

Migrants Continue To Die In Attempts To Cross Mediterranean Sea To Europe

The pandemic and its many travel restrictions haven't stopped thousands of migrants from attempting the dangerous trip across the Mediterranean Sea this year. More than 1,000 have died at sea.

AILSA CHANG, HOST:

One group of people continues to take on dangerous travel despite all the restrictions of the global pandemic. I'm talking about migrants from Africa and the Middle East. They still made thousands of journeys into the Mediterranean Sea in 2020, attempting to get to Europe. At least a thousand of them died this year as their routes to welcoming ports diminished. NPR's Ruth Sherlock has looked into the numbers and talked to some of them who have attempted this journey. She joins us now from Beirut.

Hi, Ruth.

RUTH SHERLOCK, BYLINE: Hi.

CHANG: So we're talking about trips in, like, really small ships or leaky boats arranged by smugglers, right?

SHERLOCK: Yes, that's right. And migration experts tell me that despite the pandemic, thousands of migrants have kept trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe, a route they say is now the most dangerous in the world. And just last month, to give you an example, 72 migrants drowned off the coast of Libya. And these kinds of deaths are tragically common.

What has changed, though, is that there aren't as many European rescue ships. And some countries, like Malta and Italy, have closed their ports to migrants. They say it's because of safety concerns in the pandemic. But migrant advocates have criticized them for saying they're using the pandemic as a cover to stop this kind of unpopular arrival of migrants on their shores.

I spoke with Safa Msehli, a spokesperson for the U.N.'s International

Organization for Migration. Here she is.

SAFA MSEHLI: The very unfortunate, dangerous crossings continued this year and also continued amid hardening policy and closed ports, decrees that limited the work of lifesaving NGOs, who are the only actors operating in the central Mediterranean attempting to save lives. This is absolutely tragic that people continue to die on Europe's doorstep, in European waters, and their calls for distress and their calls for assistance unheeded.

SHERLOCK: So she gives me several examples of rescue ships that were left stranded in European waters for weeks, unable to find a port where migrants could land.

CHANG: Well, can you just put all of this in perspective for us? Like, why are people still willing to make such a harrowing journey like this?

SHERLOCK: Well, you know, they do this for many different reasons. In places like Libya and some other African countries, they're dealing with wars or famine or poverty. But the common factor here is desperation. Many just don't see another way. This year, I interviewed migrants and their families of a migrant boat that was stranded off the coast of Lebanon. That boat was rescued, but only after eight days, by which time several people, including two children under the age of 3, had died.

One of the survivors, 22-year-old Ibrahim Lisheen (ph), told me that he decided to get on the boat after he hadn't been able to find work in Lebanon, which is going through its own economic crisis, for over three years. He says his family was surviving on charity handouts.

IBRAHIM LISHEEN: (Non-English language spoken).

SHERLOCK: He tells me that despite everything he suffered at sea, he would actually try again if he got the opportunity. He says, "living here with my family - we're already dead, so we may as well die at sea."

CHANG: Well, what are advocates calling for countries to do now about this really dangerous situation?

SHERLOCK: You know, they keep reminding states that there's an obligation under international law, first of all, to rescue people and to respond to distress

calls at sea, but also to provide a port of safety. So they're calling for the redeployment of search and rescue ships. And they also want an end of the EU's support to the Libyan Coast Guard, who tend to intercept migrants but then return them to migrant centers where they're being held in the most awful of conditions.

But the problem with all of these policies is that migration is an intensely political topic in Europe. And these kind of policies that advocates are calling for can be unpopular with governments. So it's hard to see for the moment how things will improve.

CHANG: That is NPR's Ruth Sherlock in Beirut.

Thank you, Ruth.

SHERLOCK: Thank you.

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