

UN refugee agency confirms mass drownings in Mediterranean

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The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) have now confirmed that a refugee boat went down earlier this week between the Libyan port of Tobruk and the Greek island of Crete. Both organisations, based on the testimony of 41 survivors, estimate that up to 500 refugees died in the disaster.

The horrific loss of human life was first reported almost a year to the day of the worst refugee tragedy in the Mediterranean thus far. On 18 April, 2015, 800 refugees drowned when their boat capsized near the Italian island of Lampedusa.

A year ago, European Union officials and government heads declared their shock and sorrow and the media reported the disaster in detail. Now they barely take note of a similar horror. The broadcast media and press have relegated the story to the back pages.

Unlike the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 in March 2014, when a huge area of the Indian Ocean was searched for months for any sign of wreckage, not a single ship was sent to check for survivors following initial reports last weekend. Only days later did Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi announce that he would send the coast guard to search for bodies and the wrecked boat.

The silence over the deaths of the refugees, who fled from war, violence and crushing poverty in Libya, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia to seek asylum in Europe, can be explained only by the fact that their deaths are seen as a price worth paying. Thousands of migrant drownings in the Mediterranean are, for the ruling elite, a necessary part of their policy of sealing the EU's borders to deter refugees.

The reports of the 41 survivors collected by the

UNHCR and IOM give a sense of the terrifying scenes that unfolded during the tragedy. "Two-hundred-and-forty of us set off from Libya, but then the traffickers made us get onto a bigger wooden boat around 30 meters in length that already had at least 300 people in it," said Abdul Kadir, a Somali.

As the refugees were being transferred, the larger boat capsized and rapidly sank. It remains unclear whether the larger vessel also set off from Libya or from Alexandria in Egypt. At least one of the survivors said he had started his journey not from Libya, but Egypt.

The 41 eye-witnesses managed to survive only because they had either not been transferred to the larger boat, or had managed to swim back to the smaller one. They included 37 men, three women and a three-year-old child.

"The testimonies we gathered are heartbreaking," said IOM Athens Chief of Mission Daniel Esdras. A survivor named Mohammed said, "I saw my wife and my two-month old child die at sea, together with my brother-in-law... The boat was going down... down... All the people died in a matter of minutes. After the shipwreck we drifted at sea for a few days, without food, without anything. I thought I was going to die."

According to the eye-witnesses, the traffickers continued the voyage with the survivors until the ship's engine broke down. It is not clear whether this was caused by mechanical failure or if the traffickers deliberately sabotaged it. They issued an emergency call and disappeared in a small speedboat.

Although the emergency call was received in Rome and transferred to the Greek Coast Guard, it took three days before the freighter Eastern Confidence, sailing under a Philippine flag, pulled the refugees from the sea 95 nautical miles southwest of the Greek city of Pylos

and brought them to the port of Kalamata.

There, the 41 survivors--23 Somalis, 11 Egyptians, six Ethiopians and one Sudanese--refused to disembark and demanded to be taken to Italy. This was entirely justified, as shown by a Greek policeman who cold-bloodedly told the BBC, "They will be deported. They don't come from Syria."

The details now known about the tragedy stand in stark contrast to the claims of the Greek, Maltese and Italian coast guards, which were still declaring on 17 April that they had no information about an incident and had not forwarded an emergency call. At that point, the Philippine freighter already had the survivors onboard.

A Greek coast guard spokeswoman told *Migrant Report* at the time, "There was no such incident off Greece. I think the information is incorrect. Whatever the case, this did not happen in Greek waters and nobody was rescued off a vessel with 400 to 500 people onboard."

This indifference to the deaths of hundreds of refugees is a direct result of the EU's ruthless policy of sealing its borders. The EU has declared the protection of its external borders to be a principle, as if the refugees represent an invading army. The European Union and Europe's governments are responsible for the latest mass fatalities in the Mediterranean.

They have largely abandoned all sea rescue programmes, even though the border protection agency Frontex warned in 2014 that this would lead to an increase in fatalities, as a recent report by London's Goldsmith College documented. Despite this, the EU ended the Italian coastguard's Mare Nostrum mission, which rescued 150,000 refugees from the sea and brought them to Italian territory. It was replaced by the Frontex Triton mission, the goal of which is repelling refugees.

After close to 1,200 refugees died in two tragedies last April, many migrants sought to reach Europe via the Balkan route. Following the sealing of Balkan borders and the dirty deal struck between the EU and Turkey, many refugees are trying once again to reach Italy by means of the dangerous voyage across the Mediterranean.

The refugees already confront extreme danger in Libya. The militias in control of the country since the NATO war for regime-change in 2011 treat refugees

brutally, detaining them in internment camps and abusing and torturing them. Traffickers are taking new routes as a result of the EU's EUNAVFOR Med Sophia military mission on the Libyan coast.

"There were hardly any movements of refugees off Tobruk," Ruben Neugebauer from the voluntary organisation Sea Watch told Austria's *Der Standard*. But due to Sophia, the traffickers use entirely new routes, where there is nobody in the area to assist. The shortest trip to Lampedusa, if all goes well, takes between 10 and 12 hours. By contrast, from Tobruk or Egypt it takes up to 13 days.

British migration researchers Heaven Crawley, Nando Sigona and Franck Düvell pointed out in an article for the *Conversation* that the increasing number of fatalities is the result of the militarisation of coastal regions, which forces refugees to take ever more dangerous routes, sometimes overnight, in smaller, even less safe boats. Although the risk of discovery is reduced, so is the possibility of being rescued in an emergency. This applies to the Mediterranean between Libya and Italy and the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey.

Some 25,000 refugees have landed in Italy so far this year, around twice as many as in the same period last year. The number has risen dramatically in the past four weeks. According to official figures, 851 refugees have drowned during the crossing. In the Aegean, where the flow of refugees practically stalled in April, 367 refugees have drowned.



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