

Six Kurdish immigrants suffocate in back of Italian truck

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The bodies of six Kurdish immigrants were found beside a coastal highway in Puglia, southern Italy, on October 17. Police are presuming that the men, aged 20 to 40, were being smuggled into the country and that they had been thrown from a moving truck after dying of asphyxiation.

Autopsies revealed that the men were aware that they were suffocating before they died. Markings on their hands and under their fingernails showed that they attempted to claw their way through the metal cargo container of a truck loaded with cotton. Several of the victims were found holding rosary beads in their hands. Bruises on their bodies also showed that they were most likely thrown from the moving truck after the smugglers realized they were dead. One man's head was crushed under the wheel of the vehicle.

Identification found on some of the deceased indicates they were Kurds from Iraq, most likely seeking to escape war and poverty. They had traveled through Turkey to Greece, where they were presumably placed in the cargo container of the truck carrying cotton to Italy by boat.

The death of the six immigrants is the latest such tragedy in a European Union member state—a phenomenon that has drawn increased attention since the death by suffocation of 58 Chinese immigrants in June who were being smuggled into England.

Just one week earlier a ship loaded with over 450 men, women, elderly and children, mostly Kurds from Iran and Turkey—but also 17 Pakistanis, 12 Afghans, five Indians, three Syrians, and two Palestinians—floundered in the Adriatic Sea just off the coast of Italy during an 11-hour storm. The crew had attempted to abandon the ship after issuing an SOS signal. The would-be immigrants, who barely escaped with their lives, were found in the hold.

These latest incidents are not isolated. As Italian authorities have increased their crackdown on illegal immigrants, smugglers have taken to not even landing their boats. Instead they throw the immigrants into the water near the shore, sometimes with rafts, sometime without, and leave them. On August 8 two Filipino women drowned just off the Adriatic coast of Puglia after being thrown overboard by smugglers. A third man thrown overboard was barely resuscitated by paramedics.

After World War II, Italy adhered to an “open door” policy in relation to immigrants. The last decade, however, has seen the Italian ruling class launch an attack on the social policies of the postwar period, and immigration policy has seen some of the most drastic changes as a result.

Despite the fact that immigrants, legal and illegal, make up less than 3 percent of Italy's population of 57 million they are being blamed for an increase in many social problems. An article last year in the Milanese newspaper *La Repubblica* went through the country region by region, in each case blaming immigrants for an increase in various social problems such as squatters in abandoned buildings, and an increase in homicides, rapes and prostitution.

Groups such as the Northern League have built their movements around an anti-immigrant outlook. *La Repubblica* reported in May that an “ultraconservative” group located in Parma, a city in the former Stalinist stronghold of Emilia-Romagna, has openly supported a ban on renting apartments to African families. The group has posted banners in front of its offices stating “We Do Not Work With Immigrants of Color.”

As well as the openly right-wing and neo-Nazi organizations, the main political parties and coalitions have joined the anti-immigrant campaign. The center-

left coalition government of Amato has implemented and stepped up enforcement of existing laws against immigrants. During the first six months of this year the Italian authorities report they caught 59,107 illegal immigrants and expelled more than 30,000 of these.

The candidates of the two major coalitions in next year's election—Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of the center-right Forza Italia, and the newly chosen Francesco Rutelli, leader of the center-left Olive Tree coalition—have adopted anti-immigrant propaganda in their platforms.

Also notable is the statement of Bolognese Cardinal Giacomo Biffi, who, according to the *New York Times*, has called for a strict ban on non-Christian immigration to Italy in order to “preserve the identity of the nation.”

This ethno-nationalistic bigotry has resulted in vicious racial attacks. The most recently publicized incident took place last March, when a group of young neo-fascists in Rome attempted to murder 10 Eastern European and African immigrants by setting fire to their makeshift huts under a railroad trellis.



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