NATO ships, planes left African refugees stranded in Mediterranean to die

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The British *Guardian* newspaper published an investigative report Monday documenting the case of African refugees who were left to die in the early days of the war against Libya by NATO and European authorities who spotted their vessel drifting in the Mediterranean but made no effort to rescue them.

The newspaper, citing the account of survivors and an Eritrean priest in Rome who was one of the last people to communicate with the stranded boat, said the passengers were left to drift in open waters for 16 days, even though the Italian coastguard had been alerted and the vessel had been seen by a military helicopter and an aircraft carrier.

Only nine of the 72 people who boarded the boat in Tripoli on March 25 in a desperate attempt to reach the Italian island port of Lampedusa 180 miles northwest of the Libyan capital survived the ordeal. The others, including 20 women and two babies, died from thirst and starvation while on the boat or after beaching near Misrata on April 10.

The *Guardian* exposé coincided with an announcement Monday by the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR that a refugee boat with as many as 600 people on board sank Friday off the coast of Tripoli. There are no reports of survivors.

UNHCR spokeswoman Laura Boldrini said that, besides the disaster on Friday, at least three other boats with a combined total of several hundred passengers left Tripoli in late March and disappeared.

Since the uprising that toppled the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia in January, an estimated 30,000 African migrants, mostly Tunisians, have fled to Lampedusa to seek asylum in Europe. An additional 10,000 refugees, mostly Libyans and sub-Saharan African immigrants who had been working in Libya, have left Tripoli and headed for Lampedusa since the civil war erupted in February. The wave of migrants fleeing Libya has intensified since the US, France, Britain and NATO launched their war against Libya on March 19.

The response of NATO and the European powers to the influx of African asylum seekers has been one of unadulterated hostility and racism. Italy and France, in particular, have pressed the European Union to reintroduce internal border controls and strengthen the European border agency Frontex to keep the African refugees out. In these countries and across Europe, governments have sought to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment in order to divert attention from their attacks on the jobs and living standards of their own working classes.

This vicious policy exposes as a fraud the attempt to justify the imperialist war by casting it as a humanitarian intervention to protect Libyan civilians against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. The real attitude of the US, the European powers and NATO toward the Libyan and African masses is summed up in the events described by the *Guardian*. The newspaper reported that the ill-fated boat that set sail from Tripoli on March 25 carried 47 Ethiopians, seven Nigerians, seven Eritreans, six Ghanaians and five Sudanese migrants. Many of those fleeing Libya are foreign workers from other African countries who have been targeted for violent reprisals by the so-called “rebel” forces backed by the US and NATO.

In the run-up to the US-NATO bombing campaign, Western officials and media charged that Gaddafi was using sub-Saharan African immigrants as mercenaries to repress opponents of his regime. The “rebels,” based in the eastern city of Benghazi, carried out murderous attacks on African immigrants in the areas that they controlled.

Within a couple of days of the boat’s departure from

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Tripoli, it was losing fuel and in serious danger. The refugees used the boat's satellite phone to call Father Moses Zerai, an Eritrean priest in Rome who runs the refugee rights organization Habeshia. Zerai contacted the Italian coastguard.

The *Guardian* writes: "The boat's location was narrowed down to about 60 miles off Tripoli, and coastguard officials assured Zerai that the alarm had been raised and all relevant authorities had been alerted to the situation."

Soon thereafter, a military helicopter with the word "army" appeared above the boat. The pilots, who, according to the *Guardian* account, were wearing military uniforms, lowered bottles of water and packages of biscuits. The chopper then flew off, but no rescue boat arrived.

No country has admitted to sending a helicopter that made contact with the boat. The newspaper cites an Italian coastguard spokesman as saying: "We advised Malta that the vessel was heading towards their search and rescue zone, and we issued an alert telling vessels to look out for the boat, obliging them to attempt a rescue." The Maltese authorities have denied having any knowledge of the boat.

By March 27, the boat had run out of fuel and was drifting with the current. The batteries in the satellite phone were dead.

Abu Kurke, a 24-year-old who was fleeing ethnic fighting in Ethiopia, told the *Guardian*: "We'd finished the oil, we'd finished the food and water, we'd finished everything. We were drifting in the sea, and the weather was very dangerous."

On March 29 or 30, the boat drifted near an aircraft carrier—"so close that it would have been impossible to be missed," writes the *Guardian*. The newspaper continues: "According to survivors, two jets took off from the ship and flew low over the boat while the migrants stood on deck holding the two starving babies aloft. But from that point on, no help was forthcoming. Unable to manoeuvre any closer to the aircraft carrier, the migrants' boat drifted away. Shorn of supplies, fuel or means of contacting the outside world, they began succumbing one by one to thirst and starvation."

The newspaper concludes from its investigation that the carrier was the French ship Charles de Gaulle, which was sailing in the Mediterranean on the dates in question. It reports that French naval authorities initially denied the carrier was in the region at that time, but were shown news reports to the contrary.

NATO officials have denied any knowledge of the refugee boat. Spokeswoman Carmen Romero said the only aircraft carrier under the alliance's command at that time was the Italian ship Garibaldi. "Throughout the period in question, the Garibaldi was operating over 100 nautical miles out to sea. Therefore, any claims that a NATO aircraft carrier spotted and then ignored the vessel in distress are wrong," she said.

She added, "NATO vessels are fully aware of their responsibilities with regard to the International Maritime Law regarding Safety of Life at Sea and have already saved hundreds of lives at sea."

This is an evasion, since French warships participating in the war are officially operating outside of the NATO command.

Thierry Burkhard, spokesman for the chief of staff of the French armed forces, denied that the French navy had failed to help. "The Charles de Gaulle was never at any moment in contact with this type of boat, nor was any other French vessel, due to its position," he said.

International maritime law requires all vessels, including military ones, to answer distress calls from nearby and to offer help whenever possible. Refugee rights groups are demanding an investigation into the deaths. UNHCR spokeswoman Laura Boldrini said, "The Mediterranean cannot become the wild west. Those who do not rescue people at sea cannot remain unpunished."

Father Zerai, the Eritrean priest in Rome, was more blunt, saying: "There was an abdication of responsibility which led to the deaths of over 60 people, including children. That constitutes a crime, and that crime cannot go unpunished just because the victims were African immigrants and not tourists on a cruise liner."

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