

Dozens of refugees suffocate in boat off the coast of Italy

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On the night of Monday, June 30, the Italian coast guard discovered the bodies of 45 refugees in an overcrowded fishing boat. The 20-metre-long boat, which was jam-packed with the more than 600 refugees, was discovered about 160 nautical miles northwest of the Libyan city of Tripoli. The refugees had come from Syria, Eritrea, Mali, Gambia and the Central African Republic.

In another refugee tragedy that day more than 70 refugees drowned when their rubber dinghy capsized in the channel separating Sicily from mainland Italy. Some 27 of the surviving refugees were rescued by a merchant ship. According to figures from the refugee support organization, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of refugee deaths during the crossing from Africa to Europe has increased to more than 500 since January this year.

The coast guard was confronted with a gruesome sight when members of its crew boarded the fishing vessel. Crammed together in the boat's 9-square-metre hold, otherwise used as a refrigerated room for fish, were numerous corpses.

Survivors told the Italian authorities that the Libyan people-smugglers had been extremely brutal, particularly with the refugees from sub-Saharan Africa. Because these refugees had apparently paid less money for the crossing, they were huddled together in the hold, while those from Syria were allowed to stay on deck.

However, when the quality of air worsened in the sweltering area below deck and engine fumes began to seep in, the desperate refugees tried to break out of the hold. Some of the refugees were pushed back because the people on deck were afraid that the overloaded boat might capsize.

A Syrian survivor described to the *La Repubblica* newspaper the desperate agony of the entrapped people. "They were screaming, pleading for help, begging to be let out to breathe fresh air. They tried to climb out of the hold, in which they were penned like cattle, but the boat was rocking too much. Others on deck got scared and slammed the hatch shut right in their faces."

A survivor from Gambia said the cries they heard went on hours, but they could not do anything about it. "Shortly before the coast guard reached the boat, the screaming stopped and I realised that all the trapped people must have been dead.

Among them is a cousin of mine and friends from my village", she said.

The fishing boat was towed into the Sicilian port of Pozzallo to dispose of the dead. Much of the deck had to be pried open to get the corpses out. "They were stacked on top of one another like bodies in a mass grave", said the Pozzallo chief of police, overwhelmed by the sight. "It reminded me of Auschwitz."

Criminal investigation proceedings were opened against three Senegalese and a Ghanaian, who had been hired by traffickers to operate the crossing.

Still unclear are the circumstances under which a rubber dinghy with probably more than 100 refugees on board capsized around the same time as the other tragedy. The survivors reported that more than 70 refugees were missing, but the authorities are playing down the incident. A spokesman for the Italian navy said that, as far as he knew, a dinghy had not capsized and further investigations would be conducted.

The Italian authorities are anxious to keep the number of victims as low as possible, so as to continue to present Operation Mare Nostrum (Our Sea), which has been underway since October 2013, as a success.

Mare Nostrum was initiated after more than 400 refugees were killed in two naval disasters off the Italian island of Lampedusa last autumn. Since then, a large-scale naval and coast guard operation has been systematically scouring the waters between Italy and Libya for refugee boats.

The operation, which involves a massive military and surveillance mobilization at Europe's borders, is only superficially concerned with the rescue of refugees. Refugee boats are often simply intercepted and turned back to the Libyan coast, and even those refugees rescued by merchant or military ships are denied access to a fair asylum procedure and forced to live in inhumane conditions.

On June 10, *Spiegel Online* reported that two groups of 160 to 170 refugees, who had only recently been stranded on the Italian coast, had simply been dumped by the Italian authorities at parking sites outside Rome and Milan—barefoot and without any money or food. The UNHCR reported that many of the refugees had been completely disoriented after hours of bus travel.

Mare Nostrum cooperates closely with the Libyan coast guard, and many of the refugees who were initially rescued from drowning were immediately deported back to Libya pursuant to a refoulement (returning) agreement between the two countries. Having returned to Libya, many refugees are subjected to arbitrary detention and systematic torture.

In late June, Human Rights Watch published the initial results of an investigation that was conducted in April 2014, which attempted to document the mistreatment of refugees in Libya. The human rights organization had inspected 9 of the 19 detention centres administered by the interior ministry's Department for the Control of Illegal Migration [DCIM] and interviewed 138 of the refugees confined there. Some 93 prisoners from eight camps showed signs of abuse and torture, and these included minors of 14 years of age. The refugees described how they were beaten with iron rods, sticks and rifle butts, whipped with rubber hosing and cables, and tortured with electric shocks. Prisoners in some camps even stated that they had been hung from a tree upside down and whipped.

The camps were also overcrowded with poor sanitation. The prisoners were denied access to medical treatment or any form of legal aid. They were detained without trial for months, their only "crime" being the accusation that they had entered Libya without documentation—or were unable to provide any identity papers.

Such blatant human rights violations are not only commonplace at the gates of Europe; they are also strongly supported by the Italian government and the European Union [EU]. The EU provides €12 million alone for the maintenance of the Libyan admission and detention camps.

Cecilia Malmström, the EU commissioner for justice and home affairs, contends that the EU and its Frontex border agency lack the money to take over the financing of Operation Mare Nostrum and transform it into a rescue mission, because the EU member states refuse to increase Frontex's €90 million budget.

In the meantime, the Italian government has announced that the operation will be scaled back or entirely culminated unless it receives additional financial support from the European Union. In adopting this position, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's government is yielding to the demands of right-wing and fascist parties that oppose the expenditure of the €9 million allocated to the rescuing of refugees.

Although hundreds of billions of euros from state coffers have been swallowed up by the banks and corporations over the past years, Europe's politicians continue to haggle over spending relatively tiny sums to rescue refugees from certain death. The haggling continues while the number of refugees trying to reach Europe has greatly increased. In particular, refugees are fleeing the worsening crises and wars in Syria, Iraq, the Central African Republic, Mali, Eritrea and Libya, which have been incited and supported by the US and European powers.

Given the mounting instability of social conditions in Libya and the growing numbers of refugees stranded there, attempts to cross the Mediterranean in overcrowded, unseaworthy boats will continue. More than 62,000 refugees have already landed on the coasts of Italy this year—many times more than in the same period last year. According to a recent report by Save the Children, these include nearly 10,000 children, of whom 6,000 have fled unaccompanied by parents or family members from their regions of origin. Syrians and Eritreans constitute the largest contingent of all these refugees; more than 10,000 people have been forced to flee each of the countries.

But the European Union's response to the refugee drama unfolding at its doors is only to mount more repression. Measures for the admission of refugees are not being considered, nor is access to fair asylum procedures being facilitated. Instead, the Eurosur surveillance program, involving the newest drone and satellite technology, is being used to meticulously monitor border regions in order to observe the refugees' every movement and block their passage as early as possible. The EU also secures readmission agreements and so-called "mobility partnerships" with neighbouring states. These countries are rewarded with better access to EU visas if they are prepared to intercept and detain refugees on their way to Europe. The EU turns a blind eye to any mistreatment suffered by refugees in this process.

The expansion of "Fortress Europe" compels refugees to resort to ever more dangerous routes of entry into the EU. The European states thus encourage the ruthless business of traffickers and people smugglers, who cash in on the desperation of refugees. But it is not the small-time boatmen who should be standing in the prisoner's dock, as is now the case with the tragedy off Sicily. It is the leaders of governments of Europe, whose inhumane refugee policies have been responsible for the deaths of more than 23,000 refugees since the year 2000.



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