

Libyan Red Crescent recovers bodies of 74 refugees

Our reporter
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Libya's Red Crescent recovered the bodies of 74 migrants when they washed ashore in northwestern Libya near the town of Zawiya (30 miles west of Tripoli) early Wednesday morning. The Red Crescent indicated there were many more casualties, but that the rough seas prevented them from recovering the rest of the bodies.

Officials estimate there were some 150 refugees on board the vessel, which they believe was bound for Europe when it stopped functioning. A lone survivor--a middle-aged, African male--was rescued, comatose, from a torn rubber dinghy in the sea.

Taha K. Sultan Elbarghathi, a spokesperson for the Red Crescent, told CNN the drowned were all African men of varying ages. He noted more African migrants are now attempting the hazardous central Mediterranean route to Europe, departing from the Libyan coast.

According to Elbarghathi, the Zawiya team had never recovered so many bodies in a single incident. He believes the men fell prey to perilous sea conditions over the weekend. "We don't know the exact time the boat capsized but the boat did not totally sink," Elbarghathi told CNN. "One of the sides has lost its air."

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) does not believe that rough seas caused the boat's failure. According to migrants who have survived other such disasters, the IOM says, human smuggling operators frequently remove the engines from the overloaded boats, telling those aboard they will be rescued. They can then use the motors on other boats, likewise overloaded with people paying a steep price, and launch more migrants towards Europe for profit. In this case, says Leonard Doyle, spokesman for the IOM, the migrants apparently were set adrift, but the

expected rescue never occurred. "Those who died," he says, "appeared to have been dehydrated for days."

According to the IOM, 13,170 migrants have entered Europe by sea since January 1. Seventy-five percent of those arrived in Italy, with the rest coming in through Greece and Spain. IOM Rome reports that migrant arrivals in Italy--over 10,000--represent an increase of 2,000 over the same period last year.

The International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has said that while the numbers of migrants attempting the eastern Mediterranean route to Europe has significantly declined since last year, the number of people attempting central routes from Libya to Italy has increased. So, too, has the total of those who have successfully entered Europe through these routes. Last year, the central Mediterranean routes brought an unprecedented 181,000 migrants to the European continent.

Throughout Europe, migrants have become a target for right-wing nationalist movements, who deflect the blame for declining social conditions onto the migrants. Even in countries where migrants are supposedly more welcome, such as Germany, they have been scapegoated by politicians to support border closures and more stringent police tactics.

In early February, European Union (EU) leaders unanimously approved a plan to halt the flow of migrants across the Mediterranean. The European Commission developed the plan to leverage an existing agreement between Italy and Libya, promising increased financial aid and rescue efforts in return for Libya's cooperation in stanching the flow of migrants through its borders. The declaration concluded with vows to "break the business model of smugglers," while also promising to police the eastern

Mediterranean routes more brutally.

These promises rely more upon chaos-ridden Libya than upon European humanitarian aid. Libyan Prime Minister Fayyez al-Sarraj maintains only a tenuous grip on Tripoli, the capital city. He has already stated that the funds pledged by the EU are insufficient to contain and manage the current flow of migrants through Libya. Furthermore, while the European Union is united in its determination to seal the hemorrhaging borders of Africa and the Levant, the EU itself is beset by fractious, nationalistic tensions. Member countries have already begun to try and forecast which other routes migrants might take.

Three weeks after the EU's joint declaration, it is clear that this agreement's success depends upon blatant disregard for the lives of migrants. On February 17, IOM Libya reported a separate incident in which 125 migrants--including four children--were rescued at sea off Zuwara. On February 18, another 187 migrants were rescued off Zawiya. Those refugees are currently being held in the Al Nasr Detention Centre, which is well known for its brutal treatment of migrants.

The IOM's Missing Migrants Project, which tracks the deaths and disappearances of migrants throughout the world, has estimated that, as of February 22, 362 migrants have died on the Mediterranean since the beginning of the year. This does not include the nearly 100 migrants currently unaccounted for in the wreckage off Zawiya.



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