

Witnesses accuse Greek Coast Guard of responsibility for refugee tragedy in the Mediterranean

Martin Kreickenbaum
26 June 2023

Several of the survivors from the refugee tragedy off the Greek port of Pylos have unanimously testified that the Greek Coast Guard capsized the fishing boat *Adriana* with some 750 refugees aboard. They contradict the official version of the Greek authorities that the boat capsized by itself.

According to the witnesses, the Greek coast guard threw a rope to the refugee boat and initially tried to tow it away. When this apparently did not succeed, the Coast Guard boat first made a sharp turn to the right and then to the left, causing the boat to capsize. The Coast Guard thus deliberately risked the deaths of hundreds of refugees, if not intentionally caused them.

The *Adriana* capsized on Wednesday night, June 14, at around 2:04 a.m. 104 survivors were rescued and so far, 82 bodies have been recovered from the sea. Hundreds of refugees, including women and children crammed below deck, were swept down with the *Adriana*.

What is clear so far is that the boat had set off from Egypt and stopped off at the port of Tobruk on the east coast of Libya on June 9 to take hundreds more refugees on board. On June 13, the boat was spotted by a surveillance plane of Frontex, the European border agency, at around 9:47 a.m. Frontex notified the Greek and Italian authorities that the overcrowded boat, travelling at slow speed, had been spotted in international waters but within the Greek maritime rescue zone.

Two freighters then arrived at the *Adriana* late on Tuesday afternoon. The captain of the “Lucky Sailor,” which was the first to arrive, later reported that the refugees on board had refused help and declared that they wanted to go to Italy. They first had to be convinced to accept at least some water and food, it was reported.

Similar claims were made by the Greek Coast Guard, whose boat arrived early on Tuesday evening. Ilias Siakantaris, a spokesman for the Greek government, told Greek TV station ERT that a rope had been thrown over to the *Adriana* to stabilise the boat and see if it needed help. “They said they didn't want help, they wanted to go to Italy, and they kept going.”

According to the official Coast Guard statement, the overcrowded refugee boat continued at a steady speed and on the same course until a few minutes later it suddenly stopped, capsized and sank within a few minutes.

Surviving witnesses vehemently contradict this official version.

Abu Ahmad and Abu Hussein (they did not want their surnames published for fear of repression), both from Syria, told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that the water on board had already run out on the third day and the engine had repeatedly failed. Five people on

board collapsed and died of dehydration. On Tuesday, the engine had stopped working altogether and the boat had not moved.

Abu Hussein said it was a lie the refugees had refused help. “We asked for help from whatever country.” There had been a dispute over the remaining water. Everybody could see that they needed help.

This coincides with the report of the aid organisation Alarm Phone, which had already received a call for help in the early afternoon of June 13. The refugees reported that they were in distress at sea and would not survive the night.

Research by the BBC and the *Guardian* also cast doubt on the information provided by the Greek authorities. According to these media outlets, an evaluation of the locations of the ships involved clearly showed that the *Adriana* had not moved for at least seven hours, probably even eleven hours, before it capsized. A photo of the *Adriana* taken by the Greek Coast Guard hours before the accident also shows a motionless ship.

Abu Hussein and Abu Ahmad further told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that the men on board the Greek Coast Guard boat were only partly uniformed. Others were wearing black clothes and masks. They attached a rope to the bow of the *Adriana* and began to tow it away. However, the rope broke, and another rope was attached. Then the Coast Guard boat turned sharply to the right, whereupon the people on board the *Adriana* all moved to the left. This caused the boat to capsize.

Other survivors who were interviewed independently confirmed this.

All survivors interviewed by the port authority in Kalamata reported that the Greek Coast Guard boat had caused the *Adriana* to capsize. “They tried to tow our boat for two or three minutes, but each of us shouted and whistled for them to stop, as they were pulling too hard and causing violent waves. At first they were able to pull us forward, but then the Coast Guard vessel veered to the right and capsized our boat.”

Investigative journalist Brirmi Jihed posted excerpts of an interview with a survivor on Twitter. He too described black-clad, masked members of the Coast Guard attaching a rope to the boat, which was then pulled to the right and left until it capsized. “I have spoken to other survivors. We are all one hundred percent convinced that the coastguard sank us. But we don't know if it was intentional or an accident.”

Mohamed Elsherkawy, an Egyptian migrant living in Italy whose brother drowned with the *Adriana*, has also interviewed and filmed survivors who confirmed the version of the other witnesses.

All the survivors' accounts tell a similar story; the only possible conclusion they allow is that the Greek Coast Guard vessel caused the capsizing of the *Adriana*. Many indications also suggest that this was done on purpose after the Coast Guard failed to pull the refugee ship out of the Greek sea rescue zone. The Coast Guard boat is said to have cut the rope immediately after the refugee boat capsized and moved away to within a kilometre of the scene of the accident.

According to survivors interviewed by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, all the men on the deck of the *Adriana* jumped into the sea, while there was no escape for the many women and children inside the fishing vessel. But even as the *Adriana* was sinking, the coastguard ship had moved away. For 15 to 20 minutes, the Coast Guard merely watched. Only then did they lower small boats into the water. Abu Hussein and Abu Ahmad only survived because they swam towards these boats. Both conclude that the Coast Guard did not want to rescue them.

Another survivor confirmed this to the Greek newspaper *Kathimerini*: "When the boat capsized, the Coast Guard cut the rope and continued on its way. They kept moving away even though we were all shouting. Only after 10 minutes did they come back with small boats to pick up survivors. But they all stayed right by the Coast Guard ship. They only took in those who managed to swim to them."

If these statements are true, the Greek Coast Guard committed serious crimes: negligent homicide, manslaughter, or murder by failure to render assistance. But the Greek authorities are trying to cover up their responsibility for the worst refugee disaster in the Mediterranean in ten years.

The court in Kalamata on the Peloponnese peninsula ruled on Tuesday that nine arrested Egyptians who survived the tragedy remain in custody. They are being investigated for manslaughter, forming a criminal organisation, and causing the capsizing of a ship. According to survivors, however, they are not smugglers, but only helpers who did not have to pay anything for the crossing when they supervised the transit and distributed water and food.

The Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, who is responsible for migration and flight at the European Union, also held the smugglers solely responsible for the disaster.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who at the time of the disaster was still campaigning in the election, also absolved his Coast Guard of any blame. He cynically thanked "the Greek Coast Guard, the Greek Police and the Armed Forces, who selflessly and sacrificially protect the Greek and European borders, saving lives, with all their hearts."

In fact, the Greek Coast Guard is notorious for its brutal crackdown on refugees. There are dozens of reports of illegal turn backs, so-called pushbacks, from Greek waters towards Turkey, Italy and Malta. Black-clad, masked men on official Coast Guard boats play a crucial role in this.

In May, the European Commission had urged the Greek government to launch an independent investigation into one such pushback operation. On April 11, a group of twelve refugees, including children and a six-month-old baby, had been taken from the island of Lesbos to a Greek coast guard vessel and then abandoned in the middle of the Aegean Sea on an inflatable raft.

The main responsibility for the mass deaths in the Mediterranean lies with the European Union itself. A report by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) last year proved that numerous pushbacks were covered up or even supported by the European border protection agency Frontex.

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, migration researcher

Maurice Stierl accused the European Union of deliberately allowing refugees to drown in the Mediterranean in order to "prevent the arrival of refugees." EU member states were trying by all means "not to get involved in rescues, to delay rescue efforts or to shift responsibility to other authorities or states." There was a system to not helping refugees at sea, and time was used as a weapon, he said.

Stierl accused European governments of deliberately preventing methodical sea rescue in the Mediterranean, although the possibilities existed. "Frontex has a budget of millions, the member states have coast guards and navies. Of course, they could do much more. They don't want to."

The EU's brutal Fortress Europe policy is responsible for well over 20,000 deaths in the Mediterranean over the last decade. The EU has drastically restricted sea rescue and covers up the practice of illegal pushbacks in the Aegean and central Mediterranean. It provides billions for the expansion of Fortress Europe and supports the inhumane refugee policy of the Greek government, which has built up a system of illegal pushbacks, inhumane internment camps and deportations.

The EU forces refugees to risk ever more expensive and dangerous routes, playing into the hands of unscrupulous smugglers who charge thousands of euros for a crossing on unseaworthy boats. As a result, the number of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean continues to rise.

Only on Wednesday, a refugee inflatable boat capsized in the Atlantic off the coast of Morocco with 61 people on board. Although the Spanish and Moroccan coast guards were informed about the emergency at sea at an early stage and a merchant ship accompanied the refugee boat from a safe distance, it capsized. At least 24 people, including children, drowned. A rescue mission was not launched until ten hours after the first distress call.

The survivors are usually treated like dirt, locked up in internment camps and deported if possible. The "asylum compromise" negotiated by the EU member states at the beginning of June will expand this perfidious system even further.

Abu Ahmad and Abu Hussein, who told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* about the horrific tragedy outside Pylos, are housed in the Malakasa container camp north of Athens. The camp is fenced off and monitored by police officers and a private security company. They were given one meal a day and only provided with dirty, used clothes. During their interrogation, the police did not write down what they had to say and the camp manager instructed them not to talk to the press. Clearly, the horrific crimes committed by the Greek coast guard on behalf of the EU are to be covered up by all means.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact