

UN says 73 people presumed dead in shipwreck off Libya

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A rubber boat is seen after having capsized

Since January 29, at least 531 migrants and refugees have been intercepted by the so-called Libyan coast guard [File: Flavio Gasperini/Sos Mediterranee/Reuters]

Tripoli, February 15 (RHC)-- At least 73 Europe-bound migrants and refugees are missing and presumed dead following a shipwreck off the coast of Libya, the United Nations migration agency has said.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) said on Twitter that Libyan authorities retrieved at least 11 bodies from the wreck, which happened on Tuesday. Seven people survived and made it to Libyan shores in “extremely dire conditions,” the UN said, adding that they were taken to a hospital.

Tuesday’s shipwreck was the latest sea tragedy in the central Mediterranean, a key route for migrants. According to the IOM’s Missing Migrants project, 25,821 migrants and refugees have gone missing in the Mediterranean since 2014.

Libya has in recent years emerged as the dominant transit point for refugees and asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East trying to make it to Europe.

A controversial migration agreement between Italy and Libya was automatically renewed earlier this month for a period of three years, amid warnings by humanitarian organisations that this might make Rome and the European Union complicit in crimes against humanity.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) warned that “assisting Libya’s coast guard, knowing that it will facilitate the return of thousands of people to serious human rights violations, makes Italy and the European Union complicit in such crimes.”

Since January 29, at least 531 migrants and refugees have been intercepted by the so-called Libyan coast guard and returned to the war-torn north African country, according to the IOM. Oil-rich Libya plunged into chaos following a NATO-backed uprising that toppled and killed longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

A June 2022 report by the United Nations Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya found that migrants and refugees faced “murder, enforced disappearance, torture, enslavement, sexual violence, rape, and other inhumane acts ... in connection with their arbitrary detention”.

In September 2022, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) found that crimes against migrants and refugees in Libya “may constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes”.

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