

Dozens of refugees drown in the Aegean Sea as Fortress Europe is expanded

Marianne Arens and Martin Kreickenbaum
30 October 2015

On Wednesday, upwards of 50 refugees died in several boating accidents while making the journey from the Turkish coast to the nearby Greek Aegean islands. In the worst accident, which took place on the way to the island of Lesbos, 242 refugees—including many women and children—were rescued by fishermen and the Greek coast guard.

To date, 11 bodies have been found, but 38 refugees are still missing. The bodies of eight additional refugees, including six children, who were killed in several incidents near the islands of Samos and Agathonisi have also been recovered from the sea.

Near Lesbos, a badly overloaded wooden boat capsized. Four coast guard boats and three helicopters took part in a rescue mission that lasted the entire night. All together, the Greek coast guard rescued 900 refugees from the sea in a 24-hour period.

Every day, in spite of strong winds and stormy water conditions, thousands of refugees continue to risk the dangerous journey from Turkey to Europe. They are driven above all by the fear that the states of the European Union might close their borders very soon in reaction to the continuous stream of refugees.

In the past week alone, more than 48,000 refugees have reached the Greek islands. Last Friday, 180 inflatable rafts with a total of 9,600 refugees were counted on a single day. The raging winds have had essentially no impact on the flow of refugees.

The number of refugees who drowned in the Aegean in October rose to 77 as a result of the recent boating accidents. So far, an estimated 400 refugees have lost their lives in 2015. According to Minister Theodoros Dristas, who is in charge of the coast guard, the Greek harbor police have had to carry out the frightening job of gathering up drowned refugees with ever increasing frequency.

According to a press release by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 566,369 refugees have arrived in Greece since the beginning of the year. The majority of them have traveled by way of the island of Lesbos, where 300,000 stranded refugees have been counted. The Greek authorities and the European Union have intentionally created an inhumane situation there. The refugees do not have reasonable lodging options and lack adequate care. Left to themselves, most refugees try to leave Greece again quickly and travel further along the so-called “Balkan route.”

The humanitarian situation is worsening along the whole route. At the border crossing between Austria and the German state of Bavaria, more than a thousand people every day are forced to spend the entire night standing out in the cold.

The German authorities insist that everyone who crosses the border has to be registered individually. This has led to a situation in which hundreds of exhausted refugees spend the entire night on the street. Many have small children in their arms and are seriously ill. For many hours, in cold and rain, they are left standing together in crowded conditions.

With bureaucratic thoroughness, the border police insist on processing no more than 50 people per hour. This rule comes from the highest levels of government. “We want to know who comes into our country,” said Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière (CDU) at a press conference on Wednesday.

De Maizière made it clear that the government, far from offering a so-called “culture of welcome”, is working feverishly to implement the guidelines set by the EU summit on Sunday. The German government has already begun to send police to Slovakia in order to prepare an extensive Frontex operation. Germany will send a thousand police to Slovakia for this operation.

Under the leadership of the Merkel government, the EU decided on Sunday to further strengthen the borders in Europe, seal off the individual countries and further arm security bodies. In Germany, the deportations are supposed to be perfected in order to deter additional refugees. All of these measures are grist for the mill of the right-wing extremists in and around the right-wing Pegida movement in Germany.

The increase in the flow of refugees is the logical consequence of the wars in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. But de Maizière now wants to send refugees back to Afghanistan, which he claims “is in second place among countries of origin”.

De Maizière bragged on Wednesday about the new government legislation designed to speed up asylum procedures. He said the legislation would make it possible to accelerate deportations significantly. “About ten thousand rejected refugees”, he said, would have to “leave our country” in the coming days. He said that more than 11,000 refugees have been deported already this year in addition to the approximately 27,000 “encouraged returnees”, that is, people who were brought into the country with false promises and voluntarily returned to the misery they had just escaped.

The refugee question is also increasing tensions between European countries. The Bavarian state government attacked the Austrian government sharply and complained that refugees are being “simply transferred to Germany”. Bavarian Interior Minister Joachim Herrmann (Christian Social Union/CSU) in effect blamed Austria for organized smuggling. Refugees were brought to the border in buses at night and let out. He demanded “solidarity”—not with the refugees, who arrived exhausted and sick in Bavaria after weeks of travel on foot—but with the Bavarian state government.

At the press conference on Wednesday, de Maizière criticized the government of Austria with unusual severity, saying Austria’s behaviour was not “in order in the last days”. He expected that Austria would “return immediately to orderly relations”.

Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann (Austrian Social Democratic Party/SPÖ) countered: “We cannot also take over Germany’s applicants for asylum. We are too small for that.”

Austria began on Wednesday to seal the borders to its neighbouring countries in the south and sent a thousand additional police to the border with Slovakia.

The erection of a border zone has been under discussion in Austria for some days. In the summer, Hungary had already blocked off its entire southern border with a high fence. Faymann downplayed this action with the claim “a door with side openings” was planned. “We are not building a fence like Hungary”, he said. But Austrian Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner (Austrian People’s Party/ÖVP) countered: “Of course it is also about a fence.” She demanded “solid technical barriers several kilometres to the left and the right of the border crossing.”

The attitude of the volunteer helpers and aid organizations contrasts sharply with that of the official authorities. The local Red Cross volunteers in Passau have criticized the federal police who only let in 50 people per hour. “It simply takes too long. The weather conditions are now much too cold for that”, said Leonard Stärk from the German Red Cross. “It cannot be that people have to stand so long in the cold at night”, he said.

On Tuesday, two refugees jumped in despair into the cold river in the Bavarian town of Simbach am Inn in order to swim further into Germany. They were swept away by an unexpectedly strong current. They were rescued from drowning only with great difficulty.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact