One month at the borders of “Fortress Europe”: at least 85 dead and 61 missing

Robert Stevens
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At least 85 migrants have died and 61 are missing in shipwrecks between October 16 and November 9 on the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands and the Mediterranean and Aegean routes to Greece. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) counted 56 dead this past weekend alone.

The incidents were:

• October 16: at least 12 died off The Gambia, in West Africa, when a boat bound for Spain’s Canary Islands, off north-west Africa, sank, with others missing.

• October 19: six died off Samos, a Greek island in the eastern Aegean, when a speedboat from the Turkish coast capsized during a coast guard chase; 14 survived. Six more died off Lesbos, another Greek island near the Turkish coast, among them an infant, when their boat collided with a Greek coast guard vessel.

• November 3: a boat carrying 60 people sank off Chrysi, an uninhabited islet south of Crete—Greece’s largest island—near the town of Ierapetra. The sole survivor was found there the next day. The Hellenic Coast Guard lists 59 missing.

• November 7: a long wooden fishing boat bound for the Canaries capsized off the Loumpoul dunes in Kébémer department, north-western Senegal. Just one person was rescued. The death toll has risen to at least 39.

• November 7-8: a boat out of eastern Libya was found south of Crete, 10 nautical miles from Kaloi Limenes bay after five days at sea, its fuel, food and water exhausted. Eight were found dead and 28 Sudanese nationals rescued. Two passengers who reportedly fell into the sea are missing.

• November 9: a second boat from eastern Libya was spotted south of Crete, 15 nautical miles from Kaloi Limenes, by a Moroccan-flagged container ship. A patrol vessel recovered 13 bodies. Eighteen survivors were rescued, four of them taken to health centres, including a toddler. One survivor later died, bringing the toll to 14. Greek coastguard confirmed on Monday that more than 180 people were found on three other boats heading across the Mediterranean Sea from Libya in North Africa to Crete.

Sixty-one people are missing and feared dead off Crete: 59 from the boat that sank off Chrysi on November 3, which has never been found despite searches by patrol boats and a European Union border agency Frontex aircraft. Two others reportedly fell from the boat found on November 7-8. No figure has been established for the missing in The Gambia or Senegal boat incidents, so the true toll of those missing, feared dead, is higher.

Giannis Sarantidis, secretary general of the Eastern Crete Coast Guard Personnel Union, said crews had found survivors forced to remain aboard alongside the dead, *The Greek Herald* reported Tuesday.

The IOM had recorded 1,036 deaths and disappearances on the central Mediterranean route this year by early November, against 1,330 in the whole of 2025, and at least 454 just on the Atlantic route by October 26. The figures are minimums.

These deaths are the intended outcome of the “Fortress Europe” regime enforced by every European government. They have erected steel and razor-wire fences across the continent, wound down state rescue agencies, criminalised civilian rescue and paid regimes across North and West Africa to intercept those who try to leave. Those fleeing are the victims of imperialist policies that have left their homelands devastated by war and impoverishment.

In the Aegean, border forces are killing migrants. The October 19 deaths followed an incident in February in which a boat carrying an estimated 35 people to Chios was rammed by the Greek Coast Guard, killing at least 15 and injuring 26. Two surviving women lost unborn children.

In the central Mediterranean, preventing migration from North Africa to Europe is subcontracted to regimes in

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Libya. The rescue organisation Sea-Watch published an updated report on November 4 documenting 107 violent incidents by Libyan militias since 2016, including shootings, people forced overboard and bodies left at sea. At least 80 incidents involved the EU-funded Libyan coastguard. “This is deadly violence paid for with European money,” said Sea-Watch advocacy officer Bérénice Gaudin.

Sea-Watch said the 26 violent incidents this year, five involving people forced overboard, make 2026 “the most violent year in the Mediterranean since records began in 2016”, up from 22 in 2025.

On November 2, Sea-Watch reported that its plane, Seabird 2, had seen four boats in distress in international waters carrying about 140 people, including babies. Rescue ships were nearby, but Frontex “chose to communicate only with the abductors” [Libyan militias that intercept boats and return people to Libya] “not with the rescuers”.

Sea-Watch watched Libyan militias rip the engine off one boat to reuse it, stating, “It’s a cycle: they catch people at sea, lock them up, make them pay to get out, then catch them again.”

It noted that Frontex ignored repeated calls from the NGO Solidaire and a request to help find two people reported overboard, who were not found.

The Tunisian government is also paid to carry out Europe’s dirty operations. On October 31, Sea-Watch reported that Seabird had seen four Tunisian Navy and National Guard vessels the previous day chasing and circling an overcrowded, deflating dinghy at risk of capsizing, before seizing about 50 people. Citing its State Trafficking report, Sea-Watch said those taken face expulsion to the desert or sale to armed groups.

This repression will be stepped up, led directly by the Europeans. On November 4, the day Seabird’s report appeared, the Bundestag began debating Germany’s participation in Irini, the EU’s naval mission in the Mediterranean. The German government’s motion drops a 2024 clause barring the Bundeswehr from training the Libyan coastguard, and backs a planned maritime coordination centre in Benghazi. This is in territory controlled by General Khalifa Haftar, whose government is not internationally recognised.

Sea-Watch timed its report to coincide with the debate. Sea-Watch Advocacy Officer Bérénice Gaudin Bérénice Gaudin said in a press release: “The so-called Libyan coastguard shoots at people, threatens rescue crews, and leaves bodies behind at sea. And Europe trains them.”

In 2024, the European Commission signed a €210 million agreement with Mauritania, nearly €60 million of it to stop departures with Frontex. The result is not fewer journeys but longer and deadlier ones, with departures shifting south towards The Gambia, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, according to the IOM.

On El Hierro, the smallest of the seven main Canary Islands, the island council declared a state of emergency on November 7 after more than 5,000 people reached the island in nine days — more than 40 percent of its 11,400 residents.

Those who survive the perilous crossings are brutally warehoused in southern Europe. Earlier this month, more than 650 migrants were shifted into a site on Crete used for parking refuse trucks; 835 more were crowded at the port of Heraklion, the island’s largest city, and about 500 at Agia, near Chania in the west. The right-wing government of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis pleads poverty over rescue and reception centres for migrants while implementing a €25 billion, 12-year rearmament programme.

In October, EU governments adopted the Return Regulation, under which people facing deportation can be detained for up to 24 months, and 30 in some cases. On October 27, the Commission proposed nearly doubling Frontex’s budget to about €12 billion for 2028–2034. This will allow the expansion of its partly armed Standing Corps to 30,000, letting it deport people between non-EU countries and creating a centre to monitor social media, according to Sea-Watch.

On November 6, Belgium’s parliament approved police entry into homes, and those of relatives or friends, between 5 a.m. and 9 a.m. to seize people facing deportation, despite a human chain of 3,000 people formed in protest around Brussels’ Palace of Justice.

In Britain, Prime Minister Andy Burnham’s Labour government has pledged to be “relentless” against small boat crossings, despite 173 deaths being narrowly averted in August when a migrant dinghy capsized in the Channel.

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