

Hundreds of migrants drown in Mediterranean

By Bill Van Auken
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More than 200 migrants are believed to have died trying to cross the Mediterranean last weekend, according to the UNHCR, the United Nations refugee organization. They are feared to have drowned when the rubber boats into which they were packed by smugglers deflated and sank.

A group of seven survivors picked up by the Libyan coastguard reported that they were the only ones left from a boat crowded with 170 people. Another 60 are believed to have drowned after a second boat carrying at least 120 migrants sunk on Saturday.

The bodies of some of the dead have washed ashore west of the Libyan capital of Tripoli. Mohanad Krima, a spokesman for the Red Crescent in Zawiyah, about 30 kilometers west of Tripoli, reported that 11 bodies had been found on the beaches there.

“All the bodies are of female victims and there is a girl of less than one year old,” he said.

Even before these latest tragedies, the UNHCR reported that more than 1,150 people had died or disappeared trying to make the treacherous crossing from North Africa to southern Italy so far this year.

The UN agency reported Sunday that more than 43,000 migrants have managed to reach Italy so far this year, a 30 percent increase over the same period in 2016. UNHCR Chief Filippo Grandi said that based on these statistics, one out of every 35 people attempting to make the crossing dies. The real death toll, however, is undoubtedly far higher.

The recent surge in the number of people attempting to make the deadly crossing is tied in part to the onset of warmer weather. A far greater role, however, has been played by the right-wing anti-immigrant policies being pursued by capitalist governments throughout Europe.

The sea route from northern Africa to Italy is the

most deadly crossing for immigrants anywhere in the world, having turned the Mediterranean into a watery graveyard for countless thousands. It has become, however, virtually the only option for those trying to reach Europe, many of them seeking not only to escape the horrors wrought by imperialism in their homelands, but also to unite with family members already in Europe. More than 90 percent of refugees attempting to reach Europe are now departing from Libya. More than 5,000 of them died in the Mediterranean last year, according to official figures.

The EU has worked to erect a “Fortress Europe,” sealing off its external borders on the so-called Balkan route with barbed wire fences, erecting detention camps to lock up refugees, and carrying out mass deportations. It has also reached a shameful deal with the authoritarian Turkish regime of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to facilitate the mass deportation of refugees and prevent others from leaving Turkey for Europe, in return for 6 billion euros and political concessions to Ankara.

Now, Italy, with the support of other EU governments, is attempting to replicate these arrangements through a deal struck with the Western-backed Libyan Government of National Accord headed by President Fayeaz al-Sarraj in Tripoli. This unstable regime exerts control over only a fraction of the country, which has been mired in civil war and dominated by the violence of rival militias since the 2011 US-NATO war for regime-change ended in the toppling and assassination of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

In the coming weeks, Italy is set to deliver at least 10 patrol boats, helicopters, four-wheel-drive vehicles, communications equipment and other gear to the Libyan coastguard to carry out operations aimed at

stopping boats carrying refugees from ever leaving Libyan waters.

The Libyan coastguard, which is being beefed up to do the EU's dirty work in hunting down and turning back migrants, is notorious for its brutality and corruption. It has slaughtered migrants on the high seas, sunk boats, attacked humanitarian groups attempting to aid the refugees and profited off of collaboration with smugglers.

By stopping refugees from leaving Libya, Italy and the EU are condemning them to conditions that can only be described as hellish. Refugees are held in a network of detention camps run by the government as well as by militias and criminal gangs, where they are systematically extorted, tortured, raped and summarily executed. Those who fail to come up with the money demanded by their captors are often killed or left to starve to death. Others have been sold—women as sex slaves and men as laborers—in modern-day slave markets set up in parking lots in Tripoli.

The surge in those risking death by crossing the Mediterranean is in large measure a function of the desperation of migrants to escape the conditions in Libya, where Italy and the EU now want to trap them.

Italy has also forged a pact with a group of tribes in southern Libya to block the country's borders with Niger and Chad, posing the direct threat of armed violence against refugees fleeing war and repression in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, or, at the very least, pushing them back into the Saharan desert and to countries where their lives will be in imminent danger.

Italian Interior Minister Marco Minniti portrayed his government's actions as a humanitarian crusade. "The people who land in Italy arrive from the violent hands of human traffickers," he said. "All we are doing is saving them from that fate." The hypocrisy is breathtaking. Minniti gave no indication as to what fate he expected for these vulnerable refugees at the "violent hands of human traffickers" deprived of the ability to profit from sending them into the Mediterranean.

The Italian parliament, meanwhile, has approved legislation sharply curtailing appeals for rejected asylum seekers, while the government is preparing to open 16 detention centers to hold those slated for deportation.

The number of people escaping to Europe from the

horrors of US-backed wars in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Somalia and elsewhere, along with the crushing oppression and poverty imposed by imperialism throughout sub-Saharan Africa, is a tiny fraction of the record 65.3 million refugees that these conditions have created worldwide. Yet keeping them out, repressing and deporting them has become a focus of capitalist politics in Europe, just as it has in the United States with the demands by the Trump administration for the building of a wall on the Mexican border and the unleashing of Border Patrol and ICE agents in a campaign of persecution and intimidation against immigrants.

On both sides of the Atlantic, and all across the globe, governments and right-wing political movements are attempting to scapegoat immigrants for the conditions of mass unemployment, declining living standards and social crisis created by the capitalist system.

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