

Mediterranean takes record as most deadly stretch of water for refugees and migrants in 2011



Briefing Notes, 31 January 2012

This is a summary of what was said by UNHCR spokesperson Sybilla Wilkes – to whom quoted text may be attributed – at the press briefing, on 31 January 2012, at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

According to UNHCR estimates, more than 1,500 people drowned or went missing while attempting to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe in 2011. This makes 2011 the deadliest year for this region since UNHCR started to record these statistics in 2006. The previous high was in 2007 when 630 people were reported dead or missing.

Last year is also a record in terms of the massive number of arrivals in Europe via the Mediterranean, with more than 58,000 people arriving. The previous high was in 2008 when 54,000 people reached Greece, Italy and Malta. During 2009 and 2010, border control measures sharply reduced arrivals in Europe. The frequency of boat arrivals increased in early 2011 as the regimes in Tunisia and Libya collapsed.

Our teams in Greece, Italy, Libya and Malta, warn that the actual number of deaths at sea may be even higher. Our estimates are based on interviews with people who reached Europe on boats, telephone calls and e-mails from relatives, as well as reports from Libya and Tunisia from survivors whose boats either sank or were in distress in the early stages of the journey.

Survivors told UNHCR staff harrowing stories of being forced onboard by armed guards, particularly during April and May in Libya. The actual journey took place on unseaworthy vessels with refugee and migrant passengers often forced into having to skipper boats themselves. In addition, some survivors told UNHCR that fellow passengers beat and tortured them. Judicial investigations are ongoing in Italy following these reports.

The majority of last year's arrivals by sea landed in Italy (56,000, of whom 28,000 were Tunisian) while Malta and Greece received 1,574 and 1,030 respectively. The vast majority arrived in the first half of the year. Most were migrants, not asylum-seekers. Only three boats landed from mid-August to the end of the year. In addition, according to Greek government figures, some 55,000 irregular migrants crossed the Greek-Turkish land border at Evros.

We are disturbed that since the beginning of 2012, despite high seas and poor weather conditions, three boats have attempted this perilous journey from Libya, with one going missing at sea. This boat, carrying at least 55 people raised the alarm on 14 January, warning of engine failure. Libyan coast guards informed UNHCR that 15 dead bodies, all identified as Somali, were found washed up on the beaches last week, including 12 women, two men and a baby girl. On Sunday, three more bodies were recovered. It was confirmed later that all those that perished were Somali residents of the makeshift site in Tripoli known as the Railway Project.

The other two boats that made it to Malta and Italy in January required rescuing. The first rescue of 72 Somali nationals by the Italian coast guard took place on 13 January. Those rescued included a pregnant woman and 29 children.

The second boat was rescued by the Maltese Armed Forces on 15 January with the support of the US Navy and a commercial vessel. In total 68 people were rescued from a dinghy found drifting some 56 nautical miles from Malta. A baby girl was born on one of the rescue vessels. Another woman reported a miscarriage during the voyage.

UNHCR welcomes the ongoing efforts of the Italian, Maltese and Libyan authorities to rescue boats in distress in the Mediterranean. We renew our call to all shipmasters in the Mediterranean, one of the busiest stretches of water in the world, to remain vigilant and to carry out their duty of rescuing vessels in distress.

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