

UN agency calls Mediterranean Sea deadliest route for refugees

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In the first eleven months of this year, around 207,000 refugees have attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe, three times more than the previous record year of 2011 when 70,000 people fled the NATO war in Libya. Officially, 3,419 people have died this year during their journey from Africa to Europe.

The UN High Commission for refugees (UNHCR) published the dramatic figures on global boat routes at the beginning of its annual High Commissioner's dialogue in Geneva on Wednesday. At the discussion event, which focused on the issue of rescue at sea, the UNHCR described the Mediterranean as the "deadliest route for refugees in the world."

UN high commissioner for refugees Antonio Guterres criticised European governments with unusual sharpness. He stated that "some governments grant the defence against refugees a higher priority than the right to asylum." According to Guterres, this was a mistake, and "the wrong reaction at a time when a record number of people are fleeing from wars." Refugee policy could not be organised in such a way "that it accepts the loss of human life as collateral damage."

This admission by a high-ranking European politician—Guterres, who was Portuguese Prime Minister between 1995 and 2002—underscores the de facto responsibility of the European Union (EU) for the mass killing of refugees.

The EU's policy of rigorously combatting refugees regards the deaths of thousands as a price worth paying. Since the EU countries have fully closed off all land borders with barriers and walls, and use satellites and drones to oversee the external borders, refugees are compelled to take the dangerous route across the Mediterranean.

The EU has commenced the Frontex-led Triton

mission in the region to repel refugees, leaving sea rescues to trading ships. This criminal policy has cost the lives of more than 25,000 refugees over the past 15 years.

In total, the UNHCR counted 348,000 people who had dared to attempt to flee across the Mediterranean this year. Of these, 4,245 fatalities have been identified. With 3,419 counted fatalities, the comparatively small Mediterranean is by far the world's deadliest route.

In the Gulf of Bengal in southeast Asia, 540 asylum seekers lost their lives. A total of 54,000 people were compelled to take the route across the open sea. Around the Horn of Africa, 82,000 refugees were counted in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. On the route to Yemen or Saudi Arabia, 216 fatalities were confirmed. In the Caribbean, 72 refugees did not survive their journey across the sea.

The EU is not only responsible for the largest number of refugee deaths, but it also accepts the lowest number of global refugees. According to UNHCR statistics, more than half of the refugees seeking to cross the Mediterranean by boat come from current war zones. This includes 65,000 Syrians, 35,000 Eritreans, 10,000 Malians, and thousands of Afghans, who have all found every legal route to Europe blocked.

Although the imperialist powers are responsible for the wars that turn millions into refugees in the first place, they are raising the drawbridge ever higher.

At the latest UNHCR crisis conference on Syria in Geneva a few days earlier, the European and North American states agreed merely to accept a further 38,000 Syrian refugees. They thus plan only to accept 1 percent of all refugees. The German government has gone even further, refusing to take any more refugees from the Syrian civil war, citing the 80,000 it has already accepted.

In comparison, Syria's neighbouring states, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Turkey, have taken in 3.5 million refugees. An impoverished country like Ethiopia has accepted 650,000 refugees from Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan, twice as many as Germany's total. In Kenya, 350,000 refugees are confined to one refugee camp near Dadaab, mainly from Somalia. Because the World Food Programme is running out of resources, rations have had to be reduced and the refugees are starving. This list could be lengthened considerably.

The refugee crisis in Syria is rapidly intensifying. Neighbouring states, which are increasingly overburdened, are following the EU's example and closing their borders. In addition, Syrians in Iraq are no longer secure due to the war against ISIS by the United States and its allies. The coming of winter is intensifying the crisis of provisions. According to estimates from experts, thousands more refugees face the threat of death in the coming months.



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