

One hundred and fifty feared dead in Mediterranean boat tragedy

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Coast guards reported that the straits between the island of Lampedusa and the North African coast were the scene of yet another tragedy, after a boat capsized in stormy seas with many lives lost.

The boat is believed to have been transporting around 200 African refugees trying to flee the fighting in Libya and the bombardment of the country by NATO bombers and fighter planes. Coast guard officials told media outlets that the boat most likely departed two days ago from the town of Zuwarah in western Libya.

48 survivors were picked up by coast guards, some suffering from hypothermia. Local officials say the chance of finding any more survivors is slim, in particular due to the absence of lifejackets amongst those recovered. More than a dozen bodies were spotted in the sea, and rescue officials in Lampedusa declared: "We fear that many people may have died."

Survivors declared that the boat, which was estimated to have been only 13 metres long, had been carrying about 200 persons, including many women and a handful of children. This means that over 130 are still unaccounted for, presumed dead.

In recent years Lampedusa has been the stopping-off point for tens of thousands of young Africans seeking to flee destitution in their own countries and seek better working and living conditions in Europe. Paying thousands of dollars to traffickers for transit, these young men, women, and frequently children, set off in often unseaworthy vessels to travel less than 100 miles from the coast of Tunisia or other North African countries to Lampedusa.

In the past few years thousands have met their deaths on this hazardous journey to reach Europe. Between July 2008 and July 2009 more than 20,000 migrants made the perilous journey from Tunisia to Lampedusa, with hundreds dying at sea along the route. This

number then fell dramatically, in line with the deportation policy introduced by Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

This flow of migrants has surged again after the recent social upheavals in the Maghreb and the NATO war against Libya. Already an estimated 20,000 North Africans have sought to quit the continent in favour of Europe since the collapse of the Tunisian government in mid-January.

The same European governments which are supplying the planes and missiles for the NATO war of aggression against the former colonial country of Libya also advocate draconian measures to deter migrants from leaving their countries. This is combined with support for harsh methods of repatriation, should they reach European soil at all.

Fearing that the revolt against the Gaddafi regime could unleash a new wave of refugees, European governments immediately responded by deploying helicopters, speedboats and war ships across the Mediterranean to intercept and turn back boats carrying migrants. They have also sent rapid reaction force units from the Frontex border control agency to the Libyan and Tunisian coasts, to block the flight of refugees to mainland Europe.

On the political front, the Italian interior minister and leading member of the racist Northern League, Roberto Maroni, traveled to Tunisia on Tuesday to sign an agreement with its provisional government to halt the flow of migrants. In particular, Maroni promised full police cooperation in measures to deter and repatriate immigrants.

Maroni also called upon other European states to accept some of the refugees who had already made their way to Italian soil. Maroni's request has been widely ignored by EU officials, but his policy of

repatriation has the full backing of the European Union.

EU Interior Affairs commissioners Cecilia Malmström and Stefan Füle declared in Brussels that all those with no proper right to reside in Europe should be sent back to their country of origin. The EU definition of “right to reside” excludes virtually all of the refugees arriving on Lampedusa from Northern Africa.

While EU officials stubbornly refuse to take any responsibility for the consequences of their own policies—in particular the war against Libya—the growing influx of refugees has again exposed divisions within the European Union.

Towards the end of February, a violent dispute broke out between European countries when 6,000 refugees from Tunisia arrived on Lampedusa. The Mediterranean countries of Italy, Malta, Spain, Greece and France called for all those stranded on the island to be dispersed among all EU states by means of a quota system. This proposal was then categorically rejected by the northern EU member states like Britain, Sweden, Austria and especially Germany.

Interior Minister Maroni responded by declaring a state of emergency on Lampedusa and warned of an “exodus of (African migrants) of biblical proportions”. At the same time he refused to open up empty reception camps for refugees on Lampedusa.

As a result, thousands of refugees arriving on Lampedusa have been forced to sleep out in the open and have been denied access to toilets and hygienic facilities. According to a March 30 report by human rights group Amnesty International, conditions for refugees on Lampedusa are “appalling” with many refugees lacking any basic humanitarian assistance such as shelter, medical care, mats, blankets and access to sanitary facilities.

The xenophobic “Fortress Europe” policy adopted by the European Union stands in sharp contrast to the response to the refugee crisis by the citizens of the island of Lampedusa.

In its edition of February 14, the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* reports that in response to the refugee crisis: “All the minibuses serving public transit on the island have been requisitioned by the mayor and are evacuating Tunisians from the docks and taking them around to all possible accommodations that can be drummed up. The big cranes and trucks used for

hauling fishing boats on the island are being used now to lift the decrepit old tubs confiscated from the Tunisians out of the water and load them onto trucks, which are carrying them off to the landfill under open skies in the centre of the island. Bakers are working tirelessly to feed the thousands of unexpected guests. And, in another sign of generosity, free cigarettes are being handed out.”



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