

New evidence suggests Greek coastguard lied about sinking of refugee ship with loss of over 600 lives

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Only two more migrants' bodies from the fishing vessel that sank off Greece last week have been found, bringing the official death toll to 80. Reported to be men, they were recovered from the sea off the Peloponnese peninsula on Monday.

The ship, packed with refugees and asylum seekers to the point where there was not a spare inch on the upper deck or in the hold, sank in the early hours of last Wednesday.

There were a reported 750 people on board, including many women and children, and only 104 people are known to have survived. The assumed death toll of over 600 is the worst in a single event in the Mediterranean since April 2015, when a sinking cost up to 1,100 lives.

Many of those who died were Pakistanis. In a statement on Sunday, Muhammad Sadiq Sanjrani, the chairman of Pakistan's senate, said that around 300 Pakistani nationals had boarded the ship. He declared a day of national mourning to be held on Monday. The *Guardian* reported last week witnesses who said the Pakistanis were kept in the hold, with only 12 of them among the survivors.

The governments of Europe's southern states who enforce the European Union's "Fortress Europe" policy are responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people over the last decade. Greece plays a major role, with successive governments closing Greece's borders. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis boasted last month, "We protected our country's borders both on land and at sea, and reduced irregular arrivals by 90 percent. We proved that the sea has borders, and those borders can and must be guarded". Refugees who do manage to get to the Greek mainland are immediately thrown in migration detention camps to await deportation.

The survivors of Wednesday's tragedy were first thrown in a filthy warehouse facility in Kalamata, lacking basic living conditions, and are now being held in a fenced detention camp near Athens.

Greece's conservative New Democracy government is

seeking to evade all responsibility, even as evidence grows that it mounted no rescue mission despite the Greek coastguard travelling alongside the dangerously overcrowded, unseaworthy vessel for hours before it sank.

In a swipe at NGOs including Alarm Phone, who were in contact with the boat in the hours before it sank and who documented how the Greek authorities made no attempt to rescue the vessel, Mitsotakis said on Sunday in a speech in Sparta, "It is very unfair for some so-called 'people in solidarity' [with refugees and migrants] to insinuate that the [coastguard] did not do its job...These people are out there [around the clock] battling the waves to rescue human lives and protect our borders,"

Virtually all media coverage in Greece is focussed on the arrest and upcoming trial of 10 people accused of trafficking the people on the boat.

On Monday, the BBC published evidence rebuffing the narrative of the Greek authorities that the migrants refused coastguard offers of help and were travelling westwards to Italy at a steady speed. The broadcaster obtained evidence based on an "analysis of the movement of other ships in the area" that "suggests the overcrowded fishing vessel was not moving for at least seven hours before it capsized."

The data is in the form of a computer animation of tracking data provided by a maritime analytics platform, MarineTraffic.

In addition, the BBC said it had "video and photographs authenticated by BBC Verify, as well as court records and shipping logs, to analyse the movement of vessels in the area in the following hours [after it was first sighted]." It stated, "The fishing boat had no tracker so is not shown on the map. Neither are coastguard and military vessels which do not have to share their location." However, the "movement of ships in the area where the vessel eventually sank [including a freight ship that provided occupants with food] suggests it was stationary hours before the shipwreck".

The animation shows that "All of the shipping activity of

the previous seven hours was focused around one specific spot, suggesting the migrant boat had hardly moved. The scale of the animated map suggests it travelled less than a few nautical miles, which may be expected of a stricken vessel buffeted by the wind and the waves in the deepest part of the Mediterranean Sea.”

London’s *Sunday Times* published a detailed interview with five of the survivors, with the newspaper noting, “They describe neglect, cruelty and callousness from the Greek authorities, in direct contradiction to the official version of events.

“Ayad and the other survivors not only claimed that the coastguard watched as people drowned, but blamed them for causing the ship to capsize by tying a rope to the prow and surging forward so the fishing vessel was destabilised.

The *Times* reports, “It is not only the survivors interviewed by The *Sunday Times* who have made these claims. A survivor whose account was published by *La Repubblica* in Italy, and a politician who spoke to the Greek publication *Kathimerini* (relaying a conversation with yet another survivor) told similar stories.”

Describing the appalling conditions in which he arrived on the fishing boat, the newspaper reported, “Ayad was on the last small vessel to arrive. As they climbed on board the larger boat, he heard the smugglers counting in Arabic. ‘That’s 750,’ one of them said. ‘That’s enough.’” It added, “Ayad could see men throwing food and drinking water over the side to make space for more passengers. ‘There were so many people you couldn’t move,’ he said.”

The *Times* reports that the “survivors we interviewed,” in accordance with accounts from other survivors, “say that the Greek coastguard vessel tied a rope onto the prow of the fishing vessel, and tried to start towing it. Then, the rope broke. They tied another, and began moving forward, before turning abruptly left and right. That motion, they said, caused the boat to rock heavily back and forwards three times before capsizing.”

The coastguard is sticking to its story, claiming the fishing boat “sailed from the moment of its detection during the morning, noon and afternoon hours of June 13, traveling a total of 24 nm.”

With the second round of Greece’s general election to take place on Sunday, the country’s rightward-careening pseudo-left opposition party Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) has sought to capitalise on mass anger at the deaths. An attempt to do the same over the 57 preventable deaths in February’s train crash in the Tempi valley backfired, with protests pointing out the party’s role in savaging Greek public infrastructure as it enforced austerity while in government.

Last Thursday, Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras spoke in

Kalamata with doctors and survivors of the shipwreck. While there he said, “The policy that Europe has been following is greatly to blame... It’s a policy that has turned the Mediterranean into a watery grave.”

This is hypocrisy on a breath-taking scale. In government for four years from 2015-19, Syriza played the leading role in preventing refugees and asylum seekers—fleeing their war-ravaged and poverty-stricken homelands—from entering Greece under the EU’s brutal pushback policy agreed with Turkey. It ruled in an alliance with its xenophobic coalition partners, the Independent Greeks.

By the time of its fourth year in power, Thodoris Vitsas, Syriza’s Minister for Immigration Policy, was boasting that under the previous New Democracy/social democratic PASOK government, “there were no organised camps or major reception centres.” Among those Syriza kept open and expanded was the hell on earth Moria camp—the largest refugee camp in Europe until it burned down in September 2020. In 2018, a Doctors Without Borders field coordinator described Moria as the “the worst refugee camp on earth”. A year later, with Syriza still in office, Moria was described as a “concentration camp on European soil” by Jean Ziegler, the vice-chairman of the committee of experts advising the UN Human Rights Council.

So vicious was Syriza’s anti-immigration policy that Mitsotakis—who only continues Syriza’s dirty work—was able to say in response to Tsipras’s crocodile tears this week, “Those who today appear as the so-called authentic humanitarians are those who allowed detention camps such as Moria to exist. The same who, a few days ago, were condemned by the European Court of Human Rights for the wretched conditions at Moria.”



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