 27, a Danish merchant ship rescued 339 refugees from the sea. They had been tossed into the

water when their dinghy capsized due to bad weather. Fifty-one refugees are missing from this episode, and only one corpse was recovered from the water.

On the night before that disaster, the Libyan coast guard reported that a dinghy with 126 refugees on board capsized 23 nautical miles from Tripoli, not far from the location of the most recent tragedy. A coast guard ship rescued 29 survivors, but an additional 97 refugees remained missing.

At almost the same time, a ship belonging to the aid organization Doctors without Borders (MSF) discovered a dinghy with 29 dead bodies on board. They had all succumbed to petrol vapours. Only three days later, the Libyan Red Cross reported that 16 corpses had washed up on the coast of Zuwarah in northwestern Libya.

With two months to go, the deaths of 4,220 people trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2016 are already a horrifying record. In the course of the previous two years, a total of 3,279 refugees drowned in the Mediterranean, according to statements by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The Mediterranean route has produced the highest number of refugee fatalities by far. The IOM estimates that more than 5,530 refugees have died worldwide so far this year. Some 299 refugees have died on the US-Mexico border, 149 have died in Central America, 435 in the Sahara and North Africa, 94 in the horn of Africa, 96 in the Middle East and 61 in Southeast Asia.

It is striking that the number of fatalities in the Mediterranean has risen so dramatically even though a smaller number of refugees has taken this route this year. Last year, over a million travelled to Europe, compared to only 340,000 this year.

The deaths are taking place in the central Mediterranean even though the European Union and NATO have enormously increased the number of ships in the sea. In fact, however, these ships are not responsible for rescuing

refugees, but for keeping them out of Europe.

In October 2014, the European Union made a conscious decision to accept an increase in the number of deaths in order to deter refugees. With the blocking off of the Balkan route earlier this year, the refugee deal with Turkey and the so-called “war on traffickers,” the EU has drastically and deliberately increased the risks for refugees.

A study titled “Destination Europe,” from the MEDMIG (Mediterranean Migration) project, released November 2, noted that “Since the beginning of 2016 the rates of death have increased from 1 in 54 to 1 in 46 people among those crossing via the Central Mediterranean route and from 1 death in every 1,063 arrivals to 1 death in every 409 arrivals via the Eastern Mediterranean route.”

Another of the group’s research papers alleges that “European governments have contributed to the European ‘migration crisis’ by blaming people smugglers, rather than conflict, for increased migration to Europe. The failure to open up safe and legal routes to protection and the focus on border security has actually driven demand for the smugglers.”

In previous years traffickers used discarded merchant and fishing boats with satellite telephone and GPS equipment. Today, in order to avoid detection by stepped up surveillance, they rely almost exclusively on dinghies that are not suited to maritime conditions. In addition, according to the report, traffickers were now “looking for alternative routes” or sending “boats onto the water at night when they were less likely to be detected and also to be rescued.”

Meanwhile, the European Union is strengthening its military presence on its outer borders. At the beginning of October, the new European Border and Coast Guard Agency, which replaced Frontex, was deployed. The new agency not only has more extensive refugee deterrence and deportation powers than Frontex. It is also has significantly more personnel and supplies at its disposal, including over 1,500 permanently deployable border soldiers, its own ships, airplanes and helicopters, and a yearly budget of €330 million (\$US 367 million).

The response of EU Commissioner for Migration, Dimitris Avramopoulos, to the deaths of 4,220 refugees dripped with cynicism. Speaking to the news media at the opening of the Bulgarian-Turkish checkpoint Kapitan Andreevo, he called the agency a “symbol of a Europe that is efficient in addressing the migration and security challenges we are facing in cooperation with our

neighbours. A symbol that we are determined to preserve our freedom of movement, without internal borders.”

Avramopoulos thanked the employees of Frontex: “Throughout all these months of the ongoing refugee crisis, these people have been working tirelessly and it is thanks to them that today we are in a much better situation than one year ago.” He ended his speech with a barely concealed threat to the refugees: “It is now our duty and responsibility for those who arrive at our borders to keep delivering in the same vein on all aspects of our comprehensive migration policy.”

The European Union is cooperating ever more closely with North African countries to stop the flow of refugees before they even reach the coast of the Mediterranean.

In Tunisia, the German federal police is training border guards. The *Zeit* reported that the Tunisian forces were being supplied with trucks, pick-ups, speedboats, trailers with lamp posts for watching the border at night, thousands of combat helmets and flak jackets, hundreds of protective barriers and telescopes, dozens of thermal imaging cameras and night-vision devices, and, in the near future, Dingo armoured vehicles.

In order to keep out refugees, the EU also supports dictatorships in Sudan and Ethiopia, where a state of emergency was recently declared. For European weapons companies, refugee deterrence has become a billion-euro business in which above all Airbus, Leonardo-Finmeccanica and Thales have muscled in to provide thermal imaging cameras, drones and helicopters.

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