

More than 230 migrants drown off Libyan coast

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Over 230 migrants were feared drowned at the end of last month when their overcrowded boat capsized in high winds around 30 miles off the coast of Libya. According to the International Organization for Migration, nearby oil platform workers rescued about 20 people. However, the majority of the more than 250 would be migrants on the boat are feared drowned. Over 100 bodies have now been recovered, but the search for survivors was called off Thursday, April 2.

A second vessel with over 350 on board was taken in tow and safely made it back to Tripoli. Two other boats were caught up in the storm, but it was unclear whether they were boats carrying immigrants or were fishing or merchant craft.

It is assumed the capsized boat was making the perilous journey to Italy or perhaps the Italian island of Lampedusa, which lies between the North African coast and Sicily. One of many such tragedies, the loss of life, if confirmed, would be one of the highest from a single incident.

According to a BBC report the dead included an African woman recovered from the sea with her dead infant in her arms.

The United Nations refugee agency UNHCR provided assistance to those on the second boat that was towed back into Tripoli. According to an UNHCR press statement, "The passengers ... said they had paid smugglers hundreds of dollars per person for passage to Italy's Lampedusa Island. They include Egyptians, Eritreans, Ethiopians, Somalis, Syrians and Tunisians."

The UN high commissioner for refugees, Antonio Guterres, described the mass drowning as "the latest tragic example of a global phenomenon in which desperate people take desperate measures to escape conflict, persecution and poverty in search of a better life."

Jean-Philippe Chauzy, spokesman of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) based in Geneva, explained that in the past such sea trips would not take place in winter months when the weather is worse. Now he said: "It is no longer a seasonal trend ... It's ongoing. The arrivals on Lampedusa are regular."

He explained that the boats used by the smugglers are adapted to maximize the human cargo and profit. "The boats have been stripped of everything to pack as many people in as possible, so there are no life jackets. The option of survival is fairly limited. Because the boats are overcrowded and top-heavy they often capsize, and that sounds like a possible explanation this time."

According to the United Nations there has been a 50 percent increase in the numbers of migrants making it to the coast of Italy over the last year.

Figures show over 30,000 migrants arrived on the island of Lampedusa in 2008 after making the sea journey. The journeys are likely to get more perilous as Italy and Libya are to mount joint sea patrols to try and deter would-be immigrants. This can only make it more dangerous as the boats try to avoid detection.

Most immigrants making the journey from North Africa to Europe are from the African continent, although some Asians are also taking this route. The route from Libya across the Mediterranean to Italy has become more popular as other routes, such as from Spanish enclaves in Morocco and via the Spanish territorial Canary Islands, have become more rigorously patrolled.

Europe is seen as the goal for many would-be immigrants escaping conflict, desperate poverty or seeking more life opportunities. But whilst travel and movement of workers within Europe has been made easier as a result of European Union (EU) legislation, to those outside Europe it has become a fortress.

According to the United Against Racism organisation, over 11,100 have died attempting to get into Europe since

they started monitoring the figures in 1993.

In a recent report, “Death by Policy,” they wrote, “European governments have tried to implement border control and militarization policies. No matter how they try, they are incapable of effectively shutting Europe’s doors. The more they try, and the stricter the laws they implement, the higher the number of deaths gets.”

The EU has established the Frontex agency, with headquarters in Warsaw, to coordinate police, military and intelligence services to control Europe’s border. Frontex has special militarised rapid border intervention teams (RABITs)—armed response units that can be used against migrants.

The campaign group Noborder Network, writing on Frontex in June last year, explained, “As migrants are forced into more and more dangerous ways of crossing borders, the people smugglers and mafias are making good business. But the price for migrants is often death in the back of an overloaded truck or at sea. The latter is becoming more and more frequent thanks to the work of Frontex sea patrols. Instead of taking the shorter routes, migrants are choosing longer routes at sea and more are dying.”

The German Institute of Global and Area Studies published a paper in May 2007 on African migration to Europe. The report notes most of the undocumented migrants to Europe are African. It states, “Sub-Saharan Africa has probably a higher potential for immigration into the EU than any other region of the world. All of the twenty least developed countries (LLDCs) are African... Some experts even believe that population movements from Africa could evolve into one of the largest in world history... In the past decades the number of refugees from conflict regions in Africa increased dramatically... At the end of 2005 some 18 percent of all African migrants were refugees... African refugees constitute about one third of global refugee population.”



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