

22 Malians, including children, die in boat disaster off Libya

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Libya has become a key route for irregular migration to Europe over the past decade [File: Pablo Tosco/AP]

Tripoli, July 6 (RHC)-- Twenty-two people from Mali, including three children, have died in a boat disaster off the coast of Libya, the United Nations and the Malian government have confirmed.

The people who died were part of a group of 83, most of them Malian nationals, stuck on a distressed vessel since June 22, the Ministry of Malians Abroad said in a statement on Tuesday.

The ministry and the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) said 61 were rescued with the help of the Libyan coastguard and brought back to the shore on Saturday after nine days at sea.

IOM spokeswoman Safa Msehli said the cause of death for the 22 people was drowning and dehydration, according to survivors. Msehli also said some of the survivors were in very poor health and had to be taken to hospital by the IOM. "The remaining migrants were taken to al-Maya detention centre" in Libya, she said.

The latest tragedy comes amid concerns that a hunger crisis arising from the war in Ukraine could stoke an increase in attempts to reach Europe by people fleeing poverty, conflict and persecution. In addition to the fallout of the war, analysts have also cited the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as a driving factor.

Spain, its southern neighbours and European Union officials are increasingly alarmed that a hunger crisis worsened by the disruption of Ukraine's grain exports will trigger chaotic migration from the Sahel and sub-Saharan regions of Africa.

At least 23 people died last week when some 2,000 people tried to cross into Spain's North African enclave of Melilla. Human rights groups in Morocco and Spain have called for a "comprehensive" investigation into the incident.

While many have drowned at sea, thousands have been intercepted by the Libyan coastguard, which has been backed by Italy and the European Union, and returned to Libya. Thousands of refugees and asylum seekers in Libya are languishing in cramped detention centres under unhygienic and inhumane conditions, with abuse and violence being rampant.

The IOM has warned of a "significant increase" in migrant flows through Mali and Niger towards North Africa in the first quarter of 2022 compared with previous years.

According to the organisation, the number of refugees and migrants that left Niger between January and April was more than 45 percent higher than the number during the same period in 2021. The number of outgoing migrants from Mali almost doubled in the same time span.

The IOM has said that nearly 2,000 people drowned or went missing in the Mediterranean in 2021, compared with 1,401 the previous year – making it the world's deadliest migration route.

Following the latest boat disaster, the Malian government called on its citizens to "fight against irregular migration".

Mali, which is currently under military rule, has been plagued by a conflict that began as a separatist movement in the north of the country in 2012, but devolved into a multitude of armed groups jockeying for control in the central and northern regions.

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