

Hundreds feared dead as another refugee boat sinks in Mediterranean

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According to numerous news sources, another disaster involving a refugee boat took place Monday in the Mediterranean Sea. Italian President Sergio Mattarella spoke of several hundred deaths, while German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier confirmed over 300. Somalia's ambassador in Egypt told BBC Arabic that there were 400 deaths.

Reports say the refugees came from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Egypt and Sudan. They were reportedly traveling from Egypt to Italy in boats that were poorly equipped for the voyage.

The BBC published interviews with 41 survivors who said up to 500 people died. The survivors spoke to the BBC from the southern Greek city of Kalamata, where they are being held after their rescue. The news agency quoted Abdul Kadir, a Somali, as saying some 240 migrants left the Libyan port of Tobruk heading for Italy. He said that once out on the Mediterranean, traffickers made them move in the middle of the night onto a bigger wooden boat that already had at least 300 people on it. This boat then capsized.

The BBC quotes Muaz, from Ethiopia, saying, "My wife and baby drowned in front of me."

At the time of writing, neither the Italian nor the Greek coastguard had confirmed the reports about the tragedy. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and other voluntary organisations also had no information on it. However, Reuters cited a United Nations refugee agency official as telling Swiss broadcaster SRF that he knew of 40 survivors from what appeared to be the same incident.

In a separate incident, six bodies were recovered and 108 migrants rescued when a rubber dinghy sank off the coast of Libya, according to the organization SOS Mediterranean.

Experts have long been warning that another incident

involving large numbers of deaths would occur in the Mediterranean. The responsibility for this lies with the European powers and the European Union, which are forcing refugees to take ever more life-threatening routes by sealing off Europe's borders and largely suspending sea rescue programmes.

The US government is equally culpable, having led the 2011 war for regime change that killed some 50,000 Libyans, toppled and murdered Muammar Gaddafi, and plunged the entire country into a tribal civil war that continues to devastate Libyan society. The bloodletting and chaos have forced thousands of displaced and desperate Libyans and others fleeing imperialist wars in the Middle East and North Africa to make the perilous trip across the Mediterranean.

Just last week, in an interview with Fox News, President Obama called the current situation in Libya a "mess" and termed his failure to "plan for the day after" the overthrow of Gaddafi the worst "mistake" of his presidency. At the same time, he defended the US-NATO intervention as justified by "humanitarian" considerations.

The US-led war in Libya was not a "mistake"; it was one of the greatest war crimes of the young 21st Century.

On the same day as this latest tragedy, exactly a year ago, 18 April, 2015, the worst refugee boat disaster to date occurred, claiming more than 700 lives. Within the space of a single week, 1,200 refugees were drowned.

Even at the time, the EU accepted the deaths as a price worth paying, and even desired them, as the study "Death by Rescue: The Lethal Effects of the EU's Policies of Non-Assistance at Sea," released immediately prior to the latest catastrophe, has confirmed.

Researchers from Goldsmiths College (University of

London), who evaluated internal EU documents and protocols, demonstrate in the study that the EU deliberately ignored the warnings of the border protection agency Frontex that the number of refugee deaths would increase when it ended the Italian Navy's "Mare Nostrum" rescue mission in 2014, replacing it with the Frontex operation "Triton." Within the framework of "Mare Nostrum," some 150,000 refugees in distress at sea were brought to Italian territory, while "Triton" was aimed above all at deterring refugees.

Charles Heller, the co-author of the study, said in an interview to the Press Association, "Can we really qualify the ending of Mare Nostrum and its replacement by Triton, in all knowledge of the consequences this would have, as a mistake? I would rather argue that this was a case of institutionalised wilful neglect, and that European policymakers and Frontex have made themselves guilty of killing by omission."

After last April's catastrophe, many refugees sought to reach Europe via the Balkan route. Many lost their lives in the sea leg of this route, but the relatively short distance from Turkey to the Greek islands made the voyage less risky than the much longer journey from either Libya or Egypt to Italy across the Mediterranean.

With the sealing off of the Balkan route and the dirty refugee deal with Turkey, many migrants are once again risking the more dangerous route across the Mediterranean. The estimates of the number of refugees waiting for an opportunity to travel from Libya range from 100,000 to half a million. Despite bad weather, 24,000 have made it to Italy since the beginning of the year. In March alone there were 9,000, four times as many as the same month last year.

The EU is responding by strengthening efforts to deter refugees and at the same time using the refugee crisis as the pretext for new military interventions and imperialist wars of conquest. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has proposed a refugee deal with African countries along the lines of the EU-Turkey agreement. At the weekend, he sent a proposal to this effect to EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and EU Council chief Donald Tusk.

According to the plan, the regimes in North Africa will accept the return of rejected asylum seekers, establish EU-funded detention camps and "secure zones" in Africa, and "manage" migration flows by

separating refugees from economic migrants. In exchange, the regimes will receive billions, which Renzi proposes to fund via "EU migration bonds."

To this end, the EU intends by military means to establish a puppet regime in Libya, led by the "government of national unity's" Fayeze Sarraj, who is currently based at the Abu Sitta naval installation near Tripoli but does not control his own territory. These plans were discussed yesterday evening at a meeting of EU foreign and defence ministers in Luxembourg, in which Sarraj participated by video link.

On 14 and 15 April, the Munich Security Conference met for the first time in Africa. Some sixty high-ranking officials from Africa, Europe and the United States, including several foreign and defence ministers, discussed how German and European security policy in Africa could in the long term resolve "the two great challenges with which it must currently concern itself—the refugee crisis and terrorism," as the head of the security conference, Wolfgang Ischinger, told *Die Welt*.

"We require something drastic, an offensive under the heading: Europe creates security," the veteran German diplomat and foreign policy expert declared, making it clear that this "offensive" could include military action.



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