

Channel drowning survivor reveals UK, French police left them to die

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Mohamed Shekha Ahmad, a 21-year-old Kurd who is one of two survivors of the mass drowning of migrants on November 24 in the English Channel, spoke Monday to the Kurdish Rudaw News Agency. He revealed that French and British police both ignored desperate pleas for help from the refugees as they drowned.

This exposes cynical lies told by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, French Prime Minister Jean Castex, and French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin, blaming “people smugglers” for migrant deaths off the coasts of Europe.

The group of 33 to 35 migrants arrived at the French coast near Dunkirk around 6pm. There were fifteen Kurds from Iraq, four Kurds from Iran, four Somalis, four Ethiopians, two Egyptians and one Vietnamese. There were women and children, including a 3-year-old girl and two young Kurdish women, Maryam Nuri Mohamad Amin and another named Muhabad, trying to join their fiancés in Britain. Mohamed, a construction worker, said he hopes to work in Britain to raise money for his sister, Fatima, to get treatment of fused discs in her spine.

The group left France aboard a flimsy inflatable dinghy between 8 and 10pm, but several hours later, the dinghy’s air tube began to leak massively, and large amounts of water came into the boat.

Mohamed said, “The right side of the boat was losing air. Some people were pumping air into it, and others were bailing the water from the boat. Then after a bit, we called the French police and said, ‘help us, our pump stopped working.’ Then we sent our location to the French police and they said, ‘you’re in British waters’ ... we called Britain. They said call the French police. Two people were calling, one was calling France and another was calling Britain.”

Both French and British police refused to help the drowning migrants, leaving them to die in freezing waters. “Britain should have come on board, because we drowned in the Channel. They didn’t help us or do anything for us,” Mohamed said, adding that the dinghy had reached British waters. He explained, “British police didn’t help us and the French police said, ‘You’re in British waters, we can’t come.’ Then, as we were slowly drowning, the people lost hope and let go. Then the waves took us back to France.”

The migrants initially clung together, Mohamed explained, to keep themselves from drifting away from the group and drowning. He said he still vividly remembers the group crying out in the night, “Please God, rescue us! Please God, rescue us!”

“Everyone could take it until sunrise, then when the light shone, no one could take it anymore and they gave up on life,” he said. “A guy from Ranya was with me,” Mohamed recounted. The two were Kurds of the same age, and they had promised not to let go of each other. “I said, I won’t let go of your hand. Then he said, ‘I’ll go in front of you.’ I didn’t see him again.”

Mohamed saw photos of a family with a 3-year-old girl from Darbandikhan in Iraq’s Suleimaniya province, and confirmed they were aboard the dinghy. “This is the little girl. They were with us,” Mohamed said. “I saw death with my own eyes. I was thinking only about my dad and my mum.”

About twelve hours after the dinghy had begun to sink, French fishing boats found the wreck and alerted a ferry that picked up the bodies and the survivors.

Contacted by Rudaw, the British Home Office responded that Mohamed’s account is “completely untrue.” A Home Office spokesman claimed, “Officials here confirmed last night that the incident happened well inside French Territorial Waters, so they led on the

rescue effort, but deployed a helicopter in support of the search and rescue mission as soon as we were alerted.” The spokesman told Rudaw to contact the British Coast Guard for details.

The British Coast Guard did not reply to Rudaw’s questions. French authorities also ignored a request for comment from the news agency.

Other accounts of the disaster bear out Mohamed’s account. The other survivor, a Somali man named Mohamed Isa Omar, also said that the refugees contacted both French and British authorities. “Most of the calls were for Britain, asking for help,” Omar said. “They could hear us, we were crying for help and we called twice, not once. We drowned in the British sea, we drowned in British waters.”

A relative of one of the Kurdish victims of the disaster, who gave the name Taha, confirmed Mohamed’s account in a separate interview with Rudaw, by phone from Iraq.

Taha said he was in contact with the migrants via phone, tracking their location via Facebook. “They started experiencing tube problems around 1:30am British time. I was in contact with them, talking until 2:40... They were five kilometers inside British waters,” he said. “Forty-five minutes before they drowned, they called and said they were in British waters but could not move. They drowned in British waters, and the waves took the bodies to French waters.”

Taha ruled out the possibility that British or French police could have misunderstood the drowning migrants’ appeals for help. Among the migrants, Taha said, “There were foreign people too, who spoke good English. Even the 15-year-old Kurdish girl from Darbandikhan spoke good English.”

Taha concluded, “What happened is a crime, it’s not destiny or God’s will. It’s a crime committed by the two countries.”

These accounts expose the horrific contempt for human life that prevails in ruling circles in France, Britain and across Europe. After thirty years of NATO wars and interventions across the Middle East and Africa since the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq, there are over 82 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, the most since the end of World War II. The European powers treat this great mass of humanity, the size of the German population, with murderous hostility.

The European Union’s (EU) Frontex agency has

blocked rescue operations for migrant ships in the Mediterranean. Since 2014, 22,594 migrants are confirmed to have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean from Africa or the Middle East to Europe—to flee imperialist interventions in Iraq, Somalia, Syria, or Libya, the bloody NATO-backed military dictatorship in Egypt, or poverty and unemployment. The EU set up a network of detention camps from the Greek islands or Bosnia to the Canary Islands, where refugees who survive the crossings are imprisoned.

The official campaign against “people smugglers” is exposed as a pack of lies, as is the NATO powers’ claims to feel deep sympathy for the Kurdish people. Over the last decade, potential danger to Kurds served as a pretext for NATO military deployments to Syria and then Iraq, in which billions of dollars were spent to deploy thousands of troops and bomb entire cities. When it is a matter not of justifying wars, however, but of sending boats to rescue 30 people drowning a few miles off the coast of two of Europe’s wealthiest countries, nothing is done.

After a spat between London and Paris over Johnson’s request that France retake migrants arriving in Britain, both governments are reportedly preparing to deploy Frontex to the English Channel. Workers across Europe and internationally must defend migrants, oppose plans to intensify police repression targeting them, and support their right to live, study and work where they choose.



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