

Fortress Europe policy kills hundreds more refugees in Mediterranean and Aegean Seas

Robert Stevens
4 November 2022

The mass loss of life of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas continues. Dozens more died this week.

According to the Aegean Boat Report (ABR) group, 22 dead bodies have been recovered but at least 34 more are missing from a shipwreck near the Greek islands of Evia and Andros. Among the dead found in the Kafireas Strait are five children and six women. There were around 68 people on the boat which sank on Tuesday.

Separately, eight people are missing after an inflatable dingy overturned and sank off the eastern Aegean island of Samos on Monday.

On November 2, ABR issued more information on the Kafireas Strait sinking, stating in a Facebook post, “We have decided to release one of the two videos filmed onboard the sailboat just before it sank. There is no faces in the video, and the voice has been changed so it no longer can be recognized, due to the sensitivity of this tragedy. In the videos the man is speaking Sorani, so most likely from Northern Iraq (Kurdish), The man is talking on the phone, it seems with emergency services saying, ‘the water is coming inside the boat, please hurry to save us, we have only ten minutes and the boat will go down’.”

An ABR tweet on November 1 showed four pictures of refugee women and children squeezed onto a dingy and exhausted on the shoreline rocks, with the words, “40 people arrived on [Greek island] Lesbos last night, 11 of them are now safe in camp, 29 was arrested, beaten and robbed before thrown in a life raft by Greek coast guard, left helplessly drifting in the Aegean Sea, this is Greek border management.”

These are just the latest horrific instances, as the Greek and Turkish authorities compete with one another over who can impose the most brutal anti-immigration policies on the southern border of Fortress Europe.

Before this week’s deaths, at least 27 refugees and asylum seekers drowned last month in two separate sinkings. Eighteen people died when a boat that had set sail from Turkey sank off Lesbos. Another boat containing 100 people

went down in a gale, resulting in at least nine deaths, with six people still missing.

People remain missing after a sailboat carrying 95 refugees crashed onto rocks on October 5, east of Kythira’s main port of Diakofti, off the coast of the Peloponnese in southern Greece. At least 11 people died, with just seven bodies recovered and eight people still missing. The boat sailed from Turkey two days prior, on route to southern Italy.

Another incident epitomises the sheer brutality and inhumanity shown by governments towards desperate men, women and children fleeing their devastated homelands. Over the weekend of October 15, 92 immigrants from Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco, Iran, Bangladesh and Pakistan were discovered in Greece—at the Evros river border with Turkey—after having been abandoned and stripped naked by authorities. Among their number were children.

Neither the Greek nor Turkish governments have accepted responsibility. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), describing the incident as “cruel and degrading treatment”, called for an investigation. Whoever is directly responsible for this atrocity, it is an outcome of the brutal anti-immigration measures agreed between both countries and the European Union (EU). In March 2016, the EU-Turkey Statement was adopted as a “temporary and extraordinary measure” stipulating that people deemed to have crossed “illegally” to the Greek islands from Turkey would be returned there.

No systematic data is kept by the EU or any European country on the numbers of refugees being drowned or arrested and deprived of their democratic rights in the Mediterranean and Aegean. It is left to organisations such as the Aegean Boat Report group, with limited resources, to compile information and document the horrific treatment of refugees by a fascistic “pushback” policy.

On November 2, the ABR tweeted that the previous month, it had “registered 105 illegal pushbacks in the Aegean Sea, performed by [Hellenic Coast Guard], 2,618 people, children, women and men, have been denied their right to seek asylum, their human rights have been violated

by the Greek government.”

Its October report notes that the Greek and Turkish coastguard have stepped up their persecution of migrants and asylum seekers in recent weeks. Explaining that in 2022 the number of people arriving was up 153.2 percent compared to 2021, it found that in October arrivals of people on Greek islands had “decreased 16.3 percent compared to September”.

ABR adds, “225 boats started the trip [from Turkey] towards the Greek islands in October, carrying a total of 6,113 people. 54 boats made the trip carrying a total of 1,282 people, the rest, 171 boats, 4,831 people were picked up by the Turkish Coast guard, half of these boats had been pushed back by the Greek Coast Guard.”

Of the year so far, “In 2022, 1,386 boats have been stopped on their way towards Greece,” and a staggering “44,041 people have been arrested.”

The latest bimonthly bulletin on refugees and migrants from ReliefWeb site provided by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), provides more examples of the criminal treatment of refugees.

It notes, “Between 15 March and 27 September 2022, the European Court of Human Rights granted 20 interim measures in a series of cases of refugees and migrants in the Evros region, represented by GCR [Greek Council for Refugees], ordering the Greek authorities for their immediate rescue. Despite the court rulings, most of the people were pushed back or forcibly expelled to Turkey. Those who were formally arrested and registered report that they had previously experienced pushbacks.”

Among the cases reported by ReliefWeb are:

- “In August, 38 refugees were stranded on an islet in the Evros river for days. No rescue operation was launched by the Greek authorities, who claimed that the refugees were located on Turkish territory. The refugees were formally arrested and registered only after they reported that a five-year-old girl died on the islet.

- “Since 10 August, around 50 people are said to be missing after a migrant boat leaving from southern Turkey and heading to Italy sank in the Aegean Sea, off the Greek island of Rhodes.”

International law is being violated with refugees often left to die on the seas. ReliefWeb writes, “An increasing number of migrants on boats sailing from Turkey and Lebanon to Italy disembark on southern Greek islands or coastal areas after several days adrift at sea. Dramatic delays in EU states’ Search and Rescue (SAR) operations demonstrate their disregard of international obligations to rescue victims in the Mediterranean Sea.”

In one horrific event, “A 4-year-old Syrian girl died from

dehydration, an 8-month pregnant woman lost her child, many were injured and two people went missing after a delayed and inadequate SAR operation in the Maltese SAR zone, off Crete.”

The treatment of refugees housed in Greece’s camps is ever more abhorrent. ReliefWeb’s report notes, “An unjustified 25-day movement restriction has been applied to newly arrived asylum seekers in Samos Closed Controlled Access Center.” It adds, “Newly arrived Yezidi refugees remained homeless and without access to drinking water outside of Serres Camp for days.”

Greece’s conservative New Democracy “government violently closed Elaionas [or Eleonas] camp with the involvement of riot police.” This took place in August, with Info Migrants reporting, “The clearance operation of the Eleonas camp started at 5:00am local time in Athens. However, when they arrived, police initially ran into barricades, which the residents of the 670-strong camp had erected around the gates in a bid to stop their eviction. After removing the improvised structures, police clashed with migrants, eventually pushing them back with the use of tear gas and a flash grenade.”

According to a UNHCR report in May this year, more than 3,000 migrants died, or have gone missing, presumed dead, while trying to reach Europe by sea in 2021. This was twice as many as in 2020. This year is expected to be similarly deadly, with at least 478 people having already perished or gone missing at the time the report was published.

Greek Minister for Migration Notis Mitarachi has claimed “guarding the border” has reduced the number of lives lost.

Just how grotesque this lie is has been exposed by the humanitarian group Koraki. The European Council on Refugees and Exiles cited its research finding that “while arrivals have significantly decreased partly as the result of the ‘government’s illegal and immoral acts’ the proportion of mortalities has in fact gone up from one in every 835 people to one in every 66.5 person attempting to reach Greece via the Aegean Sea.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact