

# Over 700 refugees drown in Mediterranean shipwrecks

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More than 700 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea since Wednesday attempting to reach Europe from Libya. It is the single deadliest week for refugee drownings this year, according to the United Nations refugee agency, the UNHCR.

Three shipwrecks in just three days account for most of the week's enormous death toll. Other agencies, including Médecins Sans Frontières (MSN), have estimated more than 900 deaths. "We will never know exact numbers," MSN tweeted on Sunday, "Around 900 people may have died in the Central Mediterranean in the last week alone. Europe, this is unbearable."

Carlotta Sami, a spokesperson for the UNHCR, has confirmed an estimated 100 people are missing after an unseaworthy vessel capsized on Wednesday. Horrifying images of the boat tipping over, with hundreds of terrified asylum seekers thrown into the sea, were captured on video by the Italian Navy.

Sami told the Associated Press that another 550 people are feared dead after another boat carrying refugees capsized the next day. The vessel reportedly left the Libyan port of Sabratha on Wednesday, with 670 refugees on board.

A third shipwreck occurred on Friday, during which 135 people were rescued and at least 45 bodies were recovered—taking the overall death toll to 700. But refugees who survived the incident say many more are missing.

The shipwrecks account for the largest loss of life in the Mediterranean since April 2015, when a single boat capsized killing 800 people trapped inside.

The death of hundreds of refugees in the Mediterranean is not only a tragedy, it is a crime. The governments in the US, Germany, Greece, Italy and other European countries, as well as the European Union, bear principal responsibility.

The numbers of asylum seekers fleeing to Europe in unseaworthy vessels is increasing due to vicious anti-migrant controls that have blocked routes to Europe via the Balkans. This includes the deal reached in March with Turkey creating a "Fortress Europe," aimed at cutting off lifelines to those fleeing wars conducted by the European powers and the United States that have devastated entire countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

As a result, according to Italian authorities, the number of refugees rescued this week reached 13,000. On Saturday alone, a flotilla of ships saved 668 people from boats off the southern coast. Last week, over 4,000 migrants were rescued at sea in just one day.

The UNHCR's update provided new information about Thursday's deadliest sinking. Initial reports only took into account the missing and dead from a smaller, powered boat. Sami told AFP that the refugees rescued from the smaller vessel said the boat that sank did not have an engine and was being towed by another equally packed smuggling boat before it capsized.

AFP reports that Italian police corroborated the UN account, based on their own interviews with survivors, though the numbers cited do not precisely tally. According to survivors, the boat "started taking on water after about eight hours of navigation." An attempt to bail it out "with a line of migrants passing a few five-litre bailing cans" failed:

"At that point, the commander of the first smuggler's boat ordered the tow rope to be cut to the sinking boat. The migrants on the top deck jumped into the sea, while those below deck, estimated at 300, sank with the ship, police said. Of those who jumped into the sea, just 90 were rescued."

Giovanna Di Benedetto, a spokeswoman for Save the Children, said, "There were many women and children

on board. We collected testimony from several of those rescued from both boats. They all say they saw the same thing.”

The *Independent* reports a Libyan naval spokesman, Col. Ayoub Gassim, saying its own coastguard had rescued 766 refugees in two operations that took place on Thursday. They were found in two groups: 550 near the western coast city of Sabratha and another 216 off the coastal city of Zwara. Gassim said two boats were also found empty in the area between the two Libyan cities, and only four bodies had been retrieved. The death toll is unknown.

There are sinister and unanswered questions over the role of the military in the tragic events of the past week.

As part of “Operation Sophia,” a massive military mobilisation involving fourteen European countries has been underway for the past year. Warships, submarines, aircraft, helicopter gunships and drones have been deployed by European powers, including Germany, Italy, Spain, France, Britain, Greece, the Netherlands and Sweden. The headquarters of the mission is located at a military airport in Rome.

According to media reports over the weekend, military aircraft first saw the vessel (which subsequently sank on Thursday) in trouble around 35 nautical miles off the coast of Libya. Yet little was done in response. EU officials said a second helicopter “arrived on the scene Thursday and threw lifejackets into the water.”

The purpose of Operation Sophia is to strengthen “Fortress Europe” to ward off refugees, while preparing a new military intervention in North Africa under the guise of fighting the ‘causes’ of refugee crisis.

On Friday, UK Prime Minister David Cameron, once again confirmed this analysis. Speaking at the G7 summit, he praised the EU-Turkey agreement to deport asylum seekers from Greece. He declared, “In the eastern Mediterranean, on average nearly 2,000 people arrived this way per day before the EU-Turkey deal was signed. Since then, it’s fewer than 100. It’s still a fragile agreement—but returning people works. Now we need to do the same with the central Mediterranean route.”

Cameron also declared that the European powers “are working to agree a plan to boost the capability of the Libyan coastguard.” Then he announced: “Once a

detailed plan has been agreed with the Libyan authorities, the UK will send a UK training team to assist in its implementation. And once the relevant permissions and UN Security Council Resolution are in place, I will deploy a naval warship to the south central Mediterranean to combat arms trafficking in the region.”



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