

Council of Europe report makes NATO responsible for the death of 63 refugees

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NATO bears a high degree of responsibility for the deaths of 63 refugees, who died of thirst last spring in the Mediterranean en route from Libya to Italy. This is the conclusion of a preliminary report issued by the Council of Europe.

The small inflatable boat with 72 refugees on board was in serious distress during its 15-day odyssey and was spotted several times by NATO helicopters and warships, but they refused to come to the aid of the desperate people on board. Finally, the boat ran aground in Libya with just 10 survivors. They were arrested immediately, and one woman died due to lack of medical care.

This tragedy took place at a time when one of the largest naval operations was taking place in the waters between Libya and Italy. More than 20 warships from 10 NATO countries, including aircraft and helicopter carriers, supported the NATO war against Libya. The fleet was equipped with high-quality radar and other tracking devices, was monitored by AWACS aircraft and was also equipped with satellite imagery.

At the same time, the European border agency Frontex was conducting *Operation Hermes*, searching for and finding refugee boats off the coasts of Italy and Malta. Also in the region were vessels and planes belonging to the Italian border police, who routinely monitor the strait between the Italian island of Lampedusa and the North African coast.

In spring 2011, this portion of the sea was one of the most watched in the world, and an Italian officer said at the time that “the crossing from Libya to Italy is like a slalom between warships”.

Nevertheless, over the course of two weeks, it was apparently impossible to come to the aid of the floundering refugee vessel and its passengers, who were slowly dying of thirst. In fact, the refugees could

have been saved with ease, as the Council of Europe report reveals. Instead, they became the victims of NATO’s inhumane policies, which first drove the desperate refugees to flee as a result of the war in Libya, and then left them to their fate.

In no previous year have so many people lost their lives fleeing across the Mediterranean as in 2011. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHRC) counted more than 1,500 refugees who drowned or died of thirst, and the true figure is likely far greater.

The Council of Europe, which is not an institution of the European Union (EU), but is charged with monitoring compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights within the 49 member states, conducted an investigation to find out why so many people died in 2011 on the Mediterranean despite its being monitored more closely than ever before.

Dutch Council of Europe senator Tineke Strik (Green Party) looked in detail at the March 2011 incident. She spoke to survivors of the tragedy, as well as to official representatives of NATO, the Italian rescue services and the European Union. But while the survivors provided virtually identical accounts of the events when questioned independently, military and government officials were either evasive or refused to answer.

On March 26, 2011, the 72 refugees from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Nigeria, Ghana and Sudan, including 20 women and 2 babies, started out from Tripoli in the expectation that within 18 hours they would reach the small Italian island of Lampedusa. But bad weather and the inexperience of the skipper put the vessel in distress. During the late afternoon of March 27, the skipper made contact with an Eritrean priest in Rome via satellite phone, who immediately alerted the Italian Coast Guard.

The satellite phone enabled the precise location of the boat to be identified, and the Coast Guard sent several emergency calls through various channels to all ships and also to the NATO high command in Naples.

According to corroborating reports by survivors, shortly thereafter, a military helicopter appeared and lowered a rope to provide water and biscuits to those on the boat. But the refugees waited in vain for further help to arrive.

After about 10 days, half of the refugees had died of thirst; the boat, which had lost the ability to manoeuvre, approached a large warship. The soldiers on board could see the refugees through their binoculars, and photos were taken. In desperation, the refugees even showed those on board their dead babies, but the ship sailed away without providing any help.

Strik tried in vain to find out where the helicopter came from and which warship had been involved. Although there are records indicating that the Spanish frigate *Mendez Nunez* and the Italian warship *ITS Borsini* were only 11 and 37 nautical miles away from the damaged refugee boat, the competent authorities and ministries of defence stonewalled the request for information from the Council of Europe, either referring the request to NATO as the competent authority or simply denying there had been a maritime distress call.

A NATO representative in Brussels told Strik that the emergency call had been passed on, but refused to divulge the identity of the vessel which had been in the vicinity of the refugee boat.

The United States and Britain have refused to provide any information about whether their warships were in the vicinity of the damaged boat. Catherine Ashton, the European Union's foreign and security policy representative, only responded to Strik five months after she had received the request for information, and then asserted that the EU had no satellite imagery of the Mediterranean and pointed to its being NATO's jurisdiction.

The denials of responsibility, the claims about no longer having any records and the buck-passing to other national or supra-national authorities are meant to cover up a crime.

Strik's draft report is couched diplomatically and speaks mainly of failures, shortcomings and negligence. At the end of her report, however, the

Council of Europe senator is more explicit and declares that "the boat's occupants could have been saved if the actors involved had complied with their obligations". Under the current law of the sea, captains must take all necessary steps to rescue those who are in distress. In plain language, this means that the 63 refugees who died miserably on the high seas were the victims of a failure by others to come to their assistance. The NATO war fleet is directly to blame for the deaths of these victims of its own war.

The refusal of NATO to cooperate in the investigation of this offence is not only intended to cover up the immediate crime, but also to conceal the real causes of the war against Libya.

The NATO operation against the regime of Muammar al-Gaddafi was conducted under the cynical name of "Unified Protector" and was officially justified as providing the "protection of civilians" against attack by Libyan government troops. The fate of the Mediterranean refugees exposes the fact that this was merely a pretext for an imperialist war. NATO never had the slightest interest in protecting the lives of civilians and refugees, Libyan or otherwise.

Immediately after the first NATO air strikes, the UNHRC warned of the possibility of a large wave of refugees from Libya, particularly since some migrants in Libya were accused of being Gaddafi's mercenaries and had become the targets of rebel troops. For the stranded refugees and migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in Tripoli, the choice was between falling into the clutches of the imperialist-backed rebel troops or attempting to flee across the Mediterranean.

Frontex, the border protection agency, refused to help, because EU refugee policy is aimed at repelling refugees. In the past 25 years, nearly 15,000 refugees have paid for this inhumane policy with their lives.



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