

UN report says EU partly to blame for migrant deaths in Mediterranean

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'Lethal disregard': EU partly to blame for migrant deaths in Mediterranean, UN report says

United Nations, May 27 (RHC)-- Hundreds dying at sea is not a "tragic anomaly" but rather is a result of the policies of the EU, its members and other actors trying to push responsibilities for migrants onto one another, a report by the UN rights office says.

The new report, titled 'Lethal Disregard,' was unveiled by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on Wednesday. It highlights the issues of migration across the Mediterranean Sea, where thousands of people embark on a daring journey to Europe, seeking to escape warzones in Africa and the Middle East.

"The real tragedy is that so much of the suffering and death along the central Mediterranean route is preventable," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet commented, unveiling the report and also calling for urgent reforms of search-and-rescue practices in the EU, as well as in Libya.

The report primarily focuses on the so-called central Mediterranean route – stretching through Libya to Malta and southern Italy. While the route is among the shortest and thus is favored by migrants, hundreds of people continue to die on it every year. According to the OHCHR, at least 632 migrants perished on it so far in 2021. From January 2019 to December 2020, at least 2,239 migrants died attempting to cross it.

"The evidence further suggests that this is not a tragic anomaly, but rather a consequence of concrete policy decisions and practices by the Libyan authorities, European Union Member States and institutions, and other actors that have combined to create an environment where the dignity and human rights of migrants are at risk," the report reads.

The deaths, apart from the migrants using sub-par dinghies to brave the seas, stem from "dangerous rescue and interception practices," which involve the ramming of and even shooting at migrants' boats, often resulting in the capsizing of vessels and consequent deaths. Other practices, including the so-called "pushback" operations, when the people are forcibly turned back to Libya, as well as the EU member states trying to send the incoming migrants onto their neighbors instead of rescuing them on the spot, further contribute to the death toll. War-torn Libya, which has effectively been fractured into two separate states, cannot and should not be considered a "safe" place to return migrants back into, the report stressed.

"Every year, people drown because help comes too late, or never comes at all. Those who are rescued are sometimes forced to wait for days or weeks to be safely disembarked or, as has increasingly been the case, are returned to Libya which, as has been stressed on countless occasions, is not a safe harbor due to the cycle of violence," Bachelet stated.

The report also blasts the EU for not only cutting back on its own search and rescue operations, but also for actively trying to disrupt private assistance operations undertaken by various NGOs. The Libyan Coast Guard has also stepped up its efforts in catching migrants and sending them back to Libya, with at least 10,352 migrants caught by the force in 2020 – nearly 2,000 more than in 2019.

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