

# Protests mount as Lampedusa migrant death toll expected to hit 400

Robert Stevens  
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Six days after a boat carrying more than 500 migrants from Africa capsized off the coast of the southern Italian island of Lampedusa, 250 are confirmed dead. Most of those on board were from Eritrea and Somalia.

With just 155 survivors, the final death toll of this tragedy is expected to be close to 400. This is the highest-ever number of migrants killed in the Mediterranean trying to reach Europe. The number of dead will outstrip that of a disaster in 1996 in which recorded 283 fatalities, also off Italian shores.

The boat sank when a fire was started on board, allegedly by the captain, who was attempting to use a blanket as a distress signal after the vessel's engine failed. As the fire took hold, many of those on board reportedly rushed to one side of the boat, resulting in it capsizing. The incident happened just one kilometre (half a mile) offshore.

On Monday evening coast guard divers freed another 38 bodies from the ship's hull. Describing the harrowing scenes, one diver said they had "unpacked a wall of people," adding that corpses were "so entwined one with the other" they were difficult to pull out.

Police report that divers have now recovered all bodies that drowned and lay around the ship and on its hull, but many remained inside the vessel or undiscovered.

Police diver Riccardo Nobile said, "Some we have found with their arms outstretched. We try not to notice this kind of thing too much, otherwise the task is too difficult."

A further 18 bodies were recovered on Tuesday.

The deaths of hundreds of migrants have led to angry protests. Eritrean refugees were attacked by riot police at refugee camps in Ethiopia as they dedicated a memorial vigil to the victims of the Lampedusa boat tragedy.

The rights activist Meron Estefanos describing how "a riot erupted in the Mai Ayni refugee camp after Eritrean refugees started expressing their frustration at authorities." The *IBT* added, "Police opened fire to disperse the riot and four children were wounded as a result. The unrest spread to other refugee camps such as the Adi Harish and three people were killed." Estefanos said many other refugees were injured.

The 154 survivors of the boat disaster, all but one from Eritrea, held a protest Tuesday against the poor conditions they are being held under at the overcrowded migrant "reception centre" on Lampedusa. The survivors are being held at a 250-bed centre that has already taken in more than 1,000 people. Many refugees are being forced to sleep outside. Among these are a reported 40 unaccompanied minors aged 11 to 17.

Lampedusa residents held a candlelit procession through the streets of the island in memory of the victims. Fishermen took their boats out to sea on Saturday in a commemoration for the drowned.

Local fisherman Salvatore Martello said, "The dead cannot be forgotten, they have to be commemorated because they are people who tried to come and work, to live a better life."

The tragedy and subsequent protests have elicited a flood of crocodile tears from the bourgeois establishment in Italy and Europe. The Italian government declared last Friday a day of national mourning.

The same day Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta announced, "The hundreds who lost their lives off Lampedusa yesterday are Italian citizens as of today."

This is sickening hypocrisy. The Italian government is fully responsible for the deaths, due to its repressive

laws which treat asylum seekers and refugees as criminals. Even as Letta confirmed citizenship on the dead, under laws passed in 2002 by the right-wing government under Silvio Berlusconi the remaining survivors are now classed as “clandestine immigrants” who have attempted to enter Italy illegally. They could be subjected fines of up to €5,000.

The government also stands accused of a slow response to the disaster. At the weekend, Vito Fiorino, a fisherman who arrived first at the site of the capsized boat, stated that Italian coastguard officials were wasting time by filming footage of rescue efforts.

Fiorino told the Ansa news agency, “They refused to take on board some people we’d already saved because they said protocol forbade it.”

An article in *La Sicilia* said two boats belonging to Italy’s Financial Guard, which are tasked with carrying out a range of police and rescue duties, remained in port.

According to a statement by the Italian coastguard, “After we received the alarm by radio at 07:00 we immediately intervened with our boats, arriving on at the site of the shipwreck at 07:20.”

Cecile Kyenge, the Italian integration minister, visited the island on Sunday and in response to growing anger at the massive loss of life, said, “The rules must be changed, we can’t just have to approach immigration with repression, but we need also one of acceptance.”

The “repression” referred to has been systematic and brutal and has underpinned Italy’s anti-immigration policy for more than a decade. In March 2002 the Berlusconi coalition enacted a “state of emergency,” giving police powers to make rapid decisions on immigration matters, including expediting asylum requests and removal procedures.

A subsequent “Bossi-Fini” law, passed in July, named after then Italian Reform Minister Umberto Bossi and Deputy Premier Gianfranco Fini, a former fascist, required all non-European Union immigrants to be fingerprinted and allows the use of naval ships to patrol Italian coastlines and to intercept incoming ships containing migrants.

In September 2011 Italian riot police brutally beat hundreds of Tunisian migrants being held at a compound containing 1,500 people. Dozens of the migrants were hurt, as they peacefully protested an

agreement between Italy and Tunisia that would force more than 1,000 Tunisians to be sent back to Tunisia. Footage here shows the police onslaught, in which they assault those being forced to flee for their lives, even as they jump from a 13-foot balcony.

Mayor Bernardino De Rubeis sought to whip up hostility to the migrants. Revealing that he kept a baseball bat in a desk drawer in his office, he told *Al Jazeera*, “I have to defend myself and am ready to use it. It’s like a war zone.”

De Rubeis called on the government to “immediately send helicopters and ships to evacuate the Tunisians.”

In January 2009, 650 African refugees escaped from their refugee camp, heavily guarded by Carabinieri, on Lampedusa. Protesting the deplorable conditions they were being held under awaiting deportation, they ran through the centre of the island’s main city crying “freedom!” and “help us!”



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