

Hundreds feared drowned as migrant boat capsizes off Egypt

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Hundreds of people on board a boat that capsized off the Egyptian coast Wednesday are still missing at sea.

Latest reports indicate that only 163 survivors, out of an estimated 600 migrants on the boat, have been brought ashore, along with 43 dead bodies—including those of several women and children. In June, a similar terrible tragedy befell more than 300 migrants from Egypt when their boat sank near Crete.

An Egyptian official told reporters, “Initial information indicates that the boat sank because it was carrying more people than its limit. The boat tilted and the migrants fell into the water.”

Four suspects have since been arrested, accused of involuntary manslaughter and human trafficking.

European governments and the European Union (EU) bear full responsibility for turning the Mediterranean into a watery grave for refugees fleeing their homes as a result of the wars in Syria and Libya led by the US and aided by various European powers.

The EU’s “Fortress Europe” policing measures have closed down the land routes and shorter sea routes in the western Mediterranean Sea to Europe. As a result, migrants and refugees have been driven to attempt the longer, more perilous crossing from North Africa across the central and eastern Mediterranean. Escalating hostilities in Libya, the starting point for the 150-mile voyage to the Italian island of Lampedusa, have led to more attempts being launched from Egypt—over 1,000 miles away. The number of migrants arriving in Italy by boat from Egypt this year has increased by nearly 70 percent compared to 2015.

The ramping up of Fortress Europe, largely as a result of the filthy deal reached between the EU and Turkey to close the Balkan route, has led to a sharp drop in the number of refugees reaching the continent—from over one million last year to around 280,000 so far this year.

At the same time, the number of people who have died or remain missing at sea has soared proportionally, standing already at over 3,200, almost equal to last year’s total of 3,673.

The deaths in the Mediterranean are not simply collateral damage resulting from a misguided refugee policy, but a conscious decision aimed at deterrence. When the Italian navy mission Mare Nostrum—which had rescued 100,000 refugees from the Mediterranean—was halted in 2014, the EU border protection agency Frontex recognised that its new “Triton” mission “will likely result in a greater number of fatalities.”

The EU is now attempting to incorporate the coast guards of North African countries more directly into its policy and seeking the construction of internment camps farther afield to prevent refugees from even attempting the journey to Europe.

The human rights organisation ProAsyl has denounced the policy: “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.”

Abuse and torture are daily occurrences in Libya’s refugee internment camps.

The refugee crisis was a major element in divisions that erupted at last week’s EU post-Brexit summit in Bratislava. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi boycotted the final press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande, declaring that he didn’t “share their conclusions” on the economy and migration. Italy’s main demand is that other EU countries take in or help fund the accommodation of refugees.

Hollande insisted the main message from Bratislava was the need to secure further control of the EU’s

external borders. To that end, at Tuesday's UN Refugees and Migrants summit, Austrian chancellor Christian Kern said that the EU should make an agreement with Egypt, similar to that with Turkey, and provide funds to Cairo to stem the flow of migrants. "Austria fears asylum seekers could start coming to the EU from Egypt next year," Kern declared.

This was the cue for Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who, with an eye on the \$6.7 billion and political concessions the EU promised Turkey, stepped forward to say his government was "committed" to ending the flow of migrants from North Africa to Europe and that Egypt's security forces had stepped up their efforts to secure the country's borders.

Sisi boasted about his country's treatment of its five million refugees, of whom some 300,000 are Syrian. He claimed, "We are working on providing [them] with respectable living conditions without isolating them in camps."

His pronouncements are patently false. A 2015 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) study classified up to 90 percent of Syrian refugees in Egypt as "highly and severely vulnerable", receiving less than the 592 Egyptian pounds (\$US67) per person per month required to meet basic needs. The mass of refugees, according to the report, were "effectively living on or below the poverty line." Only 30 percent of the 130,000 Syrian refugees registered with the UNCHR in Egypt receive a food ration card, which is only equivalent to 320 Egyptian pounds per person.

According to the UNHCR, "Refugees in Egypt often suffer from loss of hope, deteriorating psychological and medical conditions, and limited livelihood opportunities. They are particularly vulnerable to poverty, insecure food supply, access to poor quality services, as well as sexual and gender-based violence, including abuse and exploitation."

"Loss of hope in the resolution of conflict in their country of origin coupled with a perceived lack of future in Egypt has contributed to some refugees departing and seek entry into Europe."

Sawsan, a Syrian mother of four children, in an interview with the Egyptian *Al-Ahram* newspaper, explained, "We lost everything in Syria. Our home was destroyed, my mother died, my husband was detained, and my daughter was hurt."

Although a registered refugee, Sawsan said, "We have not received UN food cards for several months...We need the cards badly. We need to eat."

"Life is becoming tougher every day, so much so that sometimes I think of braving the Mediterranean to reach Europe...My brother-in-law does not agree, and he says we would drown. I really do not know what to do," she concluded.



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