

Fourteen drown when Italy-bound boat sinks off Tunisia

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Rome, March 10 (RHC)--At least 14 people from sub-Saharan African countries have drowned off Tunisia as they tried to reach Europe by boat in the latest tragedy on the Mediterranean Sea. Tunisia's coastguard said in a statement on Wednesday that officers the previous night had intercepted "a group whose boat had sunk, rescuing 54 people of various sub-Saharan African nationalities and recovering 14 bodies."

Hundreds of people have drowned off Tunisia in recent months as attempted crossings from Tunisia and Libya to Italy have increased. The coastline at Sfax in east-central Tunisia has become a major departure point for people fleeing poverty and conflict in Africa and the Middle East for a shot at a better life in Europe.

Life in Tunisia has progressively worsened since President Kais Saied said on February 21 that migration from sub-Saharan Africa aimed to change Tunisia's national identity. The remarks, which drew international condemnation, have led to what has been described by advocacy groups as a racist backlash against people from sub-Saharan African countries as well as Black Tunisians.

The far-right Tunisian National Party has led a campaign calling for the expulsion of sub-Saharan African immigrants, framing immigration to Tunisia from other parts of Africa as being part of an effort to initiate demographic change in the country.

The deaths announced on Wednesday add to the grim toll of refugees drowning as they attempt the perilous crossing of the Mediterranean, the world's deadliest migration route. More than 25,000 people have died or have gone missing since 2014, according to data collected by the International Organization for Migration's Missing Migrants Project.

Italy said in February that more than 32,000 people, including 18,000 Tunisians, reached its shores from Tunisia last year, while thousands more have departed from neighbouring Libya. European governments, particularly Italy, have pressured Tunisia to stem the flow, and the Tunisian coastguard regularly intercepts boats carrying refugees in its territorial waters.

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