

At least 140 drown in refugee boat disaster off Senegal coast

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At least 140 people drowned last week when a boat carrying approximately 200 refugees bound for Europe exploded and sank off the coast of Senegal. The tragedy is the deadliest mass refugee drowning reported this year.

According to a statement by the International Organization of Migration published Thursday, the boat departed from Mbour, on the west coast of Senegal, on Oct. 24. It travelled northward in the Atlantic along the Senegalese coast toward the Spanish-controlled Canary Islands, where the hundreds of people aboard hoped to lodge their claims for asylum in Europe.

One of the survivors aboard the ship told the local Sene.news, “At some point, the motor caught fire. The crew were able to get control of the blaze, but the fire restarted and reached the jerrycans full of petrol. I jumped into the water, holding onto a can that floated in the water.”

M. Diéye, another survivor, described the scenes before the explosion. “When the fire started at the back of the boat, many passengers, particularly those who couldn’t swim, rushed to the front... When the explosion happened there was a general panic, and those who couldn’t swim hung on to those who could. They stayed there and went down with the boat. I can’t say how many there were.”

Fallou Samb, who had a minor in his care aboard the ship, said, “After the boat capsized, he panicked and cried my name. When I found him, I gave him a can so that he could stay above the surface. After two hours, he was exhausted, and couldn’t hold on any longer. He let go and went down in front of my eyes, without anything that I could do.” Another man, Demba Sow, told Radio France Internationale that his two daughters, aged 21 and 27, had been aboard the ship and were not rescued.

The total number of people who had been aboard the ship is unknown. The IOM stated that there were at least 200. Only 59 were saved. Several dozen at least came from the same community in Pikine, a suburb of the Senegalese town of Saint-Louis. “More than 20 youth from the quarter of Pikine had wanted to reach Europe on this trip,” wrote Sene.news. The *Guardian* reported that in this area, “entire streets were plunged into mourning by the tragedy.”

Just two days after the disaster, in the evening of October 25–26, another boat carrying an unknown number of refugees sank five kilometers off the coast of Dakar, the Senegalese capital. Thirty-nine people were saved, but the ship reportedly had between 60 and 70 people aboard.

The deaths of at least a dozen people were directly caused by the actions of the Senegalese and Spanish navies. One Spanish and another Senegalese ship had caught the refugee boat while it was en route and had sought to physically block it from passing. The refugee boat collided with the Senegalese navy boat, causing it to capsize. Senegalese journalist Babacar Fall told *Bonjourdakar.com* that the navy boat had deliberately rammed the small vessel carrying dozens of refugees.

More than 414 people are known to have died in 2020 on the route from western Africa to the Canary Islands. This is a more than 100 percent increase from the 210 fatalities in 2019. The real number is likely far higher. According to the IOM, there were 11,000 arrivals on the Canary Islands in 2020, up from 2,557 during the same period in 2019.

The increasing use of the dangerous route is the direct outcome of the criminal policies of the European powers, who adopted harsh policies leading thousands to drown in the Mediterranean, in order to prevent refugees from exercising their democratic right to claim

asylum in Europe.

The European Union is collaborating with and funding governments across North Africa, from Morocco to Algeria to Libya, to prevent refugees from trying to cross the Mediterranean. It is funding Islamist militia forces in Libya and providing them with coast guard vessels to catch refugee boats attempting to reach Italy. From there thousands are imprisoned, sold into bondage, and held hostage for large ransom fees from their family members.

The EU has also ceased all rescue operations in the Mediterranean, and actively seeks to prevent NGOs from conducting search and rescue, by refusing to grant them sailing rights. According to the UNHCR, in 2018 and 2019 an average of 72 refugees died *every day* trying to reach Europe. This is the conscious and intended outcome of the European policy, which seeks to use the threat of likely death to deter refugees from claiming asylum in Europe.

This flow of thousands of desperate refugees from Africa is the outcome of decades of European and US imperialist policy in Africa, exacerbating the legacy of the colonial oppression of the continent. María Jesús Vega, the spokesman of the United National High Council of Refugees in Spain, told the *Guardian* that 30 percent of refugees traveling from Senegal to the Canary Islands come from Mali.

They are fleeing the outcome of the war in Mali led by France. The war was triggered by NATO's war to overthrow the Libyan government in 2011 with the aid of Islamist militias. The resulting strengthening of Islamist forces in Mali allowed France to launch a military intervention to secure its domination over the geostrategically crucial Sahel, which includes important uranium and raw mineral resources, amid growing Chinese influence in the region.

There are documented reports of war crimes committed by the armed forces of the G5 with which France is collaborating, including the deliberate promotion of sectarian ethnic killings, to terrorize opposition to the European occupation and the puppet regime in Bamako. This has caused a social breakdown in Mali that is triggering a mass exodus. The social crisis and mass youth unemployment are exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

These are the social and political roots of the catastrophic drownings that occurred last week off the

coast of Senegal.



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