

Spain: Investigation into death at sea of 36 African migrants

Paul Stuart

20 November 2003

On November 12, Spain's national ombudsman, Enrique Mugica, announced that an inquiry would be launched into the horrifying events of October 25 when 36 immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa drowned after their motorboat sank in high seas off the coast off Cadiz. The inquiry will concentrate on why it took 52 minutes for rescue services to leave the shore after the motorboat had been reported to be in severe difficulties.

Rogelio Navarrete, captain of the freighter *Focs Tennerife*, twice alerted the Cadiz authorities of a boat in distress and kept communication channels open whilst he used his cargo ship to shield the vessel from 6-metre-high waves. The freighter was unable to get close enough for a rescue without endangering the small craft and his own freighter. Up to 90 oil tankers pass through the straits every day, many of which unknowingly crush small migrant ships in their way.

The migrants' boat drifted past the largest joint US-Spanish naval and air base at Rota—home to the US Sixth Fleet and the Spanish navy—and shortly afterwards disappeared beneath the waves. It was not until almost an hour after receiving the distress signal from the *Focs Tennerife* that a rescue craft was launched. Even then, the crew—volunteers untrained in sea rescue—had to hire a private tugboat because security services' boats were not operational.

Over the next three weeks, 36 decomposing bodies were washed ashore on the beaches around the Bay of Cadiz. *El Pais* described the events as the greatest recorded tragedy of “clandestine” immigrants in Spanish history. The captain of the *Focs Tennerife* told the newspaper, “Couldn't someone have come from the base at Rota? They have plenty of launches, landing ships and trained personnel.”

News reporters from the British *Guardian* questioned Spanish authorities, who were unable to confirm

whether the naval base had been asked for help or even knew about the presence of the immigrants' motorboat. A US spokesman for the base commented, “The Spanish have the lead on recovery and rescue... We would have assisted if we had been asked.”

It is impossible to believe that the military base was unaware of the boat's distress. Every naval base is on a high state of alert for the approach of just such small vessels because of the fear of terrorist attacks. It is more likely that its location and progress were monitored very closely using satellite and advanced radar systems.

Socialist Party (PSOE) spokesman in Congress, Consuelo Rumi, attempted to divert mounting criticism of the authorities when he declared, “Whatever the reality of the situation, the tragedy in Cadiz highlights the lack of resources at the disposal of the emergency services in Spain.”

This claim is a complete fabrication. In 1999, the Popular Party (PP) government of Jose Aznar announced an additional £100 million would be spent on operation “South Frontier.” Operated by the Civil Guard, the operation was described as an “Integrated System of External Vigilance” (its Spanish acronym is SIVE), utilising the latest technology in long-distance radar systems, thermal cameras, night viewfinders, infrared optics, helicopters and patrol boats to guard Spain's south coast.

The surveillance system was specifically designed to detect small boats used by migrants attempting to cross from Africa to Spain through the Strait of Gibraltar. A radar network on either side of the Strait was designed to enable the authorities to establish how many people were travelling on these boats.

On November 10, the PP's public works minister issued a statement asserting that the rescue was delayed

because the sinking boat had not sent a distress signal, and claimed that the authorities had acted with “diligence” hampered by “adverse weather conditions.” He only succeeded in highlighting that Spain’s sea rescue and security services are geared more towards “preventing arrival” than rescue.

Aznar’s government has become synonymous with the concept of a “Fortress Europe” against immigrants arriving from the African continent. In November 2001, Human Rights Watch (HRW) conducted a six-week investigation into the conditions of migrants detained by Spanish authorities on the Canary Islands and issued a series of recommendations to the government. Three months later, HRW reported that the situation had worsened and that migrants face appalling treatment.

Spanish citizens caught helping immigrants are regarded as criminals. One notorious incident was reported in July 11, 2001, in the *New York Times*. Juan Antonio Lopez, a 24-year-old taxi driver from Zahara de los Atunes, a town near Tarifa, spent 15 days in jail for giving a ride to undocumented immigrants.

Immigrants arriving in Spain from sub-Saharan Africa describe journeys of almost unimaginable suffering and danger. Surviving civil wars and brutal militias in several African countries, they arrive in Algeria and then must walk across the desert to Morocco. If they run out of supplies or take the wrong route, they perish. They are hunted by the Moroccan police and are forced to pay a fortune to people traffickers for transit into Spain.

Sixteen medical experts recently gathered at the European Union headquarters to plead for assistance for immigrants who are suffering chronic mental disorders because of their experiences. The medics attacked the European Union’s common immigration policy as giving priority to keeping people out instead of dealing with the problems they and other organisations have identified.

Psychiatrists in Barcelona, who have been monitoring the mental health of African and other immigrants for a number of years, have defined a new mental disorder connected to their experiences en route to Spain. They have named it the “Ulysses syndrome.” Barcelona psychiatrist and pioneer in the field Jeseba Anchotegui explained, “We have dubbed it the Ulysses syndrome because the odyssey they talk to us about in getting as far as here reminded us of the Greek hero of the

Mediterranean Sea.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact