

Dozens of refugees and migrants die as boat sinks in English Channel

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Migrants are helped by a RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) lifeboat before being taken to a beach in Dungeness, on the south-east coast of England, on November 24, 2021, after crossing the English Channel [Ben Stansall/AFP]

Paris, November 24 (RHC)-- At least 31 refugees and migrants have died trying to cross the English Channel from France to England when their dinghy sank off the northern coast of Calais.

A joint French-British operation to search for survivors was under way on Wednesday evening. At least three boats and three helicopters were deployed to take part in the search, local authorities said.

The United Nations migration agency, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) called the incident the largest single loss of life in the Channel since it started collecting data in 2014.

More people left France's northern shores than usual to take advantage of calm sea conditions on Wednesday, although the water was bitterly cold, the Reuters news agency reported, citing fishermen. One fisherman called the rescue services after seeing an empty dinghy and people floating motionless nearby.

French President Emmanuel Macron announced that at least 31 people had died and said his country would not let the Channel become a cemetery. "My thoughts are with the many missing and injured, victims of criminal smugglers who exploit their distress and misery," he wrote in a tweet.

French Interior Minister Gerard Darmanin said five women and a girl were among the 31 dead. He said two people had been rescued. Darmanin added the French police had arrested four people suspected of being linked to the drowning which he called "the biggest [migrant] tragedy that we have seen."

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he was "was shocked and appalled and deeply sad by the loss of life", after he had chaired a meeting of the government's emergency committee on the crossings.

"My thoughts and sympathies are [with] the victims and their families and it is an appalling thing that they have suffered. But this disaster underscores how dangerous it is to cross the Channel in this way," he added.

Johnson asserted his government would "leave no stone unturned to demolish the business proposition of the human traffickers and the gangsters".

"We have to work with our French friends, with our European partners across the Channel. I say to our partners now is the time for us all to step up, to work together, to do everything we can to break these gangs who are literally getting away with murder." Earlier on Wednesday, the French interior ministry said French patrol vessels found five bodies and five other people unconscious in the water after a fisherman alerted authorities.

The incident comes as tensions grow between London and Paris over the record numbers of people crossing the Channel. The number of people using small boats or dinghies to cross the Channel has grown sharply this year, despite the high risks. Britain has urged France to take stricter actions against those attempting to take the journey.

According to the French authorities, 31,500 people attempted to leave for Britain since the start of the year and 7,800 people have been rescued at sea, figures which doubled since August.

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