

The “Human Cost” of The EU’s Response to the Refugee Crisis

By the time the first week of 2018 had ended, the Mediterranean Sea had already taken a deadly toll. A rubber dinghy sank off the coast of Libya while carrying 150 migrants and refugees from across Africa. Just eight bodies, all women, were recovered. Another 56 went missing, disappearing beneath the waves. The remaining survivors were pulled from the water and brought to Italy.

It was an ominous start to the new year. Rickety boats and rubber dinghies sinking into the Mediterranean have become a distressingly common sight throughout the ongoing migration crisis. Less than a month into 2018, more than 200 people have already died or gone missing at sea, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

As the crisis enters its third year, Europe continues to struggle with how to respond to an influx that has seen more than one-and-a-half million refugees and migrants come to its shores — and nearly 12,000 perish or go missing attempting the journey.

Since the crisis began, the European Union has spent millions discouraging people from making the journey, funding and supporting countries that have become main points of entry, and speeding up the return of people to their countries of origin. While these measures have contributed to a steep decline in arrivals to the continent, rights groups and humanitarian organizations say they have also had unintended consequences. For some, the journey to Europe has grown increasingly deadly, while others are now stuck in nations where they are vulnerable to human rights abuses.

“I’m sure plenty of people will say it’s a success, but at what cost?” said François Crépeau, a professor at McGill University who served as U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants from 2011 to 2017, of the drop in overall arrivals. “There’s a human cost to all this.”

The EU Response

The sudden influx of those escaping violence, persecution and poverty starting in 2015 triggered a series of reactions from individual governments in Europe. One by one, countries along the primary route taken by asylum seekers to western Europe — Hungary, Slovenia, Austria and Macedonia — tightened their borders. Politicians who had initially been sympathetic to refugees adopted harder stances as public backlash grew and elections drew near.

Amid pressure to act, the European Union moved to stem the flow. In March 2016, it struck a controversial deal with Turkey, one of the main transit hubs along the eastern Mediterranean route, particularly for those fleeing war-torn Syria. Anyone — refugee or migrant — who tried to cross from Turkey to Greece outside of proper channels would be sent back. For every Syrian sent back to Turkey, the EU would accept one refugee.

In February 2017, the EU took aim at the central Mediterranean route, popular among those fleeing from Africa and arriving in Italy. It gave \$245 million to the internationally recognized government in Libya — itself beset by conflict and political instability — to stop boats from leaving the country's territorial waters. As part of the agreement, the EU would provide training and equipment to the Libyan coast guard, seek to ensure "adequate" conditions for migrants inside of Libya, and support the voluntary returns of people to their countries of origin. Italy also inked a deal with Libya, providing an additional \$245 million, and increasing training and cooperation with Libya's coast guard.

The EU framed its response as an effort to strengthen cooperation and support for transit countries like Turkey and Libya, saying they would break the business model of smugglers and help save lives.

These deals and border closures have helped precipitate dramatic declines in the overall flow of refugees and migrants coming to Europe by sea. Arrivals have fallen by nearly 85 percent, dropping from more than one million in 2015 to 171,300 last year, according to data from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

The sharpest declines happened along the Turkey to Greece route, which saw a drop of 97 percent between 2015 and 2017, per UNHCR. Arrivals in Italy fell

almost 35 percent from a record high in 2016.

Deaths at Sea

As with arrivals, the total number of deaths is also down, dropping from a high of more than 5,000 in 2016, to slightly more than 3,000 last year.

Yet critics point out that the number of those who either died or went missing at sea has never fallen below 3,000 per year.

In fact, even with fewer people attempting the journey, the risks of dying in the Mediterranean have only grown as smuggling networks employ more dangerous routes and methods using smaller, overcrowded vessels that are not seaworthy.

There was a 1 in 269 chance of dying or going missing at sea for those who crossed the Mediterranean in 2015. The next year, it crept up to a 1 in 71 chance. Last year, the odds rose to 1 in 55.

Deaths in the Mediterranean Sea

2015: 37 deaths per 10,000 crossings - 3,771 total dead and missing. Total crossings: 1,015,078.
2016: 140 deaths per 10,000 crossings - 5,096 total dead and missing. Total crossings: 362,753

2017: 180 deaths per 10,000 crossings - 3,081 total dead and missing. Total crossings: 171,332

Experts argue that one reason deaths have continued at such high rates is because the EU response has focused too heavily on stemming arrivals, rather than developing legal alternatives to reach Europe.

“Every time states try to prohibit an activity which is not necessarily considered criminal ... all it does is create underground criminal networks who are bypassing government,” said Crépeau.

“Saving lives, protecting migrants, fight[ing] traffickers and replacing irregular migration with organized, legal and safe pathways are the core objectives of the EU’s migration policy,” a spokesman for the European Commission, the EU’s executive arm, told FRONTLINE in a statement. “The way forward must build on these steps by further enhancing cooperation with our partners in Africa, disrupt the criminal smuggling and trafficking networks, fighting the root causes of

irregular migration, helping stranded migrants return home and ensuring the most vulnerable can come to Europe safely.”

The Stranded

Among those who have survived the journey, thousands along the migration route have been stranded since nations began closing their borders. More than 1,300 are stuck in Bulgaria, another 4,400 in Serbia, and 54,000 in Greece, according to IOM figures from last November. The worst conditions at camps inside these countries were described by Doctors Without Borders as “on the brink of a humanitarian emergency.”

On the other side of the Mediterranean, in Libya, conditions are unimaginable, according to humanitarian reports. “Every single person — and it really is that extreme — every single person who has made this journey through Libya describes Libya in one way or another as hell,” said Gauri van Gulik, Amnesty International’s deputy Europe director.

According to Amnesty’s research, tens of thousands are being held in official detention centers or held captive by militias or gangs. A report from December says, “They are systematically exposed to torture and other ill-treatment, including sexual violence and severe beatings and extortion. They are also at times killed or left to die after being tortured, exploited, abused, or sold on for forced labor and other forms of exploitation to other militias, armed groups or criminal gangs.”

In November, U.N. Human Rights chief Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein called the suffering of migrants in Libya “an outrage to the conscience of humanity.” The EU’s efforts, he said, “have done nothing so far to reduce the level of abuses suffered by migrants.”

“The EU is extremely active in doing everything we can to provide protection and alternatives to migrants and refugees in Libya,” the European Commission told FRONTLINE, adding that it was EU funding that allowed 20,000 people to voluntarily return home from Libya since January 2017.

But aid groups say that EU support of the Libyan coast guard has led to more interceptions of boats, which results in migrants and refugees being sent back to

Libya, where they're vulnerable to abuse. Critics say this has presented new challenges for Western aid groups and humanitarian organizations.

Luca Salerno, Doctors Without Borders' project coordinator onboard the rescue ship Aquarius, said there have been incidents where the ship has been told to stand by while a boat was in need of rescue, in order to allow the Libyan coast guard to intervene instead. On one occasion, he said, the rescue ship waited almost four hours in front of a rubber boat in distress, because they weren't allowed to carry out the rescue.

"The situation can become critical at any moment," he said. "To wait three, four hours in front of a rubber boat without authorization to intervene — it was an extremely risky situation."

The European Commission said the EU does not send migrants back to Libya. "What we do is to train the Libyan coast guard, since the vast majority of people were dying in Libyan territorial waters — to which we do not have access," a spokesperson said, adding that training emphasizes human rights, women's rights and the correct handling of migrants.

EU member states have pledged to receive around 40,000 refugees by May 2019, but the need is vast. Turkey, which was the transit point for more than 800,000 people heading to Europe in 2015, now hosts 3.6 million refugees, 3.3 million of them of Syrian origin.

"Sooner or later, we will need to deal with the fact that these people continue to flee their countries of origin, even if they don't reach Europe," said Eugenio Ambrosi, director of the IOM's regional office for the EU, Norway and Switzerland. "We're talking about thousands of people that move out of desperation. And if you're desperate, yes, you might know that you're going to risk your life or run into serious trouble, but you're already in serious trouble back home so you have nothing to lose."

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