

At least eight migrants drown after boat collision off Greece's coast



Greek coastguard member with a ship in the background at sea

The speedboat capsized near the island of Rhodes as it attempted to flee a Greek coastguard vessel [Erdem Sahin/EPA-EFE]

Athens, December 20 (RHC)-- At least eight refugees and migrants have drowned off the coast of Greece after the coastguard chased a boat they were on in the Aegean Sea.

The speedboat capsized near the island of Rhodes as it attempted to flee a Greek patrol vessel, authorities said on Friday, adding that 18 people were rescued.

A coastguard statement said the driver “lost control” of the boat, causing several passengers to fall overboard. Coastguard vessels retrieved eight bodies as a helicopter from the Hellenic Air Force searched for survivors. It remains unclear how many people were on board.

Greek authorities said they detected the vessel as it attempted to disembark people near Afandou Beach, on the eastern coast of the Greek island of Rhodes. Greek media outlet Kathimerini reported that the boat collided with the coastguard’s vessel during the chase, adding that the driver of the boat was arrested.

Greece has seen a 25-percent rise this year in the number of migrant and refugee arrivals, with a 30-percent rise in Rhodes and the southeast Aegean, according to the Ministry of Migration and Asylum.

In late November, nine people, including six minors and two women, died after two boats sank in separate incidents near the islands of Samos and Lesbos. Another five people died in a sinking near the island of Crete earlier this month.

Greece has been accused of adopting an increasingly hostile approach towards migration in recent years. Its coastguard has been repeatedly accused by asylum seekers and humanitarian organisations of capsizing boats by trying to tow them or prevent their disembarkation on its coasts.

The European Union also found evidence of human rights abuses at the recently constructed, EU-funded refugee camps on the Greek Aegean islands, including allegations of sexual and other violence against children.

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