

11 die, dozens rescued from capsized migrant boat off coast of Puerto Rico

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Eleven people died and at least 38 have been rescued after a boat carrying migrants capsized on Thursday about 10 nautical miles north of Desecheo Island and northwest of Puerto Rico, the US Coast Guard reported on Friday. The group was spotted Thursday morning by a US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) helicopter.

Although search and rescue operations were ongoing as of this writing, authorities have indicated that the death toll could rise higher as it is not immediately clear how many people were in the boat. The passengers had been spotted in the water and did not appear to be wearing life jackets, the Coast Guard reported.

Rescue crew members had initially pulled 31 survivors from the water after the boat tumbled over, a spokesperson with the US Coast Guard's 7th District told CNN. The Coast Guard increased the total number of survivors to 38 in a Friday update. 'We always look for the possibility of finding survivors,' said Coast Guard spokesman Ricardo Castrodad, adding that crews worked through the night.

A CBP spokesman said 36 of those rescued are Haitian nationals, while the remaining two were from the Dominican Republic. The boat had reportedly departed from the Dominican Republic and was traveling across the tumultuous stretch of water in the Mona Passage, a strait that lies between Puerto Rico and Hispaniola, the Caribbean island that includes the Dominican Republic and Haiti. At least eight Haitian nationals have been hospitalized.

According to CBP spokesman Jeffrey Quiñones, the boat was taking on water and the occupants were trying to shovel water from the boat. Quiñones noted this was not uncommon for such voyages since the unsafe ships are often not built for tumultuous seas. "It appears that the boat broke because it's not a boat that's made for

such a voyage," Quiñones said. "With a lot of people inside the boat, of course this could happen."

An autopsy performed by Puerto Rico's Forensic Science Institute found that all 11 victims were female. The institute announced it was forming a special team to perform autopsies Friday on the bodies recovered. María Conte Miller, the institute's executive director, said her agency has been talking with Dominican consular officials to the family members of the deceased.

Authorities in recent months have noted a sharp increase in migrants from Haiti and the Dominican Republic making dangerous voyages aboard makeshift boats that are often overturned or drop people off on uninhabited islands. Despite the perilousness of the journey, these trips are the cheapest methods for migrants to flee from countries that are seeing soaring costs in basic goods, double-digit inflation and severe gas shortages.

Gang violence in Haiti has shuttered hundreds of schools and businesses and prompted some hospitals and clinics to temporarily close. Dozens of gangs now occupy the country's capital, Port-au-Prince, forcing many to flee in search of safety and stability.

Almost the entire political and social fabric of the country has been upended since the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July of last year. A flood of evidence has emerged implicating powerful sections of the country's venal ruling elite, and many of those that now occupy positions in government and police posts were involved in the plot to murder Moïse, including incumbent President Ariel Henry.

The social and economic crises wrecking the Caribbean nations have spurred a massive surge in migration, particularly over the past two years as a result of entrenched food insecurity and joblessness

that have accompanied the coronavirus pandemic. From October 2021 to March 2022, 571 Haitians and 252 people from the Dominican Republic were detained in waters around Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands, according to CBP. The majority of those Haitians, 348 of them, landed in Puerto Rico's uninhabited Mona Island and had to be rescued.

According to the US Coast Guard, the fiscal year that ended September 30 saw state officials apprehend 1,527 Haitians, 838 Cubans and 742 people from the Dominican Republic in the region, which includes Florida and the Caribbean. In January, the Coast Guard searched for at least 38 people missing off Florida's coast after a suspected human smuggling boat that had left the Bahamas capsized in a storm, with one survivor reported.

Recently, as many as 68 migrants were rescued Saturday along the Mona Passage. One woman believed to be from Haiti died. Earlier this month, CBP detained 60 Haitian migrants that the agency said had traveled through southwest Puerto Rico. On May 4, another 59 Haitian migrants were detained in northwest Puerto Rico. In late March, officials said they detained more than 120 migrants in three separate maritime smuggling incidents.

These marine disasters come amid a surge in seaborne migration on both coasts and expose the hypocrisy of the Democratic Party and the Biden administration, which campaigned on promises for a softer approach to immigration than Trump and Obama. In fact, the Biden administration has upheld and argued in court for the continuation of the most inhumane Trump era immigration policies: pandemic-related border restrictions and the separation of migrant families at the border.

Central responsibility for the crisis in immigration lies with the barbaric and criminal policies of the Biden administration, which has maintained Trump era immigration policies of rejecting asylum cases and repatriating migrants on bogus pandemic-related health restrictions and separating children from their families. More than 20,000 Haitian immigrants have been deported in recent months.

The Democrats have made no serious attempts to rescind the Trump's Title 42 restriction, a section of the Public Health Service Act that allows the US government to ban noncitizens from entering the

country in the interests of public health.

A coalition of Republican-led states have filed a lawsuit against any lifting of the pandemic-related restrictions. Lawyers for the 24 states have argued for a nationwide injunction to maintain the swift expulsion of migrants under the pandemic-related public policy, and a federal judge said he planned to issue an order before the policy is set to be rescinded on May 23.

While Judge Robert R. Summerhays of the US District Court for the Western District of Louisiana has not said explicitly how he would rule, he has previously been supportive of the arguments brought by the states to force Title 42 to remain in place. Scott St. John, Louisiana's deputy solicitor general, said after the hearing that he was "confident" based on the judge's comments during the hearing that the states that had sued were "in a good position."

The reactionary Title 42 measure is in defiance of the health recommendations of public health experts, who have repeatedly argued against the policy and said there is no scientific reason for its implementation. Proper safety precautions make it entirely possible to process asylum seekers at the border without spreading COVID-19 and other communicable diseases. The Biden administration, however, has capitalized on Title 42 and the fascistic politics of the Republican Party to justify the continued rounding-up and expulsion of immigrants while doing nothing to actually confront the pandemic.



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