

Fortress Europe: more migrants dying in the Mediterranean

Sunday 23 April 2023, by [PIERRE Dominique](#) (Date first published: 20 April 2023).

The first quarter of 2023 was the deadliest for migrants crossing the Mediterranean since 2017.

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The International Organization for Migration (IOM) announced on Wednesday 12 April that at least 441 people died while trying to reach Europe; the toll was further increased at the beginning of April with the death of twenty people in the sinking of their boat off the coast of Tunisia, according to the Tunisian coast guard.

The UN agency is also investigating several cases of missing boats where there is no sign of survivors, no debris and no search and rescue operation has been carried out.

Mediterranean graveyard

These frightening numbers are falling and becoming commonplace, “usual”. Who remembers the 250 people found on a beach in Calabria on Sunday 26 February? They had a name, a family, a country of origin. But for some of them, whose bodies will never be found and whose relatives will never be informed, their history and identity disappeared on that Sunday in February in the anonymity of the turbulent waters of the Mediterranean, swallowing up their dream of a better life in Europe.

The refugees using this deadly Mediterranean graveyard route are mostly from Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea and Pakistan and a growing proportion of Tunisians, sometimes making the crossing with their families. The deep economic crisis, which has been coupled with a political crisis since the coup d’état of President Kaïs Saïed in 2021, has pushed many Tunisians to leave their country in any way they can. In addition, President Saïed’s xenophobic rhetoric against sub-Saharan Africans has triggered a wave of expulsions.

Tougher laws in Italy

The IOM believes that delays in search and rescue operations are to blame for 127 of the 441 deaths at sea. For years, sea rescue NGOs have deplored both the lack of European resources and the growing obstacles imposed on them by certain countries, including Italy. The Italian Parliament passed a law with a decree, signed on 2 January 2023, which obliges humanitarian ships to carry out only one rescue at a time, and then to immediately reach a port of disembarkation, which is often far

from the rescue area. A few days after the adoption of this law, on 7 January, the humanitarian vessel Geo Barents was detained for 20 days in a Sicilian port and forced to reach the port of Ancona in Italy, some 1,500 km away, after having carried out only one rescue.

NGOs such as SOS Méditerranée and Médecins sans Frontières denounced the decree as contrary to the principle of helping anyone in distress at sea. But EU governments and institutions are doing nothing to prevent the Italian Prime Minister's criminal policy; it is a matter of public concern.

DOMINIQUE PIERRE

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