

Thousands of refugees perish on European Union borders

United network documents nearly 4,000 deaths in 10 years

Martin Kreickenbaum
23 July 2003

While heads of government at the European Union (EU) summit in Thessaloniki, Greece, last month resolved on further measures to restrict refugees, more than 250 were estimated to have drowned in the Mediterranean in two shipping incidents. According to a study undertaken by United, an anti-racism network, documented deaths directly attributable to the border security measures and the consolidation of Fortress Europe rose to a total of more than 4,000 in the last 10 years.

On June 16, a refugee boat carrying more than 60 people capsized 50 miles south of the Italian Mediterranean island of Lampedusa. Only three refugees who set out in a small lifeboat were rescued.

The second catastrophe took place four days later, on June 20, as a hopelessly overloaded boat set out from Libya towards Italy despite bad weather. The boat sank only 60 miles from the African coast. A fishing boat's crew sighted the sinking ship, sounded the alarm and began to organise a rescue operation, in which a number of boats from nearby oil-rig platforms took part. However, only 41 refugees were saved; 50 bodies were later recovered from the Mediterranean Sea. More than 160 people were still missing as the Tunisian rescue ship abandoned the search on Sunday due to bad weather. It was the worst shipping tragedy in the Mediterranean for years.

It was only a matter of luck that the week did not claim more victims. On June 17, in the Gibraltar Straits, the Spanish coast guard captured a distressed refugee boat carrying 160 people. In the same week, the Italian coast guard escorted a small 12-metre boat transporting 107 refugees into Lampedusa Harbour after an eight-day journey beginning in Turkey.

The mortality rate for refugees in the overloaded and decrepit boats continues to rise. People smugglers, demanding up to 2,000 euros for the passage to Europe in unseaworthy boats, get their best returns by catering to the needs of desperate people.

However, the growing mortality rates on European borders are not simply the result of people smuggling but due to the ever-harsher measures of the EU against refugees and asylum-seekers. With no hope of gaining a visa and thereby no possibility of crossing borders legally, refugees are left to the services of smugglers. Ultimately, it is the increasingly restrictive immigration policies of all European countries that are responsible for the two latest shipping disasters.

Both tragedies, which were widely reported in the media, are nevertheless only the tip of the iceberg. On an almost daily basis, refugees die unnoticed on the outer borders of Europe or in the detention centres of the European Union. United, a network against racism that supports refugees and migrants, and comprises more than 550 European organisations, has put together a document that lists almost 3,800 officially recorded victims of Europe's refugee policy from January 1993 to March 2003 [<http://www.united.non-profit.nl/pdfs/listofdeaths.pdf>]. In fact, this figure is likely to be far higher under conditions where the fate of

many refugees—who pay with their lives during their flight or who perish from exhaustion in the barren tracts of an east European winter—go unrecorded.

The majority of the deaths documented by United consist of refugees who drowned in the Mediterranean. Most are anonymous victims, who remain unidentified and whose identities are of little concern to the authorities.

For example, on November 30 of last year, 100 refugees of mostly unknown origin lost their lives in two sea-damaged vessels off the Libyan coast near the Canary Islands. On October 8, 2002, 16 Africans died in the Straits of Gibraltar as their boat sought to avoid the ultramodern Spanish surveillance craft, purposely built to ward off refugees and fitted out with radar and infrared cameras. Twenty-two refugees died in July 2002 following a collision with an Italian coast guard boat. On March 7, 2002, 59 refugees from Nigeria and Turkey drowned near Malta, after an Italian navy ship, despite its proximity, offered assistance only after some hours, managing to pull only two refugees out of the water. A small fishing vessel that immediately set out to help was able to save seven lives. Similarly, 30 refugees lost their lives in August 2000 near Tangier, Morocco, due to tardy rescue operations, this time by the Spanish coast guard.

Other refugees drowned because they were ordered off their ships by people smugglers miles from the coast and told to swim towards land.

However, the sea is by no means the only cause of fatalities for refugees. Refugees also die in minefields on the border between Greece and Turkey, as in the case of two men from Burundi who came across minefields in heavy fog on January 4 of this year. They drowned in the Oder, the river bordering Poland and Germany, unnoticed by the border patrols and ignored by German authorities. Many continue to suffocate, crowded in air-tight containers like the 58 Chinese who were found in Dover, England, on June 19, 2000.

In addition, United lists many instances in which refugees were either shot by Turkish, Spanish or German border guards, or were so badly beaten they died of their injuries.

On November 2, 2002, a 23-year-old Albanian illegally crossing a border was mortally wounded by Greek border police. Idris Demir, a Kurd fleeing an imminent deportation after his asylum application was rejected, was shot near Jönköping in February 2001 by Swedish police. On May 2, 2000, in Austria, police beat a Nigerian to death in a refugee centre near Vienna. Two days later, a 40-year-old Slovakian died in Vienna under interrogation for illegal residency.

Immigration officials also bear responsibility for the deadly toll of refugees. On February 12 of this year, in the Swiss town of Thurhof, Nigerian Osuigwe C. Kenekukwu died after being refused medical assistance in a refugee transit centre. Similar cases that the authorities

prefer to keep hidden have been documented in nearly every EU country.

The consequences that follow the denial of asylum-seeker status are similarly disastrous. Suicide occurs frequently in deportation centres and the homes of those seeking asylum. Mikhail Bognarchuk, a 42-year-old Ukrainian, hanged himself in the deportation centre in British Haslar on January 31, 2003. Shortly before, David Mamedov, 45, a Georgian who had resided in Germany for some years, hanged himself at his home in Schloss-Holte in eastern Westphalia after receiving his deportation papers.

Two instances occurring on March 22, 2001, and April 23, 2000, respectively, illustrate in an especially stark manner the despair to which refugees are driven. In Spain two years ago, a Moroccan refugee threatened with deportation murdered a 40-year-old asylum-seeker from Guinea, preferring a sentence in a Spanish jail to deportation to Morocco. A year later in Holland, a Chinese asylum-seeker, fearing deportation for himself and his girlfriend whose application for asylum had already been rejected, stabbed her and then killed himself.

Many refugees fail to reach Europe's borders. For example, many fatalities due to the actions of border guards are documented in Turkey. The shelling of a refugee boat near Cyprus in May 2002 by the Turkish coast guard caused widespread outrage. Hidar Akay from Turkey was killed in a hail of bullets. Nine refugees were shot and another five wounded as a group of 139 people from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan crossed the border between Turkey and Iran at the beginning of May 2000. This incident rated only a brief mention in the press.

Turkey, which has been warned that it would fail to gain membership to the EU due to its record on human rights, was in reality only following EU practice in regard to refugees. With the Amsterdam agreement and the decisions adopted at the EU summit in 1999 in Tampere, Finland, the enacting of ruthless border security measures against refugees became a requirement for EU membership. The harsh measures carried out by the Turkish border guards are also a result of the pressure the EU exerts on neighbouring counties and candidates for EU membership.

Libya is the last potential entryway to Europe due to the trade embargo decreed against the Qaddafi government, which consequently does not collaborate with the EU over the issue of refugees. Many refugees become victims of the murderous desert conditions. According to an article in the German *tageszeitung*, the Ghanaian embassy reported in recent weeks that more than 200 Ghanaians died of thirst in the desert. In May 2001, tourists made a gruesome discovery when they came across a van from Niger in the Libyan desert that had been lost three months earlier. The van contained 40 corpses.

The hundreds dying annually in European processing centres attempting to get to Europe are the direct result of increasingly intensified border patrols on Europe's external borders.

While claiming that its coffers are empty when it comes to its domestic budget, Germany has dramatically increased its spending on border protection. The number of security guards patrolling its eastern borders exceeds those standing sentry on the closely watched border between the US and Mexico.

In recent years on its southern coast, Spain has established the world's most modern and expensive surveillance system for the detection of refugee boats. Equipped with radar and infrared cameras, Spanish authorities are able to identify, along a 115-kilometre stretch of coastline, even the smallest boat on the Moroccan shore. Coast guard ships then force detected boats to turn back.

Partly through financial aid, partly by the exertion of tremendous pressure, countries bordering the EU have been forced to step up measures against asylum-seekers. The EU has almost completely equipped Hungary with its border control equipment. The sum of 50 million euros was foisted onto Rumania to turn its border with Moldavia into an impassable wilderness for refugees. Pressure was exerted on Poland, particularly by Germany, to set up 25 deportation centres. The Czech Republic

established its first deportation centre in November 1998. Inmates in both countries are mainly refugees who have been sent back by German authorities according to the "safe" third-country rule.

In a communication on July 1, the EU Commission proposed the strengthening of an agreement between neighbouring states with future boundaries with EU states after the EU expansion of 2004. It is estimated that about 1 billion euros, a figure that could be increased, out of the total directed to development aid for future border regions will go towards the militarisation of the borders for refugee protection.

The collaboration within the EU on border security in refusal of entry permits, deportations and the development of a common policy on asylum and immigration issues at the lowest level continues to take ever more drastic forms. At the EU summit in Thessaloniki, 140 million euros were expressly allocated to intensify cooperation on policing the EU's external borders; 250 million euros were allocated for deportations and the development of cooperation with third countries for the return of refugees. This was in order to further streamline the mass deportation of refugees out of the EU. Already, 350,000 people annually are expelled and approximately 150,000 forced to return to their countries "voluntarily."

The summit also established a common visa system allowing complete surveillance by recording biometric information, recorded on the passport of the bearer. In centralised records, the Visa Information System (VIS) would then assemble data that would be made available to all border and police authorities.

There are also plans to link the VIS to the Schengen Information System (SIS). The latter was strengthened after an agreement was reached in Thessaloniki to broaden and accelerate the data system. Together with the ongoing militarisation of the EU's external borders, the VIS draws the EU electronic curtain ever tighter, with ever more deadly consequences, as the United report notes.

The only ones to profit would be the people smugglers, whom the EU is ostensibly aiming to combat. A market would be established by the EU's xenophobic policy against the asylum-seekers. People smugglers can already demand exorbitant fees for the Mediterranean crossing or for a lorry transport across the eastern borders of the EU. Prices range from the "all-inclusive" (i.e., guaranteed transport from the origin of the journey to a destination point with forged papers) for around 10,000 euros, to a guided escort across the border on foot for a few hundred euros. Prices will increase as border-crossings become riskier and the illegal paths longer due to ever-tightening EU borders.

Refugees, who borrow heavily in order to take the road to Europe, will become victims not only of higher financial debt. In the ruthless trade of people smuggling they will increasingly pay with their lives.

The narrowing of freedom of movement and travel as well as the death of refugees on the inner German borders (the so-called "wall deaths"), deplored by Western countries during the period of the "iron curtain," are increasingly becoming a feature of EU politics.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact