

Mass drowning of refugees off the coast of Tunisia

Martin Kreickenbaum

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At least 29 refugees drowned off the Tunisian coast in three boat accidents last week, and another 67 people are missing, according to aid agencies.

These new tragedies occurred amid a veritable exodus of refugees from Tunisia. Mostly coming from Central Africa and West Africa, as well as Pakistan and Bangladesh, they are victims of a racist campaign conducted by the Tunisian government and the European Union's criminal anti-refugee policy.

The Tunisian coast guard was only able to rescue eleven refugees from one of the capsized boats north of the city of Mahdia, while another patrol boat pulled eight bodies out of the water. Two fishing boats recovered another 21 bodies from the sea about 60 kilometres off the coast of the port city of Sfax. The actual death toll, however, is likely to be far higher. Speaking to Sky News, one of the smugglers who organised the crossings said he had counted 130 fatalities in the last week. "There have been many disasters this week," he added.

The Tunisian coast guard reported at least 80 decrepit boats last week carrying around 3,000 refugees who were trying to cross to Italy and have now been taken back to Tunisia.

In Italy itself, 6,564 refugees have been registered on the coast in the same period, almost as many as in the first three months of 2022. In total, 27,000 refugees have already been stranded on Italy's coast this year, with 12,000 having departed from Tunisia, according to the United Nations. That is ten times as many as during the same period last year, when just 1,300 refugees from Tunisia were registered.

The aid organisation Forum for Social and Economic Rights (FTDES) also reported that the Tunisian coast guard had prevented a total of 14,000 refugees from crossing to Italy. Tunisia has thus replaced Libya as the main point of departure for refugees crossing the Mediterranean towards the European Union.

However, only 1,771 of the refugees from Tunisia registered in Italy so far have Tunisian citizenship. According to a report in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 3,660 people gave the Ivory Coast as their country of origin, 3,177 Guinea, 1,986 Pakistan, 1,896 Bangladesh and 1,195 Egypt.

The immediate trigger for this dramatic increase in refugee numbers from Tunisia was a racist diatribe by Tunisian

President Kais Saied on February 21 this year. Addressing the generals of the National Security Council, Saied made refugees into scapegoats, declaring they were responsible for the country's deep economic crisis, which has led to rampant poverty and the impoverishment of a broad mass of the population.

Saied stated, "There are still hordes of illegal immigrants coming from sub-Saharan Africa, with all the violence, criminality and unacceptable practices that go with it." He also said, "The unspoken aim of the successive waves of illegal immigration is to turn Tunisia into another African country that no longer belongs to the Arab and Islamic nations." He claims there is a deliberately organized "population exchange", a racist theory widely propagated by far-right and fascist organisations in Europe.

In fact, out of a total population of 12 million, only about 21,000 people in Tunisia are from Central and West Africa. But Saied, who rules with dictatorial powers, sparked pogrom-like agitation against migrants with his speech, especially among the security forces, but also among the most backward layers of the population.

Only two hours after Saied's speech, police began a wave of arrests in the port city of Sfax with its 300,000 inhabitants. Migrants from Central and West Africa were arbitrarily and indiscriminately put in jail. Landlords and employers cancelled migrants' flats and jobs, often for fear of being criminalised for giving housing and jobs to people from Central Africa.

Hundreds of migrants have gathered in Tunis outside the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) office with tents and tarpaulins, hoping to find shelter from the official raids and attacks. They are marooned there, without access to sanitation and sufficient food.

More than half of the 10,000 migrants from Central and West Africa previously living in Sfax have now left the city. Some have returned to their countries of origin, but thousands are trying to find protection in Europe from the terror of the Tunisian security authorities.

The deeper reason for the mass emigration from the small North African country is the devastating economic crisis that has hit many countries in Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a massive collapse in economic output, hitting the

tourism and service sectors in particular. The OECD Tunisia 2022 report, published a year ago, declared that “Tunisians are facing the worst economic crisis in a generation.”

Since then, the war in Ukraine provoked by the NATO powers has dramatically worsened the situation. Energy and food prices have skyrocketed, basic foodstuffs are hard to come by and the official inflation rate is 10.4 percent. Youth unemployment stands at almost 40 percent. At the same time, approval ratings for President Saied’s government have plummeted dramatically. In the last parliamentary elections, only 11 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots at all, while at the same time protests and strikes have increased.

Tunisia’s impending economic collapse has rung alarm bells in the European Union. Italy’s Minister of Civil Protection and the Sea, Sebastiano Musumeci from the fascist Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia) party, described Tunisia as a time bomb and, with reference to the rising number of people seeking protection, declared, “The flow is swelling.” Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni declared a week ago: “Tunisia’s serious financial problems could spark a new wave of migration.”

European Commission Vice President Josep Borell echoed the same sentiment, fearing that Tunisia’s economic collapse would trigger a new wave of migration to Europe. The EU has therefore already made an additional 110 million euros available to North African states as a precautionary measure aimed at preventing refugees crossing the Mediterranean to Europe.

At the same time, the governments of Italy and France are putting pressure on the International Monetary Fund to conclude negotiations on a \$2 billion loan for the country. In fact the loan would impose an austerity diktat on Saied’s government, forcing it to cut all remaining subsidies and drastically reduce the public sector. However, the administrative apparatus and especially the security agencies are Saied’s last power base and negotiations are currently suspended.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported Monday that Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, together with several Gulf states, offered to grant Tunisia a loan. In addition, Saied’s loan negotiations with the governments of Russia and China are said to be close to being concluded.

The European Union wants to prevent such a deal at all costs, having chosen Tunisia for a strategic partnership in its deterrence strategy directed against refugees. Among other things, “asylum centres” are to be set up in Tunisia. This refers to detention camps where the European Union can decide on asylum applications from refugees without being bound by the rules that still apply within the European Union. In addition, the Tunisian coast guard is to be expanded in a manner similar to the practice already established by the EU with the Libyan coast guard.

The Tunisian border guards have already adopted the technique of illegal pushbacks, employed for some time by the

Libyan and Greek coast guards. Speaking to Sky News, refugees from the Ivory Coast related how their boat was stopped by the Tunisian coast guard. ‘They took our smartphones, we were in the middle of the high seas, and they stole our engines and just left us at sea. They are a gang of robbers and racists.’

The migrants living in Tunisia are caught between twin evils: a racist government in Tunisia that brands them as scapegoats responsible for the economic crisis on the one side, and on the other, a no less inhuman European Union that conducts its merciless campaign against refugees.

A report by the United Nations Human Rights Council recently proved that the European Union is aiding and abetting the so-called Libyan coast guard in committing crimes. The report, written by independent human rights experts, is based on more than 400 interviews, documents and visits to Libya.

Releasing the report in Geneva, co-author Chaloka Bayani said that serious human rights violations against civilians and especially migrants had been uncovered, linked to the activities of the Libyan coast guard, which is funded and trained by the European Union. He stressed: “We are not saying that the EU committed these crimes, but its support is an accessory to the committing of these crimes.”

In the detention centres under the control of the coast guard and other Libyan state institutions, people are tortured, blackmailed, raped and murdered, while others are sold like slaves and some are sexually exploited. The report says: “These facilities received technical, logistical and financial support from the European Union and its member states, including for the interception and repatriation of migrants.” These pushbacks are illegal and a serious violation of the Geneva Refugee Convention.

For its part the European Union claims that supporting the Libyan coast guard helps save lives in the Mediterranean. This is nonsense and the height of cynicism in view of the at least 500 refugees who have already drowned in the Mediterranean this year and the many thousands more who have been pushed back illegally by the Libyan, Tunisian and Greek coast guards.



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