

NATO allows Libyan refugees to drown in the Mediterranean

Peter Schwarz
13 August 2011

According to the UN refugee agency UNHCR, 1,500 Libyan refugees have died while trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe since the beginning of the war against Libya in March. On August 4, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported a death toll of 1,820 since the beginning of the year.

The victims are people from Libya and other African countries trying to flee economic hardship, political persecution or escape the war, risking their lives in the process. Penned into small, unseaworthy boats by unscrupulous traffickers, they drown or die of thirst at sea.

The distance between the Italian island of Lampedusa, the goal of most refugee boats, and Tunisia, the nearest point on the African coast, is just 130 kilometers. The distance to the Libyan coast is about twice as far.

This relatively small area of sea is currently filled by one of the largest navies in the world. About 20 warships from 10 NATO countries, including several aircraft and helicopter carriers, are supporting the assault on Libya. They are equipped with radar and other advanced technology and can easily detect any movement on the sea. The region is also constantly monitored by NATO AWACS aircraft, which can detect minute vessels.

In addition, there are the boats and planes of the Italian border police and the European border agency Frontex, which patrol the waters between Lampedusa and the North African coast in order to detect and send back refugee boats.

Vulnerable refugees therefore could have been easily detected and rescued. The many deaths were entirely avoidable. They are the victims of the failure to provide aid to those in distress—a criminal offence. NATO forced them to flee with its war against Libya and when

it transpires that their escape route is a deadly trap, NATO has left them to their fate.

NATO has not merely “overlooked” the refugees. It has also refused to provide shipwrecked refugees assistance when alerted.

Just last week, such a case came to light, in which the culpability of NATO was so obvious that even the Italian government, which conducts its own persecution of refugees, felt obliged to protest and demand an investigation.

The Italian Coast Guard on August 4 retrieved a wrecked, 20-meter-long wooden boat with nearly 300 refugees from the waters south of the island of Lampedusa. The wreck had drifted at sea for a week with a faulty engine. Conditions on the boat were appalling. According to the survivors, 100 people had died of thirst and exhaustion, and had been thrown overboard. The refugees themselves were severely dehydrated, many in critical condition, and were flown to hospital on the Italian mainland.

As it turned out, the damaged boat had already been detected by a Cypriot tug, which sent an SOS signal but then proceeded on course. The Italian Coast Guard then alerted NATO. NATO refused to help the refugees, however, although one of its ships was just 27 nautical miles (50 km) from the stranded boat.

Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini has accused NATO of failing to provide assistance and requested an investigation into the incident. At the same time, he proposed extending the NATO mandate in such a way that NATO is made responsible for the rescue of civil war refugees. This is all smoke and mirrors, however. Under current international law every civilian and military ship is bound under all circumstances to help the shipwrecked.

This is not the first time NATO has been accused of

negligence. At the end of March NATO ships are alleged to have ignored distress calls from a damaged refugee boat from Libya. A military helicopter spotted the boat but merely tossed the victims water bottles and crackers. The refugees waited in vain for rescue. According to the British *Guardian* newspaper an aircraft carrier in the vicinity also failed to respond. In the end, 61 people died of thirst.

The NATO operation against Libya bears the name “Unified Protector” and is officially justified as a mission aimed at the “protection of civilians” from attacks by the Libyan government. If any further proof were necessary, the fate of Mediterranean refugees delivers the final blow to this cynical excuse for an imperialist war. The life of refugees and civilians is the least of the priorities of NATO.

European governments also have no interest in helping the refugees. It would be easy to equip ships to track down and rescue the refugees in the Mediterranean, and such an operation would cost only a fraction of the daily costs of the Libyan war. This is politically undesirable, however, with EU countries fearful of an increase of refugees. The entire European refugee policy is aimed at deterrence.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact