

At least eight die in Mediterranean boat tragedy, including pregnant woman

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Rome, February 4 (RHC)-- A pregnant woman and four-month-old baby were among several victims who died on board a refugee and migrant vessel in the central Mediterranean, according to officials and witnesses. The Italian coastguard "recovered eight bodies, five men and three women" late on Thursday and 42 survivors were brought ashore, Filippo Mannino, mayor of the island of Lampedusa, told AFP.

Italy's ANSA news agency said rescue services intervened in Malta's Search and Rescue (SAR) region to assist a boat in distress. The bodies of two people were still missing, ANSA reported. Rescuers found the passengers, who had boarded the six-metre-long boat in the Tunisian town of Sfax early on Saturday, soaked and experiencing extreme cold and dehydration after days at sea.

Survivors said one woman was travelling with her four-month-old baby, who died during the journey. She put the infant's body in the sea in her grief, before she also died of cold and hunger. Prosecutors in the Sicilian city of Agrigento have launched an investigation into the incident. The boat was 67 km (42 miles) from Lampedusa, where it was headed.

The tiny islet has been dealing with the arrival of hundreds of refugees and migrants, with Mannino complaining that its inhabitants have been left "almost alone" in dealing with the reception. The mayor on Thursday appealed to Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, asking for the government's support in managing "this enormous tragedy".

"Help, we cannot handle it this way for much longer," he said as he headed to the Favaro port ahead of the survivors' arrival.

The passengers, who hail from Mali, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Niger, have been taken to a reception centre on the island and will be questioned by prosecutors in the coming hours, ANSA reported. The rate of arrivals appears to be increasing.

Almost 5,000 refugees and migrants have landed in Italy since the start of the year, according to the interior ministry, up from just over 3,000 in the same period last year, and 1,000 in 2021.

In recent months, hundreds have drowned off the Tunisian coast, with an increase in the frequency of attempted crossings from Tunisia and Libya towards Italy.

The coastline of Sfax has become a major departure point for people fleeing poverty and conflict in Africa and the Middle East for a chance of a better life in Europe.

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