

# More than 200 people drown in the Mediterranean at the weekend

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4 July 2018

The Mediterranean is turning into a mass grave since European Union states began actively obstructing the rescue work of ships operated by non-governmental organizations. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) registered 204 drowned migrants in just three days last weekend. Since the beginning of this year the number of people drowned in the course of attempting to enter Europe has risen to over a thousand.

On Friday, June 28, 103 people drowned, including three toddlers, only to be followed by a further 38 victims on Saturday. They were reported by survivors to be either drowned or missing. A photo of members of the Libyan coast guard carrying the bodies of the three babies was widely spread through social media. On Sunday, another 63 drowned people were registered after the Libyan coast guard retrieved 41 survivors from the sea and brought them back to Libya.

The IOM published these figures after its officers in Al-Khums, near Tripoli, had spoken with survivors. One week previously, 220 migrants had drowned in the Mediterranean, bringing the total of deaths in just a few days to over 400. The real number of the dead, however, could be much higher since the IOM documents only reported cases.

Othman Belbeisi, an IOM representative in Al-Khums, said the IOM was “deeply concerned” because the rescued migrants were being sent to enclosed camps and conditions in such camps were worsening continuously. Sixteen young men who had been rescued on Friday were immediately taken to a camp in Tajoura. The men were from Gambia, Sudan, Niger, Guinea and Yemen. In the past few days, around a thousand people have been detained by the Libyan coast guard and prevented from entering Europe.

The dramatic increase of deaths at sea is a direct consequence of the recent decisions made at the EU

summit. Last week, the leaders of EU governments meeting in Brussels decided to seal off Europe, massively reinforce the Frontex border police, and work even more closely with the Libyan coast guard. Those apprehended in the course of attempting to reach Europe will in future be locked up in veritable concentration camps. Politicians of all political parties supported this criminal policy in Brussels, including the Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras (Syriza) and the Social Democrats, Pedro Sánchez (Spain) and Joseph Muscat (Malta).

The EU deliberately criminalises the work of NGO ships. The horrific rise in the number of drowned people is directly attributable to the fact that the EU is hampering civilian rescue services, which have saved tens of thousands of lives in recent years. EU governments are preventing NGO ships from leaving port and are therefore implicit in the mass murder of migrants.

In Malta, the NGO ships Lifeline, the Sea Fox and Sea-Watch 3 are currently restricted to port, while the Aquarius, which just a few days ago transported more than 600 stranded refugees to Spain, is currently only allowed to anchor in Marseille. The Open Arms, a Spanish NGO ship, is currently being forced to embark on the long journey to Barcelona with 59 migrants on board because Italy, France and Malta have all closed their ports to NGOs.

“What sort of world are we living in when rescuers are turned into criminals?” asked the captain of the Lifeline, Claus-Peter Reisch, on Monday in Valletta. “What kind of world is it that does more against rescuers than to prevent people dying?”

Reisch, 57, has been on trial in Malta since Monday and is not allowed to leave the island under threat of a €10,000 penalty. His passport has been confiscated.

The ship of his organisation is being held and can only be entered by a restricted crew of three persons. The next trial hearing is set for July 5.

The Lifeline is a privately operated rescue ship run by the Dresden Mission Lifeline, which has been active in the Mediterranean for just a year. During that period the ship has saved nearly a thousand lives. The Mission Lifeline is financed by donations, such as the money raised by the acting company at the Dresden Opera House and the German pop band Die Ärzte.

After a six-day odyssey on the Mediterranean Sea, during which European ports refused to allow the Lifeline to dock, Reisch was finally able to dock in Valletta, the capital of Malta, on June 28. He was immediately arrested. The authorities in Malta accuse Reisch of crossing Maltese waters with an unregistered ship. In fact, the Lifeline is registered with the Royal Dutch Water Sports Association, which permits ships under 500 tons to run under the Dutch flag.

The allegations made against him, according to Captain Reisch, are merely a pretext. “I’ve saved 234 lives. I’m going to court with my head held high and I have no problem with that.” In reality, the EU is guilty of allowing the deaths of thousands of refugees for political reasons. “The dying in the Mediterranean continues while we are stranded,” Reisch said. He also criticised the Maltese judiciary and made serious allegations against the Libyan coast guard, which is responsible for regularly killing migrants. The Libyan coast guard has threatened his crew and recently threatened to kill them.

With regard to the Libyan coast guard, the EU and the government of Malta have adopted the logic of Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini (Lega), Five-Star leader Luigi Di Maio and German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer (Christian Social Union, CSU). According to this logic, NGOs are practicing a form of smuggling if they rescue those shipwrecked off the Libyan coast. The NGO ships have been denounced as “Mediterranean taxis” (Di Maio), “shuttles from Libya to Europe” (Seehofer), and as transporters of “human flesh” (Salvini). The politicians demand that volunteers halt all sea rescue operations off the Libyan coast and give free rein instead to the Libyan coast guard.

This is the same coast guard which operates detention centres in Libya renowned as “hell on earth,” where prisoners are tortured, abused, enslaved and also killed.

In such facilities “concentration camp-like conditions” prevail. This term comes from an official source, namely the German Foreign Office, which has a report on the detention centres drawn up by the German ambassador in Niamey, the capital of Niger. The report is also available to the German chancellery and is no doubt well known to EU politicians.

The policy of the EU, based on paying the Libyan government and coast guard to keep refugees from reaching Europe by all means, clearly violates international law. It violates the ban on repatriation (*non-refoulement*), a key element of international refugee law, which states that persons should not be sent back to states where they face serious human rights violations. It is anchored in both the Geneva Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Anger and opposition to the deadly policy of the EU is increasing. In Valletta on Monday the entrance to the courthouse where the *Lifeline* trial is taking place was lined with banners. One read: “Rescue ships blocked—over 400 died” and another: “Rescue at sea is not a crime.”

On Friday, German TV star Jan Böhmermann launched a fundraising campaign for the Lifeline trial. Böhmermann pointed out that the captain and the crew could face legal action in Germany, encouraged by Interior Minister Seehofer “for the fact that they have saved the lives of over 230 people.” Over €88,000 was raised for lawyers’ fees in just three days.

Also on Friday, the rock band Pearl Jam gave a concert at the packed Olympia Stadium in Rome. When bandleader Eddie Vedder sang the song “Imagine” by John Lennon, 70,000 visitors turned on their cell phone lights to express solidarity with the sea rescue crews, while *Aprite i porti* (open the ports) appeared on the screen. The “Aprite i porti” campaign was launched at Salvini’s inauguration and calls for protests and sit-ins against the EU’s Fortress Europe policy.



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