

Survivors say Greek policy caused deaths of 12 migrants in Aegean Sea

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The latest deaths of migrants seeking to enter “Fortress Europe” by boat occurred this week in the Aegean Sea.

Twelve people seeking to enter Europe via Greece perished, including nine children aged between one and nine years. The boat contained 25 Afghans and three Syrians, the latter adults. Only two of the victims’ bodies have been recovered so far.

On Wednesday the bodies of a woman and a five-year-old child, were discovered off the Turkish coast.

In recent tragedies, including the loss of around 360 migrants’ lives off the Italian island of Lampedusa, those who died did so when their boats capsized and before any rescue attempt could be mounted. In this case, evidence is emerging that the deaths Monday were the result of a deliberate policy by the authorities to “push back” into Turkish waters migrants seeking entry to Greece.

Greek authorities sought to blame the tragedy on the migrants, claiming that they had panicked and caused the boat to capsize. A statement from the Greek coastguard claimed that the boat carrying the migrants was found not moving and had no lights on, when they found it early Monday morning. The authorities said that due to poor weather conditions, a decision was taken to tow the boat to the Dodecanese islet of Farmakonisi. The deaths occurred in the process of escorting the boat to Farmakonisi, according to the authorities.

Grief-stricken survivors refuted this version of events. Speaking to the Greek branch of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, survivors explained that the tragedy occurred as their boat was being pulled at high speed in stormy weather by the coastguard boat and headed back *towards* Turkey.

One of the survivors told the media that he had lost

his wife and four children when the boat sank: “The coastguard hit them. They tried to jump on the boat. And the coastguard hit them with the door so they would fall back into the water.”

He told how he heard his child shout, “Mama, Papa, help!” from the sea, but none of the coastguards helped.

Another man said his wife, two sons and a daughter (aged 9, 11 and 13) all perished. He said coastguards were swearing at those on board the migrants’ vessel and “threw them into the sea, on purpose.”

The Ecre NGO said, “Survivors tell that they were crying out for help, given that a large number of children and babies were on board.”

Karl Kopp, the director of European affairs for a German NGO, Pro Asyl, stated: “It is highly likely that this action by the Greek coastguard was an illegal push-back operation rather than a rescue at sea.”

On Tuesday the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) responded to the testimony of the survivors and called for an investigation into the tragedy.

Laurens Jolles, the UNHCR’s southern Europe regional representative, said, “UNHCR is urging the authorities to investigate this incident and how lives were lost on a boat that was under tow.”

The UN statement was silent on Greece’s notorious and illegal “push-back” policy. Instead, it called on “European and other governments to work together to reduce losses of life among people making dangerous sea journeys across the Mediterranean and the world’s other major sea frontiers, including by continuing to strengthen search and rescue operations, as well as the creation of legal migration alternatives to dangerous irregular movements.”

The Greek government is washing its hands of any responsibility. The survivors of the tragedy were taken to the Greek island of Leros and were, with one

exception, taken to and held in Leros police station. The survivors were then charged to get a ferry to the main Athens port of Piraeus, with the fee paid by Amnesty International.

New Democracy Shipping Minister Miltiadis Varvitsiotis used the tragedy as an opportunity to whip up hostility to those seeking refuge in Greece, telling Skai TV: “All of this can’t be used for stupid games. I don’t believe anyone wants to throw open the gates for all immigrants to enjoy asylum in the country.”

In a statement released Tuesday, Amnesty International (AI) called for an investigation, noting that the survivors’ statements “resemble the testimonies [AI] has previously collected on push-back operations of the Greek coastguard—the practice of summarily turning back a group of migrants across the border towards Turkey.”

It added, “Push-back operations carried out by Greece deny people the right to explain their individual circumstances and raise any protection or other concerns. As such, they are in breach of Greece’s international obligations and EU law.”

Amnesty’s statement referred to its 2013 report, “Frontier Europe: Human rights abuses on Greece’s border with Turkey.” Among the cases it reports are inflatable boats being “rammed, knifed, or nearly capsized while they were being towed or circled by a Greek coastguard boat. They said their boats’ engines were disabled and their oars removed, then they were just left in the middle of the sea. Life-endangering practices were also reported by people caught after crossing Greece’s land border with Turkey along the river Evros.”

The frontier of the EU between Turkey and Greece consists of a 203 km land border in the Evros region in the north and a sea border on the Aegean in the South. The border has long been an entry point for refugees and asylum seekers from impoverished and war-torn nations, including Afghanistan and now Syria, desperate to find a safe haven and a better life.

In the last four years, those seeking entry to Greece have faced relentless obstacles by land and sea, from the Greek government and the European Union’s Frontex border agency.

Amnesty notes, “Up until 2010, most migrants and refugees sought to reach Greece by crossing the Aegean Sea in small boats. That year, the main route shifted to

the land border in the Evros region, which for the most part runs along the River Evros. This was partly because of increased surveillance at sea by Greek coastguards supported by Frontex...”

In mid-August 2012, Greece launched Operation Aspida (Shield) to prevent migrants entering across the Evros border. More than 1,800 additional police officers were deployed and €3 million spent on building a four metre tall, 10.5 km barbed-wire fence along the northern section of the land border. The fence was not built with EU approval, but was to work alongside Frontex’s own “Poseidon Land” operation.

Amnesty states, “According to Frontex, these developments have had such an impact that less than ten irregular migrants a week were detected crossing this border at the end of October 2012, down from 2,000 in the first week of August 2012. ... With heightened security on the land border, more and more refugees and migrants are again taking the more dangerous sea route to Greek islands on small boats.”

The “shift of the migration route back to the Aegean Sea is claiming lives,” the report states.

At least 136 refugees, mainly Syrian and Afghan, have lost their lives in 12 known incidents since August 2012.



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