

Dozens of refugees drowned last week in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas

Stefan Steinberg
10 December 2015

Dozens of refugees, including babies and children, have drowned this week in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. Their deaths are a direct product of US and European military interventions in the Middle East and Afghanistan, combined with the increasingly restrictive border policy of the European Union.

On Tuesday at least six children died after a boat carrying Afghan migrants sank in Turkish waters en route to Greece, according to the Anatolia news agency. The Turkish coastguard recovered the bodies of the children, including a baby. Two other migrants were reported missing.

The group of Afghans were travelling in a flimsy inflatable dinghy that sank in strong winds and high waves near the town of Cesme in western Turkey. One day before, the body of a five-year-old migrant girl washed up on the beach of Cesme, according to the Dogan news agency.

In a third incident, at least 11 migrants, including five children, drowned and about 10 were reported missing after their wooden boat sank in the southeastern Aegean Sea off the Greek island of Farmakonisi, the Greek maritime police said Wednesday.

In September the photo of a dead three-year-old Syrian boy washed up on a Turkish beach led to a series of hypocritical speeches by European politicians bemoaning his death. But in the months since then the US and Europe have stepped up the military destruction that forced millions to flee from Iraq, Libya, Syria and Afghanistan in the first place. At the same time the European Union has reinforced its policy of sealing off Europe's borders, forcing refugees to risk the most dangerous routes at sea in an attempt to enter the continent.

At the centre of this policy is the deal struck at the start of this month between the EU and Turkey aimed

at sealing off Turkey's borders and preventing refugees from the wars in Syria and Afghanistan from crossing the country to reach Europe.

In exchange for €3 billion from the European Union and a commitment to speed up negotiations for EU membership, Turkey pledged to prevent refugees from entering the EU, i.e., to act as Europe's military guard dog.

Already at the end of November a report by Human Rights Watch noted that Turkey had virtually closed its borders to Syrian asylum seekers and was pushing back refugees attempting to enter the country.

Gerry Simpson, senior refugee researcher at Human Rights Watch declared: "Turkey's border closure is forcing pregnant women, children, the elderly, the sick, and the injured to run the gauntlet of Turkish border officials to escape the horrors of Syria's war."

The aim of the EU-Turkey deal struck on December 2 was precisely to close any remaining gaps along the Turkish border. The determination of the EU authorities to repel the victims of the war was spelled out by the vice-president of the EU Commission, Frans Timmermans, in an interview on December 1 with the *Wall Street Journal*.

When asked about the influx of Afghan refugees attempting to enter Europe, Timmermans declared: "This is all linked. Because of the Syrian refugees, a path is built and then others, who want to come to Europe for other reasons, see the possibility of using that 'highway to Europe'."

In order to shut down the refugees' "highway to Europe" Timmermans said it was necessary to coordinate with Turkey to ensure "that people from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh can be stopped at the external Turkish border rather than coming to Turkey first and having to be stopped at the European

border.”

In the same interview, Timmermans made clear that he agreed with the policy of racial profiling currently in force at the borders of a number of Balkan countries (including Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia) that bar entry to all refugees apart from those from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Even as they reinforce the walls of Fortress Europe, the EU powers, together with the US, are stepping up their military interventions that have forced millions to flee in the first place. On December 1, NATO announced it was reversing its decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Instead NATO members, with Germany taking the lead, are expanding their military interventions in the country.

Additionally, the US, France, Great Britain and Germany all announced in the past week that they would be increasing their involvement in the war against Syria, which has already reduced entire swathes of the country to rubble. Germany is participating directly in the Syrian war for the first time. The German parliament agreed last week to send Tornado aircraft, a frigate and 1,200 troops to the region.

According to the International Organisation for Migration, over 909,000 migrants and refugees have entered Europe by sea so far in 2015—four times the figure of 219,000 recorded in 2014. Total fatalities amongst refugees so far this year stand at 3,601.



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