

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **EU leaders must urgently act to stop the increasing death toll in the Mediterranean Sea**

**(Brussels, 13 May 2014)** Amnesty International is deeply concerned by the latest tragedy and loss of migrants' and refugees' lives off the coast of Lampedusa, Italy. The Mediterranean has once again claimed the lives of those seeking safety and refuge in Europe, with many fatalities reported and hundreds still missing. The European Union (EU) and its member states must urgently act to protect the rights and lives of all migrants and refugees.

In the last two days (Sunday 11 and Monday 12 May), more than 50 people have lost their lives in the two consecutive shipwrecks between Italy and Libya, with hundreds still missing. Last October's shipwrecks off the coast of Lampedusa cost over 400 lives and triggered many statements of sadness and solidarity up to the highest level in the EU.

But to date, EU leaders have consistently and collectively failed to take concrete action to prevent further deaths along Europe's borders. Shipwrecks and drownings have continued in the Mediterranean and in the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece. At least 188 people drowned or went missing between August 2012 and March 2014 in the Aegean, and 22 people lost their lives on 5 May 2014 while trying to reach the Greek island of Samos from Turkey.

This increasing death toll highlights the ineffectiveness of the EU's current migration and asylum policies and practices, which focus on preventing people from reaching Europe at any human cost. The increasingly restrictive policies and practices have only forced desperate people to take more hazardous routes. With virtually no safe and legal routes to Europe, people are increasingly pushed into the hands of smugglers and traffickers, and are forced to risk their lives on unseaworthy vessels.

But there are alternatives.

A shift in EU asylum and migration policies is urgently required to save lives. The next month - as member states' representatives gather at the 5 and 6 June Justice and Home Affairs Council and the 26 and 27 June European Summit - will be a key opportunity to redefine Europe's approach to migration and asylum policy, before further lives are lost.

Amnesty International is calling on EU leaders to ensure people are put at the heart of migration and asylum policies and practices by ensuring more search and rescue, safe and legal routes to Europe, and ending the outsourcing of migration control to non-EU countries with deplorable human rights records.

#### **Increased Search and Rescue**

Following the October 2013 Lampedusa tragedies, Italy has been carrying out extensive search and rescue operations in the central Mediterranean under the "Mare Nostrum" operation. Italy's Operation

Mare Nostrum shows that it is possible to ensure greater safety for migrants and refugees by strengthening search and rescue operations.

These efforts are to be applauded. However, with further tragedies and loss of life, the strengthening of search and rescue activities in the Mediterranean can only be achieved through a joined effort which all EU member states must contribute to. Such activities should also be carried out in the Aegean.

### **Safe and legal routes to Europe**

To date, EU member states have been unwilling to discuss safe and legal ways for refugees to enter the EU. Even with the Syrian refugee crisis deepening at their doorstep, the member states' responses have been nothing else but shameful. While Syrian families are risking their lives at sea, EU member states are still refusing to open meaningful safe and legal ways for refugees to come to Europe.

The member states can do this through resettlement, humanitarian admission programmes, and facilitation of family reunification. By the end of 2013, Lebanon – a country of less than 4.5 million people - had hosted 800,000 Syrian refugees, whilst only 81,000 had managed to reach the EU in search of protection.

As the European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Cecilia Malmstrom said in her [reaction](#) to yesterday's Lampedusa tragedy, it is possible to "reduce the risk of such tragedies from happening again" by for example "resettling refugees directly from the camps outside the EU and opening new legal channels to come legally."

An EU-wide conference on the resettlement of Syrian refugees in EU member states as proposed by the German Parliament on 8 May would be an initial but key step in the right direction.

### **Cooperation on migration control with third countries**

The EU and European countries are continuing to cooperate with non-European countries on migration control, whilst turning a blind eye to human rights abuses suffered by migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees in those countries.

Despite well-documented evidence of abuse against migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in Libya, the EU and European countries such as Italy are cooperating with Libya to stem migration flows to Europe.

Cooperation with third countries neighbouring the EU must be aimed at assisting them to uphold the human rights of refugees and migrants rather than seeing prevention of arrivals in the EU as the primary aim. Any migration control agreements should also be transparent, and include adequate protection standards and measures.

The human cost of Europe's asylum and migration policy and practice is too high. More must and can be done to prevent deaths and suffering in the waters along Europe's shores.

This is a human rights issue. It is the collective responsibility of all of the EU member states to do everything in their power to prevent these deaths.

At the 26 and 27 June European Summit, EU leaders will agree the EU's five year migration and asylum strategy. This is a crucial opportunity for EU member states to finally put the human rights of migrants and refugees at the heart of EU's policy in this area, and save lives.

Without concrete action, tragically, the death toll off Europe's shores will continue to rise. We can and must do better than this.

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