

# Over 300 migrant workers perish off Italian coast

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In what has become an unending tragedy in the Mediterranean Sea, hundreds of migrant workers attempting to escape war and poverty and find a better life for themselves have perished off the coast of Italy as they attempted to cross from Libya in rubber dinghies, without food and water. The majority of the victims were from the Ivory Coast, Senegal, Mali, and Gambia.

The death of 300 refugees adds to the more than 40,000 refugees since the year 2000, according to the International Organization for Migration. The tragedies are all a direct result of the callous “Fortress Europe” policy of the European Union (EU), compelling refugees to resort to ever more dangerous routes of entry and encouraging the ruthless business of traffickers and people smugglers.

The migrant workers told aid organisations that four dinghies left the North African coast on Saturday, carrying around 100 people each. Two of the boats capsized over the weekend in stormy weather. Only nine people survived after spending four days in freezing waters before they were rescued. The Italian coast guard came to the aid of the third boat and took on board 76 people, but at least 29 of them then died from hypothermia. The whereabouts of the fourth boat is still unknown. The youngest of the missing is a 12-year-old boy.

“This is a tragedy on an enormous scale and a stark reminder that more lives could be lost if those seeking safety are left at the mercy of the sea. Saving lives should be our top priority. Europe cannot afford to do too little too late,” said the Europe Bureau Director of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Vincent Cochetel.

A UNHCR statement repeated “its concern about the lack of a strong search and rescue operation in the

Mediterranean. Europe’s Triton operation, which is run by the European border protection agency Frontex, is not focused on search and rescue and is not providing the necessary tools to cope with the scale of the crises.”

The latest tragedy is the biggest loss of life since October 3, 2013, when a boat carrying migrants from Libya to Italy sank off the island of Lampedusa, with more than 360 dead. The EU began patrolling the Mediterranean in November 2014, after Italy ended its Mare Nostrum search-and-rescue operation following the Lampedusa deaths.

The Mare Nostrum operation was only superficially concerned with rescuing refugees. Its main goal was to identify trafficking boats and force them back to Africa. As then Italian Defence Minister Mario Mauro and Interior Minister Angelino Alfano made clear, the deployment of warships was to deter those who “think they can get away with people trafficking without being punished.”

Those rescued were denied access to a fair asylum procedure and forced to live in inhumane conditions. In one incident the naval ship Aliseo opened fire with several machine gun bursts on a boat containing 176 refugees. After the rescue of the refugees, the boat sank.

The Italian government had abandoned the Mare Nostrum operation barely a year after it was put in place, claiming other European countries did not provide enough support, and also pressure from right-wing anti-immigration groups saying it was a “pull factor” encouraging migrants to make the crossing.

The replacement Triton operation, run by the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex), is purely a border control measure, extending just 30 miles from

the Italian coast. From its inception, with a meagre annual budget of 2.9 million euros, the European Commission insisted Frontex “is neither a search and rescue body nor does it take up the functions of a Rescue Coordination Centre.”

The Commission knew its policy would lead to increased fatalities, stating, “It must be stressed that the withdrawal of naval forces from the sea area near the Libyan coast... will probably lead to a higher number of deaths.”

The intention was that “significantly fewer migrants will attempt to cross the Mediterranean in bad weather and prices for the crossings will rise.” The number of refugees would thus decline to “the level of previous years”.

Instead, 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. 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.

On New Year’s Eve this year the Blue Sky M, carrying 970 Syrian and Kurdish migrants, was intercepted by Italian sailors, after it had been abandoned by its crew and placed on autopilot within five miles of rocks off Italy’s coast. Within a few days, the Ezadeen was similarly abandoned with 450 migrants on board, and towed to Italy.

The EU denies it has any responsibility for the continuing tragedy in the Mediterranean and blames the traffickers. But the emergence of unscrupulous people smugglers is due to the systematic sealing-off of Europe. It is now impossible, as a result of war and repression perpetrated by Europe and the United States in the Middle East and Africa, for refugees to legally enter Europe. They are forced by the EU to take ever more dangerous routes across the Mediterranean.

At the same time, the NATO-led war and overthrow of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and that country’s descent into civil war between rival militias has led to hundreds of thousands of migrants being trapped there.

The EU’s response to the refugee crisis on its borders is to mount more repression.

Measures for the admission of refugees and access to fair asylum procedures are forbidden. Instead, drone and satellite technology is being used to monitor border regions, and neighbouring states are being coerced into intercepting and detaining refugees on their way to Europe in return for concessions to their ruling elites.



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