

Second migrant ship rescued off coast of Italy

Chris Marsden
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A second ship abandoned by its crew, the Ezadeen, was rescued Friday with 450 migrants on board and towed to Italy. It follows the New Year's Eve rescue of the Blue Sky M, with 970 migrants on board.

The Ezadeen had run out of fuel and lost power in rough seas approximately 65 kilometres off southern Italy. It was secured by a rescue team with members from three coastguards that landed by helicopter after several hours struggling in rough seas. The passengers included children and pregnant women and are believed to be mostly Syrians. They were abandoned to their fate on a 50-year-old, 73 metre (240 foot) Sierra Leone-flagged livestock carrier that reportedly set sail from Turkey.

A migrant had called for help, saying, "We're without crew, we're heading toward the Italian coast and we have no one to steer," according to Italian Coastguard Commander Filippo Marini.

The Moldovan registered Blue Sky M freighter, carrying Syrian and Kurdish migrants, was intercepted by Italian sailors after it had been placed on autopilot within five miles of rocks off Italy's southeastern shore.

People-smugglers had navigated it from Turkey via Greek waters. If a helicopter landing had not been successful, another 45 minutes' sailing time would have ended in a massive loss of life among passengers that included 60 children and two pregnant women—one of whom gave birth on board.

What makes the events more appalling still is the fact that a passenger had sent a distress call Tuesday, December 30 to the Greek 112 emergency line pleading that "we are without water, food and blankets."

The Blue Sky M was reportedly heading from Turkey to the Croatian port of Rijeka and was off Corfu. Greek authorities scrambled a navy frigate and helicopter, but took no action after the captain said the vessel wasn't in distress and didn't require assistance. The authorities

accepted these assurances and said no one aboard the vessel was in danger.

Greek state television reported the alarm was raised because armed men were on board.

The ship then changed direction, heading west towards Italy. Weather conditions were so bad at the time that they were hindering the rescue of those trapped on the Norman Atlantic ferry, which had caught fire two days earlier, killing at least 11 people.

The ship's crew abandoned ship and programmed it to crash into the coast at a speed of six knots. It was intercepted by a team of six coast guard officials on two helicopters near Santa Maria di Leuca, on the southernmost tip of Italy. The motor had been blocked. "There would have been death and destruction" if the vessel had crashed into the coast, Marini said.

The Blue Sky M safely docked at Gallipoli on New Year's Eve. Thirty-five migrants were hospitalised, with many treated for hypothermia. The ship's safety certification had been withdrawn several months ago, according to the BBC.

The Icelandic Coastguard's ICGV Tyr, which towed the Ezadeen to the Italian port of Crotone, has been involved in four incidents involving abandoned ships since December—indicating a new pattern of behaviour for people-smugglers preying on the victims of imperialist wars and economic devastation seeking refuge in Europe via North Africa.

The number of people attempting to reach Europe by sea from the Middle East, Africa and Asia reached a record in 2014, with more than 170,000 individuals rescued by Italy and 40,000 by Greece in the last 14 months.

At least 4,077 people died in 2014 while trying to cross borders as they fled war and poverty, according to the International Organization for Migration. Of those, 3,072 died in the Mediterranean, up massively from the estimated 700 in 2013.

Over 40,000 migrants have died since 2000, the organisation states. Simona Moscarelli told the *Toronto Star* there are presently more conflicts than at any time since the Second World War. “Half of the people who arrive come from places where there are conflicts, war or dictatorships,” she said.

The situation has worsened, because smugglers are ready to use (and abandon) bigger vessels since the Italian government abandoned its’ Mare Nostrum (“Our Sea”) maritime search and rescue mission in December, refusing to spend the 114 million euros it cost.

It has been replaced by the European Union-led Triton mission, controlled by the Frontex border police, which are severely under-funded. The policy is effectively designed to allow the death of refugees, because this acts as a deterrent to others who might attempt entry to Europe.

Predictably, whatever critical commentary has emerged has focused on inadequate funding of border protection. Claude Moraes, who chairs the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, was quoted widely complaining, “Triton scares no one,” because it doesn’t have the weight of a sovereign justice system behind it.

There is no questioning within ruling circles of immigration policies designed to exclude the most desperate and vulnerable, or the pro-business economic agendas and neo-colonial wars that are responsible for the dire straits in which so many find themselves. Instead, political and media figures wax indignant at the criminals who make \$1,000 to \$2,000 dollars by exploiting the misery that imperialism has created.

Moraes is now the Labour member of the European Parliament for London and deputy leader of the European Parliamentary Labour Party. In 1992, he unsuccessfully contested Harrow West in the general election for Labour. He has stood loyally by as Labour signed up for wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria and imposed authoritarian laws in the name of the “war on terror,” even as he postured as a guardian of civil liberties and the welfare of immigrants.



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