

Dozens of migrants killed in shipwreck off Libya's coast



More than 17,000 migrants and refugees have drowned in the Central Mediterranean since 2014.
(Photo: Faras Ghani/Al Jazeera)

United Nations, January 21 (RHC)-- At least 43 migrants and refugees have been killed in a shipwreck off the coast of Libya, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) said, the first tragic event of 2021 in the Central Mediterranean where more than 17,000 have drowned since 2014.

In a joint statement released on Wednesday, the IOM and UNHCR said the boat sailed from the city of Zawiya in the early hours of Tuesday and reportedly sank due to bad weather just a few hours later.

The statement added that 10 survivors – mainly from Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ghana and The Gambia – were brought back to land by Libyan authorities. Libya acts as a major gateway for African migrants and refugees hoping to reach Europe. The conflict in the country drives the people to the sea.

The Central Mediterranean route is described by the UNHCR as the most dangerous migration route in the world – one in six people who depart the shores of North Africa dies. Human smugglers based in Libya launch vessels, many of them flimsy rubber dinghies or rickety fishing boats, crowded with migrants who hope to reach European shores to seek asylum.

Some are fleeing conflict or persecution, while many of the hundreds of thousands of migrants who have been rescued at sea in recent years are fleeing poverty. In addition to the casualty figures are the ones forcibly returned to Libya, which is described as “hell” by those who survived the ordeal on their transit.

Since February 2017, at least 36,000 people have been intercepted by the Libyan coastguard and returned to the North African country, UN figures show. The EU has reportedly spent more than 90 million euros (\$100m) in funding and training the Libyan coastguard to stop the crossings.

An Associated Press investigation revealed the EU sent more than 327.9 million euros (\$373.8m) to Libya, largely channelled through UN agencies. EU nations such as Italy and Malta have often refused docking permission to humanitarian rescue boats.

According to Italian interior ministry data, there has been an uptick in the number of people trying to reach Italy with at least 31,000 refugee arrivals in 2020, compared with almost 10,000 over the same period last year.

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