

# Dozens of immigrants drown in eastern Turkey's Lake Van

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After the removal of coronavirus restrictions, a boat carrying dozens of immigrants believed to come from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran sank in eastern Turkey's Lake Van on June 27.

So far, rescue workers have only recovered bodies of 10 migrants. But it is believed that the boat still at the bottom of the lake was carrying at least 60 or more people. While local residents have claimed that more than 100 immigrants might have lost their lives, at least 11 people were arrested about the incident.

This tragedy is not the first. Last December, seven died and 64 others were rescued when a boat sank carrying refugees and immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Migrants reportedly are forced to travel by boat over Lake Van to bypass police checkpoints on land.

Van, a city on the Iranian border, is a transit point for immigrants fleeing war, persecution and poverty from Central and South East Asian countries that have been devastated by imperialist interventions. Many immigrants travel through Turkey as a transit country and then follow the Aegean Sea route through Greece in hope of reaching Europe.

Last week, the Turkish Coast Guard Command also rescued 35 migrants and is still searching for four others after their boat capsized off the coast of Ayval?k in Turkey's western Bal?kesir province near the Aegean Sea, opposite the Greek island of Lesbos. Turkey's state-owned TRT Haber claimed that the rubber boat carrying the migrants was punctured by the Greek Coast Guard, who also removed the fuel tank and pushed migrants toward the Turkish coast.

In early March, Turkey opened its gates for migrants wanting to cross to Europe, accusing the European Union (EU) of failing to keep its promises in a 2016 migrant deal. Turkey's attempt to use refugees to blackmail the European NATO powers into backing Ankara's war aims in Syria led to a new crisis on its western border.

President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an's government indicated that Ankara would no longer block some 3.5 million Syrian refugees and hundreds of thousands of more immigrants from leaving the country for Europe.

At that time, refugees took to boats on the Aegean Sea, marching to the Greek and Bulgarian borders. Heavily armed police and military units intervened against helpless refugees who have fled the conflicts in the Middle East to seek refuge in Europe. With EU support, Greek soldiers fired tear gas at refugees including women and children and even used live ammunition, killing and injuring several on the border.

After March 11, when the first case was traced in Turkey, the Erdo?an government long continued to encourage immigrants to go to the border with Greece. However, the government suspended this policy temporarily after a meeting between Turkish and EU officials in early March amidst a growing COVID-19 outbreak in Europe, leaving them to their fate during the pandemic across Turkey.

In early June, the International Organisation for Migrants (IOM)-Turkey's emergency coordinator, Mazen Aboulhosn, stated: "The COVID-19 epidemic hit migrant and refugee communities in the larger cities such as Istanbul, Izmir and Gaziantep particularly hard," adding: "Hundreds of thousands of migrants were among the first to lose their jobs, causing an immediate financial burden for them and their families. Many are still not able to afford food, medicine and healthcare."

Studies reveal the COVID-19 pandemic's disproportionate health and social impact on migrants. Fully 63 percent of refugees have had difficulty getting food during the pandemic, and more than 88 percent reportedly had no employment, compared to 18 percent before the outbreak. While the Health Ministry has still refused to make public the full coronavirus data in Turkey, there is little information about the health

situation facing millions of refugees and immigrants who lack basic social rights in the country.

Today, the coronavirus pandemic is not under control in Turkey or elsewhere in the world. As a result of the policies of “normalisation” and the return to work in the interests of the ruling class, the number of daily cases has risen more than 1,000 again.

Immigrants, who live in crowded houses or packed like sardines in vehicles, are one of the largest risk groups. The camps, often funded by the EU and lacking basic sanitation, are in grave danger of succumbing to COVID-19.

The plight of asylum seekers in Turkey and Greece is the product of the EU’s brutal policies. A rotten deal between the EU, Turkey and Greece in March 2016 established Greece as the EU’s jailer of refugees and obliged the Erdoğan regime to ensure that refugees from the war zones in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan will not make their way to Europe.

The agreement mandates that all refugees entering Greece via “irregular” routes—that is, those making the dangerous journey via boat from Turkey to Greece—will be deported back to Turkey. Only those who can prove that they would be persecuted in Turkey can obtain asylum in Greece. Once in Greece, they are interned until their applications for asylum are processed; most are denied and sent back to Turkey.

The nearly 5 million refugees and immigrants who live in Turkey amount to a significant fraction of the approximately 79.5 million refugees fleeing imperialist war and poverty around the globe.

It is a critical task of the international working class, in particular in Turkey and Greece, to defend refugees. They must be released from detention camps, receive medical care and obtain full democratic rights, including citizenship rights. They must have the right to settle in the country of their choice and study, live, and work as they please.



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