

# Refugee numbers decline as deaths rise in the Mediterranean

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More than 9,500 refugees were rescued earlier this week from the seas off the west coast of Libya within just 48 hours. The number of refugees who have arrived in Italy via the central Mediterranean route from Libya rose as a result to more than 112,000. The dramatic rescue operations retrieved at least two dead bodies from the water.

Last Monday alone, 40 rescue operations saved 6,500 refugees from severely overcrowded boats. Alongside boats from the Italian navy and coastguard, ships from non-governmental organisations participated in the operations.

Around 3,000 refugees were then pulled from the water in 30 rescue missions. Due to good weather and calm sea conditions, an increased number of refugees were attempting the dangerous crossing to Europe.

However, this week's rescue operations cannot conceal the disastrous consequences of the European Union policy of sealing off its borders to refugees. Investigations by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reveal a sharp increase in the number of refugees who have drowned during the journey to Europe, even though the number arriving on Europe's coastlines has declined significantly.

IOM registered 280,000 refugees who had crossed to Europe by the end of August. Between January and December 2015, the figure was over a million.

While in the first three months of the year almost 160,000 crossed the Aegean Sea to Greece, this route is virtually sealed off now because of the closure of the Balkan route and the dirty deal between the European Union (EU) and Turkey.

By contrast, the number of refugees arriving in Italy is almost the same compared to last year, when 116,000 refugees arrived in the first eight months.

More than 3,167 refugees have lost their lives in the first eight months of the year during their journey to Europe.

The central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy claimed the most fatalities, with 2,728 deaths. In the Aegean, 386 refugees drowned during their crossing, and 53 on the western Mediterranean route from Morocco to Spain. The number of deaths is thus close to equaling the figure for last year as a whole, when 3,673 lost their lives.

This makes the Mediterranean by far the deadliest route for refugees in the world. One out of every 29 refugees setting out from Libya or Egypt to Europe drowns during the crossing—an average of 13 refugees each day.

The main responsibility for these deaths lies not with unscrupulous smugglers, who force refugees to board unseaworthy boats, but rather with the European governments who are determined to prevent the influx of any refugees. They are not only showing complete disregard for the numerous victims of their inhumane refugee policy, but also consider them as useful collateral damage in their policy of deterrence.

When the Italian navy mission Mare Nostrum, which had rescued 100,000 refugees from the Mediterranean between Italy and Libya, was halted in November 2014 and replaced by the Frontex mission "Triton," the EU border protection agency had already come to the conclusion "that the withdrawal of naval units from the sea areas off the coast of Libya...will likely result in a greater number of fatalities." But as a result, according to Frontex at the time, "far fewer refugees will risk the crossing during bad weather and the prices for the crossings increase."

European navy units now operate the "Eunavformed – Sophia" mission in these waters. As they are not

performing a rescue mission, but a combat operation against people smugglers, their ships are not part of the Italian coast guard's SOS system. The military ships are not even visible to the coast guard's radar. The Italian coast guard's operations centre always has to contact the office of commander Enrico Credendino to ask if a naval ship is active in the area around a ship in difficulty.

The militarisation of the Mediterranean, with the EU effectively waging war on refugees, is to be expanded further in the future by incorporating the coast guards of North African countries more directly into the EU's policy of sealing off its borders. Marine units involved in the "Sophia" mission will begin this month to train the Libyan coast guard and navy. The EU has already concluded an agreement on this with Libya's "unity government."

What is presented as a struggle against unscrupulous smugglers and the illegal arms trade is in reality aimed above all at the refugees themselves. This is demonstrated by two instances in which the Libyan coast guard fired on two ships operated by non-governmental organisations.

In April, a Libyan speedboat attacked a ship operated by Sea Watch, an NGO that monitors refugee traffic, outside of Libyan territorial waters. Armed personnel stormed the ship under the pretext that it was suspected of illegal fishing, and intimidated the crew by firing shots.

On August 17, the Bourbon Argos, operated by Doctors without Borders, which was sailing in international waters north of Libya as part of a rescue mission, was targeted by the Libyan coast guard. Shots fired from a Libyan speedboat damaged the bridge of the Bourbon Argos, which was subsequently boarded and searched for hours.

Despite this, the EU extended the EUBAN mission, which is aimed at rebuilding the Libyan military and police. EUBAN has the task of "planning a possible future EU mission which would offer advice in the areas of criminal justice, migration, border protection and combatting terrorism, and press ahead with capacity building," as an agreement approved by the EU foreign ministers stated.

NATO also intends to participate in the operation. On July 9, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced the transformation of the "Active

Endeavour" naval mission first established in 2001 into "Sea Guardian," which operates off the Libyan coast.

One goal is the construction of a presidential guard, which is to enable the EU and US-backed Prime Minister of the unity government, Fayez al-Sarraj, to leave his naval base in Tripoli and bring more territory under his control. In this way it will be possible, among other things, to immediately deport refugees who have arrived in Europe back to the North African country, which the German government in particular is pushing for.

The human rights organisation ProAsyl has justifiably denounced such inhumane actions. "Giving the Libyan coast guard the capability of intercepting refugee boats and bringing people seeking protection back to Libya is complicity in serious violations of human rights," ProAsyl wrote. Abuse and torture are daily occurrences in the internment camps in Libya where refugees are being imprisoned.

While the US and its allies are currently escalating the wars in Syria and Libya, thus driving millions more to flee their homes, the European Union is sealing off their escape routes. With boundless cynicism, the western powers are forcing refugees, fleeing the consequences of their own aggressive foreign policy, to attempt ever more dangerous routes, or supporting puppet regimes to intern them in transit states.



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