

Seven people die in shipwreck off Greek island

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Greece is one of the main routes into the European Union for migrants and refugees fleeing conflict and poverty in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and beyond [File: Yannis Behrakis/Reuters

Athens, December 24 (RHC)-- At least seven people died when a boat carrying migrants and refugees was shipwrecked off a small island in southern Greece, authorities have said. Greece's coastguard on Friday said it had rescued more than 90 people after their sailing boat hit rocks north of the remote island of Antikythera the previous day.

Seven bodies were recovered, and search efforts were continuing, it said. Those rescued so far included 27 children, 11 women and 52 men, a coastguard official told the AFP news agency. "It is still not clear how many were on the boat before it sank," the official said.

In a separate incident on Friday, Greek police arrested three people on smuggling charges and detained 92 migrants and refugees after a yacht ran aground in the southern Peloponnese region.

Greece is one of the main routes into the European Union for migrants and refugees fleeing conflict and poverty in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and beyond, although the number of arrivals has significantly tapered off since 2015-2016, when more than a million people, mainly Syrian refugees, traversed the country to other EU states.

Most attempt to cross in dinghies from the Turkish shore to the nearby eastern Aegean Greek islands. But with increased patrols and allegations of summary deportations back to Turkey for those who arrive, smugglers based in Turkey have increasingly sent sailboats packed with migrants and refugees across the Mediterranean Sea towards Italy instead.

Thursday's wreck was the second in the Aegean Sea this week. Overnight between Tuesday and Wednesday, a boat thought to be carrying up to 50 people sank off the island of Folegandros, killing at least three people. Dozens of others are feared missing.

The United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, called the Folegandros shipwreck "the worst" in the Aegean this year. "This shipwreck is a painful reminder that people continue to embark on perilous voyages in search of safety," said Adriano Silvestri, the UNHCR's assistant representative in Greece.

"Such tragic deaths are avoidable, including through the establishment of regular and safe pathways that could prevent people from resorting to smugglers," he added.

UNHCR estimates that more than 2,500 people have died or gone missing at sea in their attempt to reach Europe from January through November this year.

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