Shipwrecks of refugees boats off Greek islands kill at least 23, many people still missing

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Two separate shipwrecks of boats carrying refugees across the Aegean occurred within hours of each other last Thursday, resulted in at least 23 deaths.

The latest mass fatalities of refugees off Greek islands happened just days after at least 86 people drowned when a boat carrying refugees from Lebanon sank, on September 24, off the coast of Tartus, Syria.

The first shipwreck occurred on the eastern side of the island of Lesbos, off the coast of Turkey, when a dinghy carrying around 40 people capsized due to heavy winds, resulting in 18 deaths—16 young women, one adult male and one 15-year-old boy. Most of those on the boat were reportedly of African descent, likely from Somalia. 15 of the survivors had swum to the surface and were discovered in the surrounding mountains by members of the UN's High Commission for Refugees, who handed them over to the authorities. Another 10 survivors were discovered trapped on rocks underneath a military outpost on the coast.

The second shipwreck occurred a few hours earlier when winds between 90 and 100 kilometres per hour forced a sailboat carrying 95 refugees to crash onto rocks east of Kythira's main port of Diakofti. The island is located off the coast of the Peloponnese in southern Greece.

The boat sank five minutes after impact with a coastguard spokesman saying it was "completely destroyed". The refugees, including 18 children, were mainly from Afghanistan with some from Iran and Iraq. The boat set sail two days prior from Turkey and was on route to southern Italy. The crash occurred 20 minutes after people on the boat had called 112, the Europe-wide emergency number. Only seven bodies were recovered and eight people are still missing.

The terrible plight facing refugees fleeing war-torn and poverty-stricken homelands were visible in the harrowing scenes following the Kythira shipwreck. Video footage published by *Kythira News* showed desperate survivors at the bottom of the steep cliff, hanging on for their lives in windy conditions with waves crashing against them, waiting to try to climb up a rope to be pulled to safety.

That the fatalities were not higher was down to the heroism of locals who descended to the cliff edge to help with rescue efforts.

Speaking to *The Press Project*, one of the rescuers said, "More than 50 locals promptly descended to the area of the shipwreck to help with blankets, dry clothes and various emergency supplies. There is a rescue team on the island that was mobilised immediately and helped co-ordinate locals to participate in the rescue effort. 10 people in a row used ropes to pull up one by one from the cave [at the bottom of the cliff] the 80 people they managed to save. It was impossible for helicopters and coast guard vessels to approach the rocky shore in the dark and with the waves coming from the north."

Another clip from the Hellenic Coastguard, taken from a wider angle, showed the great peril the refugees were in, stranded at the bottom of a massive cliff face.

In a tweet Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis hypocritically expressed his "sorrow at the tragic loss of human lives" and blamed human traffickers "exploiting innocent desperate people." Coast guard officials, speaking to conservative daily *Kathimerini* wrote that while human traffickers in the past would not sail when weather conditions were bad they now "send people to their deaths in order to earn cash fast."

The reality is that refugees crossing into Europe are taking ever greater risks to avoid detection by the authorities due to Greece's brutal pushbacks policy—the forcing of refugees back across the border into Turkey.

Shortly after the two tragedies occurred, prominent Greek activist Iasonas Apostolopoulos who leads search and rescue operations of refugees in the Aegean and the Mediterranean tweeted, "In Lesbos they set forth with wind strength at 7 on the Beaufort Scale so that they were not detected by the Greek Coast Guard and pushed back. In Kythira they were

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trying to get to Italy directly from Turkey (100 times more difficult) for the same reason."

Illegal under international law, the pushback policy is routinely carried out by the Greek government as part of the EU's Fortress Europe policy of denying the right of desperate refugees to seek asylum within the EU. A recent investigation revealed that the Greek authorities even force desperate asylum seekers to participate in the pushbacks in return for being allowed transit through Greece into Europe. As for the traffickers, Greek police routinely work with them when carrying out their pushback operations.

According to figures compiled by *Aegean Boat Report*, pushbacks have increased substantially in the last two years. In 2021, 632 boats were pushed back into Turkey—nearly double the number of boats the year before. This has already been surpassed in 2022 with 697 boats pushed back so far this year.

This policy has led to a rise in fatalities as refugees take greater risks to cross dangerous seas in ramshackle vessels. According to the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) 2,062 people died or went missing while trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2021, up from 1,449 the year before. By the end of September this year, 1,522 people were reported dead or missing.

Heinous crimes against refugees by the authorities are commonplace. On October 4, *The Press Project* reported, "For a whole month, 8 refugees were detained illegally and arbitrarily in the detention facilities of Samos Police Station, without accommodation, hygiene and clothing. Among the 8, a young refugee, Madi, who for 26 days remained detained in a cell fenced with bars - similar to a cage - which was located inside the cell where the 7 men were staying. The refugees made the 'mistake' of entering from Evros and coming voluntarily in order to register and apply for international protection at the Samos Police Station. The result was their illegal detention in deplorable conditions, despite the fact that 46 million euros have been invested in Samos to create the Closed Controlled Facility, which serves this purpose."

Apart from a brief press release from the border agency Frontex expressing the agency's "deepest condolences" regarding the Lesbos shipwreck, there has not been a single statement from within the European Union (EU) to even acknowledge the tragedy. Recent reports have revealed that Frontex routinely takes part in Greece's pushback operations.

In addition to shifting the blame onto traffickers the Greek government has used the tragedy to ramp up sabre-rattling against Turkey amid rising geopolitical tensions as result of the ongoing war in Ukraine. In a tweet on October 8 Greek Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi said, "Urgent call to Turkey to take immediate action to prevent all irregular departures due to harsh weather conditions…. EU must act."

This follows a tweet Mitarachi posted one day before the tragedies occurred of video purportedly showing "footage from Turkish coastguard violently pushing forward migrants to Greece, in violation of international law and the EU joint statement." Mitarachi's claim unravelled after *Aegean Boat Report* replied, "This video is over 3 years old, and you know it, deliberately misleading people. This video do not show a "push forward" as you say, it shows Turkish coast guard trying to violently stop a boat from crossing towards Greece, this is what EU paid them to do under the EU-Turkey deal".

Whatever their regional rivalries, the Greek and Turkish elites remain united in enforcing the EU's Fortress Europe policy.

The lies and hypocrisy of Greece's New Democracy government were more than matched by the pseudo-left Syriza, the main opposition party in parliament. Following the tragedies, a joint statement by Syriza MPs called on Turkey "to stop weaponizing refugees, which it continues to do while the EU leadership tolerates this, and to respect its obligation according to international rules."

The statement called "on the Greek government to finally abandon the catastrophic role of the jailor of Europe, and well as Europe's leadership to stop pretending that they don't see dead people in the Mediterranean and take the initiative for a just asylum and migration policy."

If anyone knows anything about being the jailor of Europe it is Syriza, which boasts of its anti-immigration record. In power between 2015 and 2019, Syriza set up camps to intern refugees fleeing hardship and persecution, at the behest of the EU. The most notorious was on Moria, on Lesbos, dubbed "the worst refugee camp on Earth" before it burned down in September 2020.

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