

UN says more than 160 migrants drown in shipwrecks off Libya

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Rescued migrants sit onboard a Libyan coastguard vessel arriving at the capital Tripoli's naval base. [File: Mahmud Turkia/AFP]

Tripoli, December 22 (RHC)-- More than 160 migrants drowned in two separate shipwrecks off Libya during past week, a United Nations migration official has said. Safa Msehli, a spokeswoman for the International Organization for Migration, said on Tuesday that at least 102 migrants were reported dead after their wooden boat capsized off Libya on Friday. At least eight others were rescued and returned to shore, she said.

The second shipwreck took place on Saturday. The Libyan coastguard retrieved at least 62 bodies of migrants, Msehli said. The same day, the coastguard intercepted a third wooden boat with at least 210 migrants on board, she said.

The fatalities were the latest disasters in the Mediterranean Sea involving migrants seeking a better life in Europe. The new deaths have brought the tally in the central Mediterranean route to about 1,500 migrants drowned this year, Msehli said.

Recent months have seen a surge in crossings and attempted crossings from Libya as authorities accelerated their deadly crackdown on migrants in the capital of Tripoli.

About 31,500 migrants were intercepted and returned to Libya in 2021, compared with nearly 11,900 migrants the previous year, according to the IOM. About 980 migrants were dead or presumed dead in 2020, the UN agency said. The IOM said that 466 migrants were intercepted or rescued at sea and returned to Libya between December 12 and 18.

Libya has emerged as the dominant transit point for people fleeing war and poverty in Africa and the Middle East. The oil-rich country plunged into chaos following a NATO-backed uprising that toppled and killed longtime ruler Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

Human traffickers have benefitted from the chaos in the oil-rich nation and smuggled people through the country's lengthy border with six nations. They pack desperate people into ill-equipped rubber boats, then embark on risky voyages across the perilous Mediterranean Sea.

Those returned have been taken to detention centres rife with abuses, including forced labour, beatings, rapes and torture. The abuse often accompanies efforts to extort money from families before migrants are allowed to leave Libya on traffickers' boats.

UN-commissioned investigators said in October that abuse and ill-treatment of migrants in Libya could amount to crimes against humanity.

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