

*More than 900 people have
drowned off coast of Tunisia so
far this year*

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Tunis, July 27 (RHC)-- The bodies of at least 901 drowned refugees and migrants have been found off the coast of Tunisia between January 1st and July 20th of this year, according to the country's Interior Minister Kamel Feki.

The numbers, revealed by Feki on Wednesday, mark an unprecedented number of victims off the country's coasts. Feki told parliament that among the bodies found were 36 Tunisians and 267 foreigners, while the identities of the rest were unknown.

The North African country is facing a record wave of migration this year and frequent catastrophes as boats filled with refugees and migrants sink as they attempt to get to the Italian coastline.

Tunisia has replaced Libya as the region's main departure point for people fleeing poverty and conflict in the hope of a better life in Europe.

Thousands of undocumented refugees and migrants have flocked to the coastal city of Sfax in recent months with the goal of setting off for Europe in boats run by human traffickers. The central Mediterranean has become the world's most dangerous migratory route, claiming more than 20,000 lives since 2014, according to the International Organization for Migration.

Earlier this month, the Italian interior ministry counted more than 75,000 refugees and migrants who had arrived by boat on the Italian coast since the beginning of the year, compared to about 31,900 in the same period last year.

In July, the European Union and Tunisia signed in July a "strategic partnership" deal that includes combating human traffickers and tightening sea borders.

Tunisian President Kais Saeid's government has come down hard on refugees and migrants in the country, with the president courting controversy in February for what critics said were racist comments – including claims of a plot to erase Tunisia's identity by overrunning it with sub-Saharan Africans.

More than 21,000 sub-Saharan Africans live in Tunisia, including those with student visas and other legal residencies, according to the FTDES advocacy group.

On July 3, hundreds of refugees and migrants fled or were forced out of Sfax after racial tensions flared following the killing of a Tunisian man in an altercation between locals and Black sub-Saharan Africans.

According to Human Rights Watch, up to 1,200 Black sub-Saharan Africans were "expelled or forcibly transferred by Tunisian security forces" to the border regions with Libya and Algeria this month.

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