

Over a hundred feared dead as refugee boats sink in Mediterranean

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27 May 2016

More than 100 refugees were feared dead Thursday after a pair of sinkings of overcrowded boats attempting to make the dangerous crossing from Libya to Italy.

In what was apparently the worst of these tragedies, a leaking fishing boat carrying some 650 people capsized in the open sea when passengers rushed to one side of the vessel in hopes of being rescued by an approaching Italian navy ship.

Video shot from the Italian ship captured the horrifying moment in which the ship rolled over, pitching hundreds of refugees into the water.

While aid officials initially reported that 550 people had been rescued and 5 bodies recovered, survivors of the disaster later told members of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) that 650 passengers were on board the vessel, and an estimated 100 missing people had been trapped in its hull.

The captain of the Italian naval ship that came to rescue the refugees told the BBC: “I never saw myself in a situation of this magnitude. When something like that happens, it touches you inside. You would like to save everybody, to magically push them out of the water at once. Then you crash with reality.”

In a second sinking in as many days, dozens of refugees are believed to have died Thursday when the boat they were traveling in sank about three miles off the coast of Libya. Italian officials acknowledged that the death toll of 20 to 30 was only an estimate, and the real number of those who lost their lives could be considerably higher.

In the second shipwreck, the *Guardian* newspaper quoted members of Alarm Phone, a group of activists that have set up a hotline for refugees in distress in the Mediterranean Sea, who said that they had received a call from the vessel from a Syrian national. They said he told them that most of the people onboard were

Syrians and Iraqis.

This news strongly suggests that the European Union’s (EU’s) sealing off of the so-called Balkan route through its filthy deal reached in March with the authoritarian regime in Turkey has begun to shift the flow of refugees from the war-ravaged Middle East back to the far more dangerous route through Libya and across the Mediterranean.

The IOM reported on Monday that “an estimated 191,134 migrants and refugees entered Europe by sea in 2016 through 21 May, arriving in Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Spain.” It placed the number of deaths of those attempting to reach Europe by sea during the same period at 1,370, which it said was 24 percent lower than last year’s toll of 1,792. The report declared it “notable” that only 13 refugees had lost their lives during the first three weeks of May. The latest sinkings, however, bring the rate of fatalities for the month back up to what they were a year ago.

These latest disasters befalling refugees in the Mediterranean came as weather conditions improved, prompting an uptick in sailings by smugglers. More than 6,000 refugees have been reported rescued on boats en route to Italy just since Monday, according to the UN refugee agency UNHCR.

“It takes at least three days from Libya to Italy and many more from Egypt,” Barbara Molinaro of the Italian branch of UNHCR told Al Jazeera. “These are very dangerous routes and accidents are just waiting to happen.”

She added: “Our position is that people who are forced to flee and cannot return home need to be given a safe means to get to Europe and ask for protection. If they are forced to risk their lives and turn to smugglers, then this is what’s going to happen.”

There is no indication that the imperialist powers,

whose decades of war and oppression in the Middle East, Africa and Central Asia are principally responsible for the refugee crisis, have any intention of pursuing any such a policy. Indeed, the mass deaths in the Mediterranean are factored into their anti-refugee campaign as a valuable deterrent.

The prospect of mass deaths at sea was understood in striking the reactionary deal between the EU and Turkey to halt the flow of refugees northward through the Balkans. When it was signed in March, German interior minister Thomas de Maiziere commented: “Even if we have to endure some hard images for a few weeks, our basic approach is right.”

With the gut-wrenching video of hundreds of refugees being dumped into the Mediterranean to fight for their lives, his prediction of “hard images” has been confirmed.

The EU is attempting to further contract out its campaign against refugees to some of the most repressive regimes in Africa. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* reported earlier this month that a secret meeting of the ambassadors of the 28 EU member states discussed plans to “work together with dictatorships around the Horn of Africa in order to stop the refugee flows to Europe—under Germany’s leadership.”

Under the plan, some \$45 million is to be paid to eight African governments to aid in curtailing refugee flows. One of the principal beneficiaries of the plan is to be the government of Sudan’s president, Omar al-Bashir, who is charged by the International Criminal Court with war crimes and whose security forces have been accused of torture.

The *Guardian* newspaper pointed to Facebook postings that suggest smugglers are encouraging Syrians to make their way to Libya via Sudan. It cited one posting, an “Announcement to all Syrians and Sudanese,” that declared, “The Sudan–Libya desert route is back to business, costing US\$1,200 from Khartoum to Tripoli.” The announcement indicated that traveling on to Italy would cost another \$1,000.

Sudan is also a major route for refugees fleeing Eritrea, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, all attempting to reach the Libyan coast.

The aid that the EU is preparing to provide to the Sudanese regime would include “cameras, scanners and

servers for registering refugees,” according to *Der Spiegel*, in addition to training for Sudanese security forces and the construction of two detention camps. The magazine quoted a general in Sudan’s interior ministry as saying the security aid would be used to control not just migrants, but the Sudanese people themselves.

The EU, according to the *Der Spiegel* report, warned its member states that “under no circumstances” should the public be informed of these plans, adding that Europe’s reputation could be at stake.



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