

# Refugee death toll rises in Mediterranean Sea graveyard

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The courageous action of captain Carola Rackete has once again focused public attention on the plight of refugees seeking to reach Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. Ten days ago, Rackete, the captain of Sea Watch 3, ignored a ban issued by Italy's Interior Minister Matteo Salvini (League), and transported 42 rescued refugees to the port of Lampedusa.

The Italian rescue ship Alex, run by the organisation Mediterranea, also defied Salvini's ban. It landed 54 people in Italy on Sunday, including 11 women and four children. Another ship, the Alan Kurdi, which also headed towards Lampedusa with 64 immigrants on board, decided to continue to Malta. After 11 days, those it had rescued were finally picked up on Sunday morning by a Maltese naval boat and brought ashore.

The Maltese government headed by the social democrat Joseph Muscat, banned the crew of the Alan Kurdi, however, from landing in Valletta. Gordon Isler, chairman of the Alan Kurdi mother ship, Sea-Eye, called the ban "blatant trickery". Captain Werner Czerwinski from Hamburg said: "We saved the lives of 64 people. That will last forever." It was his first assignment as an NGO captain.

The ship's name stems from the two-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi, who drowned in September 2015 on his way from Turkey to Greece. Although the crew of the Alan Kurdi had been at sea continuously for four weeks, they returned the next day to the dangerous seas off the Libyan coast to rescue 44 people on Monday. The search aircraft Colibri had spotted the group stranded helplessly on a wooden boat.

There are far too few ships to accommodate all those shipwrecked. The Mediterranean has become increasingly deadly for immigrants following the decision by the European Union one year ago to discontinue the "Sophia" naval missions and at the same time prevent private ships coming to the rescue.

"The route across the Mediterranean to Europe seems to have become even more dangerous," declared Flavio Di Giacomo, spokesman for the International Organization for Migration (IOM). "Today, more than one in ten immigrants dies on the crossing; in the past it was much less." According to the IOM project "Missing Migrants", 682 people drowned in the Mediterranean from January to July 9, 2019. Many more have died who have never been registered because no witnesses survive. Over the same period only about 30,000 people have reached the mainland safely. Last year, from January to July, this figure was almost twice as high, at 58,000.

Only last week, 82 people drowned in a horrific accident off the Tunisian port city of Zarzis. On July 3, Tunisian fishermen found four castaways out on the open sea. They had been afloat for two days, clinging to a wooden plank and were the only survivors.

The four men rescued, three from Mali and one from Ivory Coast, were taken to a hospital in Zarzis. There, the man from Mali died a short time later from exhaustion. Their boat, carrying a total of 86 people, had filled with water and sunk. "The four of us clung to a wooden plank," a survivor told the Red Crescent. "The waves beat over us. We stayed like that for two days sitting on the plank surrounded by the dead."

Since then, other bodies have washed ashore in this region of Tunisia. Twelve bodies were found on the beach in Zarzis on July 7 and 8. *Le Monde Africa* wrote: "There are more bodies than swimmers at Aghir beach on the island of Djerba at the beginning of this month."

The situation has worsened following the fresh eruption of civil war in Libya. Life for refugees has become even more dangerous. On July 4, more than 50 people died in a detention centre near Tripoli when the camp was hit by an airstrike. Last Monday, other prisoners in the detention centre in Tajoura went on hunger strike after the so-called "unity government" under Fayiz as-Sarradsch forced

them to remain imprisoned in the semi-ruined camp.

The EU and the UN support and finance the thuggish Sarraj regime and its criminal coastguard to prevent people from crossing to Europe. At the same time, EU governments are stirring up nationalism and racism in their own countries while criminalising sea rescue efforts. This applies to governments of all political stripes, from social democrats to right-wingers and open fascists.

Only a few days ago, the Spanish government of Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) threatened to impose a horrendous fine on the Proactiva Open Arms group if it continued to rescue refugees. The right-wing government of the Netherlands, led by Mark Rutte, has also proposed penalising maritime rescue missions in the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini is raging that he will raise financial penalties for NGOs bringing refugees to Italy to the sum of €1 million.

Politicians are seeking to blame one another for the mass murder in the Mediterranean. At the weekend, the German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer (CSU) wrote a letter to the Italian government saying that “there could be no excuse for the fact that ships carrying rescued people drifted for weeks on the Mediterranean.” Salvini promptly countered, declaring he would never open the ports and would rather “let the migrants be taken by bus to the German embassy in Rome.”

In Brussels, EU Interior Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos has urged member states to agree on a “temporary distribution mechanism for rescued refugees”. Avramopoulos told *Die Welt*: “The challenges of migration cannot be just the responsibility of Italy and Malta simply because they are located on the Mediterranean.”

In Berlin, Seehofer sought to make political capital from the rescue of the refugees aboard the Alan Kurdi in Malta: “in the spirit of European solidarity” he offered to accept up to 40 persons(!). The EU must “quickly find a viable and functioning mechanism,” Seehofer continued. The grand coalition government in Berlin, which has been actively promoting “Fortress Europe” for years now suddenly declares it is ready to work with France to seek a “temporary solution” for taking on shipwrecked immigrants.

Behind the scenes, a cynical and shabby deal is being worked out. Sea rescues have become a political football in the EU Parliament. Along with the CDU, the Greens are playing a particularly despicable role with regard to the proposal by the EU heads of state and government to appoint the current German Defence Minister Ursula von

der Leyen (CDU) as president of the European Commission. This proposal underlines the intent to turn the EU into a major military power under German-French dominance.

The president of the Commission has to be confirmed by the European Parliament on July 16, and von der Leyen needs the votes of the majority of the 751 members of the European parliament. The votes of the Greens will be decisive.

The Greens already held a one-hour conversation with von der Leyen on Monday. Subsequently, the Greens’ group leader Ska Keller said she saw “no reason” to vote for von der Leyen. Her colleague Erik Marquardt then called on the EU Commission president-designate to “work for the decriminalisation of maritime rescue.” The European Greens demand, according to Marquardt, that the German government puts itself “at the head of a coalition of the willing to support sea rescues.”

The Greens are preparing to put the German Defence Minister into the executive chair of the EU Commission on the pretext of a supposed better solution for rescues at sea. In fact, this manoeuvre will do nothing to improve conditions for desperate immigrants fleeing their countries to avoid war and intolerable living conditions.

This is confirmed by the fact that the German Grand Coalition has not responded to the numerous offers made by many cities to accept refugees. In addition to Bremerhaven, the cities of Dusseldorf, Cologne, Dortmund, Münster and Wetter have all agreed to do so.

On Saturday, large demonstrations against the death toll in the Mediterranean took place with around 30,000 people participating. An appeal to cover the costs of the trial, which awaits Carola Rackete in Italy, has raised a million euros in just four days, and another initiative in Italy raised an additional half a million. The aid organisation Sea Watch now proposes to share these donations with other rescue organisations which need them.



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