

Over 160 Migrants Have Drowned off Libya This Past Week as More Try Crossing to Europe

Over 160 migrants drowned in two different shipwrecks off the Libyan coast this past week as more people try crossing to Europe, a United Nations migration official said Tuesday.

International Organization for Migration (IOM) spokeswoman Safa Msehli said the new deaths have brought the death toll this year for the central Mediterranean route to about 1,500 migrants drowned.

On Friday, a wooden boat capsized off Libya with at least 102 reported dead, Msehli said. At least eight people were rescued and returned to the shore.

On Saturday, the Libyan coast guard discovered and retrieved at least 62 bodies of migrants from a second shipwreck that had occurred.

Also on Saturday, a wooden boat holding at least 210 migrants aboard was intercepted by the coast guard.

In Libya, particularly around the capital city of Tripoli, thousands of migrants have been arrested, and several were shot in October, according to the France 24 Observers news outlet.

Some arrested migrants were placed at the Ain Zara detention center, which has food, shelter and medical care, according to guards and Libyan officials at Ain Zara, but migrants said the facility lacked those supplies, Reuters reported.

Another detention center, Ghut Shaal, quickly ran out of food and water, France 24 Observers added.

Recent months have seen a surge in crossings and attempted crossings from Libya as authorities accelerated their deadly crackdown on migrants in the capital of Tripoli.

Around 31,500 migrants have been intercepted and returned to Libya in 2021,

compared to nearly 11,900 migrants in the previous year, according to the IOM. Around 980 migrants were dead or presumed dead in 2020, the U.N. agency added.

Libya has emerged as the dominant transit point for migrants fleeing war and poverty in Africa and the Middle East. The oil-rich country plunged into chaos following a NATO-backed uprising that toppled and killed longtime autocrat Moammar Gadhafi in 2011.

Human traffickers have benefited from chaos in the nation and have smuggled migrants through the country's lengthy border with six nations. They pack desperate migrants into ill-equipped rubber boats then embark on risky voyages through the perilous Mediterranean Sea.

Those returned have been taken to detention centers rife with abuses, including forced labor, beatings, rape and torture. The abuse often accompanies efforts to extort money from families before migrants are allowed to leave Libya on traffickers' boats.

U.N.-commissioned investigators said in October that abuse and ill treatment of migrants in Libya could amount to crimes against humanity.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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