Dozens killed as boat carrying migrants sinks off Syria

In this file photo from August, migrants give signals with mobile phones to NGO Proactiva Open Arms Uno rescue boat in the central Mediterranean Sea [File: Juan Medina/Reuters]

Damascus, September 23 (RHC)-- Dozens of people have been killed after a boat carrying migrants and refugees from Lebanon capsized off Syria's coast, according to the Syrian government. "The number of people found dead has risen to 34," Syria's health ministry said in a statement on Thursday, adding that 20 survivors were being treated in Basel hospital in Tartous.

Samer Qubrusli, the director general of ports, told the Reuters news agency that survivors said that the boat had left from Minyeh in north Lebanon days ago. He said search operations were ongoing in difficult conditions due to rough seas and strong winds. The incident is one of the deadliest since a surging number of Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians have tried to flee crisis-hit Lebanon by sea to Europe.

In Lebanon alone, tens of thousands of people have lost their jobs and the Lebanese pound has dropped more than 90 percent of its value, eradicating the purchasing power of thousands of families that now live in extreme poverty.

It was not immediately clear how many people were on board and where exactly were they heading, but the coastguard is still searching for bodies. State media said the boat was carrying people of different nationalities.

Thousands of Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians have left Lebanon on boats over the past months seeking better opportunities in Europe. Lebanon has a population of six million, including one million Syrian refugees, and has been in the grips of a severe economic meltdown since late 2019 that has pulled more than three-quarters of the population into poverty.

In April, a boat carrying dozens of Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians trying to migrate by sea to Italy went down more than 5km (3 miles) from the port of Tripoli, following a confrontation with the Lebanese navy. Dozens were killed in the incident. Migrants have been leaving the country from the northern Lebanese coast which is the most impoverished region in the small country.

On Thursday, Lebanese officials said naval forces rescued a boat carrying 55 migrants and refugees after it faced technical problems 11km (6 nautical miles) off the coast of the northern region of Akkar. It said the people rescued included two pregnant women and two children.

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