

Over 300 refugees drown in Mediterranean

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At least 340 refugees drowned in four accidents involving boats travelling from Libya to Italy in the course of two days, according to official sources.

On Wednesday night, more than 100 refugees drowned in one of the wrecks, as confirmed by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF). Of the 130 people on board the boat, MSF only managed to rescue 27.

The refugees, from Gambia, Guinea, Mali and Sierra Leone, set out from near Tripoli on Monday, according to survivors. Smugglers accompanied the dinghy part of the way, but then removed the boat's engine and left the refugees to their fate. The inflatable boat, battered by the sea, lost air and filled with water. Already during the voyage, some refugees fell overboard or died due to exhaustion.

One day earlier, another private organisation pulled 23 refugees from the water alive after their boat also capsized on the way to Italy. An additional 99 refugees are categorised as missing and are most likely dead.

Also on Tuesday, a boat carrying 150 refugees sank, with only 15 being saved.

After another sinking, rescuers saved 114 refugees, but one body was found and a further 5 refugees are missing.

The number of refugees who have drowned while crossing the Mediterranean this year has climbed to 4,623, the highest figure on record. This is already almost a fifth more than the previous record year of 2015, when a total of 3,771 refugees drowned in the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean Sea is increasingly being transformed into a giant cemetery. Bodies decomposed beyond recognition are washing up on the Libyan coast almost daily.

"This tragedy is simply unacceptable," MSF wrote on Twitter. The disasters resulting in refugee deaths are now taking place with such regularity that the media

merely notes the mass death toll in passing. Leading European Union (EU) politicians, who showed their hypocritical concern after the first tragedies, indifferently accept the repeated reports of tragedies and avoid making any comment. The dramatic struggle for survival by refugees and the mass deaths at sea are thus largely blacked out from public attention.

Fifteen refugees were pulled from the sea last Sunday. They had clung helplessly to the remains of their sunken boat for 16 hours before being rescued by an oil tanker. Nine of those rescued remain in hospital.

Official statements routinely blame only the smugglers who organise the crossings for the mass fatalities. "The smugglers take no account of the bad weather conditions," said Flavio di Giacomo, a spokesman for the IOM, on Thursday. "Survivors have told us that they were forced to board boats even though they did not want to due to the weather."

In reality, the smuggling of desperate people who flee their homes to escape war, persecution and misery has grown into a billion-dollar business. But the smugglers are only able to operate their business model so successfully because the EU, with its brutal policy of sealing off its borders, has left the refugees with no other choice than to trust their lives to boats that are completely unseaworthy.

"Without alternative ways to reach Europe, refugees will always try to reach their goal in dangerous ways," UNHCR spokesperson Iosta Ibba told the *Guardian*.

The sharp rise in the number of deaths in the Mediterranean is the result of the deployment of EU warships off the Libyan coast. Their task of halting and destroying refugee boats has led smugglers to shift from old, semi-seaworthy fishing boats to dinghies, on which up to 150 refugees are crammed, even though they are utterly unsuitable for completing the journey.

The dinghies, which can be steered by the refugees themselves, minimise the risk for the smugglers but

increase it for refugees because there are neither GPS satellite systems nor telephones on board. If the refugees face an emergency, they cannot even call for help.

The EU is nonetheless sticking to its inhumane strategy and is expanding the military surveillance of the Mediterranean so as to prevent refugees from reaching Europe at any price. Since the end of October, the EU has been training the first 78 Libyan border protection officers to combat human trafficking and destroy smuggling networks, according to the EU foreign affairs office. Only as an additional measure will they be trained to “save human lives” in the Mediterranean.

However, the Libyan coast guard has been suspected over recent months of taking action against ships operated by private rescue organisations. The last incident occurred on October 21, when armed Libyan coast guard police stormed a refugee boat at night at sea, attacked the refugees, destroyed the boat and left the refugees fighting for their lives in the water. Thirty refugees died in the incident, which occurred in full view of the rescue boat “Sea Watch 2.”

Other civilian rescuers have been threatened with weapons by the Libyan coast guard. One boat was shot at, while another was seized. Two German volunteers were detained in September after a pursuit at sea and released only after an intervention by the German embassy in Tripoli. All of these incidents occurred at sea in international waters and represent gross violations of the law of the sea.

The EU now accepts these attacks on rescuers as a price worth paying. However, it is the ships from private organisations that are often first at the scene of a disaster. They have therefore been able to save thousands of lives, while the NATO-commanded ships that are part of the Sea Guardian mission led by the emergency centre in Rome cannot be contacted.

More than 165,000 refugees have reached Italy this year from the Egyptian and Libyan coasts. Most come from Sudan, Nigeria, Eritrea and Gambia, states that are either ravaged by civil war or are ruled by a brutal dictatorships. But the refugees are denounced as “illegal immigrants” in EU jargon and criminalised.

The EU also has no qualms about collaborating with ruthless dictators, such as Sudan’s Omar al-Bashir, who is being sought by a warrant from the International

Criminal Court, or Isaias Afwerki in Eritrea. They have been provided with weaponry, money and equipment to prevent refugees from fleeing across the border and reaching Libya. States refusing to cooperate in preventing refugees from crossing their borders or who refuse to accept deported refugees back are being blackmailed with the cutting of development aid.

While the EU proclaims it is combatting the “causes of flight,” its policies are in fact having the exact opposite effect. For decades it has demanded trade liberalisation so as to be able to sell European goods on the African market free from tariffs. Agricultural production in Africa has totally collapsed as a result, and millions of farmers have been impoverished. At the same time, the EU has secured the cheap import of raw materials like precious metals, phosphorus, oil and gas.

The social tensions are increasingly exploding into bloody conflicts into which the EU states intervene with their own troops, so as to keep desirable governments in power and oust others. In the struggle for Africa, the German army has expanded its presence on the continent massively, sending soldiers to Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and Mali.

The ruthless policy of deterring refugees is a byproduct of this neocolonial policy, which produces hundreds of thousands of refugees as collateral damage. Turning them away from Europe’s coasts and leaving them to drown in the Mediterranean is a monstrous crime that exposes the EU’s brutality.



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