

Up to 130 asylum seekers drown in the EU's Mediterranean graveyard

Stefan Steinberg
26 April 2021

Up to 130 asylum seekers are feared to have drowned after their flimsy rubber dinghy capsized in the Mediterranean off the coast of Libya on Thursday. NGO rescue ships arriving on the scene reported seeing many bodies floating in the water around the upturned craft, which had been carrying about 130 persons.

The tragedy at sea is the latest in an unceasing catalogue of drownings, which have been deliberately allowed to take place by European governments in order to deter migration to Europe.

The first contact with the dinghy in distress was reported on April 21 by the volunteer organisation Alarm Phone, which alerted the European humanitarian group SOS Méditerranée to the presence of three boats floundering in rough seas off the coast of Libya.

Alarm Phone has issued a timeline that establishes the criminal role of European authorities, including the EU border protection force Frontex, in the latest drownings. After establishing contact with the dinghy, Alarm Phone repeatedly passed on its GPS position to European and Libyan authorities. The only response was the dispatch of a Frontex surveillance airplane, seven hours after the first alarm raised by Alarm Phone.

The Frontex aircraft found the boat and contacted the appropriate European authorities, which rejected any responsibility to undertake a rescue operation, and instead passed the buck to Libya, declaring that the war-torn country was the 'competent' authority. For its part, the Libyan coastguard refused to coordinate any rescue operation, leaving the refugees to die after drifting in heavy seas. A second boat was intercepted by the Libyan coastguard, and over 103 people were returned to Libya "and detained." A mother and child were found dead on board this vessel.

The United Nations Human Rights Commission recently called for an end to the practice of returning

refugees to Libya, following many reports of torture and murder as well as the selling of refugees into slavery. A third boat, estimated to be carrying about 40 people remained undetected.

Referring to the victims of the capsized dinghy, Alarm Phone concluded: "The people could have been rescued but all authorities knowingly left them to die at sea."

According to the International Migration Organisation (IOM), more than 16,700 people have tried to cross the Mediterranean since the start of this year. Around 750 have died, including the victims of Thursday's incident, with more than 500 drowned on the so-called Central Mediterranean sea route. This figure is almost three times greater than the total for the same period last year.

At the same time, these figures are likely to be a gross underestimate of the total number who have died at sea attempting to enter Europe. EU governments have not only withdrawn their own rescue vessels from the region, they are actively sabotaging rescue operations by volunteer organisations with boats in the Mediterranean.

In particular, the authorities in Italy and Malta have sought to prevent rescue ships carrying rescued migrants from entering their ports. When some rescue vessels docked anyway, the ships were confined to the ports pending legal action against the captain and crews. Dozens of investigations have been launched by Italian prosecutors against NGOs in past years. As a consequence, for entire months last year not a single NGO rescue vessel was reported to be at sea. This means that it is highly probable that many other victims of the EU's criminal anti-migrant policy remain uncounted.

The Missing Migrants Project estimates that the

remains of 14,000 humans are unaccounted for in the Mediterranean Sea, while what is left of the corpses of at least 1,000 people remains missing in the Atlantic Ocean along the highly dangerous sea route chosen by desperate migrants attempting to cross from Africa to the Canary Islands.

COVID-19 and migration flows

The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified the crisis for migrants fleeing hunger, political repression, war and the consequences of climate change in their home countries. Last year, Italy and Malta both declared their ports to be unsafe for ships bearing migrants. Initially in 2020, as governments closed their borders in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, migration levels to Europe fell, but there are many indications that as the health and attendant economic crisis worsens in Asia and Africa more and more asylum seekers will risk their lives trying to enter Europe.

A report released at the end of March by the United Nations migration agency stated that migrant arrivals in the Canary Islands increased by 750 percent last year. Numbers were increasing before the pandemic, but COVID-19, the report states, seems to have “acted as a multiplier of existing factors motivating migration on this route.”

The report noted that many migrants had worked in sectors such as fishing and agriculture that have suffered greatly from the economic consequences of the pandemic.

An additional consequence of the pandemic is a major decline in the amount of money migrant workers send home. Migrant workers in European countries are most likely to have been the first to have lost their jobs and/or their lives due to the pandemic. The Migration and Development Brief published by the World Bank estimates that migrant money flows from wealthier countries to the migrants’ home of origin will decline by 14 percent in 2021 compared to pre-COVID-19 levels in 2019.

The increasing immiseration of families in poorer countries reliant on such money flows will only

increase the pressure on younger dependents to attempt the perilous sea crossing to Europe. The staggering toll of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean and Atlantic Seas during the past two decades must be added to the rap sheet of the ruling elites in Europe, which have so recklessly sacrificed human lives in the course of the pandemic.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)