

Migrant deaths at sea nearly doubled in first half of 2021

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Refugees and migrants are rescued by members of the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms after leaving Libya to reach European soil [Sergi Camara/AP]

Rome, July 15 (RHC)-- The number of people who died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea nearly doubled in the first half of 2021, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said on Wednesday.

At least 1,146 people died attempting to reach Europe by sea in the first six months of 2021, the IOM said in a statement. It said 513 migrants are known to have drowned in the same period last year, compared with 674 in the first six months of 2019.

“Civilian search-and-rescue organisations continued to face significant obstacles to their operations, with the majority of their boats blocked at European ports due to administrative seizures and ongoing criminal and administrative proceedings against crew members,” the IOM said.

The Central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy was the deadliest, claiming 741 lives. Next was the stretch of the Atlantic Ocean between West Africa and Spain’s Canary Islands, where at least 250 people died, the agency said.

At least 149 people also died on the Western Mediterranean route to Spain, as well as at least six on the Eastern Mediterranean route to Greece. The agency also noted the increased deaths come as interceptions of migrant boats launched from Libya are on the rise. Those who have been returned to Libya are subjected to arbitrary detention, extortion, disappearances and torture, the IOM said.

It also warned figures for migrants braving the western Mediterranean route may be severely underestimated. “Hundreds of cases of invisible shipwrecks have been reported by NGOs in direct contact with those on board or with their families,” it said.

The body called for “urgent and proactive steps to reduce loss of life on maritime migration routes to Europe,” quoting IOM Director-General Antonio Vitorino.

Italy and the European Union have for years been financing, training and providing aid to Libya’s coastguard to stop smugglers from taking migrants and refugees in flimsy boats across the Mediterranean to Europe.

But the coastguard has faced numerous accusations of appalling mistreatment of asylum seekers, and charities and human rights groups have severely criticised the arrangement.

Mediterranean countries such as Italy, Malta, Spain and Greece have repeatedly asked other European countries for help caring for the people who are rescued and brought to their shores.

Last year, when pandemic restrictions made it hard to move between countries, the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe by sea dropped to its lowest level since 2015. That year, one million reached Europe, many of them refugees fleeing the war in Syria.

The deadliest shipwreck so far this year took place April 22 off Libya, when 130 people drowned despite sending multiple distress calls.

The EU-trained and equipped Libyan coastguard was criticised after video emerged showing one of its vessels chasing and firing warning shots at a migrant boat on June 30. Libyan authorities acknowledged the coastguard vessel’s actions endangered the lives of migrants and said it would hold those responsible to account.

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