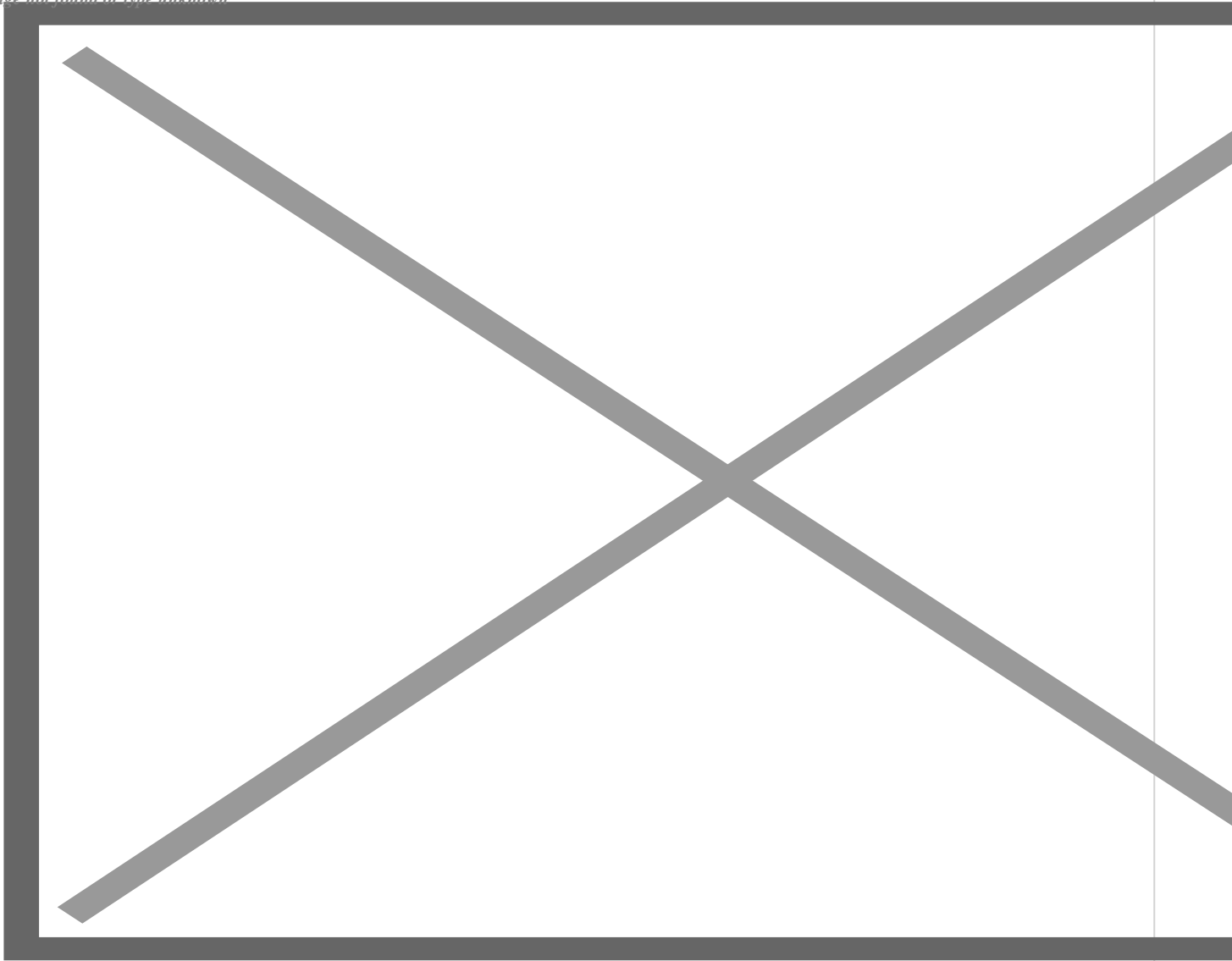


UN reveals Italy could have saved 200 drowning migrants

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Since 2014, more than 20,000 migrants and refugees have died at sea while trying to reach Europe from Africa. (Photo: Faras Ghani / Al Jazeera)

Geneva, January 28 (RHC)-- Italy failed to protect the “right to life” of more than 200 migrants and refugees who died when the boat they were on capsized in the Mediterranean Sea more than seven

years ago, independent human rights experts who work with the United Nations said.

The Human Rights Committee says that Italy “failed to respond promptly to various distress calls from the sinking boat, which was carrying more than 400 adults and children.” It also called on Italian authorities to “proceed with an independent and timely investigation and to prosecute those responsible” for the deaths.

The boat departed Zuwarah, a fishing port in Libya, on October 10, 2013, carrying mostly Syrians. A few hours later, water flooded the vessel.

Italy “failed to respond promptly” to distress calls after the vessel was shot at “by a boat flying a Berber flag in international waters,” some 113 km (70 miles) south of the Italian island of Lampedusa, the committee of 18 experts said. It added that distress calls to Italian authorities were redirected to Malta, which was some 218 km (135 miles) away. By the time a Maltese patrol boat arrived, the boat carrying the migrants and refugees had capsized.

Committee member Helene Tigroudja called it a “complex case” since the migrants’ boat was in international waters within Malta’s search and rescue zone, but said a timely response might have averted the tragedy. The committee’s decision followed a joint complaint by three Syrians and a Palestine national who survived the accident but lost their families.

One of those on board the vessel called Italian authorities, saying the boat was sinking and sent them the GPS coordinates. He rang several times again, only to be told they were in the Maltese search and rescue zone. The Italian operator only passed the phone number of Malta’s Rescue Coordination Centre to them.

The migrants then made increasingly desperate phone calls to the Rescue Coordination Centre and the Armed Forces of Malta for two hours. When a Maltese patrol boat arrived at the scene at 5:50 pm, the vessel had already capsized.

Italy finally instructed its navy ship ITS Libra, which was in the vicinity, to come to the rescue after 6pm in response to Malta’s request. “Had the Italian authorities immediately directed its naval ship and coastguard boats after the distress calls, the rescue would have reached the vessel at the latest two hours before it sank,” Tigroudja said.

War-torn Libya acts as a major gateway for migrants and refugees fleeing war and poverty in Africa and the Middle East, hoping to reach Europe. Human smugglers based in Libya launch vessels, many of them flimsy rubber dinghies or rickety fishing boats, crowded with migrants who hope to reach European shores to seek asylum.

The central Mediterranean route is described by the UNHCR as the most dangerous migration route in the world – one in six people who depart the shores of North Africa dies. Since 2014, more than 20,000 migrants and refugees have died at sea while trying to reach Europe from Africa.

While many have drowned at sea, thousands have been intercepted by the Libyan coastguard, which has been backed by Italy and the European Union, and returned to Libya. They mostly end up in detention, often in horrific conditions.

Since February 2017, at least 36,000 people have been intercepted by the Libyan coastguard and returned to the North African country, UN figures show.



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