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## *Nearly 300 refugees drowned in the Mediterranean in the week before Christmas*



A woman holds a 3 month old baby as migrants and refugees from different African nationalities wait for assistance on an overcrowded rubber boat, as aid workers of the Spanish NGO Open Arms approach them (AP Photo/Bruno Thevenin)

In the week before Christmas, close to 300 refugees drowned in several boat accidents in the Mediterranean Sea. According to the International Organization for Migration, at least 200 people died off the Libyan coast and dozens more perished in the Aegean Sea. According to official data, at least 1,887 people have drowned in the Mediterranean this year while seeking asylum.

Most recently, the bodies of 28 people were found near the western Libyan port city of Al-Khums. “The advanced state of decomposition of the bodies suggests that the shipwreck

occurred several days ago,” a Libyan security official said. According to the Libyan Red Crescent, two women and a baby were among the bodies found. Only three people have been rescued, while more deaths are feared.

On December 17, 102 refugees drowned when their wooden boat capsized near the port city of Surman, west of Tripoli, International Organization for Migration (IOM) spokeswoman Safa Msehli confirmed. Another 61 bodies were found by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard aboard a vessel off the coast not far from the town of Sabratha, according to IOM coordinator Flavio di Giacomo via Twitter.

At the same time as these tragic boat accidents have occurred, ships belonging to private aid organizations have rescued more than 1,200 refugees from distress in this maritime area. Some of them are still waiting to enter an Italian port. While the Sea-Watch 4, with 216 rescued refugees on board, and the Geo Barents, with nearly 560 refugees, have been given permission to enter the ports of Pozzallo and Augusta in Sicily, the Ocean Viking, with 114 survivors, has yet to be assigned a port.

The Sea-Watch 3, which rescued 446 people from distress at sea in five missions over the Christmas period, also urgently needs a berth to bring people ashore and provide them with supplies. Many people aboard these private sea rescue vessels are dehydrated and have burns from the mixture of salt water and gasoline that often builds up in the crowded inflatable boats used for the dangerous crossing.

This year, at least 1,534 refugees have drowned on the central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy alone, 50 percent more than a year earlier. In addition, according to IOM data, the so-called Libyan Coast Guard has intercepted some 31,500 refugees at sea and returned them to Libya—nearly three times more than in 2020, when “only” 11,900 refugees were forced back to Libya.

Dozens of refugees drowned in the Aegean last week. They were on small boats leaving from Turkey and had probably been trying to reach Italy’s east coast.

Wednesday last week, a boat with up to 50 refugees sank near the island of Folegandros. According to the Greek Ministry of Shipping, survivors reported that the boat had filled up with water and sunk within minutes after an engine failure. Only 13 refugees were able to

save themselves on a rubber dinghy attached to the vessel. During the subsequent rescue operation, only the bodies of three refugees were recovered; no other survivors were found.

Greek Coast Guard spokesman Nikos Kokkalas said the chances of finding more survivors were extremely slim: “We fear that most of them simply did not manage to leave the sinking boat in time and were dragged down with it.” The 13 survivors who had fled from Iraq, Syria and Egypt included four adolescents and one woman.

Just a day later, at least 27 refugees died in two other shipwrecks in Greek waters. A boat with more than 100 refugees on board ran onto a reef near the rocky island of Andikythira. Eleven people could only be recovered dead from the sea. Among the 90 survivors who managed to save themselves on the tiny island were 27 children and 11 women.

And just a few hours later, a sailboat capsized off the Cyclades island of Paros with around 90 refugees on board. The Greek Coast Guard recovered 16 bodies from the sea and managed to rescue 63 refugees.

Greek Shipping Minister Giannis Plakiotakis blamed the smugglers who organized the crossings for these tragic shipwrecks. According to Plakiotakis, they are “indifferent to human life and they pile dozens of people without life jackets in ships that do not meet the most basic safety standards.”

Without question, the smugglers are extremely unscrupulous, but the responsibility for the more than 20,000 refugees who have drowned in the Mediterranean since 2014 lies with the European Union and its murderous refugee policies. Fortress Europe, with its ruthless measures taken against refugees, is the basis for the smugglers’ business model, and it drives the desperate refugees to take ever more dangerous and longer routes.

All three of the ships that capsized in Greek waters were traveling along a rather unusual route. Until now, most refugees had headed for the eastern Aegean islands such as Lesbos, Samos or Leros, leaving Turkey in small inflatable boats. But since the Greek government has implemented the EU’s dirty refugee deal with Turkey ever more rigorously, mercilessly deporting refugees without hearing their asylum claims or forcing refugee

inflatable boats back toward Turkey in illegal “pushback operations,” the number of refugees arriving here has plummeted.

The militarization of the Greek land and sea border is forcing refugees to switch to other routes. This greatly increases the risk of not surviving the crossing. The islands of Folegandros, Paros and Antikythera, off which the recent tragic shipwrecks occurred, lie north of Crete on a route that leads to the Italian coast. This course has already brought 11,000 refugees to Italy this year. However, there is no official information on how many refugees have lost their lives in the process.

The spokeswoman for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Athens, Stella Nanou, said the recent shipwrecks made clear “that people continue to risk their lives by making desperate journeys in search of safety. If there were legal and safe routes, these refugees would have a choice.” For now, however, Nanou added, these people are “faced with the insoluble dilemma” of either risking their lives in their places of origin or embarking on the perilous journey.

And the EU continues to close itself off. Most recently, during the refugee crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, it has eroded the right of asylum to such an extent that it effectively no longer exists. Contrary to the Geneva Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights, the EU Commission has allowed EU border states to detain asylum seekers, concentrate them in camps, and conduct an abbreviated asylum procedure there without legal guarantees. At the same time, accommodation standards and care for refugees are being undermined, deportations facilitated, and illegal pushbacks enabled.

As in the pandemic, mass deaths in the Mediterranean are the result of deliberate policies being taken over the mounting piles of corpses. Sea rescue missions have been largely halted by European countries bordering the Mediterranean. Desperate refugees who find themselves in distress at sea and request help are often referred to the EU-trained and highly equipped Libyan Coast Guard. This is essentially comprised of militias led by warlords and is notorious for its serious human rights crimes.

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