

Tunisia retrieves bodies of 41 drowned refugees

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Coastguards retrieve a body, which according to them belongs to a migrant, in Sfax, Tunisia April 26, 2023. REUTERS/Jihed Abidellaoui

Tunez, April 28 (RHC)-- Tunisian coastguards have retrieved 41 bodies from Tunisian waters, a national guard official has said, raising the number of victims of refugee shipwrecks off the country's coast to 210 in 10 days. The bodies were in a decomposed state, suggesting they had been in the water for several days, Housseem Eddine Jebabli told the Reuters news agency on Friday. The cumulative total of fatalities

was unprecedented over such a short period, he said.

Numbers of boats carrying asylum seekers – most from sub-Saharan Africa, Syria and Sudan – trying to reach Italy from Tunisia have risen sharply in recent months, in part due to a crackdown on departures by authorities in neighboring Libya. Tunisia is struggling to contain the surge, and some morgues are running out of space to bury the victims.

So many refugees risking the dangerous sea crossing from Tunisia to Europe have drowned that morgues and hospitals in the key launchpad city of Sfax are full, officials said Friday.

“On Tuesday, we had more than 200 bodies, well beyond the capacity of the hospital, which creates a health problem,” said Faouzi Masmoudi, justice official in the port city where the central morgue for an area of around a million people is sited. “There is a problem with large numbers of corpses arriving on the shore. We don’t know who they are or what shipwreck they came from – and the number is increasing.”

Tunisia, whose coastline is less than 150 km (90 miles) from the Italian island of Lampedusa, has long been a favoured stepping stone for refugees attempting the perilous sea journey from North Africa to Europe.

On April 20, at least 30 people were buried. Days later, many more bodies were recovered at sea. DNA swabs are taken from each body before burial to help their possible identification by relatives, he said.

According to Romdhane Ben Amor of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), at least 220 dead and missing have been recorded this year to April 24, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa. More than three-quarters of refugees leaving Tunisia do so from the coast between Sfax and Mahdia, some 90 km (55 miles) north, he added.

The problem of managing the bodies of those drowned in shipwrecks is complicated by the fact that local authorities “have undertaken to create a special cemetery for migrants on the grounds that they are not Muslims”, Ben Amor said. Many of those drowned came from Muslim-majority nations.

The number of refugee departures has intensified after President Kais Saied made a speech on February 21 claiming that irregular immigration was a demographic threat to Tunisia.

While many of the refugees come from further south in Africa, Tunisia is also in the grip of a worsening economic crisis that has pushed many of its citizens to take desperate measures in search of better lives abroad.

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