

UPDATE1 -- 500 migrants feared dead in `mass murder` on the Mediterranean Sea

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USPA News - More than 720 migrants who were attempting to travel by boat from North Africa to Europe are feared to have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in four separate boat tragedies in recent days, including one in which hundreds died when traffickers caused the boat to sink on purpose, officials said Monday. The deliberate sinking happened after around 500 migrants, including families and unaccompanied children, had left the Egyptian port city of Damietta on September 6 and were forced to change boats several times during the trip.

When they were told to change to yet another smaller boat on Wednesday, the migrants became concerned and rebelled against the traffickers, survivors said. "Realizing the danger of the situation, many rebelled and a clash occurred with the traffickers who, at one point, became nervous and rammed the migrant boat from the stern, causing it to sink," said Flavio Di Giacomo, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration (IMO). "Most of the 500 people fell into the sea and drowned while others managed to stay afloat by clinging to objects." Only 11 people were rescued after they were spotted on Thursday by migrants aboard the Panamanian freighter `Pegasus`, about 300 miles (482 kilometers) off Malta. Among those who survived are two Palestinian boys who had escaped from Gaza and traveled to Egypt in early September. One of them told IOM that he clung to a buoy along with seven other people, but the others all drowned one by one as the hours passed. He was rescued on Thursday when migrants on board the `Pegasus` spotted him, about 1.5 day after the boat had sunk. The second Palestinian boy was rescued soon after and had managed to stay afloat because he was wearing a life jacket, the organization said. Nine other survivors were also rescued. "This is a particularly serious episode because it would not just be an accident, but a mass murder perpetrated by criminals with no scruples and no respect for human life," Di Giacomo said. He said the International Organization for Migration was appealing to the international community to stop traffickers and to bring them to justice. "At this time, the only way to stop these organizations is to start opening legal channels for entry into Europe for all people - men, women and children - who flee their countries in search of protection," Di Giacomo explained. He said the nationalities of the victims in Wednesday's boat sinking are believed to be Syrians, Palestinians, Egyptians and Sudanese. Monday's news came just hours after word of three other boat tragedies elsewhere on the Mediterranean Sea, off the coast of Libya. The worst accident near Libya happened on Sunday off the coast of Qarabouli, which is to the east of the Libyan capital of Tripoli, where a boat carrying an estimated 250 people sank. At least 99 migrants had been rescued by Monday while three bodies were recovered, leaving around 148 others unaccounted-for. In a second incident off Libya, a migrant boat carrying an unknown number of people sank off Libya's Tajoura district, about 24 kilometers (15 miles) east of Tripoli. At least 45 bodies were recovered, including six women of whom one was seven months pregnant. A total of 75 people had been rescued but it was not known whether others were still missing. In a third incident, an inflatable boat thought to be carrying 52 people ripped apart near the scene of the second sinking, killing 26 people. Another 26 people were rescued and no one else was believed to remain missing. "This looks to have been a particularly tragic weekend on the Mediterranean," said Adrian Edwards, a spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "As of now, and off Libya, we are hearing of three incidents, but when these occurred is still unclear." The news came as UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres and Special Envoy Angelina Jolie visited the naval rescue headquarters in Malta on Sunday and met with survivors of recent boat tragedies. They thanked naval authorities for their part in rescue operations but called for increased efforts by European nations to contribute to rescue efforts at sea. "We all need to wake up to the scale of this crisis. There is a direct link between the conflicts in Syria and elsewhere and the rise in deaths at sea in the Mediterranean," Jolie said. "We have to understand what drives people to take the fearful step of risking their children's on crowded, unsafe vessels; it is the overwhelming desire to find refuge." The United Nations believes more than 3,000 people have died so far this year while attempting to make the dangerous journey from North Africa to Europe. More than 600 people hoping to reach safety in Europe drowned or went missing in 2013, making the Mediterranean Sea the world's deadliest stretch of water for migrants and refugees. At least 500 died in 2012 and around 1,500 in 2011. So far this year, a record 118,000 migrants have arrived to Italy by sea, most of whom are fleeing either the worsening security situation in Libya or the raging civil war in Syria. The numbers surpass the record 63,000 migrants who were rescued by Italy in 2011 at the height of the Arab Spring. Some 15,000 migrants have also arrived in Greece this year.

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

United Press Association, Inc.

3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168

Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA

(702) 943.0321 Local

(702) 943.0233 Facsimile

info@unitedpressassociation.org

info@gna24.com

www.gna24.com