

At least five drown off Tunisia coast trying to reach Europe

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Another 28 people were still missing after a boat headed for Europe capsized off the coast of Tunisia

A Tunisian national coastguard member helps people to get off a rescue boat in Jebeniana, Sfax, Tunisia [File: Wahid Dahech/ Handout via Reuters]

Rome, March 23 (RHC)-- At least five African migrants have died and another 28 are missing after a boat sank off Tunisia, as they tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Italy, a local rights group has said.

Romadan Ben Omar, a member of the Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights, said on Wednesday that the Tunisian coastguard had rescued five people who had been on board the boat that sank off the coast of the southern city of Sfax.

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 at a better life in Europe.

The incident comes amid a significant increase of boats setting off from the Tunisian coast towards Italy, and amid a campaign by Tunisian authorities of arrests targeting undocumented sub-Saharan African immigration.

According to unofficial United Nations data, 12,000 of those who have reached Italy this year set sail from Tunisia, compared with 1,300 in the same period of 2022. Previously, Libya was the main launchpad for migrants from the region.

Last month, Tunisian President Kais Saied said that undocumented sub-Saharan African immigration was aimed at changing Tunisia's demographic makeup. His remarks sparked a wave of violence against Black migrants, and landlords fearing fines evicted hundreds of people who are now camping in the streets of Tunis. Kais ordered security forces to expel any migrants living in Tunisia illegally.

The order had led people to flee the country, even if they previously had no intention of making the dangerous crossing to Europe, a senior official with the United Nations said. About 21,000 migrants from sub-Saharan Africa are believed to be in the country of 12 million people.

Tunisia is struggling with a financial crisis, and negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for a bailout have stalled amid fears of a default in debt repayment, raising concerns from Europe, especially Italy.

Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani previously said that Rome wanted the IMF to unblock the \$1.9bn loan to Tunisia, fearful that without the cash the country would be destabilised, bringing more people to move towards Europe.

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