

Another 400 refugees feared dead in latest Mediterranean Sea disaster

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Four hundred migrants fleeing Libya have reportedly drowned after their boat capsized in the Mediterranean last weekend. A spokesman for the International Organisation for Migration in Italy told Agence France-Presse that survivors reported there were up to 550 people on board when the ship sank. Around a dozen bodies have been recovered so far.

If initial estimates of the scope of the tragedy prove correct, this would be the largest loss of life at least since around 360 migrants drowned in October 2013 after their boat sank near the island of Lampedusa.

There is good reason to believe that the number of deaths in the Mediterranean Sea will continue to rise. According to official tallies, more than 8,500 people were rescued trying to cross the Mediterranean between April 10 and 13 alone, including at least 450 children. Many of the refugees were fleeing war zones in Libya, Syria and Africa.

Judith Sunderland, the acting deputy director for Europe and Central Asia at Human Rights Watch, declared, "If the reports are confirmed, this past weekend would be among the deadliest few days in the world's most dangerous stretch of water for migrants and asylum seekers."

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) up to 500 migrants and asylum seekers died in the Mediterranean this year before the current disaster. This figure represents a 30-fold increase over recorded deaths during the same period in 2014. An estimated 3,200 people died in all of 2014. So far this year, the number could be approaching 1,000 with the death toll expected to rise dramatically as warmer conditions encourage more migrants to take to the seas in coming months.

Many of those rescued over the weekend remained in Italian vessels while others were transferred to already

overcrowded refugee centers on the Italian coast and on nearby islands where they confront intolerable living conditions.

The latest flood of refugees from the Middle East is the direct result of the criminal wars conducted by the US, the European Union and its member states. Leading European states have fully supported and participated in the US-led military operations for regime change in Iraq, Libya and Syria. The unrelenting military offensive by western imperialist powers over the last two decades has plunged the Middle East and large swathes of Africa into chaos and conflict. By 2014, an estimated two million of the six million inhabitants of Libya fled the country following US-French-British bombing campaigns in 2011.

The subsequent western-led campaign to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad plunged the country into civil war and forced an estimated four million to leave the country. Many fled to neighboring Turkey but others made the treacherous journey to Europe, including some of the victims of last weekend's tragedy.

Now the US and Saudi Arabia, with the backing of the European nations, are extending the battlefield to Yemen. This imperialist warmongering has led to the highest levels of refugees fleeing their homelands since the Second World War.

As desperate migrants increasingly seek refuge in Europe, the EU is transforming the Mediterranean into a no-go zone with the increasing number of deaths at sea serving as a de facto deterrent to others.

Following the outcry after the Lampedusa tragedy in 2013, Italy launched a search and rescue naval operation called Mare Nostrum ("Our Sea"). In practice, sea rescue was always of secondary importance to the operation. The deployment of the

navy was primarily intended to block migrants from reaching Italy by detecting refugee boats off the coast of Libya and Tunisia and escorting them back to North Africa.

Nevertheless, an estimated 150,000 refugees were rescued under the program. Mare Nostrum was scrapped last November and replaced by the much smaller and less well-equipped Triton surveillance mission, run by the EU's external border agency, Frontex, whose primary mandate is border control, not search and rescue. This was a conscious decision by EU authorities to end any effective rescue operations and allow the number of deaths at sea to soar.

At the same time European political parties of all shades are stepping up their anti-immigrant policies aimed at blocking migrants from entering the continent while deporting those already here. On April 14, the leader of Italy's ultra-nationalist Northern League called on all local authorities to resist "by any means" requests to accommodate asylum seekers. He declared that his party was ready to take actions to prevent arrivals.

In Germany refugee centers have been the target for a wave of fire bombings in recent weeks, while far right organizations such as Pegida have conducted vicious xenophobic campaigns denouncing immigrants as social spongers and equating Moslems with terrorists. In both Italy and Germany, organizations such as the Northern League and Pegida receive tacit support government parties, which argue that it is necessary to "seriously" consider the arguments raised by the racists. While broad layers of the German population have taken to the streets to defend the rights of immigrants both the governing Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) have entered into talks with supporters of Pegida.

Local German officials have also raised the idea of housing refugees in concentration camps. A recent report in *Der Spiegel* on the appalling conditions of refugee centers in Germany began with the declaration on one inmate who said, "In Syria you die quick, here you die slowly".

On Tuesday, the European Commission responded to the weekend's boat tragedy with plans for a so-called "comprehensive migration agenda". At the centre of the plan is the setting up of offshore camps in North African countries to incarcerate and intimidate

immigrants and asylum seekers before they can leave their countries. The measures are described bluntly in one report as a step towards "outsourcing border control and containment mechanisms to prevent departures."

Referring to the plan Judith Sunderland of Human Rights Watch commented, "It's hard not to see these proposals as cynical bids to limit the numbers of migrants and asylum seekers making it to EU shores."



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