

More than 1,000 refugees brought ashore in Italy rescues



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Rome, March 12 (RHC)-- More than 1,000 people have been brought to safety at two Italian ports after the overcrowded boats they were on encountered problems in the Mediterranean, the Italian coastguard

has said, almost two weeks after at least 76 people died in a shipwreck.

The coastguard said on Saturday it had conducted up a large rescue operation that began Friday after three boats were spotted drifting off Italy's coasts. One was south of the Calabrian city of Crotona and two further south, off Roccella Ionica.

Coastguard videos showed a large fishing boat pitching violently back and forth in nighttime rough seas with dozens of people visible on the deck. Other images showed inflatable rescue boats approaching another fishing vessel packed with people.

The coastguard said 487 people on board the first boat were safely brought to the port of Crotona at about 02:00 GMT on Saturday morning. Another rescue operation in which 500 people were brought to safety on board a coastguard ship was wrapping up, it said. News agency ANSA had earlier reported that the ship had docked at the port of Reggio Calabria.

A third boat carrying 379 people was rescued by two coastguard patrol boats and the refugees transferred to a navy ship headed to the Sicilian port of Augusta, it said.

The known death toll from the shipwreck climbed to 76 on Saturday after the bodies of two children and an adult were recovered, Italian news agency ANSA reported. Seventy-nine passengers survived, but others were reported missing and presumed dead. In all, the United Nations has estimated 300 refugees have died in the central Mediterranean so far this year.

The right-wing government led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has drawn sharp criticism for failing to intervene in a timely manner to save the February 26 shipwreck, which occurred just off the shore of Calabria. Prosecutors are investigating whether Italian authorities should have done more to prevent the disaster. Meloni has rejected the suggestion and looked to pin the blame entirely on human traffickers.

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