Scores of refugees die brutally in the Mediterranean

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At least 49 refugees and asylum seekers died a gruesome death in the hold of an overcrowded fishing boat off the coast of Libya, Saturday. According to reports, an Italian navy helicopter spotted the boat at 7 a.m. local time, around 21 miles off the Libyan coast and south of the Italian island of Lampedusa, as it was starting to sink.

Some 320 others were saved. When 312 survivors had been taken on board, Admiral Pierpaolo Libuffo, head of Italy's rescue operations, said these included 45 women and three children. But when the rescue team searched the boat's hold they found at least 40 dead people.

Speaking from the ship, Commander Massimo Tozzi said rescuers found the dead, "immersed in water, fuel and human excrement."

The victims are thought to have asphyxiated after inhaling fumes from fuels after the boat took on water in the hold.

Such is the flood of migrants now leaving their war-torn and poverty-stricken homes in North Africa and the Middle East that each day boats are rescued in the southern and eastern Mediterranean.

The same day, the Italian coastguard said hundreds more refugees were rescued from boats and were taken to Sicily. In addition, on Saturday, coastguards on the Greek island of Kos told Reuters they saved more than 200 people in several small boats.

Just days earlier, on August 11, the Italian navy organised the rescue of 1,700 people. The following day, 50 refugees on a rubber dinghy were saved, but others are thought to have died.

The boat crossing from North Africa to Europe is designated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as the most dangerous a refugee can make anywhere in the world. According to IOM figures released Friday, before the weekend s tragedy, already this year more than 2,300 refugees and asylum seekers perished attempting to reach Europe by boat. This compares with 3,279 deaths during the whole of 2014.

Mass deaths are commonplace. Earlier this month more than 200 drowned after a massively overcrowded fishing boat capsized 15 nautical miles off the Libyan coast. Some 600 refugees, including 100 who were below deck, were crammed into a vessel designed to carry a maximum of 50 people.

Commenting on the increasing number of deaths of refugees in the holds of vessels, the BBC's James Reynold said, "It seems that migrants who can't afford to pay the full fare to smugglers to get them from North Africa to Europe, particularly here to Italy, sometimes get locked in the hold of the ships they're travelling in."

He added, "Bear in mind these ships are incredibly unsafe to begin with, but being locked in the hold proves so many extra dangers, often fatal ones. It seems that these migrants were overcome by diesel fumes. They essentially suffocated to death."

On August 4, the IOM revealed that around 188,000 people trying to cross the Mediterranean had been rescued so far this year, with the figure expected to reach 200,000 within days.

The staggering numbers of refugees who are still prepared to make the life threatening trip to Europe is testament to the scale of the devastation wrought by the major imperialist powers over the last 20 years. Just this year, according to IOM spokesman Joel Millman, nearly a quarter of a million refugees and asylum seekers have arrived in Europe via the Mediterranean, compared to 219,000 for all of 2014.

Many of those who manage to reach land end up in Turkey, whose coastline is just a few miles from the

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eastern Greek islands. Thousands more attempt entry into Europe via Italy. According to the IOM, 97,000 have arrived in Italy so far this year.

Even more have crossed from Syria and Turkey into Greece. Vincent Cochetel, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR's) Director of the Bureau for Europe, said this week that 124,000 refugees fleeing war zones have arrived by sea, from Turkey, at the Greek islands of Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos since January 2015. This represents a 750 percent increase in the number of refugees compared to 2014.

Upon arrival in these countries, these desperate refugees face the most appalling conditions.

At least 7,000 refugees and asylum seekers, most of whom are fleeing the Syria and Afghanistan conflicts, are already on Kos. They have been brutally treated at the hands of the Syriza-led government. Last week, thousands were rounded up and attacked by riot police. The cops assailed them with tear gas and used fire extinguishers against them. More than 1,000 refugees, including women and children, were locked in a sports stadium with no basic facilities for hours on end. Most of the penniless refugees are forced to sleep in tents, abandoned structures or in the open air.

The Syriza government has responded to international criticism of its actions by commandeering a huge car ferry, onto which it is currently herding up to 2,500 refugees. The refugees will be forced to live on the ship, essentially a floating detention facility, for at least the next two weeks.

According to reports, many of the exhausted refugees seeking assistance and shelter on the ship will be refused. The *Times of Change* noted that a number of the arrivals on Kos from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran "have little chance of getting aboard the ship as they have not established themselves as refugees like the Syrians, who have priority."

Some Syrians are also being denied. AFP reported the comments of one Syrian refugee who was turned away from the ship, who said, "We don't know where to go. We were told we could no longer register at the stadium." He added, "We are in a vicious cycle, and we keep turning round and round."

Last Friday, EU Migration Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos gave a speech in which he said that the world was facing the "worst refugee crisis since the Second World War."

This is the case, but the desperate situation refugees confront in these transit countries is entirely due to the criminal policies of the European Union (EU).

The EU has met the growing numbers of refugees seeking to enter the continent with an iron fist. At its June crisis summit on mass migration, the EU's member states strengthened the repressive apparatus used to keep refugees and asylum seekers out. The draft document agreed to the creation of "structured border zones and facilities" in the "frontline states" of Italy, Greece and Malta, that "will ensure the quick registration, identification and fingerprinting of refugees."

Syriza Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras signed up to new repressive measures, including the forced identification and registration of refugees in camps run by European authorities, termed "Hotspots" by the EU. From these camps, all those deemed to come from previously defined "safe countries of origin" will be immediately sent back.

The assembled heads of state blocked all efforts at even setting quotas for each country to take. Instead, it agreed to the relocation in Europe of just 40,000 refugees in Greece and Italy over two years—a fraction of those who have arrived in those countries just in the last weeks.

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