

UN agencies seek decisive action from EU after Greece tragedy

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The International Organization for Migration and UN Refugee Agency say EU must put 'safety' at centre of plan for Mediterranean migration route.?

United Nations, June 17 (RHC)-- United Nations agencies have called for "urgent and decisive action" to be taken by the Europe Union to prevent further deaths in the Mediterranean following the presumed drowning of hundreds of people this week off the coast of Greece.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UN refugee agency (UNHCR) said in a statement on Saturday that between 400 and 750 people are believed to have been on board the boat that capsized on Wednesday in the Ionian Sea some 47 nautical miles (87km) off Pylos.

In what could be one of the worst tragedies of its kind in the Mediterranean, hundreds remain missing and feared dead as just 104 people have been rescued to date and 78 bodies retrieved. The boat that sank was reported to have been in distress since Tuesday morning but a search and rescue operation by the Hellenic Coast Guard was only launched after the boat capsized on Wednesday morning, according to the UN organisations.

“The duty to rescue people in distress at sea without delay is a fundamental rule of international maritime law,” the IOM and UNHCR said. “Both shipmasters and States have an obligation to render assistance to those in distress at sea regardless of their nationality, status or the circumstances in which they are found, including on unseaworthy vessels, and irrespective of the intentions of those onboard,” they said.

The UN organisations said that they welcomed an investigation by Greece into the circumstances which led to the boat capsizing. Collective efforts and coordination by the EU to prevent a recurrence were now required, given the increased numbers of refugees and others taking to the Mediterranean Sea route, the UNHCR said.

“The EU must put safety and solidarity at the heart of its action in the Mediterranean,” Gillian Triggs, UNHCR assistant high commissioner for protection, said in the statement.

Federico Soda, director of the IOM’s Department of Emergencies, said the current approach by states to the Mediterranean migration route was not working. “Year after year, it continues to be the most dangerous migration route in the world, with the highest fatality rate. States need to come together and address the gaps in proactive search and rescue, quick disembarkation, and safe regular pathways,” Soda said.

The UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights separately on Friday called for action against people smugglers and human traffickers, and for more routes to be opened for safe migration in light of the Greece tragedy.

“What happened on Wednesday underscores the need to investigate people smugglers and human traffickers and ensure they are brought to justice,” Jeremy Laurence, UN Human Rights Office spokesperson, told reporters in Geneva.

“The high commissioner reiterated his call to states to open up more regular migration channels and enhance responsibility sharing, ensure arrangements for the safe and timely disembarkation of all people rescued at sea, and the establishment of independent monitoring and oversight of migration-related policies and practices.”

Dimitris Chaliotis, a Hellenic Red Cross volunteer who was part of the rescue operations, said most of the people on board the vessel were from Libya and Syria. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, 104 survivors and 78 people who drowned were brought to shore by Greek authorities, but no one has been found since.

Nine people have been arrested over the shipwreck, a Greek shipping ministry official said.

The UN has recorded more than 20,000 deaths and disappearances in the central Mediterranean since 2014, making it the most dangerous migrant crossing in the world.

In a joint statement on Friday (PDF), 10 NGOs including Human Rights Watch and Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said the European Union was “complicit in the loss of lives at sea.” “Failures to engage in search and rescue that have now become the EU’s de facto migration management policy,” the statement

said, adding that the first quarter of 2023 marked the deadliest in the central Mediterranean in six years.

“We urge the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, to finally take a clear stand on the open graveyard at Europe’s land and sea borders, and to hold Member States accountable.”

Following Wednesday’s shipwreck, Von der Leyen said she was “deeply saddened” by the tragedy and promised to strengthen cooperation between the EU and nearby countries to crack down on migrant “smugglers.”

Human rights groups say Europe’s close border policy plays into the hands of smugglers, as asylum-seekers are forced to pay thousands of dollars to undertake dangerous and illegal journeys. Last week, Von der Leyen proposed a ?900 million (\$971 million) economic aid package for Tunisia, as well as ?150 million in immediate budget assistance and a further ?105 million for border management and anti-smuggling activities.

The deal would require Tunisia’s full cooperation on the issue of migration, as well as a re-admission of rejected Tunisian and Sub-Saharan asylum-seekers.

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