

Scores of migrants drown as boat sinks off Turkish Aegean coast

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According to the latest official data, at least 49 people drowned when a boat carrying dozens of migrants sank December 8 off Turkey's Aegean coast. Some of the rescued would-be migrants stated that there were around 70 people in the boat. However, according to the information given by the Coast Guard to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number was 85. These people had reportedly set sail from a southern Mediterranean country en route for Turkey.

An official from the UNHCR told the *Turkish Daily News*, "There is no definite information on the nationalities of the migrants.... Most of them are said to be Palestinians. There were also Iraqis. We as UNHCR are all very sad about the occasion." The local governor, Orhan Sefik Guldibi, said that the majority of them were Palestinians, Somalis and Iraqis.

Tragically, this disaster is far from exceptional. Just a day after the incident, a boat carrying six Uzbek migrants sank, this time in the Mediterranean near the Turkish city of Antalya. At the time of writing, three of them were still missing.

Turkish Daily News published a list of similar disasters involving migrants in the Aegean Sea. The list did not include those taking place during the same period in the Mediterranean.

Summer 1990: Twenty migrants perish attempting to reach Greece.

September 8, 1991: Six Iranians drown when a boat sinks in the same place.

September 14, 1992: Boat sinks off Izmir's Cesme district; 29 dead.

October 30, 1992: Fourteen dead

November 15, 1994: Boat sinks off the coast of Bodrum district in Mugla province; some 27 people dead.

May 1996: Ship sinks off the coast of Izmir's Gumuldur district; 24 dead.

June 1997: Boat carrying 31 migrants sinks off Izmir's Cesme district; 16 bodies found, 5 rescued.

August 2003: Sudanese and Mauritanians drown off Altinoluk; some 19 dead.

November 2004: Boat carrying 20 people sinks in the open seas off Doganbey, 5 bodies never found.

November 2005: Boat sinks off Izmir's Cesme district; 10 drown.

April 2007: Boat sinks off the Guzelcamli district of Kusadasi; six drown.

May 2007: Another boat sinks off the Guzelcamli district; 17 Turkmen drown.

August 2007: Six migrants drown in the open seas off Zeytinli, in Urla district when the boat capsizes.

November 2007: Boat sinks in the open seas off Yenikoy Harbor, in Ezine district, Canakkale; 3 dead, 15 rescued, 3 never recovered.

This list represents just a fraction of the thousands of migrants whose lives are endangered every year in the waters of the Aegean Sea. Many of them are at the mercy of smugglers to arrange their clandestine crossing. They pay huge sums of money, selling all that they have for cash and borrowing from relatives.

These journeys often take place in flimsy, overfilled and unsafe boats, without a skilled seafarer, sufficient fuel or adequate communication and navigation equipment on board. In addition to this, every year thousands of people also risk their lives hiding in containers and airplane cargo, and by other treacherous means.

Many of the "lucky" ones who reach their destination fall victim to human traffickers. Women and children in particular face physical abuse and forced sexual labour. Those who become wage earners generally face

hazardous conditions.

The area between northern Africa and southern Europe—the Mediterranean and Aegean seas—is a major transit route and focal point for those attempting migration or seeking asylum. Many times, Turkey is used as a stopover before moving on to the other parts of Europe.

UNHCR external affairs officer Metin Corabatir told the *Turkish Daily News*: “There are mainly two reasons behind migration. One is asylum, yet the people who are seeking asylum are smaller in number. Thousands of immigrants from Asia and Africa enter Turkey illegally on their way to European countries in search of jobs and a better life. They sometimes stay for two or three years, illegally, before going on toward their destination.”

According to the calculations of the UNHCR, the total number of migrants that pass through and temporarily or permanently stay in Turkey has reached half a million.

A working paper published by the UNHCR, entitled “Irregular Migration and Asylum in Turkey,” explains: “There are many reasons why asylum seekers and other irregular migrants use Turkey as a springboard to reach the West, the most important being its unique geographical location. Historically, Turkey has always served as a bridge between East and West and North and South. To the east Turkey shares a common border with regions and countries with a long history of political conflict and ethnic divisions such as the Caucasus, Iran and Iraq. On the other side are Greek islands (some of which are just a few kilometres away) and the periphery of the European Union.”

Turkey only accepts refugees coming from other European countries and grants only temporary asylum to these people. This makes it all the more inevitable for migrants to end up in the hands of human traffickers.

Under pressure from the European Union, in 2005, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government introduced new laws to criminalise such immigration. As part of the attack on democratic rights, the aim of this legislation is to make European frontiers watertight through new anti-terror laws. The immigration issue has been made a national and European security issue. As the southern Mediterranean countries, the chief source of immigration, are overwhelmingly Muslim,

this cultivates racism and these areas are depicted as zones of “endemic terrorism.”

Governments in the EU and around the industrialised world seek to ban migrants and asylum seekers from setting foot on their territories on the grounds that there is no room and economic resources are limited. New regulations in the US prohibit commercial ships from allowing any migrants at sea on board unless it is a life-and-death situation, instead encouraging them to report the situation to the US Coast Guard.

This latest tragedy is only the latest expression of a broader global refugee crisis driven by economic deprivation and deepening social and economic inequality as well as wars, civil wars and ethnic conflicts. These people come from countries with unemployment rates of 30 percent and more.

As a result of the criminal US occupation of Iraq, every month an estimated 60,000 Iraqis leave their homes to seek refugee. UNHCR estimates that more than 4.4 million Iraqis have been turned into refugees since 2003.



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