

Hundreds of Migrants Feared Drowned Off Libyan Coast

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Geneva

31 March 2009



AP Photo

The International Organization for Migration says it believes more than 300 African migrants, possibly as many as 500, drowned after their boats sank off the coast of Libya. Libyan officials say 21 people are confirmed dead and about 20 others have been rescued.

The International Organization for Migration says, according to its latest information, up to three smugglers boats carrying hundreds of migrants sank off the coast of Libya.

Italian Coast Guard boat carrying some would-be immigrants, rescued at sea, reaches port of tiny Italian island of Lampedusa, 29 Mar 2009

IOM spokesman Jean-Philippe Chauzy says it is quite likely the rickety boats capsized because they were overloaded, top heavy and ran into heavy storm winds.

"The boats are usually overcrowded," Chauzy said.

"There is no safety equipment on those boats. No buoys, no dinghies, anything, because the purpose is to cram as many people on those boats as possible, with total disrespect for the safety, the dignity of those people who get on those boats who want to go towards Italy and the island of Lampedusa."

Egyptian authorities report the mishap occurred about 30 kilometers off the Libyan coast. They say some Egyptian nationals were rescued and that the bodies of 10 other Egyptians are among the dead.

Chauzy says most of the migrants aboard the vessels are believed to have come from Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. He says Libya is a country of destination for many migrants from these regions.

He says, increasingly, migrants from the Horn of Africa also are arriving in Libya and risking their lives to get to Europe.

"Over the past year, we have assisted more than 3,500 destitute, stranded migrants who were allowed to return home on a voluntary basis and benefited from a reintegration package to help them start new lives in their country of origin, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa ... Last year, there were over or close to 37,000 people who landed, who arrived on the Italian island of Lampedusa. I think it is fair to say that the majority of those who arrived in Lampedusa left from the Libyan coast," Chauzy said.

The smuggling season normally shuts down in October and resumes again in April. Chauzy says it is not surprising to see the numbers of boats leaving Libya and crossing the Gulf of Aden increasing.

He says the latest tragedy shows the lengths to which desperate people will go to escape a life of misery and poverty.