

Another child dies on migrant ship stranded in Mediterranean Sea

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The migrants had been communicating with relatives and activist groups through a satellite phone, and called on European coastguards to rescue them [File: Hassan Ammar/AP Photo]

Beirut, September 7 (RHC)-- Activists and relatives of Lebanese and Syrian migrants and refugees stranded on board a sinking boat near the island of Malta have said that a third child has died on the

vessel, and that they have lost contact with it.

The international activist network Alarm Phone said on Tuesday that the last contact with the roughly 60 Lebanese and Syrians had been overnight. The migrants and refugees had told their relatives and volunteer groups by satellite phone that they had been without food, water and baby formula for several days.

They also said that a third child had died on board due to dehydration, according to the relatives. The vessel left from the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli about 10 days ago. The passengers, headed for Italy, include Syrian refugees and Lebanese from the country's north.

The passengers have urged European coastguards to rescue them. Alarm Phone tweeted that it continued to alert authorities but that they "refuse to inform us if any rescue efforts have been undertaken."

Malta has also not given permission to a commercial cargo ship to rescue the stranded migrants and refugees, the network said. The Maltese authorities have not immediately responded to requests from the Associated Press news agency for comment on the boat.

One of the migrants' relatives said his brother told him during their last call on Monday night that more water was leaking into the boat and "that they are drenched". The man spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing for his brother's safety. "The adults are handling the cold and lack of supplies okay, but the children are really struggling," he said.

A Lebanese legislator, Ashraf Rifi, asked Italy to send a rescue team, and called on Lebanon's foreign ministry and diplomatic mission in Rome to do the same. The Lebanese government has not yet commented on the matter.

Lebanon has become a launching pad for dangerous migration by sea to Europe, as it struggles from an economic crisis over the past three years that has pulled three-quarters of its population into poverty. As the crisis deepened, more Lebanese, as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugees, have set off to sea, with security agencies reporting foiled migration attempts almost weekly.

In other news, a four-year-old girl drowned earlier this week during the rescue of more than 60 asylum seekers in distress in Maltese waters, the Greek coastguard said. They added that they had been notified by their Maltese counterpart to help airlift her.

The girl had been picked up with another 62 people by an Antigua-flagged cargo ship when their boat ran into trouble at sea. The child and her mother were taken by a Greek navy helicopter to a hospital on Crete, where doctors pronounced her dead.

The cargo ship was also told to reroute. It moored south of Crete with the remaining asylum seekers, whose nationalities were not immediately known.

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