

Another 170 immigrants drown in the Mediterranean

Marianne Arens
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More than 250 immigrants have drowned in the Mediterranean since the beginning of the year. The Italian government and European Union's (EU's) policies bear direct responsibility for this grim record. Last weekend alone, no fewer than 170 people lost their lives while crossing the Mediterranean.

On Saturday, the crew of Sea-Watch 3 managed to rescue 47 immigrants, including eight children, from a shipwrecked boat. The Sea-Watch 3 is currently the only NGO rescue ship still active in the Mediterranean. The Maltese government has refused to allow crews to be changed on another ship, the Professor Albrecht Penck owned by Sea-Eye, effectively preventing it from carrying out its work.

One-hundred seventeen people reportedly drowned on Friday after trying to flee Libya from Garabulli, east of Tripoli. After 10 hours at sea, the boat, with 120 people on board, began to sink. Emergency calls for help were sent. Later that day, a helicopter with the Italian navy located three survivors around 94 kilometres from the Libyan coast. Another three were dead. Sea-Watch 3 also responded to the emergency call and arrived on the scene shortly after the navy, but found no further survivors. The three rescued by the navy were therefore the only survivors from a group of 120.

The three men, from Sudan and Gambia, managed to survive in the water for several hours. The navy brought them to the island of Lampedusa. Flavio Di Giacomo, a spokesman for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), told the Adnkronos news agency that 10 women and two children, including a two-month-old baby, were among the 117 missing.

Almost simultaneously, another attempted crossing from Morocco to Spain claimed the lives of 53. The

announcement was made by the United Nations Agency for Refugees (UNHCR) on Saturday. One survivor reported that after the boat had sunk, he floated helplessly in the water for 24 hours before a fishing boat picked him up and took him back to Morocco. Apart from him, everyone else drowned.

Shortly before these two horrific tragedies, the IOM estimated the number of immigrants drowned in the Mediterranean by January 16 to be 83. On Sunday, a further two deaths were announced. This means the number of deaths has already surpassed 250 in the first three weeks of the year.

The Sea-Watch 3 and the 47 survivors will now be forced to wait on the high seas until a port agrees to let the desperate immigrants land. Italy and Malta have closed their ports.

Interior Minister Matteo Salvini (Lega), the strongman in Rome, responded to the situation by saying, "The ports are and will remain closed." Salvini's remarks perfectly sum up the inhumane refugee policies of all EU governments.

He compared the emergency rescue teams to people smugglers, drug dealers and weapons traders, and accused them of being responsible for encouraging people to risk the dangerous crossing over the Mediterranean. Salvini repeatedly wrote on Twitter, "The party is over for people smugglers and their accomplices."

Anyone can see for themselves how this alleged "party" plays out in reality. By reading the Twitter messages of Alarm-Phone, which documents the mayday calls, one can see how the grisly tragedies occur in real time.

On Sunday, Alarm-Phone reported on a boat carrying 100 people, including 20 women and 12 children, in trouble near Misrata, Libya, at lunchtime. At 12:20

p.m., a message read,” We have received a new position. They are now 12 nautical miles further east and have navigation problems. A child is unconscious or dead. Water is entering the boat.”

After Alarm-Phone appealed to the Italian, Maltese and Libyan coast guards for urgent help, nothing happened. Rome declared that Valetta, Malta, was responsible. Valetta promised to return the call, but nobody called back. In Libya, where the coast guard now has eight telephone numbers, nobody responded throughout the day. Although the coast guard receives millions in EU funding, it is not even capable of answering a straightforward mayday call.

Shortly before 4 p.m., a Twitter message noted, “We are trying to stay in contact with the boat. One person told us, ‘Soon, I won’t be able to talk to you, I’m freezing!’ They’re panicking, our team is having to calm them down. Over the past hour, we have repeatedly heard people screaming. The situation is desperate.”

At 4:15 p.m. it was confirmed once again that Rome, Valetta and Libya had been informed numerous times. By 6 p.m., the messages indicate that desperation had seized everyone on board. At 7:40 p.m., all contact broke off, probably because the batteries of all available mobile phones ran out.

Around 10 p.m., it was then announced that a ship sailing under the flag of Sierra Leone was changing course to rescue the boat’s passengers. At 1 a.m., the message service announced that the trading ship had rescued all on board, but was bringing them back to Libya.

Only 155 immigrants have arrived in Italy since the beginning of 2019. This compares to 2,730 people during the same period in 2018. The number of immigrants who reached Europe by sea declined from 199,369 in 2017 to less than a fifth of that number, 23,371, last year.

Salvini reported that over the weekend the Libyan coast guard intercepted 393 refugees in the Mediterranean and brought them back to Libya. “The cooperation with Libya is working,” stated Salvini. In fact, the reception centres in Libya are well known to be horrendous concentration camps. They are such a living hell that refugees are prepared to risk a life-threatening journey across the Mediterranean rather than staying there.

The people currently on board the Sea-Watch 3 also confront an uncertain future.

Already in early January, the Sea-Watch 3 and the Sea-Eye ship were forced to wait at sea for 19 days before being allowed to land 49 immigrants in Valetta, the Maltese capital. It took almost three weeks for Joseph Muscat, Malta’s social democratic prime minister, to obtain enough commitments from European countries to accept the 49 immigrants. Some of those rescued went on hunger strike to draw attention to their plight.

When the immigrants were finally allowed to land on January 9, Muscat refused to let the ships dock in Valetta and instead forced the ailing passengers to transfer to ships belonging to the Maltese navy. Sea-Watch 3 and its current passengers once again face the prospect of being shut out by every European country.



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