

Infants among six Syrian refugees found dead on boat off Italy

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The UN agency said more than 1,200 people have died or vanished this year while trying to cross the Mediterranean and reach Europe [File: Jeremias Gonzalez/AP Photo]

Rome, September 13 (RHC)-- Six Syrian refugees, including two infants and a child, have been found dead on a migrant boat that arrived in the Sicilian port of Pozzallo, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) has said.

“They died of thirst, hunger and severe burns. This is unacceptable,” the UNHCR’s representative to Italy, Chiara Cardoletti, wrote on Twitter. “Strengthening rescue at sea is the only way to prevent these tragedies.”

The UNHCR said in a statement the dead were among a group of 26 people who had been on the boat for days. It added that two of the dead children were aged one or two, while the other child was 12. The bodies of a mother and a grandmother were also recovered. Another woman and her daughter were airlifted from the boat to a hospital on the nearby island of Malta on Sunday, the UNHCR said.

The UN agency said more than 1,200 people have died or vanished this year while trying to cross the Mediterranean and reach Europe.

Meanwhile, six more bodies have been recovered off the Tunisian coast, the interior ministry said on Monday, raising the death toll to 12 after a boat carrying migrants capsized last week. A total of 37 Tunisians had boarded the boat from near the coastal city of Sfax in a clandestine bid to reach the Italian coast, according to a security source. The makeshift vessel capsized on Tuesday night last week off Mahdia, a coastal town in eastern Tunisia.

The latest recovery comes after six more bodies were retrieved on Thursday – although authorities had initially reported the number at eight. Fourteen people were rescued, leaving 11 still missing.

Tunisia is a key departure point for migrants seeking to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa, just 130km (80 miles) away, often in vessels that are barely seaworthy. The summer months also tend to see higher numbers of people making such journeys, and according to official figures, Tunisian authorities have intercepted some 500 people in recent days.

While many of those attempting the journey are from elsewhere in Africa or further afield, a grinding economic crisis has pushed growing numbers of Tunisians to attempt the crossing. The European Union’s Frontex border agency says more than 42,500 migrants and refugees used the Central Mediterranean route between January and July, up 44 percent compared with the first seven months of 2021.

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