

Death toll of migrants seeking to enter Europe via Mediterranean mounts

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Last October, the world looked on aghast as the coffins of hundreds of men, women and children were laid out in an airport hangar on the Italian island of Lampedusa.

Up to 360 people died a horrible death, drowning off the coast of the island after their boat capsized. Most of those who died in the tragedy were from Eritrea and Somalia, attempting to enter Europe by the hazardous Mediterranean Sea crossing. They were fleeing the terrible conditions at home in the hope of a better life in Europe.

In the aftermath of the tragedy there was much handwringing and crocodile tears among the European political and media elite, with promises that such an intolerable situation would be halted. The reality is this feigned outrage merely served to cover the fact that Europe is being made even more inaccessible to ever-growing numbers of desperate migrants and refugees.

According to José Angel Oropeza, Director of the International Organisation for Migration, at least 700 migrants drowned trying to make the Mediterranean crossing to Italy in 2013. He stated, “We will never know the exact number, as many more must have died at sea who will never be accounted for.”

Such deaths are now a ghoulish but routine occurrence. Hundreds more migrants attempting the crossing have already died this year in the most appalling circumstances.

The worst loss of life was on May 6 when a boat carrying 130 people capsized some 30 minutes into the journey, just a few miles from the Libyan coast. At least 44 bodies were recovered with a further 33 still missing. The Libyan border police were only able to save 52 of the immigrants from Ghana, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan.

Frontex, the European Union (EU) Border Agency,

calculated that 42,000 migrants were detected on routes from North Africa to Italy this year, with 25,650 of these crossing from Libya. It calculated that including other less busy routes, the total figure for the first few months of this year is probably 60,000. Frontex estimated that in the first four months of this year, the number of migrants arriving in Italy had increased by 823 percent over the same period in 2013.

A recent *Economist* article posed the question as to why so many Africans risk their lives in perilous crossings of the Mediterranean to reach Europe. It concluded: “Desertification and swelling populations outstrip agricultural productivity in much of the arid Sahel. A recent resurgence of the conflict in the Central African Republic, Mali, northern Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan has continued to displace millions, pushing ever more young men north towards Europe... It is not surprising that the Mediterranean beckons.”

As the result of a three-year civil war in Syria, fomented by the major imperialist powers, around 3 million people are now refugees. It is expected that many hundreds of thousands more will attempt to make the crossing during the upcoming “boat season”, with many certain to meet a grisly fate.

On Monday, the *Guardian* cited the comments of the mayor of the Italian town of Catania, Enzo Bianco. Bianco, a former Italian interior minister, said Europe was “Faced with a looming, colossal humanitarian catastrophe, with almost 800,000 people on the African coast ready to cross the Mediterranean ... Faced with these coffins, Europe must choose [whether to] bury our consciences of civilised men along with them.”

The *Guardian* claimed that the United Nations refugee body, the UNHCR, was considering establishing “holding centres” in North Africa and the Middle East in order to carry out the “large-scale

processing of migrants and refugees outside Europe, in countries such as Egypt, Libya or Sudan.”

It cited the comments of UNHCR’s European director, Vincent Cochetel, who said, “We would not be totally against external processing if certain safeguards were in place: the right to appeal, fair process, and the right to remain while appeals take place.”

But on June 3, the UNHCR denied the *Guardian*’s claims and said it “is not considering ‘holding centres’ as an alternative to address the challenges of refugees and migrants risking their lives at sea.” It was working with “relevant stakeholders” to find “alternatives to dangerous journeys, such as resettlement, humanitarian admission and family reunification programmes.”

This is so much hot air as the European Union and its constituent government “stakeholders” continue to ratchet up anti-immigrant propaganda and devise policies specifically based on denying migrants the right to enter Europe.

The EU spends billions of euros on a vast network designed to prevent its borders being breached by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. €1.8 billion was spent on its External Borders Fund between 2007 and 2013. In December, it began to operate the European Border Surveillance System (Eurosur).

Eurosur’s remit is to monitor the EU’s external borders with an array of drones, satellite search systems and other resources. The information gathered is then passed to the Frontex border protection agency, which coordinates measures to intercept migrant boats long before they reach Europe and to force them back.

Greece’s deputy prime minister, Evangelos Venizelos said recently, “The shaping of a comprehensive immigration policy is one of the main priorities of [the Greek presidency], as well as the Italian presidency, which follows ours”. Merchant marine minister Miltiadis Varvitsiotis echoed him, stating that processing offices should be established in Syria or Turkey “to examine who is eligible, or not, before people get on boats, put their lives in danger and trespass our borders.”

Greece’s “immigration policy” now consists of a ring of steel, as a veritable 7,000-strong coastguard “navy” patrols the eastern Aegean to prevent the entry of what it describes as 15,000 undocumented migrants. It has also sealed off its border with Turkey with a

10.5-kilometre barbed-wire fence.

A 30-kilometre fence is currently being built along the Turkish-Bulgarian border. According to the Bulgarian government, nearly 8,000 people fleeing the Syrian conflict have entered Bulgaria from Turkey in search of refuge.

Amnesty International warned in relation to these moves, “With virtually no safe and legal routes into Europe, people are increasingly pushed into the hands of smugglers and traffickers, and are forced to risk their lives on unseaworthy vessels.”

The *Guardian* noted, “Italy has pledged to force the migrant issue to the top of the EU agenda when it takes over the presidency in July. It cited the comments of interior minister Angelino Alfano who said, “During the European presidency, Europe will not see an Italy banging its fist on the table, but an Italy that overturns the table.”

Whilst plans for “holding centres” run by the UN are at this stage being formally denied, such camps and worse are already in existence in a number of Middle Eastern and North African countries. The BBC recently filmed the squalid, inhumane conditions inside one run by the Libyan regime in Misrata. At the local morgue, the bodies of eight migrants a week now fill its rooms—up from a total of three a year previously.

Migrants who enter Europe face similar levels of state brutality. Last month, three refugee camps holding hundreds of people were raided by riot police in Calais, France on the grounds they represented a threat to public health and safety.

In Britain, Operation Centurion, a series of two weeks of raids on “illegal” workers began on June 3. The raids appeared to be based on targeting specific nationalities employed in certain industries.

Details of the planned raids only became public knowledge after the Anti-Raids Network, an activist group, obtained access to government papers. One of their campaigners stated, “It is a clear attempt to demonise migrant labour and satisfy the right-wing political agenda on immigration and the EU.”



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