

At least 59 migrants drown off Italian coast, including newborn baby and 19 other children

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At least 59 migrants have been killed after their wooden vessel shipwrecked on the rocks off the Calabrian coast in Italy. A newborn baby and 19 other children were among the dead. Many of the bodies washed up on shore near a seaside resort.

Another 81 people are known to have survived, 20 of whom have been taken to hospital, one to intensive care. According to survivors, roughly 150 people were originally on board. They had set sail from Turkey three or four days previously.

Responsibility for this terrible crime lies with all the governments of Europe, who have conspired to turn the continent into a “fortress” against desperate people, and with the United States and its allies whose imperialist violence has dismembered societies across the Middle East and Africa, forcing unprecedented numbers to flee their homes.

With repulsive hypocrisy, the fascist Prime Minister of Italy Giorgia Meloni proclaimed her “deep sorrow,” before pledging more of the policies responsible for bloodbath on Europe’s borders, a crackdown on routes to Europe by “preventing departures.” Her interior minister boasted last week that such measures, implemented with Libya and Tunisia, had already “averted the arrival” of close to 21,000 people—trapping them in hellish conditions in those countries and pushing countless others to risk more dangerous journeys.

The same message as the fascist Meloni could be heard from any of Europe’s rulers.

President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen said she was “deeply saddened” by the deaths, before adding, “We must redouble our efforts on the (EU) Pact on Migration and Asylum and on the Action Plan on the Central Mediterranean.” Its details were spelt out at an EU summit earlier this month which discussed an

“integrated package of mobile and stationary infrastructures... from vehicles to cameras, from watchtowers to electronic surveillance” to deny entry to asylum seekers and plans to make easier the mass deportation of refugees and to strengthen collaboration with the brutal regimes policing the North African coast.

“Fortress Europe” has already seen 2,406 people recorded as dead or missing in the Mediterranean by the International Organization for Migration in 2022. Nearly 26,000 have been lost since 2014. This says nothing of the horrors suffered on the road to the Turkish or North African coast, or the network of internment camps in which tens of thousands of refugees are imprisoned and denied basic democratic rights.

Since the 2015 picture of a young Syrian boy lying dead on the beach in Turkey produced an outpouring of popular shock and anger, government policy has made dead children washing up on the shore a regular event. In November 2020, a five-year-old boy was found dead on the shores of the Greek island Samos. His father lost hold of him as their boat capsized on rocks. He is now facing 10 years in prison, charged with endangering his son’s life. He was taken in handcuffs to identify the body.

The next month, the bodies four children aged between 5 and 10 were found on the beach west of the Libyan capital Tripoli. Five months later, another three children, including a six-month-old baby and a three-year-old, were found dead on the same stretch of coast. A month after that, a one-year-old was found on the Norwegian coast after drowning with his family trying to cross from France to the UK.

In May 2021, *Guardian* analysis linked 2,000 deaths to the EU’s pushback operations, illegal under international law, to force migrants away from Europe’s borders, including the use of violence and humiliation. This is the

tip of an iceberg of suffering, with the worst abuse outsourced to forces in Libya and Tunisia, intercepting migrant vessels and returning refugees to camps in which torture, rape, extortion, murder and slavery are rife.

Another strategy has been to abandon refugees to the sea. A 2021 report by the European Commissioner for Human Rights found that European governments had been redeploying ships away from areas where they were most likely to find migrants in distress.

Many small NGOs have stepped in to uphold the international obligation to save lives at sea. Meloni's government is spearheading efforts to outlaw these emergency efforts. On Thursday, the parliament passed a law requiring rescue vessels to immediately sail to a port after completing a rescue, rather than find other boats in distress.

But while the Italian government has gone the furthest in law, it is only codifying the common policy of all the European powers. On Friday, 15 EU states issued a statement calling for financial support for "all types of border protection infrastructure including physical barriers." They added that "the support of Frontex should also be increased and fully deployed in the most affected member states," and demanded "more possibilities for accelerated [deportation] procedures followed by rejections in case of unfounded asylum applications."

Rescue ships filled with hundreds of refugees are regularly left stranded at sea for weeks as country after country refuses access to its ports. In 2020, Amnesty International published a report, "Solidarity on trial in Fortress Europe," condemning how "human rights defenders and civil society organizations that have helped refugees and migrants have been subjected to unfounded criminal proceedings, undue restrictions of their activities, intimidation, harassment, and smear campaigns in several European countries."

One case cited was the Greek government's ongoing investigation of a group of 24 volunteer workers who rescued migrants off the coast of Lesbos for alleged human trafficking, money laundering and fraud. Initial charges of espionage had to be dropped. The group includes Sarah Mardini, whose story of helping fellow refugees cross the sea from Turkey to Greece inspired the film *The Swimmers*.

Mardini fled the devastating war in Syria waged between NATO's Islamist proxy forces and the government of Bashar al-Assad. The refugees drowned Sunday hailed from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Iran—also the subject of US occupations, military

interventions, indiscriminate drone strikes and crippling sanctions and the victims of global inequality and climate change. These factors have created a record forcibly displaced population of more than 100 million people, considered so much human debris by the world's capitalist governments.

Nearly four million displaced people are living in Turkey, including, until recently, those shipwrecked in Calabria. Another 6.6 million are internally displaced in Syria. Many had their lives devastated a second time by the earthquake earlier this month which killed at least 50,000 people and has left millions homeless.

The response of the European governments says everything about the ruling class's priorities. So far the European Commission has pledged just €6.5 million in aid for victims of the earthquake, while last year €754 million was made available for its border force Frontex. The agency, along with the Greek government, has stepped up patrols around the Aegean in anticipation of larger numbers of people seeking to escape the disaster. "The mass movement of millions of people is not the solution," threatened Greece's migration minister Notis Mitarachi.

The assault on migrants and denial of democratic rights is playing out globally. Last week, US President Joe Biden announced an immigration policy barring entry and asylum to almost all migrants at the southern US border in a gross violation of international law.

Events like these tear apart the fiction that the US and European powers are waging a war for "democracy" and "freedom" against Russia in Ukraine. In fact, NATO's war and the attacks on migrants are inextricably linked. A major war in Europe is incompatible with democratic rights and demands a massive assault on the living standards of the working class, which will fall fastest and heaviest on its most vulnerable sections, already forced to flee their homes and communities.



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