Forty-three refugees drown off Libya’s coast: victims of the European Union’s refugee policy

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At least 43 refugees drowned on January 19 off the Libyan coast during their attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Only 10 people could be rescued. They were returned to Libya by the Libyan coastguard. The mass death in the Mediterranean, for which the European Union (EU) bears responsibility, thus continues into yet another year.

The dinghy, carrying more than 50 people, suffered engine failure amid rough seas and capsized shortly after leaving the port city of Zawiyah, west of Tripoli, in the early hours of the morning. The survivors, who came from the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ghana and Gambia, stated that everyone on board the capsized boat came from West Africa.

Chief responsibility for these pointless deaths of people fleeing civil war, poverty and misery lies with the governments in Berlin, Rome, Paris, Vienna and The Hague. In close collusion with the European Commission, they have blocked all legal avenues to Europe.

When refugees are then forced to attempt crossings on tiny, unseaworthy dinghies, the European governments do everything in their power, in what amounts to a despicable crime, to halt virtually all rescue missions in the central Mediterranean. Their hands are, in the most literal sense of the phrase, dripping with the blood of the 20,000 people who have drowned in the Mediterranean over the past eight years.

The experience of Souleymane, a refugee from Guinea, gives a sense of the tragedies taking place in the Mediterranean. Souleymane was interviewed by the Infomigrants news website last March while he was living in Libya, waiting on an opportunity to reach Europe. The 18-year-old was one of the victims who drowned in last week’s boat tragedy.

His friend Moussa, who was among the survivors, told Infomigrants that the sea became increasingly rough in the hours following their departure. The boat then capsized, and Souleymane, who could not swim, was thrown into the water. Moussa was able to grab him and pull him back to the boat. Souleymane was still in the water holding onto the boat from the outside when a second wave struck.

“I am broken. I can’t hold on anymore,” were the last words Souleymane spoke before he disappeared underwater. “He never resurfaced again,” whispered Sylla, who also comes from Guinea and lives in Libya.

Souleymane told Infomigrants last March about his plight in Libya, where he arrived in 2018. He was detained twice by the police after his boat was intercepted by the Libyan coastguard.

The Libyan coastguard is financed, equipped, and trained by the EU. In essence, it consists of the country’s warring militias, who abuse migrants and often trade them as slaves.

Souleymane was brought to the detention camps of Tajourah and Zouara and tortured, like all of the refugees there. The people who took him there on the pretext that they could offer him work abused him and inflicted severe injuries with knives.

His mother died last summer in Guinea, but Souleymane could not even attend her funeral because he was confined in Libya. Then, last Tuesday, he boarded a tiny dinghy for the fourth and last time, hoping to reach Europe, find work and start a new life. He died in the first ship accident in the Mediterranean of the year.

Emergency rescue at sea

“We have a huge gap in naval emergency rescue because almost all lifeboats have been detained by the authorities or they can’t sail because legal proceedings against them are ongoing,” a spokesperson from the aid organization AlarmPhone explained about the situation in the Mediterranean.

The only aid organisation currently able to operate a boat in the Mediterranean is SOS Méditerranée. Their ship Ocean Viking, which returned to sea on January 11 after a five-and-a-half-month break, rescued 374 refugees from the ice-cold waters in the first 48 hours alone. However, the Ocean Viking arrived too late at another shipwreck and was forced to watch as the Libyan coastguard detained 80 refugees and returned them to Libya.

The Geneva-based International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reported Friday that the Libyan coastguard has violently returned over 300 refugees to Libya already this year, including women and children, and detained them there. The IOM renewed its demand that no refugee should be returned to Libya.

In a joint statement, the IOM and UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) expressed the fear that the number of deaths last year in the Mediterranean was likely much higher than

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estimates suggest, because naval rescue operations are barely monitored any longer.

The EU withdrew from emergency rescue missions in 2019. Last year, it criminalised civilian emergency rescue missions, persecuted them, and deliberately withdrew them from service. The so-called Libyan coastguard remains solely responsible for naval emergency rescue missions, performing the dirty work for the EU in its brutal policy of deterrence towards refugees.

But the IOM and UNHCR stress that Libya is not a safe refuge for refugees, as the European governments like to proclaim. "Migrants continue to be arbitrarily detained there and interned under the most terrible conditions. They are bullied and exploited by people traffickers and smugglers, detained to secure ransoms, tortured, and abused," noted the joint statement.

According to the Missing Migrant Project, 977 people officially lost their lives last year on the Mediterranean route from Libya, making it the deadliest refugee route in the world.

AlarmPhone estimates that in 2020, 27,435 people tried to flee from Libya. 5,375 people in 75 boats made it to the small Italian island of Lampedusa. 2,281 people made it to Malta. 3,700 people were rescued at sea by civilian ships and brought to Italy. But 11,891 refugees were seized at sea by the Libyan coastguard and returned to Libya's torture camps. In total, around 200,000 refugees continue to reside in Libya in horrifying conditions, a significant percentage in the numerous internment camps controlled by the militias.

Last April, the Italian government seized on the coronavirus pandemic to declare all Italian ports "unsafe," so as to prohibit all refugees from landing. Crews of civilian ships were criminalised and charged with allegedly assisting illegal immigration.

At the same time, the EU not only supported the Libyan coastguard's illegal repatriation of refugees, but also conducted illegal "pushbacks" of refugees at sea. This refers to the process of turning refugees away without giving them the chance to file an asylum application.

The Maltese government even used a civilian fishing boat to carry out such an operation. Eleven refugees died as a result. Similar illegal "pushbacks" are increasingly being used by the Greek government in the Aegean Sea, and by Croatia on its border with Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Croatia, Bosnia and Greece

The Croatian border patrols in particular use extreme brutality against refugees. The Border Violence Monitoring Network has counted "pushbacks" on the Croatian border affecting 12,000 people. The refugees are often chased away by the border guards with batons and whips. They are beaten, robbed and abused.

A substantial amount of the financing for the EU member states' border regime comes from the European Union. The EU made €6.8 billion available for this purpose last year.

"We stand by Croatia as a partner," affirmed German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer in January 2020, when heat-seeking cameras were handed over. The German government then provided Croatian border guards with 20 vehicles in December. Croatian Interior Minister Davor Bozinovic not only expressed his thanks for the millions of euros in support but vowed that the German government would be extensively informed about the Croatian border guards' activities. The German government is not merely well informed about the blatant violations of human rights on the EU's external borders, but also supports them strongly.

The EU's criminal approach to refugee deterrence is made particularly clear by the camps on the Greek islands and in Bosnia. On the island of Lesbos, tents housing 7,000 refugees in the Kara Tepe camp are sinking into the mud. There is neither adequate food nor electricity, running warm water or health care services. Despite this, the Greek government refuses to move the refugees to the mainland.

Following the burning of the Moria refugee camp in September 2020, the German government loudly proclaimed its intention to accept at least 1,500 refugees. In fact, only 291 refugees have been flown to Germany to date, while thousands of people, including small children, continue to languish in the camp's inhuman conditions.

The situation is equally dire in the Croatian-Bosnian border region, especially since the fire in the Lipa camp on December 23. 9,000 people have been left to brave the bitter cold of the Bosnian winter with virtually no protection. Emergency camps have only been made available for around 5,600 refugees. This means that more than 3,000 refugees are sleeping in ruins, makeshift tents, or outdoors.

The humanitarian catastrophe playing out in Bosnia and the Mediterranean is the product of the EU's criminal and cynical policies. "It bears repeating: the EU's policies were consistent and coherent, and the EU provided all the necessary financial resources," noted a confidential paper from the EU Commission on the situation in Bosnia cited by the German daily *Die Welt* last week.

The procedure in Libya and Bosnia-Herzegovina is always the same: the EU pays hundreds of millions of euros to criminal gangs and corrupt elites so that they perform the dirty work and keep the refugees away from their doorstep. Following German Interior Minister Seehofer's mantra, "Help must be provided on the ground," the EU then washes its hands in innocence and claims it is not responsible for the conditions of the refugees on the ground.

As the refugee aid organisation ProAsyl explained in rejecting this, these countries neither have a functioning asylum system nor a framework for receiving refugees. Instead, refugees are at best left to their own devices, and at worst interned and horrifically abused.

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