

Thousands of African migrants drown trying to reach Europe

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The year 2006 closed with yet another in a long list of tragedies suffered by African migrants seeking refuge in Europe. More than 100 people from Senegal drowned on December 15, in the open seas, when the flimsy boat (cayuco) in which they were travelling in an attempt to emigrate via the Canary Islands was shipwrecked. Another 25 were rescued by fishermen near Saint-Louis.

According to reports from survivors, the majority drowned when the boat turned over twice, while others died of hunger and thirst while waiting to be rescued. It was their second attempt, as bad weather had forced them to return to Senegal at the beginning of the month.

Official sources calculate that more than 30,000 people arrived in the Canary Islands in 2006 from Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Cabo Verde, Mauritania and Morocco.

According to newspapers reports, more than 5,000 Senegalese have been repatriated during that time. The journey from Senegal is extremely hazardous, not only because of the effects of the weather on such small crowded boats but also as a result of the activities of the newly established “Operation Frontex”—a joint initiative between the Spanish Civil Guards and the Senegalese Navy, which hunts illegal immigrants in order to return them to their country of origin. This cooperation has intercepted a dozen or so boats with about 600 people.

Frontex is a European Union agency that began its operations in October 2005. Officially, it is called the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union. It has its headquarters in Warsaw, Poland, and ironically runs under the motto: Libertas, Securitas, Justitia.

The seas separating Europe from Africa are being turned into a mass grave of the “unidentified immigrant.” Hundreds and thousands of men, women and children perish in an attempt to eke a more tolerable life for themselves and their families abroad. They are dying as a result of the policies of the richer countries, which send their armed forces to hunt them down.

The death toll is reaching unprecedented and intolerable heights. A brief look at newspaper reports shows that in 2006 alone nearly 600 people were reported dead and nearly 300 disappeared. These figures are conservative, as they are based on those cases in which the boats actually capsize or survivors give witness accounts; they do not include incidents where nobody finds out until decaying corpses suddenly appear on beaches all over the coast.

A Canary Islands local government source has recently stated that the number of illegal immigrants killed this year so far attempting the perilous 2,000-kilometre sea crossing from north Africa could be as high as 6,000.

Some of the most harrowing examples reported in newspapers are listed on the web site, www.fortresseurope.blogspot.com:

“On October 11 2006, 40 migrants went missing after a boat sank off Antikythera’s coast, Greece. 20 migrants were missing after their inflatable boat sank off the Canary Islands on October 5. Seventeen people died after their boat went adrift off Sicily Channel, among them five women and three children on September 7. The bodies of 15 dehydrated people were found along Nouakchott seaside on August 27. Twenty-eight people died dehydrated off the Mauritanian coast on August 12. They had been sailing without water or food for days, since their boat, sailed from Senegal, was forced to invert the route by the Spanish Coast guard off the Canary Islands. Nineteen people died on August 11, after a gas cylinder exploded aboard a boat directed to Canary Islands. Twelve people died and 22 were missing after a pirogue heading for the Canary Islands sank off Daros Khoudoson on August 2. Twenty-eight bodies were found on Bilibat coast, 40 kilometres north of El-Aiun, drowned trying to sail towards the Canary Islands on August 1. A ship went adrift for six days and was rescued off Malta on July 29. According to the 13 survivors, 17 people died in the journey, among them eight children and a baby. Their bodies were thrown overboard. In May, a boat went adrift for three months before it was rescued off Barbados in the Caribbean. It had left from Cape Verde bound for Spain. Aboard were

found 11 bodies and the documents of 26 missing men. Thirty-two people died after their boat sank off the Canary Islands on April 4. Forty-five people drowned after their boats sank off Mauritanian coast on March 6. On January 30, nine people went missing off Oran (western Algeria). Additionally, during the same year, a truck carrying immigrants collided with a transport truck in southern Turkey, near Osmaniye in Adana province, killing 44 people.”

http://fortresseurope.blogspot.com/2006/02/immigrants-dead-at-frontiers-of-europe_16.html

Another report talks about a cayuco with dozens of immigrants from the sub-Sahara that ran aground in Yoff beach, north of Dakar. There were four bodies in it. The survivors said that they had attempted to reach the Canary Islands but had failed to dodge the many airplanes, boats and helicopters belonging to Frontex. They were forced to throw overboard the bodies of 20 of their companions who died of thirst, hunger and cold.

Back in March, when 45 people drowned off the coasts of Mauritania, the representative of the Red Crescent stated that immigrants are so desperate that “they are prepared to commit suicide. For them it is like the Russian roulette game: I arrive or I die.” It was then believed that between 700 and 800 people, the majority from Mali, Gambia and Senegal, attempt to cross the sea each day in fragile boats towards the Canary Islands.

Apart from Frontex, there have been pacts signed with the countries of origin of the immigrants to control illegal immigration. Spain has gotten help from the EU in building electrified walls surrounding parts of the Canary Islands as well as its protectorates, Ceuta and Melilla, and in setting up concentration camps in all three areas, into which are thrown those who succeed in crossing the borders but are later captured by police. These include a large number of minors.

El Pais reported on December 18 that 29 agents from Portugal, France, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Low Countries and Norway arrived in the Canary Islands recently to assist the Spanish National Police to identify 19,000 immigrants who arrived on the archipelago between June and November. The experts are part of Operation Hera I, designed by Frontex with a budget of €370,000. Their remit is to identify the countries of origin of the immigrants in order to return them. Spanish police sources said, “A great number of people-traffickers, departing sites, supplying sites, places of gathering, places of recruitment, interior routes, have been identified...which have been of great help for the deployment of EU aeroplanes, helicopters and frigates in the operation Hera II,” also designed by Frontex.

On December 24, 40 people from the sub-Sahara were arrested as they tried to climb the 6-metre fence around Melilla. The Moroccan news agency MAP reported that “three waves of migrants stormed the razor-wire barricade, in scenes reminiscent of the crisis of late summer and fall last year, when around a dozen would-be immigrants died as they were trying to make it across the fence.”

El Pais also reported on December 27 that the number of “irregular immigrants” detained and returned to their countries of origin has increased by 20 percent over the previous year: 92,679 in total, half of them refused entry at the frontier. The list was headed by Rumanians (32,306), followed by Moroccans (24,146), Bulgarians (8,266) and Ecuadorians (6,476).

The difference between “legal” and “illegal” immigrants—often termed as “economic migrants” to distinguish them from what the authorities accept as legitimate asylum-seekers—is in fact determined by the economic interests of Spanish business. Those who are needed to cover undesirable jobs or to work in conditions unacceptable to Spaniards are deemed legal. The Spanish government has stated that in 2007, between 180,000 and 200,000 workers will enter Spain. These will be picked at source—i.e., the countries of origin—according to need, and employers will be entitled to go to those countries and contract them.

The conditions of work of these immigrants workers are exemplified by the situation at a metal factory in Carral, Coruña, northwest of Spain, whose owner and two managers have been arrested and freed on bail with charges. The charges were brought by the trade union Comisiones Obreras, which was alerted by some of the immigrant workers themselves. They worked up to 11 hours; were forced to pay a fine of €60 per day of absence from work, even if it was due to illness or an accident sustained on the premises of the company. If they were absent for three consecutive days, they were sacked. And they had no right to any holidays.

The New Year’s Eve edition of *El Pais* praised EU efforts to clamp down on immigration in response to the urging of Spain’s Socialist Party Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. But it went on to insist that immigrant labour was needed, noting that “migrants have invigorated the Spanish economy to the extent that they have contributed 50 percent of GDP growth since 2001.”



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