

Eighty-four migrants missing in new sinking off Libyan coast

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Two weeks after over 400 migrants drowned when their craft left Egypt and sank in the eastern Mediterranean, 84 people are missing and feared dead after their inflatable craft took on water in heavy seas off the coast of Libya. Though high waves hampered search and rescue operations over the weekend, two bodies have already been recovered.

Survivors reported that 110 migrants hailing from West African countries including Nigeria, Senegal, and Gambia had boarded the craft. However, only 26 were rescued after the Italian coast guard received a silent call from a satellite phone in the Mediterranean and asked an Italian merchant ship steaming in Libyan waters, the *Valle Bianco*, to investigate. The merchant ship then transferred the migrants to two Italian coast guard vessels, which took them to the nearby Italian island of Lampedusa.

Pictures released by Italian authorities showed several women huddling in blankets after the rescue, and it was reported that several minors were also rescued from the vessel.

“According to testimony gathered by IOM in Lampedusa, 84 people went missing,” wrote the International Organisation for Migration’s (IOM) Rome spokesman, Flavio di Giacomo, on his Twitter feed.

In a statement emailed to AFP, Di Giacomo explained that the half-sunk migrant vessel was “in a very bad state, was taking on water, and many people fell into the water and drowned. ... Ten fell very rapidly and several others just minutes later.”

With women and minors making up a large percentage of those fleeing to Europe, it is feared that dozens of innocent men, women, and children have again drowned, victims of the European Union’s sinister and vindictive policy towards refugees.

In the tragic sinking first reported on April 18 of this year, officials initially did not send rescue ships after receiving reports of the sinking of a refugee vessel with hundreds of people aboard. They also delayed for nearly a week confirming press reports that hundreds of people had died, allowing the media to bury the issue in the back pages of the newspapers.

Over this past weekend, news of the latest sinking and deaths of dozens of people was again treated as a minor news item, as European officials and media—faced with growing popular sympathy for the plight of masses of people fleeing to Europe—again limited coverage of the tragedy. With survivors still held by Italian authorities on Lampedusa, no media outlets published the accounts they provided of the disaster.

The European bourgeoisie confronts the greatest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II, with a record-breaking 60 million refugees worldwide fleeing imperialist wars and economic devastation around the globe.

Last year, over a million people fled via the Mediterranean to Europe, primarily from Syria and Iraq through Turkey to Greece, and also from Libya to Italy. There were over 182,830 arrivals by sea in Europe between January and April 2016, and 1,261 migrants were reported dead or missing, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

In response, the EU is pursuing a politically criminal policy. It seeks to hide from the masses of working people in Europe the disasters caused by its decision to deny millions around the world the right to asylum. This helps it whip up a nationalistic, anti-immigrant atmosphere at home to divide the workers, fuelling the rise of far-right parties like the National Front in France, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in

Germany, and the UK Independence Party in Britain.

European officials have also made clear, however, that they positively welcome mass drownings, hoping they will terrorise potential immigrants in the Middle East and Africa into accepting to stay and face the dangers at home.

In 2014, as EU officials moved to begin limiting rescue patrols hunting for migrant ships in the Mediterranean, the Frontex border agency drafted a paper noting that this would lead to “a higher number of deaths.” This was not a regrettable or unintended by-product of EU policy, but its stated aim, as the paper made clear. It hoped that mass drownings would deter immigrants from coming to Europe, since “significantly fewer migrants will attempt to cross the Mediterranean in bad weather and prices for the crossings will rise.”

The EU’s attempt to halt immigration flows by leaving people to die in the open seas turned out to be an utter failure in the face of movements by tens of millions of refugees. It has already claimed thousands of innocent lives, however.

Moreover, the sinking and the mass drownings in the Mediterranean are expected to rise. The EU treaty with Turkey to halt further immigration from Turkey and confine refugees to camps in that country, and the closing of EU borders in the Balkans, will block the flow of refugees from the Middle East to Europe via Turkey.

As a result, it is expected that many thousands of refugees will begin taking the more dangerous route to Europe—into war-torn Libya, which is still wracked by bloodshed after the 2011 NATO war toppled Colonel Muammar Gaddafi’s regime, and then across the high seas to Italy.

Foreseeing this, NATO officials are working with the various militias that have seized control of regions of Libya since the war to halt the movement of refugees from Libya to Europe.

As the NATO powers prepare a renewed military intervention in Libya by cobbling together a so-called national unity government, five years after the initial conflict, there are plans for the construction of massive prison camps to detain refugees and prevent them from traveling on to Europe.

“Half a million people are waiting to leave,” Libyan envoy to the Vatican Ali Mustafa Rugibani warned last

month in Rome. “For this reason, it will be vital for Libya’s premier-designate Fayez al-Sarraj to agree on a migrant plan with Italy and with Europe,” Rugibani added, without giving any more details about what such a plan would entail.

Details began to emerge last week, however, when German news magazine *Der Spiegel* obtained EU planning papers on proposed operations in Libya and reported briefly on their contents. The plans reportedly call for “temporary detention centers for migrants and refugees,” stressing that “One has to think about detention facilities” in relationship to the migrant question. This prompted *Der Spiegel* to remark, “The ideas are reminiscent of when the EU cooperated with Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi to stop the flow of refugees across the Mediterranean.”

EU proposals for concentration camps in a NATO-occupied Libya are being floated at the highest levels, *Der Spiegel* reported: “The Europeans had already proposed setting up ‘migration centers’ in Africa before, at the November 2015 Valletta summit, but the Africans would have none of it. In mid-April, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi ventured a new initiative. The idea got more traction after the EU agreement with Turkey, which has significantly reduced the flow of migrants and is already seen as a blueprint for similar agreements with other countries, particularly Libya.”



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