

At least 11 people dead after two shipwrecks in the Mediterranean Sea



Migrants sail in a wooden boat as they are being rescued by volunteers some 48 km (26 nautical miles) south of the Italian island Lampedusa in the Mediterranean Sea [File: Jeremias Gonzalez/AP Photo]

Rome, June 18 (RHC)-- At least 11 people have died and 64 others are missing after two shipwrecks off southern Italy, according to a German charity, the Italian coast guard and United Nations agencies.

The German aid group RESQSHIP, which operates the Nadir rescue ship, said it picked up 51 people from a sinking wooden boat, including two who were unconscious, and found 10 bodies trapped in the lower deck of the vessel. “Our thoughts are with their families. We are angry and sad,” the group posted on X on Monday.

RESQSHIP said the survivors were handed over to the Italian coast guard and taken ashore on Monday morning, while the Nadir was making its way to the island of Lampedusa, towing the wooden boat with the bodies of the deceased.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said in a joint statement that the refugees and migrants intercepted by the German charity came from Syria, Egypt, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The second shipwreck took place about 200km (125 miles) east of the Italian region of Calabria, as a boat that had set off from Turkey eight days earlier caught fire and overturned, the UN agencies said.

They said 64 people were missing at sea, while 11 were rescued and taken ashore to the Calabrian town of Roccella Ionica by the Italian coast guard, along with the body of a woman. The coast guard earlier said it was looking for an unspecified number of missing people, with the help of the European Union border agency Frontex.

The vessel, a sailing boat found partially sunk, was first spotted by a French boat in international waters where Italian and Greek search-and-rescue zones overlap, the coast guard said. The UN agencies said the refugees and migrants involved in the second shipwreck came from Iran, Syria and Iraq.

According to a March report by IOM’s Missing Migrants Project, more than 27,000 people have died in the Mediterranean Sea over the last decade, whilst trying to reach southern Europe from northern Africa.

While most of the deaths in the central Mediterranean were documented off the coast of Libya, the IOM has also recorded an “increase in departures and, correspondingly, shipwrecks” off the coast of Tunisia. At least 729 people died off the Tunisian coast in 2023, compared to 462 the previous year.

When the IOM’s project began in 2014, European sentiment was more sympathetic to the plight of refugees, and the Italian government had launched “Mare Nostrum,” a major search-and-rescue mission that saved thousands of lives.

But with anti-immigration political parties steadily gaining influence across Europe, governments have attempted to curb migration flows to their countries by pledging funds to countries across the Mediterranean such as Tunisia and Egypt.

The UN and other NGOs have again called on EU governments to step up Mediterranean search-and-rescue efforts and expand legal and safe migration channels, so that migrants “are not forced to risk their lives at sea.”

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