Tunisia recovers bodies of 13 migrants after boat sinks off coast

Tunis, July 15 (RHC)-- The Tunisian coastguard has said that it has recovered the bodies of 13 sub-Saharan African migrants and rescued 25 after their boat sank in route to Italy. The tragedy occurred off the city of Sfax, the coastguard said, without saying how far off shore the boat was when it sank.

Tunisia is facing an unprecedented migration crisis, having replaced Libya as the region's main departure point for people fleeing poverty and conflict in Africa and the Middle East in the hope of a better life in Europe.

The number of dead and missing off the North African country's coasts rose to around 630 in the first half of 2023, far more than in any previous year, according to figures compiled by Reuters.   Tunisia is under pressure from European countries to stop large numbers of people departing from its coasts, but President Kais Saied has said it will not act as a border guard.

Tensions have been growing for some time between Sfax residents and the mostly irregular Black refugees and migrants drawn to the city and the chance of a boat to Europe.

Racially motivated attacks on the vulnerable population have been reported with increasing frequency, and on Tuesday, officials announced the death of a local man, 41-year-old Nizar Amri, who was said to be involved in the attacks on the Black refugees and migrants.

There were many reports of sexual assault, rape and physical assault among the expelled people. Voicemails sent by the trapped individuals to Human Rights Watch tell of brutal attacks.

Rights groups, including the legal advocacy group Avocats Sans Frontières, have slammed the expulsion by the Tunisian state as illegal, breaching provisions mandated by both the United Nations and the African Union, launching an open letter calling upon the government to reconsider and immediately reverse course.

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