The deadly Atlantic route: Over 140 people die while fleeing from West Africa to Europe

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At least 143 of a total of 180 refugees who faced disaster at sea while travelling from West Africa to the Canary Islands are dead or missing. Their boat was rescued off the coast of Mauritania on 18 July. According to the UNHCR, the route to Spain is considered “one of the deadliest in the world” because the boats—which are usually overloaded and unseaworthy—have to cover great distances and have little chance of a swift rescue. The crossing from West Africa to the Canary Islands can be between 800 kilometres (Mauritania) and as far as 2,400 kilometres (Guinea), depending on the point of departure.

The people on board the overcrowded refugee boat endured a hellish journey. Just 10 days after setting sail from Bafuloto, a town in Gambia, they had run out of food and water and were forced to drink seawater. Many women, men and children are believed to have starved or died of thirst along the way. After about three weeks, the boat also ran out of fuel, leaving it adrift on the high seas.

It was not until 25 days later that the boat was found off the Mauritanian port city of Nouadhibou and brought ashore by the local coastguard and fishermen—with numerous bodies and 38 survivors on board. Among the few rescued were two children who lost their entire family during the journey and are now being treated in hospital.

In total, between 14 and 18 July, 387 people were rescued from stricken boats during three rescue operations in Mauritania; one further person died. According to the Spanish NGO Caminando Fronteras, in the first five months of 2026 alone, 1,317 people have already lost their lives or are missing while attempting to reach the Spanish coast, including 129 children. Unlike official authorities or UN agencies, this NGO also includes in its figures reports from relatives as well as distress calls from boats that never arrived. During the period in question, 27 boats disappeared without trace in the Atlantic with all their passengers on board.

Many refugees are turning to the Atlantic route because the European Union (EU) is systematically blocking the Mediterranean routes to Greece and Italy. The EU’s criminal policy of sealing its borders, in collaboration with regimes in North and West Africa, is forcing people fleeing poverty, war and environmental destruction in their home countries to take ever more dangerous routes, putting their lives at risk in the process.

Death tolls in the Mediterranean are rising dramatically: the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reported in early April that, this year alone, around 765 people have already lost their lives on the central route from North Africa to Italy—460 more than in the same period in 2025. “This represents an increase of over 150 per cent. A total of at least 990 deaths were recorded in the Mediterranean region in 2026. This makes this year one of the deadliest starts to a year since 2014,” according to the IOM. Unreported figures are likely to be significantly higher.

Human rights organisations repeatedly emphasise that deterrence policies do not stop people from fleeing. They set out on their journeys nonetheless because they are persecuted in their home countries or have no prospects there.

The 38 survivors on the boat come from countries including Gambia, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea and Mali. All these countries are plagued by extreme poverty, unemployment and repression. The consequences of decades of colonial rule and today’s neo-colonial exploitation are devastating. These countries’ natural resources —such as gold, bauxite, cocoa and, increasingly, oil and natural gas—are being plundered by international corporations from North America and Europe, while China is also gaining influence.

Droughts and other effects of climate change are depriving people of their livelihoods. The NATO war against Libya in 2011 destabilised the entire Sahel region. According to the latest UN figures, there are almost 6.8 million internally displaced persons and 1.3 million refugees and asylum-seekers in West Africa and the Sahel region.

Mali has been ravaged for years by armed conflicts and military interventions by its former colonial power, France. Since April, Paris has been indirectly supporting an offensive by nationalist and Islamist militias seeking to overthrow the military regime in Bamako. According to the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, most of the refugees who arrived in Europe in 2024 were from Mali. Many report murder, torture and sexual violence in their home country.

Gambia is one of the poorest countries in the world, with high levels of unemployment and underemployment. In Senegal, equally high youth unemployment—with a median age of just

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18—is driving many young people to flee. In Guinea, protests have been violently suppressed since the military coup of 2021. Around 21,700 people fled from Guinea to Europe in 2023 alone.

The normalisation of mass murder at the gates of Fortress Europe

The latest disaster in the Atlantic has received little to no attention in the bourgeois media and political circles in Europe, let alone caused an outcry. No prominent headlines, no widespread debate, no commemoration, not even crocodile tears and hypocritical expressions of grief, as were once customary.

The fact that the deaths of over 140 people are treated merely as a footnote is no coincidence, but a deliberate choice. What is presented in the media as a "tragedy" is in reality a deliberate and systematic policy of murder at the EU's borders. The mass deaths of refugees in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean are being normalised just as much as the smear campaign against migrants within the EU.

The persecution and demonisation of refugees serve to direct anger over social inequality and mass redundancies towards a scapegoat, in order to divert attention from the actual cause of this social crisis—the ruling class and its capitalist profit interests. Bourgeois parties of all stripes, whether conservative or social democratic, are adopting the far-right positions of Meloni, Le Pen, Farage or Höcke and making them socially acceptable. One more or one fewer dead refugee child makes no difference to them—the main thing is that the number of arrivals in the EU falls.

Using death as a deterrent is part of this strategy. The EU has effectively ceased sea rescue operations, is preventing NGO rescue missions and is outsourcing "border security" to governments and militias that lock refugees up in camps, torture and enslave them.

This is also illustrated by the example of Mauritania, a key departure point on the Atlantic route. The country, with a total population of almost 5.5 million, is now home to over 300,000 refugees, most of whom are from Mali.

In 2024, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen signed a migration agreement with the Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. Mauritania received €210 million, of which almost €60 million is earmarked for combating "illegal immigration" to Europe in cooperation with the EU border agency Frontex. A driving force behind this agreement was Spain under the social-democratic government of Pedro Sánchez.

Since last November, Frontex has been conducting surveillance missions off the West African coast from Cape Verde. As reported by *Netzpolitik*, its aim is to locate refugee boats and, in collaboration with West African authorities, intercept and return them—a "pull-back system" that Frontex already practises with the Libyan coastguard.

The EU is funding a vast machinery of repression and death at the borders of Fortress Europe. It previously concluded similar agreements to deter migrants with Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt. Refugees are abandoned in the desert or left to their fate at sea on the EU's behalf. If they do manage to reach land, they are stripped of their rights, detained, tortured and deported.

Since the agreement was signed, the Mauritanian police have been hunting down migrants, as European broadcaster Arte described in a video report. Thousands of refugees are rounded up in raids and deported en masse without due process.

According to the UNHCR, the number of arrivals in the Canary Islands has also fallen sharply since the agreement was signed. In 2024, nearly 47,000 refugees arrived; a year later, the figure was just around 18,000. And in the first half of 2026, the number was 61 per cent lower than in the same period the previous year.

As the traditional departure points in Mauritania are subject to tighter controls, departures are shifting further south—for example to Gambia, where the boat that now suffered disaster also came from. The routes are becoming ever longer and more dangerous.

This downward spiral will continue unless the European working class intervenes to defend and protect people from Africa and other regions. Humanitarian appeals and demands, such as those made by NGOs and UN organisations to European governments, have fallen on deaf ears for years.

The mass deaths in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean will only cease when the EU and its member governments are overthrown and brought to trial for their crimes and the murder of thousands of refugees. To achieve this, it is necessary to build a revolutionary working-class movement that abolishes the capitalist system and fights for the establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe.

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