

2024 was the deadliest year on record for migrants trying to reach Europe

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The last deadly shipping accident in 2024 at the gates of Fortress Europe was reported on December 27: a boat with 80 people on board sank on its way to the Canary Islands. Only 11 lives could be saved, 69 people died. Many of the victims were from Mali, a country in West Africa where armed conflict has raged for more than a decade, where various powers, including European countries, have been heavily involved.

The year 2025 began with the sinking off the Tunisian coast of two refugee boats bound for Italy in the Mediterranean, in which 27 people lost their lives. No further details about the deceased were available in news reports. With these victims, the tragic death toll at Europe's external borders ushered in the new year.

According to the Spanish human rights organisation Caminando Fronteras, 2024 was the deadliest year so far for migrants trying to reach Europe. On average, more than 30 people died every day on the journey from Africa to Spain, and the NGO counted a total of 10,457 migrants who died or disappeared at sea.

This is an increase of more than 50 percent over the previous year and the highest number since records began in 2007. Caminando Fronteras obtains its data from hotlines for migrants in distress at sea, from family members of missing migrants and from official statistics on rescue operations.

The victims came from 28 countries, mainly from Africa, but also from Pakistan and Iraq. Most of the deaths are due to shipwrecks on the Atlantic route between the African continent and the Canary Islands. The Canary Islands are the nearest embarking point, just about 100 kilometres from the Moroccan coast, but boats also set out from much further south in Senegal.

The Spanish Ministry of the Interior reports that between January 1 and December 15 of 2024, 60,216

refugees entered Spain irregularly, an increase of 14.5 percent over the same period last year. Over 70 percent of them landed in the Canary Islands.

About one in five migrants, however, lose their lives on the Atlantic route, with Caminando Fronteras documenting 9,757 deaths along the way. The route is dangerous not only because of the waves on the open sea and strong currents that prevail in the deep water. Most of the boats used for the crossing are not seaworthy and are overloaded. Above all, rescue systems and resources are completely inadequate in view of the number of accidents that occur on the route on a permanent basis. "More than 10,400 people dying or going missing in a single year is an unacceptable tragedy," said Helena Maleno, a spokeswoman for the NGO, calling the toll "proof of a profound failure."

This tragedy, however, is not only tolerated by the European Union, it is very deliberately allowed to happen in order to deter so-called "illegal" migration. Not only Spain, but especially Italy and Greece, as the largest EU Mediterranean coastal states, bear direct responsibility for the deaths of thousands fleeing poverty and oppression, hoping for a better life for themselves and their families in Europe. However, the brutal border policy is ultimately supported by all EU countries and is being driven forward by Germany in particular.

Thousands of people continue to lose their lives in the Mediterranean every year because there are no legal ways for them to come to Europe. The European Union's border policy, with the practice of pushbacks, cooperation with North African rulers and their troops, and the active obstruction of sea rescues, is directly responsible for the deaths in the waters bordering Europe.

In its 2024 annual report the NGO SOS Humanity

states: “Almost 21,000 people seeking protection were intercepted by the EU-funded, so-called Libyan coast guard, unlawfully returned to Libya and imprisoned there under conditions that the United Nations fact-finding mission classified as crimes against humanity.”

Under the government of fascist Giorgia Meloni, Italy is increasingly harassing not only refugees but also civilian sea rescue operations. Since 2023, a government decree has allowed civilian rescue ships to be detained and assigned to ports far from the rescue area in northern and eastern Italy. SOS Humanity counts a total of 323 days of detention, 117,000 additional kilometres and 293 lost days of operations for the civilian fleet maintained by NGOs in the Mediterranean in 2024.

Another decree, which the Italian government only passed at the beginning of December 2024, allows future civilian rescue ships to be confiscated after being detained multiple times. In addition, the ships are now no longer allowed to help anyone in distress at sea if they already have refugees on board. Various civilian sea rescue organisations have therefore described the so-called Flussi decree as an “under the hand death sentence.”

They summarise: “The aim seems to be to make life impossible for those who save lives and witness the violations of international law that take place daily in the central Mediterranean. It is yet another harmful, propagandistic and inhumane law that is, in addition, clearly illegal.” With the decree, the Italian government is attempting to abolish international law in order to “inflict the greatest possible damage” on both rescuers and those being rescued.

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the number of people who died or went missing in the Mediterranean in 2020 is estimated at around 2,400. This brings the total number of people who have gone missing on the Mediterranean routes since 2014 to over 31,000.

At another of the European Union’s maritime borders, the English Channel, a record number of irregular crossings and a record number of deaths have also been recorded since official counting began in 2018. The British government reports that a total of 76 people have died in 20 incidents between France and Britain.

This massive crime against refugees and migrants will continue in 2025. European governments are individually and collectively responsible for the mass and completely avoidable deaths at sea of those seeking protection and safety, work and a better life in Europe. The most fundamental human right, the right to life, is denied to migrants at the gates of Europe. And if they do set foot on European soil, they face inhumane detention in camps, all kinds of harassment and deportation to war and crisis zones.

The treatment of refugees and migrants is a true reflection of the state of democracy and human rights in Europe. Conversely, the defence of migrants is one of the most fundamental tasks in the working class’s struggle against capitalism and war, and to establish social and democratic rights for all.



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