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Hundreds of migrants drown in Mediterranean as Europe refugee crisis boils over



By Eric J. Lyman - Special to The Washington Times - - Monday, April 20, 2015

ROME — European leaders hastily gathered Monday for an emergency meeting to discuss the Continent’s increasingly lethal refugee problem, after as many as 700 would-be immigrants drowned trying to reach European shores over the weekend and at least 400 more, on two separate vessels, desperately waited to be rescued.

The refugee crisis in Europe has been simmering for years, but it now appears to be boiling over amid political and economic instability in Africa and the Middle East and cutbacks on patrols in the often-rough Mediterranean Sea that separates Africa from Europe.

The refugee flood is also sparking a political crisis, as key [European Union](#) powers debate who should bear the burden for slowing the tide of illegal refugees and feeding,

housing and caring for those who make it to shore. Instability across the Middle East and North Africa, from Syria to [Libya](#), is only providing more recruits for the hazard-filled, illegal journey across the Mediterranean.

Rescuers responded Monday to two migrant emergencies off [Libya](#), and a third boat ran aground near Greece after a weekend disaster with hundreds feared dead, The Associated Press reported. In addition, prosecutors in Sicily arrested Monday the captain and crew of one of the capsized boats, on which hundreds died.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that 60,000 refugees made it to Europe in 2013 and that the number jumped to at least 170,000 last year. As many as 500,000 are estimated to make the trip this year. Processing centers are overwhelmed, and the busiest months for arrivals — traditionally from May through August — have yet to begin.

The weekend tragedy nearly doubled the death toll for this year to 1,500, about half as many as died in all of 2014.

“We have a political and moral obligation to exercise our role and act together as Europeans,” said [European Union](#) Foreign Policy Commissioner Federica Mogherini, an Italian whose country has borne the brunt of the illegal tide of humanity. “The [EU](#) was created on the idea of the protection of human rights, human dignity and human life. We have to be consistent with that idea.”

The leaders met in Luxembourg to discuss strategies, including plans to direct more funding to the Triton border protection initiative and to change its mission from safeguarding Europe’s borders to rescue operations. The [EU](#) spends about \$40 million a year on Triton, less than a third of the \$125 million [Italy](#) spent each year on its own Mare Nostrum rescue program before it was disbanded last year for budgetary reasons.

[Libya](#) is a transit point for migrants fleeing conflict, repression and poverty in countries such as Eritrea, Niger, Syria, Iraq and Somalia, with increased instability there and improving weather prompting more people to attempt the dangerous crossing.

Brussels summit Thursday

That instability will be a focus when [EU](#) leaders meet Thursday for a summit in Brussels. The Associated Press reported that Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has ruled out sending ground troops to [Libya](#) or a naval blockade of migrants, saying that would only provide a corridor for the smugglers.

For the first time, the small island nation of Malta is playing a leading role in the crisis. It is burying some of those who died over the weekend and sending ships to participate in rescue operations, though Maltese officials said rescued refugees still will be sent to [Italy](#) for processing.

Mr. Renzi, at a joint press conference with Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, told reporters that a united [European Union](#) response was needed to address the mounting security and humanitarian crisis.

“We are facing an organized criminal activity that is making lots of money, but above all ruining many lives,” Mr. Renzi said.

Some Europeans worry that making accommodations to seek out and rescue the migrants will only accelerate the flow and increase the human tragedy.

“If we make the work of traffickers easier and accept refugees that have gone overboard, this will make it an even better business for them,” Czech Foreign Minister Lubomir Zaoralek said in a television interview Monday. “We need to find a way to prevent people from setting out on such ships.”

William Lacy Swing, director general of the International Organization for Migration, blamed the influx on smugglers. He said smuggler networks are sweeping through [Libya](#) and enticing people to board boats to make the trek across the Mediterranean.

“The world needs to react with the conviction with which it eliminated piracy off the coast of Somalia a few years ago,” said Mr. Singer. “All of us, especially the [EU](#) and the world’s powers, can no longer sit on the sidelines watching while this tragedy unfolds.”

Although many blame U.S. policy for helping foment the unrest that has loosed the flood of refugees, analysts say Europe will be largely on its own in dealing with the aftermath.

“Countries like China and the U.S. feel as if they are only indirectly affected by the Mediterranean migration problems, so whatever responsibility they have in fixing Europe’s migration problem is limited,” Joel Millman, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration, said Monday.

On the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa, where the majority of refugees land and where a single processing center has been operating far beyond capacity almost nonstop

since February, residents are split over whether efforts should be focused on helping the migrants or turning them back to Africa.

Elsewhere in [Italy](#) and across Europe, nationalist political parties have stepped up calls for stricter immigration policies, but pollsters say most Europeans favor offering a helping hand. The trouble is that cash-strapped governments have been slow to allocate resources to those efforts. Analysts and activists say that may change in light of the latest tragedies.

“It is sad that so many lives have to be lost for leaders to finally pay attention,” said Antonio Luppi, an immigration activist who follows the issues in Africa closely. “All indications are that that will finally happen, but it’s still not clear how Europe will confront this growing problem.”

In his Sunday homily, Pope Francis called for a moment of prayerful silence for those who drowned trying to reach Europe’s shores. In unscripted remarks, he urged compassion for those who will be making the trip.

“They are men and women like us, brothers and sisters who seek a better life: hungry, persecuted, wounded, exploited, victims of war,” the pope said less than 12 hours after the ship tipped to its side around 130 miles from Lampedusa, and around 70 miles from [Libya](#), where the vessel began its ill-fated voyage.

With distress calls arriving regularly, Italian officials say, this month likely will be the worst ever for refugee deaths at sea, and [Italy](#) apparently has pulled out all stops in trying to prevent more fatalities. The Italian media said more than two dozen ships, including some private merchant vessels called into service, were searching the open seas for survivors and distressed ships. But an Italian Coast Guard spokesman said it would not be enough.

“We don’t have the manpower or the ships,” the spokesman said. “This has to be a multinational effort, or the death toll will rise.”

• *Christopher White in Washington contributed to this article, which is based in part on wire service reports.*

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