More than 5,000 refugees drowned in the Mediterranean in 2016

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The number of people who have drowned fleeing to Europe via the Mediterranean this year has risen to more than 5,000, according to the official data of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

According to UNHCR spokesman William Spindler, the new tragic record "means that on average, 14 people have died every single day this year in the Mediterranean trying to find safety or a better life in Europe."

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that the actual number of victims is much higher than revealed by the UN statistics, which only record the officially registered death tolls. In particular there is a lack of reliable data on the route from North Africa to Spain, where many of the crossings across the Mediterranean remain undiscovered.

UNHCR reported that 3,777 refugees lost their lives on the Mediterranean Sea in 2015 and about 3,000 in 2014. The subsequent death toll was regarded as a necessary price to pay to deter other refugees from seeking to reach Europe.

The threshold of 5,000 official victims was exceeded on the night of the 22nd of December, when two boats capsized shortly before reaching the coast of the Italian island of Sicily. The Italian Coast Guard was able to rescue 80 refugees, while 57 drowned. On the other vessel, a dinghy, 40 of 120 occupants could not be recovered.

The Mediterranean is by far the deadliest zone for refugees. Although only a fraction of the world's 60 million refugees seek to reach Europe, two-thirds of the world's 7,400 deaths occur here. In addition, there are 1,440 refugees who have been killed in the escape routes leading to Europe—in West Africa, the Sahara, the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. In Turkey, more than 100 refugees were shot dead by border policemen.

The number of deaths has increased despite the fact that the number of refugees arriving in Europe has fallen by almost two-thirds, from over 1 million in 2015 to 358,000 in 2016. The rapid increase in deaths is a direct result of the European Union's closure of the Aegean and Balkan routes. The fugitives were thus forced to cross the much more dangerous routes via Egypt or Libya to Italy.

In the case of major boat disasters in the Mediterranean, such as in May when more than 1,000 refugees drowned within a week, European politicians regularly make hypocritical promises that such a tragedy should never happen again. In fact, "the number of deaths has risen even further. And politically speaking, nothing, absolutely nothing has been done to curb this tragedy," Christopher Hein of the Italian Refugee Council explained.

The hypocrisy at work knows no limits. During the battle for Aleppo, politicians and the media accused the Syrian and Russian army of crimes against the civilian population. However, the same politicians have not lifted a finger to help bring the approximately 80,000 refugees from Aleppo to Europe. Instead, the EU has continued to set up new obstacles and expanded the measures to defer refugees to Europe's neighbours. The driving force behind this policy is the German government under Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The border protection agency Frontex has been expanded to become the European Border and Coast Guard and has been given considerably more power. Dozens of warships patrol the Mediterranean. Their task is not to rescue refugees, but to destroy refugee vessels.

Internment camps have been set up in Greece and Italy, which are described as "hotspots". Refugees have

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to stay there for months under catastrophic conditions and often have no way to apply for asylum. In Italy 120,000 people live in completely overcrowded camps. In Greece there are about 60,000, although a large number remain in tents in the winter, with snowfall and temperatures around the freezing point.

In March, Merkel negotiated a dirty deal with the Turkish government. As a result, Turkey erected fences and walls on its border with Syria and sealed off the border crossings. Since then, Turkish soldiers and border policemen have shot dozens of refugees, many have been ill-treated and brutally deported, according to human rights organizations. Nevertheless Merkel recently declared cynically that the deal with Turkey had saved lives every day.

Under the direction of the German Minister of the Interior Thomas de Maizière (CDU), the EU has concluded so-called "migration partnerships" with African governments. Pressure has been applied to the respective African regimes by linking the payment of development aid to accepting deported refugees and the closure of borders.

While the German government claims that the "migratory partnerships" are fighting the causes of the crisis, their real purpose is forcibly preventing refugees from fleeing and deporting them en masse back to Africa. The German ruling party, the CSU, has recently taken up another initiative from de Maizière, demanding that refugees who are rescued from distress be return to Africa— although this is a flagrant violation of the Geneva Convention on Refugees.

According to the German government, similar agreements involving refugee repatriation are to be concluded with Tunisia and Egypt, as was the case with Turkey. The refugees are to be interned in camps in North Africa, although it is well known that the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes trample human rights underfoot and arbitrarily abuse refugees.

The EU regularly assigns blame for the deaths in the Mediterranean Sea to the people smugglers, claiming they lure refugees with false promises onto unseaworthy boats. In fact, there is no other way for refugees to seek security than to trust the smugglers, bearing in mind that the possibility of joining family members already in Europe is now massively restricted.

In addition, more and more immigrants are trying to escape from Libya. Flavio di Giacomo of the UNHCR in Rome said there are more crossings than usual this winter: "This trend confirms the fact that the conditions in Libya are becoming increasingly dangerous for migrants."

Di Giacomo said: "Many refugees have told us that they did not want to come to Europe when they left their countries of origin. Many of them just wanted to go to Libya. But there they have only experienced violence and abuse. As a result, they decided to come to Europe by sea and fell into the hands of unscrupulous smugglers, who forced them to go aboard unseaworthy boats. These people come to Europe on irregular routes because there are not enough regular routes."

The situation in Libya has been aggravated mainly by the devastating 2011 NATO regime change operation which plunged the country into chaos. The refugees thus become victims of the imperialist powers in a double sense. With the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen, the US and its European allies have robbed millions of people of their livelihoods and forced them to flee. At the same time, by blocking borders, revoking asylum law, and programmes of massive forced repatriation, they have prevented them from escaping the chaos.

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