

Libyan authorities find 15 bodies after fire on refugee boat



A group of migrants rescued by volunteers of the Ocean Viking rescue ship, run by NGOs SOS Mediterranee and the International Federation of Red Cross [File: Jeremias Gonzalez/AP Photo]

Tripoli, October 8 (RHC)-- Libyan rescue workers have recovered at least 15 bodies found on the coast in Sabratha, including a number burned in a boat and others on the beach, a member of the Red Crescent in the city said. A spokesman for Libya's Red Crescent, Tawfik Al Shukri, said that local authorities had informed the aid group of bodies washing up onshore after a shipwreck off the country's western coast.

He said they were retrieved and transported to a hospital, where the remains would be examined to determine the cause of death. A security source in Sabratha, 70 km (43 miles) west of the capital Tripoli, also said that the dead people were migrants caught in a dispute between two rival groups of people smugglers in the northwest city.

Migrants regularly try to cross the Mediterranean from Libya in a desperate attempt to reach European shores. Sabratha is a major launching point for the mainly Africans making the dangerous voyage across the Mediterranean.

A video and pictures circulated online showed a burning boat on a beach with dark smoke pouring from it and what appeared to be the same vessel, scorched inside and containing charred human remains. The video and pictures could not be immediately verified. The cause of the deaths was not immediately clear, nor was it apparent when the fire started.

The International Organisation for Migration said in June that at least 150 migrants departing from Libya were feared to have drowned in the first six months of 2022. Crossings typically increase around the middle and late-middle of the year.

Libya has emerged as the dominant transit point for people fleeing war and poverty in Africa and the Middle East amid internal strife. Torn by civil war since 2011, the oil-rich country is divided between rival governments, each backed by international patrons and multiple armed militias on the ground.

Human traffickers in recent years have benefitted from the chaos in Libya, smuggling in people across the desert country's lengthy borders with six nations. They are then typically packed into ill-equipped rubber boats and set off on risky sea voyages.

Many of those who have been intercepted and returned to Libya – including women and children – are held in government-run detention centres rife with abuse, including torture, rape and extortion, according to rights groups.

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