

Italian fishermen report finding bodies of drowned migrants in their nets

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Rome, October 25 (RHC)-- Fishing, a quintessential Mediterranean industry, has been a historic lifeline for Lampedusa, the touristy Italian island famed for its picturesque beaches and now, Europe's latest

migration crisis.

In the 19th century, sponge diving brought economic security to locals. Business then flourished to produce the island's famed canned amberjack, tuna, anchovies, mackerel and swordfish, as well as a multitude of fresh fish.

Pietro Riso, a fisherman, feels blessed to have passed on to his two sons "the best job in the world", but recent dark developments weigh on him.

"We find people at sea – on boats and in the water – and we rescue them," Riso told Al Jazeera. "At times, we find bodies in our nets."

In mid-September, a slow procession of rickety vessels entered Lampedusa's Favaloro pier, each overflowing with refugees and migrants from across the Mediterranean Sea.

Over four days, about 11,000 asylum seekers docked at Italy's southernmost island – almost double the number of local residents. Then, the pods on the carob trees disappeared, as did the Indian figs and even the prickly pears. The only hanging fruits sat at the top of the trees, beyond arms' reach.

Antonio Di Malta, a firefighter and resident of Lampedusa, was leaving for a night out when he spotted a group of men on his field.

"One of them gestured that he was hungry and fell to his knees," Di Malta said. "His eyes were full of fear – not that I or anyone would hurt him, but fear of I don't know what. Of hunger, maybe."

Di Malta and his mother put two large pans on the stove and cooked some pennette, a tube-shaped pasta, for their unexpected guests.

They hailed from Burkina Faso, where two military coups last year left a trail of unprecedented violence. "When he finished eating, the man took the last pennetta with his fork and raised it to the sky, as if to thank God," Di Malta said.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the number of arrivals was the highest since 2011. Most boats hailed from Tunisia, despite a new deal signed with Tunis by the far-right government of Giorgia Meloni.

"Tunisia was once a country of destination for many sub-Saharan Africans, but the economic crisis and the mistreatment of Black people have turned it into a transit country," Flavio Di Giacomo, IOM spokesperson, told Al Jazeera.

Lampedusa, located closer to Tunisia than to inland Italy, has been the preferred port of call for boats departing from the coastal city of Sfax.

According to the IOM, in 2016 – when most boats departed from Libya – about 8 percent of arrivals disembarked in Lampedusa, compared to 70 percent this year.

For local residents, whose proud solidarity earned the island a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016, the surge is worrying.

Many open their homes to the hungry, while restaurants in the island's main street – the buzzing Via Roma – serve food at no charge, but there is a sense the central Italian government has abandoned Lampedusa as it is again thrust in the midst of a phenomenon much wider than its 20 square kilometres (7.7 square miles).

“Migration is not a problem if managed well, but if it’s not managed it spirals out of control – as it did,” Di Malta said. “And we are all tired.”

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