

Hundreds more refugees die in the Mediterranean

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Hundreds of refugees have died in two more cases of boat sinkings. Within eight days, many more than 1,200 refugees have drowned during their voyage to Europe.

A refugee boat had an emergency around 75 nautical miles south of Crete on Thursday. An Italian trading vessel sailing past informed the coastguard, which sent patrol boats and other commercial ships to the area. When the first ships arrived on Friday morning, the completely overcrowded wooden fishing cutter had already capsized. Hundreds of refugees were floating helplessly in the sea.

A total of 342 refugees were rescued, and nine bodies were recovered. But the scale of the sinking initially remained unclear. “The alarming question is how many people were actually on board the 25-metre-long cutter,” an officer of the Greek coastguard said. Survivors reported that up to 700 refugees were on board. By contrast, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) believes a count of 500 refugees is more likely.

At first, the coastguard refused to provide information on the origin of the refugees on the boat that likely set out from the Egyptian port of Alexandria. However, Joel Millmann of IOM stated, “These are refugees we would have previously seen on the Balkan route, from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.” Since the closing of the Balkan route, refugees are attempting to use other routes to reach Europe. The dangerously long route from Egypt or Turkey, past Crete and to Italy, is playing an increasingly significant role.

In addition, grim scenes played out on the beaches of the Libyan town Suwara, roughly 160 kilometres west of Tripoli. A total of 117 bodies of refugees were pulled from the sea. Among the dead were 75 women and six children, according to a spokesperson from the Red Crescent.

The drowned refugees were overwhelmingly from Nigeria, Gambia, Mali and the Central African Republic and had been in the water for days, according to Doctors without Borders. According to them, they originated from a boat tragedy which was previously unknown.

There is no let-up in the series of catastrophic boat accidents in the Mediterranean. Within 10 days, six ships

have capsized, sending probably more than 1,200 refugees to their deaths. “The past eight days marks one of the deadliest periods yet in the migration crisis, which is now in its fourth year,” an IOM spokesman said.

It was no accident that the refugee crisis began with the wars initiated by the United States and their European allies in Syria, Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic. These imperialist military interventions, conducted in the name of allegedly defending human rights and the struggle against terrorism, have destroyed large areas in the Middle East and North Africa and robbed millions of the necessities of life.

Fully 12 million Syrians have been forced to flee, of which 8 million are internally displaced. During the last five years, according to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), the number of refugees has risen by almost 18 million to 60 million people fleeing war, persecution, desperate living conditions and poverty.

The imperialist powers’ aggressive foreign policy is complemented by the criminal European Union policy of sealing off the borders to refugees. The numbers of deaths in the Mediterranean continues to break new records. Thus far in 2016, at least 2,800 refugees have drowned during the journey to reach Europe. This is an increase of some 40 percent since the same period last year.

But whereas the majority of refugees chose the much shorter and less dangerous route across the Aegean Sea to Greece, they have been compelled by the shameful pact between the EU and Turkey to risk the dangerous voyage from North Africa to Italy. The mass deaths in the Mediterranean are not simply collateral damage resulting from a wrong refugee policy, but a consciously desired consequence of an inhumane policy of deterrence.

When the European Union decided in the autumn of 2014 to end the Italian sea rescue mission Mare Nostrum, through which 150,000 refugees were rescued from the water, the EU border protection agency Frontex warned that this would result in a growth in refugee deaths. In the paper presented at the time by Frontex outlining the concept of Mission Triton,

which took the place of Mare Nostrum, it stated “that the withdrawal of naval units from the sea around the Libyan coast...[will] probably result in a greater number of refugee deaths.”

But this was explicitly welcomed, because Frontex believed that “significantly fewer refugees will risk the voyage in bad weather and the prices for the trips will increase.” The numbers of refugee deaths rose dramatically with the start of Mission Triton.

François Crépeau, then UN special rapporteur for the human rights of refugees, sharply condemned the EU’s inhumane policy. “To top it off by stating that increased number of deaths will have a deterring effect on future migrants and asylum seekers is disgusting,” he said. “It is as if one would say: let them die, because it is a good deterrent for the others.”

With the militarisation of the Mediterranean, the EU is pushing this criminal game to the limit by forcing the refugees to take ever more dangerous routes. NATO is patrolling the sea between Greece and Turkey with its own naval group, “to combat people smuggling and illegal migration in the Aegean,” as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg asserted. One cannot be more explicit in stating that the issue is not rescuing refugees.

The EU mission “EUNAVFOR Med” in the waters between Libya and Italy is aimed above all at destroying the smugglers’ boats and detain smugglers. In addition, it aims to prepare a new military intervention in Libya. The NATO-led war in 2011 to topple the Gaddafi regime plunged the country into a bloody civil war. In large parts of the country, which is dominated by rival militias, infrastructure is virtually non-existent and order has completely broken down.

Although hundreds of thousands of refugees from throughout Africa are already struggling to survive in Libya under terrible conditions, the European Union intends to deport refugees in large numbers to the country. The German government in particular is considering a repatriation agreement with Libya, using the EU-Turkey deal as a model.

In the opinion of human rights organisations, such a pact would be “gruesome, utterly unacceptable,” as Lotte Leicht from Human Rights Watch told German public broadcaster ARD. “It would mean that the EU would breach its own core principles.” But these have already been trampled underfoot in the EU, which describes itself as an “area of freedom, security and law.” They are supporting the regimes in Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt and Eritrea without any qualms so that they can detain refugees.

An increasing number of states are being arbitrarily designated “safe countries of origin,” permitting the rapid

rejection of asylum seekers and the immediate deportation of those affected. As a result of the dirty deal with Turkey, the registration centres on the Greek islands were transformed into internment camps. More than 8,500 refugees are currently confined to the camps, described as “hot spots.”

“The people in the camps are desperate and extremely tense,” said Spyros Galinos, the mayor of Lesbos. Food and medical care in the camps are utterly inadequate, and the hygienic conditions catastrophic. The detained refugees receive practically no information about their asylum applications.

The tensions caused by this are erupting ever more frequently into violence. More than 20 refugees were injured on Samos; on Lesbos, tents and sleeping bags were burned during conflicts between refugees from Afghanistan and Pakistan. On Chios, refugees have started a hunger strike in protest at their conditions.

At the same time, deportations of refugees from Greece to Turkey were halted in appeals decisions. In at least 10 cases, the three-person asylum committee agreed with the refugees’ appeal against the rejection of their asylum application by the Greek authorities because Turkey is not a “safe third state.” The dirty deal with Turkey is being exposed as a “human rights disaster,” as the refugee organisation ProAsyl stated.

Nonetheless, German Chancellor Angela Merkel described the EU-Turkey deal as a success because fewer people were drowning in the Aegean, meaning lives were being saved. German Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere recently declared that the deal had secured a decline in refugee numbers. “Last autumn, between 5,000 and 6,000 people arrived in Greece from Turkey daily,” he said. “Now it is fewer than 100 per day.” But the price for this is that almost 100 people are dying daily in the Mediterranean between Libya and Italy.



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