Refugee deaths surge in the Mediterranean

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This year is the deadliest ever for desperate refugees fleeing across the Mediterranean to Europe in order to escape wars in the Middle East and Africa.

“We can now confirm that at least 3,800 people have died, making 2016 the deadliest ever,” William Spindler, a spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), declared yesterday. The previous record number of deaths, 3,771, was set in 2015. Nonetheless, despite a sharp drop in the number of refugees fleeing across the Mediterranean, from 1.01 million last year to 327,800 so far this year, the number of deaths is surging.

“From one death for every 269 arrivals last year, in 2016 the likelihood of dying has spiraled to one in 88,” Spindler said at a press conference in Geneva on Tuesday.

“On the Central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy, the likelihood of dying is even higher, at one death for every 47 arrivals,” Spindler said. “This is the worst we have seen,” he added.

Political responsibility for these deaths lies above all with the European Union (EU). Having pushed aggressively for war in the Middle East and North Africa, notably with the 2011 NATO war in Libya, it then has moved to hermetically seal its borders against hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the catastrophic consequences of those wars.

It destroyed semi-seaworthy boats on the cynical pretext that this would advance the "fight against smugglers" and hired mercenaries to deter refugees, putting them in additional peril and forcing them to seek out ever more dangerous routes on unseaworthy boats.

“People smugglers are today often using lower-quality vessels, flimsy inflatable rafts that often do not last the journey. Several incidents seem to be connected with travel during bad weather,” Spindler said. He noted that refugees were also being forced to rely on “mass embarkations of thousands of people,” adding, “This may be to do with the shifting smuggler business model or geared towards lowering detection risks, but it also makes the work of rescuers harder.”

The navies and armed forces of the NATO countries are intervening, but to destroy seaworthy refugee vessels and to initiate and cover up brutal attacks carried out against defenseless migrant vessels.

An incident documented by the aid organization "Sea-Watch" on Tuesday with photos and logbook entries is symptomatic. On the night of October 21, the Libyan Coast Guard attacked a refugee boat, struck the inmates with clubs, and destroyed their dinghy. In the resulting panic, 30 people drowned.

The incident occurred about 26 kilometers off the Libyan coast in front of the crew of the rescue vessel "Sea-Watch 2", which had been called by the Italian rescue center to come to the aid of a flimsy inflatable dinghy. The Libyan patrol boat forced to one side a boat that was accompanying "Sea-Watch 2," which was distributing life jackets to the refugees; it then attacked the dinghy. After the incident, "Sea-Watch 2" rescued 124 refugees and recovered four bodies. There was no trace of a further 25 refugees.

The European Union and the Libyan Coast Guard—a force set up by and operating under the military control of NATO, which continues to launch air strikes in Libya against Islamic State (IS) members—both downplayed the incident.

A Libyan spokesman said a patrol had boarded the aid ship to check whether it was in Libyan territorial waters.

The Italian and German navies, which are on the scene due to the EU's Operation Sophia, claimed to have no knowledge of the incident.

It was not the first time that the Libyan coast guard has used brutal force against refugees and rescue boats.

In August, the ship ”Bourbon Argos”, run by the

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Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) organization, was fired on by a Libyan patrol boat. At the time, the Libyan Navy declared that only “warning shots” had been fired, under the assumption that the "Bourbon Argos" was involved in smuggling refugees.

The Libyan coast guard has also repeatedly intercepted refugee boats outside its territorial waters and forced them back to Libya, although this is illegal under international maritime law.

Nonetheless, the EU and NATO are sticking to their plans to upgrade the Libyan coast guard and use it as a mercenary force against refugees. Around 1,000 members of the Coast Guard are to be trained and equipped in Libya as part of Operation Sophia.

“The aim was to start the training this week, and it will start this week,” Antonello De Renzis Sonnino, the spokesman for Operation Sophia, told Reuters. According to the German government, the training will start on two ships, one Italian, the other Dutch. Weapons and trainers are being provided by Italy, Germany, Greece, Belgium and Great Britain.

According to the German armed forces, the training of the Libyan coast guard has little to do with rescue at sea, and will concentrate on navigation and military issues. Sea Watch spokesman Ruben Neugebauer told the German public radio station Deutschlandfunk: “Those responsible always say it is about gaining control of this region of the sea in order to reduce refugee numbers. If it were really a question of training a search-and-rescue force, then you could also train civilian rescuers. Then it would be unnecessary to train military forces.”

A huge contingent of warships has been sailing along the central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy for months. Rather than making the sea crossing safer for refugees, the flotilla has only added to the risk of drownings.

Since May this year, the EU's Operation Sophia has been mainly targeting smugglers providing boats for refugees. In addition, NATO ships and airplanes are operating in the central Mediterranean within the framework of Operation Sea Guardian.

The patrol ships of Operation Sophia have destroyed many wooden fishing boats, which were at least in part capable of navigating the high seas. As a result, refugees are now attempting the crossing in crude and completely unseaworthy inflatable boats. These are much more difficult to detect and often have only sufficient fuel to reach international waters, but not the European shore. The refugees must then count on rescue on the high seas.

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