

Italy: At least 40 migrants dead at sea, 320 others rescued

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Rome: At least 40 migrants died Saturday in the hold of an overcrowded smuggling boat in the Mediterranean Sea north of Libya, apparently killed by fuel fumes, and some 320 others aboard were saved by the Italian navy, the rescue ship's commander said.

Migrants by the tens of thousands are braving the perilous journey across the Mediterranean this year, hoping to reach Europe and be granted asylum. They are fleeing war, persecution and poverty in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

"The dead were found in the hold," Cmdr. Massimo Tozzi, speaking from the navy ship Cigala Fulgosi while the rescue was still ongoing. Asked by RaiNews24 how the migrants died, Tozzi said "it appears to be from inhaling exhaust fumes."

When rescuers stepped aboard the boat, the bodies of migrants were "lying in water, fuel, human excrement" in the hold, Tozzi said.

The death toll was not yet final.

"They are still counting the victims," Interior Minister Angelino Alfano told reporters.

Tozzi said the survivors included three children and 45 women, some of whom "were crying for their husbands (and) their children who died in the crossing."

The navy said that the survivors were later transferred to a Norwegian ship with the Frontex mission, a European effort to save migrant lives in the Mediterranean. The survivors were being brought to a southern Italian port.

Elsewhere in the Mediterranean, migrants on a Turkish beach scuffled over places on one inflatable dinghy and frantically bailed out another to keep it from sinking during a dramatic night that highlighted their desperation to reach the Greek island of Kos "and the safety of Europe."

The scenes, captured early Saturday by Associated Press journalists on a moonless night, came as Turkish authorities reported that 2,791 migrants have been caught in the Aegean Sea in the past five days alone, most of them Syrians.

Kos is only 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) from Turkey at its closest point, its twinkling lights at night an irresistible beacon to those fleeing war or poverty.

An Italian navy admiral coordinating the sea rescue missions said the first rescuers, in two rubber dinghies, approached the boat carefully, since often migrants rush to one side of their vessel when they spy help and the boat capsizes.

"We saw this boat filled up to unimaginable levels," Admiral Pierpaolo Ribuffo said.

So far, at least seven of the bodies had been transferred to the rescue vessel, which was headed toward Sicily, Ribuffo said.

An estimated 2,300 migrants have died at sea this year trying to make the crossing, according to figures released Friday by the International Organization for Migration. The Libya-to-Italy route is by far the deadliest. The exact toll of

dead will never be known, as some smuggling boats are believed to have gone down at sea without rescuers being aware of them.

The migrants "put their lives in the hands of the smugglers" in order to escape from their dire conditions, said a U.N. refugee agency official, Barbara Molinario.

The number of migrants trying to reach Europe by sea is on track to hit a record this year, according to the IOM. Greece has reported 134,988 arrivals from Turkey this year, it said.

On the Turkish beach, in the darkness well away from the shore early Saturday, two migrant smuggling boats appeared to be intercepted by another vessel and their passengers taken into custody. It was not immediately clear if Greek authorities were once again intercepting migrants at sea.

- AP