

Greek coast guard officials face prosecution over deaths of hundreds of migrants in Pylos boat disaster

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Seventeen coastguards have been charged by naval court in Greece over one of the deadliest mass drownings of a migrant boat in the Mediterranean Sea.

Last week the Deputy Prosecutor of the Piraeus Naval Court found that the Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG) staff should face criminal charges relating to hundreds of preventable deaths on the *Adriana* on June 14, 2023.

The boat—en route from the port of Tobruk, Libya to Italy with an estimated 750 on board—sank off the coast of the port of Pylos causing 600 people to drown, including women and children trapped below deck inside the ship. Just 104 people are known to have survived.

Rather than carry out a rescue mission, and get the survivors safety to Pylos, a coastguard ship (LS-920) monitored the *Adriana* for 15 hours before it sank.

However, the HCG didn't just sit and watch. Evidence uncovered by meticulous by the UK's BBC state broadcaster, German regional broadcaster NDR, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, the research agency Forensis and the Greek organization Solomon shows that the *Adriana* was towed by the Hellenic Coast Guard towards Italian waters, leading to the boat capsizing. This confirms the accounts of survivors.

The Piraeus Naval Court ruled that the 17 coastguards should face criminal charges. It stated that the actions of the captain of the coastguard ship, the LS-920, charged with "causing a shipwreck", led to the deaths of "at least 82 people". The captain is also charged with "dangerous interference of maritime transport" and "failure to provide assistance" to the boat.

Four officials, including the then-Chief of the Coast Guard and the Supervisor of the National Search and Rescue Coordination Centre in Piraeus are charged with "exposing others to danger". The rest of the crew are charged for "simple complicity" in all the captain is alleged to have committed.

The figures of 82 deaths is cited in the indictment because

these were the number of bodies able to be recovered from the water. But it is accepted by the United Nations and Greek authorities that more than 500 other people drowned. While the boat sank in international waters it was within Greece's rescue zone.

The joint legal team representing victims and survivors said of the court ruling, "Almost two years after the Pylos shipwreck, the prosecution and referral to main investigation for felonies of 17 members of the Coast Guard, including senior officers of its leadership, constitutes a substantial and self-evident development in the course of vindication of the victims and the delivery of justice."

One of the greatest crimes in the history of Fortress Europe, the sinking of the *Adriana* was the largest loss of life in the Mediterranean in a single event in recent decades and shocked the world. The disaster added to the 20,000-plus who have drowned in the Mediterranean over the last two decades while trying to reach the southern European coast from homelands in the Middle East and Africa devastated by war and poverty.

On the recent demonstrations—the largest in Greece's history—to demand justice for the 57 people who died in the Tempi rail crash, protesters also demanded the truth be revealed about the mass deaths at Pylos. Demonstrations held internationally by the Greek diaspora over Tempi included one in Edinburgh where placards read: "Justice for the death at Tempi and Pylos" and "Justice will not be given by the murderers. The people will give justice".

As with Tempi, the survivors of the *Adriana* have faced a concerted government cover-up. As the WSWs noted, "...those actually responsible for this crime were not prosecuted, but survivors of the shipwreck were put before the courts."

Last June, a Greek court acquitted nine Egyptian refugee survivors of the Pylos disaster. They were arrested immediately after their rescue, charged as alleged "smugglers" and forced to spend a year in captivity. The

WSWS explained that this claim was based “solely on interviews with some of the survivors directly after the shipwreck, which were conducted by the same coast guard suspected of causing the deaths... The judges... found that the allegations of human trafficking and illegal entry were not substantiated. The refugees had never planned and had never been paid to smuggle the passengers of the fishing vessel ‘Adriana’ from Libya to Greece.”

To Vima reported in February, “Internal Egyptian government documents have proven that Greek authorities knew that the nine survivors were likely innocent and chose to ignore the evidence and pursue the case.”

The deaths were caused by the action of the coastguard, whose remit under European Union-directed policies is to ensure that as few migrants as possible reach Greece.

Commenting on the charging of the 17, the BBC’s Europe correspondent Nick Beake and Senior Europe producer Kostas Kallergis wrote, “We have been investigating since the day of the disaster and our series of findings has cast serious doubt on the official Greek version of events... Within a week, we obtained shipping data which challenged the claim the migrant boat had not been in trouble and so did not need to be rescued.”

Noting that the case against the nine Egyptians was thrown out of court, they wrote, “Earlier this year, audio recordings emerged which further challenged the official Greek version of events.” They explained in a previous article that the Greek coastguard maintained their actions did not cause the boat to sink and “it did not try to rescue those onboard because they were not in danger and said they had voluntarily wanted to reach Italy, not Greece.

“But in a phone call that’s now emerged an unnamed man speaking from inside a Greek rescue coordination centre is heard instructing the captain of the migrant boat to tell an approaching ship that those onboard do not want to reach Greece.”

These were lies, directly contradicted by survivors who testified that they and other passengers repeatedly told the coastguard that the vessel was in danger and they desperately needed help.

In February, the Greek Ombudsman Andreas Pottakis—following his own independent investigation, including collecting approximately 5,000 pages of evidence—issued a 158-page report condemning the actions of the coastguard and the actions of the right-wing New Democracy (ND) government carrying out a cover-up.

The report concluded there were “a series of serious and reprehensible omissions in search and rescue duties on the part of senior officers of the Hellenic Coast Guard [...] which constitute clear indications for documenting the fatal exposure, and to the risk of danger to the life, health and

physical integrity of those on board the trawler, the *Adriana*”. There were “clear indications of culpability” for eight senior coast guard officials.

The report noted that evidence vital to establishing the truth, including survivors phones and other coastguard communications, have not been handed over by the authorities.

The Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Insular Policy denounced the report claiming that “objectively, he [Pottakis] is attempting to shift the discussion away from the criminal trafficking networks onto officers of the Coast Guard.”

The European Union is running a damage control operation. In February, Frontex—the European Border and Coast Guard Agency—published its findings, declaring, “The Greek authorities appeared to have delayed the declaration of [search and rescue] operation until the moment of the shipwreck when it was no longer possible to rescue all the people on board, deployed insufficient and inappropriate resources considering the number of persons aboard Adriana, and failed to make use of the resources offered by Frontex.”

Whilst its statements on the role of the ND administration are true, the illegal pushbacks carried out by successive Greek governments—including the pseudo-left Syriza from 2015-2019—are entirely in line with EU policy. This is overseen by Frontex, with the sole aim of sealing off Fortress Europe across its entire southern border. These criminal policies are ultimately responsible for the deaths at Pylos and the thousands of other immigrants lost in the Mediterranean graveyard. The framers of these policies and the heads of governments implementing them belong in the dock alongside the coastguard officials.



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