

Blood on their Hands: Libya's Boat Refugees and "Humanitarian" Imperialism

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The horrific death toll of African and Middle Eastern refugees and migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe is a damning indictment of all the major imperialist powers, and most particularly the United States.

The American president, Barack Obama, and his former secretary of state, Hillary "We came, we saw, he died" Clinton, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, have blood up to their elbows. They set the present catastrophe in motion through brutal wars for regime change waged under the hypocritical and discredited banner of "human rights."

At least three more boats packed with refugees from North Africa and the Middle East were reported to be in distress in the Mediterranean on Monday, with a minimum of 23 more people said to have drowned.

This adds to the many hundreds of people, perhaps 1,400, who have lost their lives over the past week in a desperate bid to escape military violence by the US and its European allies, civil wars stoked by Washington and the European Union, and pervasive poverty exacerbated by the machinations of imperialism in the region.

On Monday, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi said distress calls had been received from an inflatable life raft carrying 100 to 150 migrants and a second boat with some 300 people aboard. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said a caller reported that 20 people died when one of the vessels sank in international waters.

In a separate incident, at least three migrants, including a child, died when a boat, apparently coming from Turkey, ran aground off the Greek island of Rhodes. Video footage showed the wooden boat, with people crowded on the deck, heaving in the Aegean Sea just off the island. Eyewitnesses told the local radio station that there were many Syrians, but also people from Eritrea and Somalia.

The latest drownings follow the deaths of close to 950 people on Sunday in the sinking of a refugee boat off of Libya. According to the Italian Coast Guard, the completely overloaded boat capsized about 130 miles off the Libyan coast.

"We were 950 people on board, including 40 to 50 children and 200 women," a survivor from Bangladesh told the Italian news agency ANSA. Many people were trapped in the hold of the ship and drowned under horrible circumstances. "The smugglers had closed the doors

and stopped them leaving,” said the man.

Over 500 more people died the previous week in two separate sinkings of boats attempting to reach Europe across the Mediterranean.

Since the beginning of the year, at least 1,700 people attempting to immigrate to Europe have died in transit, 50 times the number for the same period last year. According to the IOM, the number of people dying in the attempt to reach the shores of Europe rose by more than 500 percent between 2011 and 2014.

Of course, 2011 was the year that the US and its NATO allies, principally France and Britain, launched their war for regime change in Libya, under the fabricated pretext that they were intervening to prevent a massacre by the government of Muammar Gaddafi in the eastern city of Benghazi.

This “humanitarian” mission initiated a six-month US-NATO bombing campaign that killed at least 10 times the number who died in the scattered fighting between government troops and armed rebels that had preceded it. This imperialist intervention, which utilized Islamist militias with ties to Al Qaeda as its proxy ground forces, left Libya descending rapidly into chaos and destruction.

Nearly two million Libyan refugees—more than a quarter of the population—have been forced to flee to Tunisia to escape an unending civil war between rival Islamist militias and two competing governments, one based in Tripoli and the other in the eastern city of Tobruk. According to the web site Libya Body Count, some 3,500 people have been killed just since the beginning of 2014—three years after the US-NATO intervention.

The escalating barbarism in Libya has included mass executions. The latest, made public in a video released Sunday by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), was of some 30 Ethiopian migrants. This follows by less than two months the similar mass beheadings of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians at the hands of ISIS, which has seized Libya’s eastern port city of Derna as well as parts of the city of Sirte.

There were no such mass sectarian murders in Libya before the US-NATO war for regime change, nor for that matter did Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias exist as any more than a marginal force. These elements were promoted, armed and backed by massive airpower after the major imperialist powers decided to topple and murder Gaddafi and carry out a new rape of Libya.

The disastrous consequences of this predatory neocolonial intervention are now undeniable. It is only one in a growing number of imperialist wars and interventions in the oil-rich Middle East and North Africa that have destroyed entire societies and turned millions into refugees. These include the wars in Iraq, Syria and now Yemen, as well as interventions by the imperialist powers or their regional proxies in Mali, Somalia and Sudan.

According to Amnesty International, the escalating conflicts in Africa and the Middle East have “led to the largest refugee disaster since the Second World War.” Amnesty estimates that 57 million people have been forced to flee worldwide in the last year, 6 million more than in 2012.

The American press, led by the *New York Times*, writes of refugees fleeing poverty and violence in the Middle East and North Africa without so much as mentioning the actions of

the United States and its European allies that have caused the humanitarian catastrophe. What is unfolding in the Mediterranean is not a tragedy; it is an imperialist war crime.

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