

Over 600 migrants drowned near Greece: Fortress Europe and the refugee crisis

Thomas Scripps
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More than 600 migrants fleeing war, environmental disaster, poverty and oppression are dead or missing after their ship sank southwest of Greece in the early hours of Wednesday morning. Among them are between 30 and 100 children.

An estimated 750 people crammed into a fishing vessel at Tobruk in Libya on June 10, setting sail for days without adequate food or water, hundreds at a time packed on the open top deck.

Only 78 bodies have been recovered. The majority of the dead are likely still trapped in the hold at the bottom of one of the deepest parts of the Mediterranean. Just 104 survivors have been rescued, with the search called off Friday night.

The Greek government is complicit in this tragedy, refusing to organise a rescue operation until it was far too late, despite monitoring the dangerously overladen vessel for 14 hours and receiving reports of passengers in distress. Prof Erik Røsæg of the University of Oslo's Institute of Private Law told the *Guardian* they “had a duty to start rescue procedures” under maritime law “regardless of whether help was requested by those on board.”

After the coastguard claimed not to have had interacted with the ship because offers of help were refused, survivors have suggesting it capsized during an attempt to tow it. The coastguard now admit they had a mooring line attached, but insist there was no effort to tug the boat. One survivor said, “Because they didn't know how to pull the rope, the vessel started tilting right and left. The coastguard boat was going too fast, but the vessel was already tilting to the left, and that's how it sank.”

Large protests in Greece condemned the officials responsible for the country's migrant policy as murderers and were attacked with teargas by police.

(See video below).

That charge can be extended to all the European powers. They have poured billions into a vast anti-migrant apparatus at Europe's borders, designed to ensure that as many people as possible either abandon the journey or die in the attempt. Frontex, the European Union's (EU) border force, had its annual budget raised from €535 million in 2021 to €754 million in 2022.

Billions more have been given to the dictatorial Libyan and Tunisian regimes, which between them intercepted more than 60,000 migrants attempting to sail to Europe in 2022, reportedly firing shots to ward off rescue ships this March.

At least 21,000 people have drowned in the Mediterranean due to the imposition of “Fortress Europe” since 2014. Countless more have been put through hell in detention camps across North Africa—where the United Nations has found evidence of crimes against humanity in which the EU is complicit—and the Greek islands, or while passing through Europe by foot—subject to state-sponsored violence, extortion, humiliation and deprivation.

Asylum seekers are victims twice over. The imperialist powers which treat them like vermin are responsible for them having to seek refuge in the first place, ripping apart societies around the world with wars, interventions, intrigues and economic sanctions, plus the growing impact of climate change.

Among the dead in the latest tragedy were people from Syria, devastated by a US-led proxy war; Egypt, under the heel of Western-backed dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and of international investors; Pakistan, subject to US drone strikes and interventions in its politics and still suffering the effects of devastating floods; and Palestine, under imperialist-backed Israeli occupation

and blockade.

Those arriving at Europe's borders are only the tip of an iceberg of suffering. According to the latest Global Trends report from the UN Refugee Council, more than one in every 74 people on the planet is forcibly displaced—over 108 million human beings, 40 percent of them children.

Numbers have soared in the last decade. Roughly 60 million were forcibly displaced globally in 2014, at the beginning of the “migrant crisis” in Europe. At that time, tragedies including several off the coast of Lampedusa between 2013 and 2015—in which more than 1,000 people, including children, drowned—and the image of two-year-old Alan Kurdi washed up dead on a Turkish beach, produced widespread outrage and a feeling this barbarism could not continue.

But Europe's governments have acted to ensure that it has. After a fall in the number of migrants recorded missing or dead in the Mediterranean from its peak of 5,136 in 2016, the figure has been rising again since a 2020 low of 1,449. The first quarter of this year was the deadliest since 2017.

Politicians are responding by building the EU's walls higher—in some cases literally. At a meeting in Luxembourg this month, European leaders agreed to sweeping attacks on the democratic rights of asylum seekers, allowing for their prolonged detention and fast-track deportation. The length of external EU border walls increased more than sixfold between 2014 and 2022, to over 2,000 kilometres, covering 13 percent of the union's land border, with more building planned.

The intention is to seal European capitalism off from the human consequences of a global society shattered by capitalist crisis, about which the media barely reports.

Of the 108 million forcibly displaced, most (62.5 million) are internally displaced in dire conditions within their own countries. Eighty percent of them are in just 10 locations: Colombia, Syria, Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, Sudan, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Somalia and Ethiopia.

Low- and middle-income countries host three quarters of the externally displaced. They live in rudimentary camps like those at Bidi Bidi in Uganda (270,000 mostly South Sudanese refugees), Nyarugusu in Tanzania (150,000 mostly Congolese), or Za'atari in Jordan (76,000 mostly Syrians); or are housed in

countries like Turkey in conditions exposed by the earthquake of this February, which killed over 50,000 and displaced millions—many for the second time.

Far more leave their homes every year than can return—22 for every one returnee last year—and vanishingly few have any chance of resettling in another country—just 114,300 could do so in 2022. Most are left to rot, with those who try to find a job and a home in Europe violently repelled.

The horrific regular toll of migrant drownings and the global refugee crisis highlight the essential connection between imperialist war and the obliteration of democratic rights. The three birthplace countries of the largest groups of forcibly displaced people, according to the UN's latest report, are Syria, (6.5 million), Ukraine (5.7 million) and Afghanistan (5.7 million)—locations of some of the most destructive US-NATO operations of the 21st century.

When the 5.9 million internally displaced in Ukraine are added, the total in that country rises to a staggering 11.6 million, the world's fastest displacement crisis, and one of the largest since the Second World War.

Under conditions of the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine, with the imperialist powers directing resources into massive military spending programmes and repressive legislation at home, the attitude of the European ruling class to these displaced people is ever more hostile. The four million Ukrainians given “temporary protection” within the EU states and the paltry 60,000 allowed into the UK are considered a necessary exception to justify their friends, families and homes being used as NATO cannon fodder against the Russian army.

In that war, the ruling classes of the NATO powers advance themselves as defenders of democracy deeply concerned by humanitarian plight. Their brutal treatment of refugees exposes these hypocrites for what they are.



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