

Greek government tries to deny responsibility for hundreds of migrant drownings

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The sinking of a fishing vessel packed with refugees 50 miles south-west of the Greek town of Pylos is likely to be the worst loss of migrant lives in the country.

In June 2016, at least 320 people were listed as dead or missing after a vessel sank near Greece's largest island, Crete. Authorities have recovered 78 bodies from the latest tragedy so far, but reports suggest 500-750 people were on board and only 104 survivors have been found more than 24 hours later.

The ship sank in the early hours of Wednesday morning in one of the deepest parts of the Mediterranean and there is little hope of finding anyone else alive. Retired Greek coast guard admiral Nikos Spanos told Greek public broadcaster ERT, "The chances of finding more people alive are minimal," describing the type of old fishing boat used for the crossing as "not at all seaworthy. To put it simply, they are floating coffins."

People on the boat report that many people, including women and children, were in the hold below decks when the ship sank. One told a doctor, "About 100 children are in the hold." The International Organisation for Migration has said at least 40 children were on board—just eight were rescued.

The survivors are traumatised and some seriously unwell. Thirty were taken to hospital to be treated for pneumonia and exhaustion. United Nations refugee official Erasmia Roumana told ERT, "People are in shock," having travelled with family or friends who are now dead or missing.

"We're talking about young men, mostly, who are in a state of huge psychological shock and exhaustion. Some fainted as they walked off the gangplanks from the vessels that brought them here."

A Greek rescuer told CNN, "These people had not

eaten for many days, had not drunk water for many days, were burnt by the sun."

Many now face deportation. Greece's acting migration minister Daniel Esdras said they would be taken to a migrant camp to have their asylum claims examined, with those found not to have a "valid" claim sent back.

The Greek coastguard and border officials who ruthlessly police the borders of Fortress Europe—employing murderous "pushback" tactics and abandoning people in distress to the sea—are seeking to pin the blame on the migrants themselves, or those transporting them.

Coastguard spokesperson Nikos Alexiou told *Skai TV*, "It was a fishing boat packed with people who refused our assistance because they wanted to go to Italy. We stayed beside it in case it needed our assistance, which they had refused."

Given the record of the Greek government, there is no reason to believe offers of help were seriously made, let alone refused. Photos taken by the Greek authorities from the air during the day on Tuesday show migrants on deck with arms outstretched to the aircraft.

But if the official narrative is true then it speaks to the appalling anti-migrant brutality of the Greek government such that hundreds of people felt driven to risk more perilous hours at sea to reach the shores of Italy—a country governed by fascist demagogue Georgia Meloni's Brothers party where five police officers have recently been arrested on charges of torture and bodily harm against migrants.

Regardless, statements made by the smugglers in charge, or the decisions made by migrants in desperate circumstances and fearful of the Greek authorities do not change the fact that the ship was clearly in serious danger. Refugee assistance NGO Alarm Phone

condemned the Greek and European authorities for failing to act despite being “well aware of this overcrowded and seaworthy vessel.”

United Nations official Vincent Cochetel commented, “This boat was unseaworthy and no matter what some people on board may have said, the notion of distress cannot be discussed.”

Yet no attempt was made to pre-empt the catastrophe by deploying the aircraft, ships, teams and equipment necessary for a rapid rescue operation: the six coastguard vessels, navy frigate, military transport plane, air force helicopter, multiple private vessels and drone now said to be involved in the rescue operation.

The authorities were clearly hoping the ship would pass into Italy’s area of responsibility where they could wash their hands of any tragedy which followed and any care for the human beings on board.

Instead, a significant role was ultimately played in the rescue by the 93-metre luxury yacht *Mayan Queen IV* and two other vessels. The yacht is owned by a Mexican family who have made billions from silver mining, producing some of the most jarring pictures of social inequality imaginable. The yacht is valued at \$175 million, with annual running costs of \$15-20 million.

Cochetel insisted, “A robust and predictable [search and rescue] regime led by states is needed in the Central Med if we want to avoid such tragedies being repeated.” Greece and the European Union are doing the opposite, using the EU’s border patrol Frontex and deals with Turkey and North African regimes to make the crossing as difficult and dangerous as possible—under the cover of cracking down on “criminals” and “smugglers”.

Ylva Johansson, EU Home Affairs Commissioner, grotesquely used this latest tragedy to push the agenda which contributed to it, declaring “We have a moral duty to dismantle the criminal networks... With member states and third countries, we must redouble efforts to fight these morally bankrupt smugglers.”

At a meeting in Luxembourg last week, the EU agreed a new common anti-migrant policy to deny legal rights to asylum seekers, secure their internment at camps on Europe’s borders and fast-track their deportation to so-called “safe third countries”. Chief among these are Libya and Tunisia, visited by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen,

Meloni and Dutch Premier Mark Rutte earlier this month.

Just days earlier, the Libyan government had begun a mass anti-migrant crackdown, rounding up thousands—mainly Egyptians but including Syrians, Sudanese and Pakistanis—for deportation.

A UN report of a fact-finding mission to Libya published this April found that “crimes against humanity were committed against migrants in places of detention under the actual or nominal control of Libya’s Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration, the Libyan Coast Guard and the Stability Support Apparatus. These entities received technical, logistical and monetary support from the European Union and its member States for, inter alia, the interception and return of migrants.”

The Libyan government had also recently carried out drone strikes in the port cities of Zawiya and Zuwara, targeting “human traffickers” and “destroying “seven migrant smuggling boats,” it claimed.

Alarm Phone announced around the same time that it had “received reports that masked Tunisian forces are violently beating up migrants after intercepting them at sea. A witness reported: ‘They are using sticks and electric shocks. The people are screaming for help.’”

The hell on earth for refugees being created by the European powers is prompting ever more desperate journeys. Over 1,000 people have been reported dead or missing in the Mediterranean already this year, a one-third increase on last year and following the deadliest quarter since 2017.



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