

AI Index: PRE 01/425/2012
07 September 2012

Italy: Lampedusa shipwreck a grim reminder of EU's failure to protect migrants at risk

The sinking of a boat carrying migrants towards the southern Italian island of Lampedusa underscores why European Union governments need to do more to rescue and assist destitute people who arrive on its shores, Amnesty International said.

Since the boat sank early on Friday morning, Italian and NATO authorities have rescued more than 50 migrants from the Mediterranean Sea, but at least one person reportedly died and dozens remain missing.

Last year some 1,500 people lost their lives attempting to reach Europe, many via Lampedusa – a key gateway to Europe that lies 80 km north of Tunisia – amid a mass movement of asylum-seekers and other migrants from North Africa and beyond.

“Once again, the waters around the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa have played host to a tragedy, highlighting that the number of people dying on Europe’s doorstep is still increasing,” said Nicolas Beger, Director of Amnesty International’s European Institutions Office.

“The EU is failing these migrants – European countries must make concerted efforts to prevent deaths at sea by stepping up capacity and coordination for search and rescue operations.

“While the number of migrants arriving at Lampedusa has ebbed since a peak during unrest across North Africa last year, this latest shipwreck shows that authorities need to remain vigilant and ready to assist large groups of people – potentially including many asylum-seekers and refugees – in vessels that are often overcrowded and unseaworthy.”

In a separate incident off the western coast of Turkey on Thursday, more than 50 migrants reportedly drowned – about half of them children – after the boat carrying them capsized. Another 45 of those on board – said to be Iraqis, Syrians and Palestinians heading for the EU – managed to swim to shore, officials said.

During 2011, numerous tragedies involving migrant boats headed to EU countries via Lampedusa led to international scrutiny of the response by Italian and other authorities.

In March 2012, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) published the findings of an investigation into an incident a year earlier where a boat in distress was left drifting in the Mediterranean Sea for two weeks. There were only nine survivors out of 72 migrants on board – who included two babies and people from Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The PACE investigation decried a “catalogue of failures” by Libyan, Maltese, Italian and NATO authorities that contributed to the deaths.

In some other cases, those in need of rescue found themselves victims of “push-back” operations that violated their human rights. Many were sent to meet an uncertain fate in countries like Libya under former ruler Colonel Mu’ ammar al-Gaddafi – which had a history of detaining and torturing migrants.

In April this year, Italy’s government signed another agreement with the new Libyan leadership to continue cooperation on preventing the arrival of migrants departing from the North African country – it is still not safe in Libya for migrants, particularly those from sub-Saharan countries.

Activists from 20 countries gathered on Lampedusa in July 2012 to highlight the suffering of the many thousands of migrants who arrive there in overcrowded boats.

They joined with some of the island’s 6,000 residents to call on EU authorities to reverse European migration policy and do more to receive and assist migrants rather than channelling resources into blocking their entry and sending them back to face uncertain fates and possible human rights violations.

“We’re still calling on authorities across the EU to respect and protect the human rights of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers – both within Europe and along its borders,” said Beger.

Launched earlier this year, Amnesty International’s “When you don’t exist” campaign aims to improve the protection of human rights for migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers across Europe.