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Mass drownings in the Mediterranean: A crime of imperialism

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Another horrific tragedy has befallen refugees fleeing Northern Africa to reach Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. On Sunday morning, a small boat capsized about 120 miles south of the Italian island of Lampedusa. As many as 700 people are dead. Rescuers are still seeking to recover bodies. The actual death toll may never be known.

The disaster comes only days after a boat carrying 550 refugees sank in the Mediterranean, with at least 400 drowned.

The number of people dying in the attempt to emigrate to Europe is shocking: more than 1,500 since the beginning of this year, 30 times the death toll for the same period last year. Some 20,000 refugees have reached Italy, the majority of whom are now locked up in internment camps.

The latest mass drowning is not simply a tragedy, it is a crime. The major imperialist powers of Europe and the United States have blood on their hands.

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other aid agencies estimate that a half-million people are now encamped along the coastline of Libya, desperately seeking passage on any vessel available to make the crossing to Europe. They represent only a fraction of the refugee population of this region: two million from Libya alone, displaced by the

2011 US-NATO war that destroyed the Gaddafi regime and the subsequent civil war. Another US-instigated civil war, in Syria, has created an additional one million refugees. Many thousands more have been displaced from countries in the Horn of Africa—Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia—ravaged by famine, civil war or US drone missile strikes.

Added to this are large numbers of people fleeing the breakdown of countries in West Africa under the combined impact of economic crisis, drought, disease and the depredations of the imperialist powers, with France playing a leading role. These nations include Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Cameroon and the Central African Republic.

Israel contributes to the flood of refugees through its onslaught on the Gaza Strip last summer, which destroyed the homes of hundreds of thousands, and the ongoing economic blockade of Gaza, jointly enforced by Israel and the Egyptian military dictatorship, which effectively imprisons the entire population of 1.5 million.

The European ruling class has responded to this humanitarian catastrophe by erecting a “fortress Europe,” focusing its efforts on preventing migrants from reaching the continent. The European Union views the drowning of refugees as a deterrent against more people crossing in the future.

The main responsibility, however, rests with US imperialism and the Obama administration, whose unending military attacks, drone missile assassinations, economic blockades and CIA regime-change operations have produced a humanitarian disaster without parallel since the Second World War.

Two decisions by Washington deserve particular scrutiny: the launching of the US-NATO war against Libya in March 2011, and the intervention in Syria, beginning the same month and continuing to this day. In each case, the Obama administration sought to conceal its predatory aims behind talk of defending human and democratic rights. The corporate-controlled American media provided the necessary propaganda, and liberal voices like the *Nation* magazine and pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization applauded.

In the case of Libya, the Obama administration claimed there was an impending humanitarian disaster in Benghazi, where Libyan government troops were supposedly poised to crush a US-backed “rebellion.” This rebellion, it later emerged, was spearheaded by Islamic fundamentalists linked to Al Qaeda, recruited for the anti-Gaddafi campaign and subsequently mobilized for the civil war in Syria.

Six months of US-NATO bombing, supplemented by aid to proxy ground forces directed by imperialist advisers, led to the overthrow of Gaddafi and his murder by “rebel” forces in the streets of Sirte. Hillary Clinton, then secretary of state, now the frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination, remarked afterwards, “We came, we saw, he died,” laughing at her own sick joke.

Since then, Libya has descended into chaos, with rival militias fighting for control, the emergence of multiple governments, parliaments and capitals, and one third of the population displaced from their homes. The main prizes have been the country’s vast oil resources as well as

the export-processing facilities and ports required to deliver oil to the world market. The next chapter may well be a return to outright colonialism, as Italy, the former ruler of the country, considers a naval blockade against refugee boats and the dispatch of ground troops to “restore order.”

In Syria, a much more populous and economically developed country, the US intervention has been more indirect, but no less catastrophic. US allies and the CIA have financed, armed and trained a succession of rebel groups seeking to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad, the principal Arab ally of both Iran and Russia.

The country’s cities have been devastated, especially Aleppo, the largest city and commercial center. The Assad regime has lost control of half the country. One third of the population of 26 million has been displaced from their homes, and many millions have fled to neighboring Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. Large numbers have sought to reach Europe, contributing to the refugee flow across the Mediterranean.

Another million refugees have been displaced in Iraq with the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), itself a byproduct of the earlier US invasion and occupation of Iraq and the CIA operations in Syria. Millions more refugees are being created by the latest explosion of imperialist-directed violence--in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and other US client states are bombing the country with American warplanes, bombs and missiles, while preparing a possible invasion by US-equipped ground forces.

For a quarter century, since the first Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991, the American ruling class has been engaged in nearly continual warfare in its bid to dominate the oil-rich regions of the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa. These wars have destroyed entire societies and produced untold human suffering throughout the region.

Both major parties and all of the official institutions of American capitalism are implicated in this historic crime, including Congress, the courts and the corporate-controlled media.

Every section of the political establishment defends the imperialist interests of the corporations and banks. Every Democratic and Republican politician does the bidding of the military-intelligence apparatus that upholds these interests around the world. The struggle against imperialist war requires a turn to the working class and its revolutionary mobilization against capitalism.

To lead this movement, a political leadership must be built. It is for this reason that the International Committee of the Fourth International has organized the 2015 International May Day Online Rally.