

Eight immigrants die attempting to reach Greece

Richard Tyler
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Sometime during Saturday night, a small wooden boat carrying 31 immigrants and their Turkish captain capsized in the Aegean. Coastguards rescued six of those on board and one was able to swim ashore. Eight bodies were recovered, but 17 are missing, presumed drowned.

Turkish Navy Sergeant Avni Cindik said, "We don't expect to find anyone in the open seas."

The 31 immigrants on board included 18 Iraqis, eight Iranians and five Afghanis. They were en route from Bodrum in Turkey to the Greek island of Kos, where they hoped to land illegally.

In Turkey, police arrested three smugglers thought to be responsible for arranging the voyage. The ship's captain said they had offered him \$1,000 for each person he smuggled into Greece.

As the flow of those desperate to flee civil war, oppression or grinding poverty in their home countries increases, so do the numbers whose journey ends in tragedy and death. At least 173 people drowned in the Adriatic last year attempting to reach Italy from Albania.

In 1998, dozens of Sri Lankans died when the driver of the lorry they were in left them locked inside a container on the Austro-Hungarian border. The same year, 90 Romanian immigrants nearly died when they were locked in a lorry and almost asphyxiated. In June this year, 58 Chinese immigrants died horribly, trapped inside an airtight container at Dover, England.

Many more who die undertaking the treacherous journey to what they hope will be freedom and a better life never make the news. Perhaps they are killed by the smuggling gangs once they have taken their money, or their bodies are lost at sea or in inaccessible terrain.

Many immigrants from Asia enter Turkey illegally via its eastern border and then make their way

westwards, trying to reach more prosperous countries such as Germany or Britain. An estimated 400,000 people a year enter the European Union (EU) illegally, mainly from Eastern Europe. Favourite routes from the south include Tunisia and Morocco, where a short trip across the Mediterranean can bring them to Italy, Spain and France. Those travelling from the east try and enter Greece, Italy and Austria. A new route from the north leads from Russia into Finland.

Tens of thousands of migrants from China, Southeast Asia and the Middle East seek to enter Western Europe from the Balkans. Mr. Duc Tran of the International Organisation for Migration in Zagreb told the press that Chinese gangs had switched their focus toward Europe. "There has been a change in the final destination since the clampdown by the US government, which has cut down illegal immigration to the United States. Europe is now the specific destination of the Chinese," he said.

Organised crime has taken control of the human trafficking. The European police agency Europol says criminal gangs now make as much from smuggling humans as they do from drugs.

Greece has become a popular target for the smugglers; the hundreds of Greek islands in the Aegean offering many possibilities for them to land their human cargo. In early August, the Greek authorities detained a wooden ship crowded with 334 illegal immigrants on board, who landed in Crete after a six-day journey in the Aegean. Many of those on board needed medical attention after their ordeal.



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