

Coast guard on alert in Mediterranean after new shipwrecks; smugglers take advantage of calm weather

9 May 2017 – About 6,600 migrants and refugees were rescued in the past few days trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea, United Nations authorities have said, as rescuers are on the lookout for up to 245 people missing after two shipwrecks this weekend.

“Rescue at sea operations, including by the Italian Coast Guard, in coordination with Frontex, and by [non-governmental organizations] are of crucial importance,” Cécile Pouilly, a spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), today [told](#) journalists in Geneva.

A rubber dinghy sank on Friday night with an estimated 132 people on board. Ms. Pouilly said some 50 people were rescued and disembarked in Sicily on Sunday, but more than 80 people are feared dead.

More recently, seven people out of an estimated 170 were rescued from a shipwreck that took place on Sunday off the coast of Libya.

This brings the number of migrants and refugees killed while trying to cross the straits to at least 1,309 this year, according to the International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)).

Meanwhile, some [49,310 migrants and refugees](#) entered Europe by sea so far this year, IOM reported. The figure is lower than the 187,569 arrivals between 1 January and 7 May 2016.



Mediterranean migrant arrivals approach 50,000 in 2017; deaths: 1,309.
Source: IOM

The reason, according to IOM spokesperson Joel Millman, is the “strong drop” in traffic on the Turkey to Greece route following the Turkey-European Union deal reached in March.

Fleeing Libya

Most of the activity so far this year is from the Libya to Italy route, as well as to Spain.

Addressing the Security Council yesterday, the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), said that the country lacks a rule of law and has become [“a marketplace for the trafficking of human beings.”](#) She warned of possible human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law.

Speaking from Rome today, IOM's Flavia Di Giacomo suggested that political prisoners were among those fleeing the country.

"Our field colleagues providing direct assistance at the harbours reported that many migrants bore signs of torture," Ms. Di Giacomo said.

More shipwrecks expected

The two latest shipwrecks came amid favourable weather over the weekend and improved sea conditions. As the weather warms, more people are expected to launch.

The likelihood of shipwreck is increasing as smugglers put more and more people on boats, Ms. Pouilly said, and the quality of vessels is decreasing.

In cases of shipwrecks, finding survivors has become more difficult. People on smuggler boats are increasingly less likely to have a satellite phone – a trend that Ms. Pouilly said is confirmed by the Italian coast guard.

"Between 2015 and 2016 the availability of those phones had decreased by half, so people were much more difficult to locate when problems occurred and could not call for help," she said. There are confirmed reports of armed gangs attacking migrants on the high seas between Libya and Italy to steal their mobile phones and boat engines.

Mr. Millman said the development is an indication that smugglers' networks are starting to unravel: "The components that smugglers feel they need to conduct this business are getting harder and harder to come by in a place like Libya, and so that would account for some of the violence and some of the robbery."

[UN experts 'strongly' condemn brutal murder of journalist and rights defender in Maldives](#)

9 May 2017 – A group of United Nations human rights experts have [strongly](#) condemned the murder of a prominent journalist and human rights defender in Maldives and called on the authorities to conduct a public inquiry into the killing and bring those responsible to justice.

Yameen Rasheed [is](#) an outspoken critic of the Government who wrote about alleged public corruption and human rights violations [and](#) was found stabbed in the stairway of his home in the capital, Malé, on 23 April.

[We](#) strongly condemn the killing of Mr. Rasheed and we urge the

Government of the Maldives to take action now to promote and protect the rights of their people to express their views freely,” the experts said in a [news release](#) issued by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)).

Mr. Rasheed was also at the forefront of a campaign calling for accountability over the disappearance of another journalist and human rights defender, Ahmed Rilwan, who has not been seen or heard from since 8 August 2014.

According to OHCHR, he had received numerous death threats, which he had reported to the police, but apparently no action was taken to protect him.

This murder is the latest in a series of attacks against journalists and human rights defenders expressing liberal views. The killings come against a backdrop of rising religious intolerance in the Maldives and reports suggest that most of the attacks have gone unpunished.

In the news release, the rights experts recognized that the Maldivian authorities have started an investigation and arrested two individuals.

However, they stressed that the “extreme seriousness” of the attack warranted “a thorough and independent public inquiry [...] bringing to bear all of the resources of law enforcement and focusing on Mr. Rasheed's murder and the disappearance of Mr. Rilwan.”

Government has to 'take active steps' to promote tolerance – experts

Further in the release, the experts also noted that the island nation's authority must take seriously their obligation to promote a free and safe space for all forms of expression.

It is the Government's responsibility [...] to take active steps in law and practice to promote toleranceRights experts

On 27 April 2017, four days following his statement condemning the murder of Mr. Rasheed, the President of Maldives reportedly stated in a public meeting that any speech that mocks Islam cannot be tolerated or protected under freedom of expression, read the release.

“It is the Government's responsibility,” the UN experts emphasized, “to take active steps in law and practice to promote tolerance.”

They also voiced concern over a legislation that uses religion and social norms to restrict freedom of expression in ways that are incompatible with the obligations of the Maldives under international law.

“We call on the Government to revise this legislation and other restrictive measures and to show a sincere commitment to human rights and democracy,” they stressed.

The UN human rights experts issuing the appeal included:

Special Rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based UN [Human Rights Council](#) to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.

[International Criminal Court may investigate migrant-related crimes in Libya, Security Council told](#)

8 May 2017 – The Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court ([ICC](#)) today told the United Nations Security Council that her Office is considering launching an investigation into alleged migrant-related crimes in Libya, including human trafficking.

“My Office continues to collect and analyze information relating to serious and widespread crimes allegedly committed against migrants attempting to transit through Libya,” said Fatou Bensouda during a Security Council meeting on the North African country’s situation.

“I’m similarly dismayed by credible accounts that Libya has become a marketplace for the trafficking of human beings,” she added, noting that her Office “is carefully examining the feasibility” of opening an investigation into migrant-related crimes in Libya should the Court’s jurisdictional requirements be met.

“We must act to curb these worrying trends,” she said.

Ms. Bensouda said that reports indicate the country is at risk of returning to widespread conflict, and such an outcome would not bode well for the rule of law in Libya, and will surely aggravate a climate of impunity, which could in turn lead to widespread human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law.

RELATED: [African migrants reportedly being sold in ‘slave markets’ in Libya, UN migration agency warns](#)

Turning to specific cases before the Court, she said that her office has alleged Al-Tuhamy Mohamed Khaled, the former head of the Libyan Internal Security Agency under the Muammar Gaddafi regime, is responsible for crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The pre-trial chamber of the Court found reasonable grounds to believe that the Internal Security Agency, led by Mr. Al-Tuhamy, along with other Libyan

military, intelligence and security agencies, arrested and detained persons perceived to be opponents of Mr. Gaddafi and his rule.

The prosecutor said these persons were allegedly subjected to various forms of mistreatment, including severe beatings, electrocution, acts of sexual violence and rape, solitary confinement, deprivation of food and water, inhumane conditions of detention, mock executions, and threats of killing and rape, in various locations throughout Libya.

Ms. Bensouda urged Libya as well as State or non-State parties to take immediate action to verify the suspect's whereabouts and facilitate his arrest and surrender to the Court.

She said the Court "unsealed" its arrest warrant for Mr. Al-Tuhamy to enhance the chances of justice being done.

In Zimbabwe, UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador calls for more protection of child victims of sexual violence

8 May 2017 – Drawing attention to the harrowing traumas of child victims of sexual violence, a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)) has called for greater recognition of the fact that it is "not OK" for children to be touched inappropriately as well as for raising awareness among youngsters that under-age sex can lead to pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.

"No woman, and most definitely no child, should ever have to experience sexual violence – especially from someone they trust for protection, such as a family member," [said](#) actress and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Priyanka Chopra, who is currently in Zimbabwe to advocate for increased support for child victims of sexual violence.

"When I met these survivors, young brave women and children, and listened to their experiences, it just broke my heart [...] I will never forget their stories," she added, recalling her conversation with a 13-year-old girl who was repeatedly raped by her uncle.

According to UNICEF, sexual violence against children is widespread in Zimbabwe and latest available data has showed that close to one in 10 girls aged 15-17 years old has been a victim of forced sexual intercourse or a forced sexual act.

Approximately two-thirds of victims were first abused by an intimate partner and about a tenth of the victims by a stranger.

Most concerning is that in the case of children, most abuse occurred in situations when the child knew and trusted the adult who abused him or her.

Sexual violence against children is also “mostly invisible” and goes largely undocumented, noted UNICEF, stating that fear of “getting into trouble” as well as shame and stigma all contributed to children not reporting the abuse.

Additionally, many victims were too young or too vulnerable to know what happened to them.

In the case of the 13-year-old girl that Ms. Chopra spoke to, with the help of her mother and neighbours, the incident was reported to the police and the uncle who abused her has been arrested, tried, and jailed for 10 years.

The 13-year-old child received supported by the Family Support Trust, an organization supported by UNICEF, that runs a “one stop” child-friendly clinic providing medical and psychosocial support for sexually abused children.

She also attended a peer support group for teens, and received regular home visits from social workers to provide the help and support she needed.

Approaching trauma with compassion and seriousness

While in the country, Ms. Chopra also visited Childline Zimbabwe, a 24-hour service that provides free, confidential, multilingual counselling to children and those under 18 years of age who have been abused, violated or exploited.

“The counsellors, all volunteers, told me that many calls come from children in hysterics because they had been raped or abused,” noted the UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador recollecting her visit.

“Without Childline, they would have nowhere to turn. This is a model that many countries with high rates of violence against children can adopt, because it is a safe place for children to turn to and know that their call will be answered by a compassionate person who will take their complaints seriously and respond.”

Consultations on migration compact begin; UN envoy urges policies that reject ‘us vs. them’ tactics

8 May 2017 – A lack of trust leads to increased intolerance and xenophobia, the United Nations envoy on international migration told UN Member States

told, calling on Governments to review and put in place effective migration policies that reject an “us vs. them” mentality between national and migrants.

“Migrants are not a burden. Even less so are they a threat. Properly managed, migration stands to benefit all,” Louise Arbour, the Special Representative for International Migration said in Geneva, kicking off the process to the first-ever [global compact](#) for safe, orderly and regular migration, due to be adopted in 2018.

She urged Governments to ratify and implement all international and regional human right instruments and related conventions, so that their countries’ migration policies would be grounded in human right norms and standards.

“Success will rest in large part on your sustained engagement, in word and deed, to changing the optic by which we view migration, from a phenomenon currently feared by too many, to one that better reflects its overwhelmingly positive impact on society,” Ms. Arbour said.

The UN envoy was addressing the first informal session on the [human rights of migrants](#), looking at their social inclusion and cohesion in societies, and the necessity to counter discrimination including racism, xenophobia and intolerance against migrants.

The two-day session opened today under the co-facilitation of Switzerland and Mexico. It is the first of six thematic discussions to be held between now and November, as consultations for the [intergovernmental conference on international migration in 2018](#), of which Ms. Arbour is the Secretary-General.



UN Special Representative for International Migration Louise Arbour. UN Photo/Mark Garten

Leading up to the conference, the UN launched the [Together](#) initiative last year to change negative perception and attitudes towards [refugees and migrants](#), and to strengthen the social contract between host countries and communities, and refugees and migrants. The initiative bolsters the work of the 2016 UN Summit to Address Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants and its outcome, the landmark A

HREF="http://refugeesmigrants.un.org/declaration">New York Declaration.

In today’s session, Ms. Arbour noted that deep-seated attitudes of prejudice and xenophobia, which many of the world’s 245 million migrants often confront, is particularly felt by so-called “irregular migrants” who enter, stay or work in a country without the necessary authorization.

While such migrants may have constituted administrative offences, “they are not crimes per se against persons, property or national security. And while states retain the sovereign prerogative to order their removal, the very presence of such migrants under their jurisdiction places certain obligations

on national authorities.”

These obligations include protections, which despite political commitments, are not implemented, and include access to services.

“Putting in place ‘firewalls’ between immigration enforcement and public services is an effective way to facilitate access to justice, housing, health care, education, social protection and social and labour services for migrants,” Ms. Arbour said.

She continued that the erroneous perception of an increased influx of irregular migration, combined with a lack of trust in state capacities to deal with such influxes has led to increased intolerance and rejection of migrants – particularly in communities that face poverty or discrimination themselves.

“Distrust grows between host communities and irregular migrants when an effective migration policy is not in place, devolving into an ‘us vs. them’ mentality between nationals and migrants,” she said.

Irregular migration by some people feeds xenophobic and racist attitudes against all migrants, creating a “downward spiral of hatred that risks becoming insurmountable.”

In contrast, facilitating access to legal avenues for migration and access to work would reduce the need for many to migrate through irregular channels, the UN envoy noted.

“Policies related to migrants must include the participation of all actors with a stake in the outcome,” she said, “including local governments, trade unions, employers’ organizations, national human rights bodies, private sector, recruitment agencies, security and justice service providers, civil society and youth organizations and migrants.”

The second information thematic discussion will be held next month in New York. It will address drivers of migration, such as climate change and human-made crises.