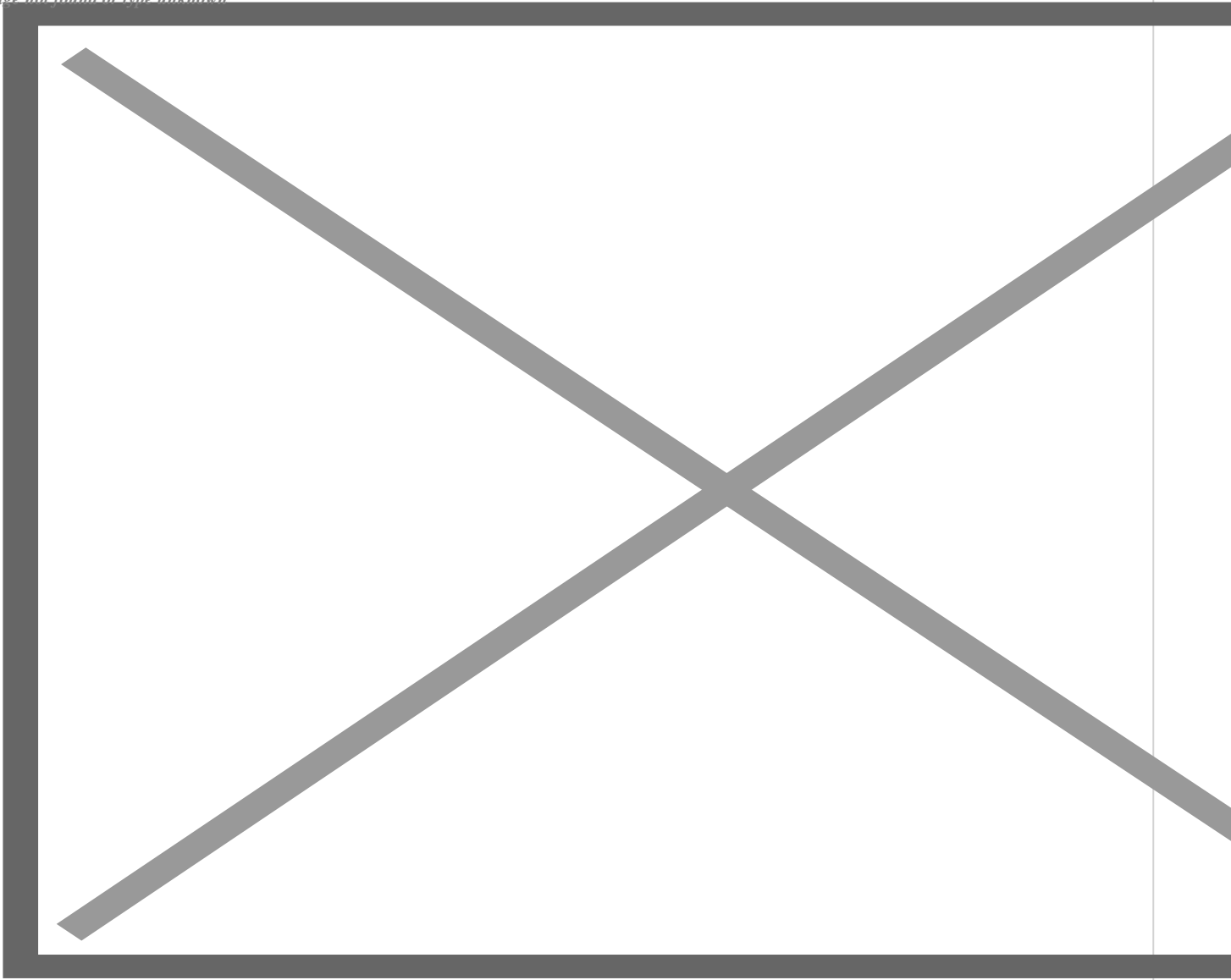


At least 21 people die after boat sinks off Tunisia

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Last month 39 migrants died off the coast of Sfax, while in another similar accident in June last year, a migrant boat sank leaving at least 60 people dead [File: Pablo Garcia/AFP]

Tunis, April 17 (RHC)-- At least 21 people have died after their boat sank off Tunisia's coast as they tried to cross the Mediterranean to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa. "The boat sank during a trip that started late on Thursday from Sfax... so far, the coastguard has recovered 21 bodies and the search is still continuing," Mouard Mechri, director of Tunisia's civil protection service, told Reuters news agency on Friday.

The Tunisian port city has become a major departure point for people fleeing conflict and poverty in Africa and the Middle East and seeking a better life in Europe. Last month, 39 migrants died off the coast of Sfax, while in another similar accident in June last year, at least 60 were killed when a boat sank.

Human smugglers launch vessels, many of them flimsy rubber dinghies or rickety fishing boats, crowded with migrants who hope to reach European shores to seek asylum. Some are fleeing conflict or persecution, while many of the hundreds of thousands of migrants who have been rescued at sea in recent years are fleeing poverty.

Since 2014, more than 20,000 migrants and refugees have died at sea while trying to reach Europe from Africa. According to the International Organization for Migration estimates, at least 406 migrants have died in the Mediterranean this year.

Since the start of this year, more than 8,500 migrants and refugees have arrived in Italy with Tunisians being the biggest group, according to data from Italy's interior minister.

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