

As over 50 refugees drown, UN condemns EU's Mediterranean migrant policy

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More than 50 refugees drowned attempting to cross the Mediterranean from Africa to Europe last week. The mass drowning is the latest such disaster this year, produced directly by the anti-migrant policies of the European Union (EU).

In another demonstration of the illegality of the EU's refugee policy, the United Nations human rights commission handed down a report yesterday, branding the EU as jointly responsible for causing hundreds of entirely preventable deaths in the Mediterranean since the beginning of the year, and thousands in the years before.

The latest disaster took place on Monday, May 16. A boat that was reportedly carrying 90 people when it departed from Libya sank off Tunisia's southern coast, near the city of Sfax, the following day. Only 33 of the passengers survived, saved by workers on a nearby oil platform, who spotted the boat sinking and alerted authorities. The survivors were all from Bengal. The remaining 57 passengers were never recovered.

The tragedy is the fifth such incident off the coast of Tunisia in just the last two months. Another 17 people drowned at the beginning of the month. The deadliest single drowning of the year took place on April 21, when more than 130 people are presumed to have drowned after their boat sank off the coast of Libya.

The United Nations reports that a staggering 685 people have drowned in the Mediterranean since the beginning of this year. Over the past seven years, the number is over 20,000. Yet even these appalling tallies are likely significant underestimates, because they do not count the untold numbers who perished without leaving a trace.

These deaths are the intended outcome of the policies of the European Union and its member states, which have turned the sea separating Africa from Europe into

a vast graveyard to deter refugees from exercising their legal and democratic right to claim asylum on the continent.

This was all but acknowledged in a report published yesterday by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), entitled "Lethal disregard: Search and rescue and the protection of migrants in the central Mediterranean Sea."

It notes that there has been a significant and continuing rise in the mortality rate of boat crossings over the past four years. In 2017, when 119,310 migrants reached Europe, the mortality rate was already almost 2 percent, or one in every 51 people who attempt to make the journey. By 2018, it had reached one in 35. In 2019, it reached one in every 21 people.

"At least since August 2017," the report states, "the EU and its Member States have gradually reduced their maritime assets in the central Mediterranean, shifting responsibility for search and rescue operations in international waters to the" Libyan border force.

In March 2020, the former Operation SOPHIA of the EU in the Mediterranean "was replaced by operation IRINI... however, IRINI vessels have no specific search and rescue mandate," and its "more eastward operational area also avoids placing EU maritime assets in the area of the central Mediterranean where most migrants seek to cross..."

In other words, the EU ceased its rescue operations in the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, NGO rescue ships have had their sailing rights stripped on baseless pretexts and been denied flags to sail under by EU member states, to prevent them from carrying out rescues.

"Humanitarian SAR vessels and aircraft operating in the central Mediterranean continue to be prevented from monitoring, searching for, assisting and rescuing migrants in distress," the report states.

“At various times during the reporting period, this led to periods in which no humanitarian SAR NGOs were present at sea in the central Mediterranean, leading to tragic and preventable loss of life.” Since 2018 alone, “national authorities in EU member states have initiated some 50 administrative and criminal proceedings against crew members or vessels, including the impounding or seizure of vessels.”

Meanwhile, the EU provides funding and live intelligence on refugee boats to the Libyan coastguard, to whom it has contracted out to catch refugees and return them to Libya, in gross violation of international law.

“Once in Libya, they become vulnerable to unlawful killings, slavery and forced labour, torture and ill-treatment, gender-based violence, arbitrary detention, extortion, and other human rights violations and abuses by both State and non-State actors, which have been confirmed by an overwhelming amount of evidence and reports, including previous public statements and reporting by OHCHR.”

This is only the latest report documenting the illegal and murderous refugee policy of the EU. Like all previous such reports, it will be ignored by EU governments, and noted briefly if at all by international media outlets, who will quickly move on.

Just this week, these same governments and news publications have been gripped by moral outrage over the actions of the Belarussian government, which forced down a RyanAir plane carrying an opposition journalist and kidnapped him. The European powers have suspended all flights to Belarus, blocked investments to the country, and issued a series of provocative militarist threats against Belarus’ ally Russia.

As the WSWS noted, these actions have nothing to do with the defense of democracy and the “rule of law,” but are driven by the geopolitical interests of the major imperialist European powers.

One need only ask what would happen if hundreds of refugees were drowning off the coast of Russia or China each month, with documented evidence that it was an intended result of their policies. The drownings would be featured in front-page columns. As it is, refugee drownings in the Mediterranean are treated by the European media and political establishment as non-events.

EU anti-migrant policies are aimed at diverting outward social tensions produced by the enormous levels of social inequality and poverty across the continent. They are also one of the mechanisms through which the EU is strengthening and promoting extreme-right politics. The defense of the rights of all people to live and work in whatever country they choose, with full citizenship rights, including the provision of safe passage, is an elemental task of the working class of Europe.



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