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# E.U. and the Avoidable Loss of Lives at Sea

Hundreds more are feared dead as yet another boat filled with refugees sank in the Central Mediterranean on April 18. Amid a spike in arrivals by sea to Italy, writer and commentator Rory O’Keeffe points out that the timing of these deaths is no coincidence.

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Children place boats in the water as part of a United Nations Children's Rights and Emergency campaign on the deaths at sea. According to UNICEF Italy, 77 children died crossing the eastern Mediterranean Sea with their families in just the first nine weeks of 2016. AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino

**BETWEEN APRIL 17** and April 18 as many as 500 people drowned in the Mediterranean between North Africa and Italy. This is a modest estimate relayed by the Italian coastguard on Monday evening. The survivors who were brought to safety claimed another 100 might have perished at sea.

The latest incident increased the death toll in the Mediterranean to more than 1,200 this year and more than 5,000 since January 2015.

That is, in 16 months, five thousand men, women and children have died on one of the world's calmest and relatively safe stretches of water, a sea which is a holiday destination for Europeans, North Africans and people from the Middle East alike.

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There were 41 survivors – Ethiopians, Somalians, Egyptians and people from Sudan.

They had boarded a boat with 240 people in Tobruk, which houses the Libyan House of Representatives, one of the state’s three governing entities. They were then transferred to a second, larger boat, on which they joined 300 people.

This boat then capsized, with all but 41 people currently missing and presumed dead.

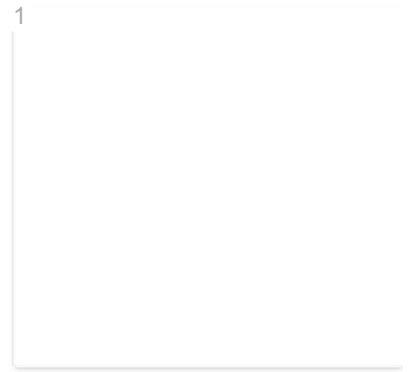
Later into Monday morning, six bodies were recovered along with 108 survivors when a dinghy capsized off the Libyan coast.

The incidents took place just one day before the first anniversary of the death of 800 men, women and children 60 miles off the coast of Libya.

And the timing is no coincidence.

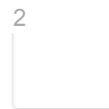
Crossings from Libya – and to a lesser extent also Egypt and Tunisia – to Europe (most often Italy) have been understandably lower on people’s agenda than those from Turkey to Greece in the last 16 months. But they have been taking place every year for decades.

The reasons are simple, but worth noting once more. From all over Africa and the Middle East, people fled war (as in Somalia and Sudan), terror (as in Somalia), repressive regimes (Sudan, Egypt) and shortages caused by any or all of the above (Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia).



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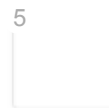
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Libya, under Muammar Gaddafi, was a destination for many of them, after he announced the state's borders were open to "any and all" people from Africa and the Middle East who needed refuge.

But traditionally, many people remained in Libya, where they found work and opportunity – at least for a period. So while many boarded boats in attempts to reach Europe, many others stayed put.

But in the five years since Gaddafi's death, the state has been starved of cash and since May 2014 has been mired in its second civil war. Its three governments are powerless to influence – far less end – the conflict now being fought between two opposing Libyan militias, al-Qaida members and ISIS in Libya.

As a result, refugees entering the state – who have already left their home because of war, terror and shortage – have literally no reason or inclination to remain any longer than they have to.

But because the sea crossing has been ongoing for far longer than that taking place between Turkey and Greece – the latter being largely the result of the Syrian Civil War – it has also "settled" into a form of regularity. Crossings take place in spring, summer and autumn, and tend to be far less regular in winter, when the 180-mile voyage to Italy becomes too treacherous.

That is, it is no coincidence that the drowning of 400-500 people on Sunday and Monday, and of 800

men, women and children on 20 April 2015 took place at almost exactly the same time of year. The incidents mark the first days of what is likely to be at least six months of desperate people, fleeing almost certain death in their home states, and risking likely death by drowning in the shared holiday resort of three continents.

It is also worth noting that this year brings high possibilities of larger numbers of arrivals and deaths than before. Not because there are more wars, terror groups, torturous regimes or people with too little to eat or lack of access to basic medicines – though there are an unacceptable, unjust, immoral number of those people – but because the E.U. has paid Turkey to shut down the shortest route by which refugees from the east can approach it.

We face a year in which those forced by the real fear of death at home will be coerced to take the longest, most dangerous sea crossings to Europe.

Because of the deliberate blocking by E.U. member states (including the U.K., Hungary, Spain and others) of initiatives that might have enabled the E.U. to safely and sensibly deal with the rise in the number of desperate people fleeing death, we face a very likely scenario of unprecedented numbers dying at sea this year.

It is no exaggeration at all to note that if this happens, it will almost entirely be due to the U.K., Hungary, Spain, Poland, Denmark and others – all

members of the single wealthiest political bloc ever to have existed on Earth – deliberately voting against all E.U. initiatives that might have helped them cross safely, and be “processed” in a calm, sensible and organized way.

But it is still not too late.

The very fact that those member states have *prevented* the E.U. from organizing an ordered response to the situation also means they can *enable* it to do so.

The E.U. *can* organize safe crossings of the Mediterranean for those who require them.

It *can* implement an application system that ensures everyone who needs a safe place to stay can have one.

It *can* provide shelter for those who need it, and help people to find work so they can pay for their own lives while they live within the E.U.

It *can* ensure that people are distributed across its territory according to resource and fairness to each state within it.

It *can* ensure that no children miss out on vital months or years of schooling, and that no one needs to die of curable disease because of lack of access to basic medicines.

It can afford it and it will actually benefit the E.U., by helping keep track of exactly where the people

it “welcomes in” are located and how their economic and social integration are proceeding, rather than the present chaos, scrambling and lack of accurate information on which people are where, or how many are in the different locations.

Most importantly it will also, simply, be the right thing to do. But sadly, this has become an unfashionable idea in political and economic circles. But when “doing the right thing” translates to preventing thousands more deaths of men, women and children, it is impossible to justify doing anything else.

We stand on the edge of mass deaths in a sea which has nurtured some of the world’s greatest civilizations. We have the money and the organizational know-how to prevent it. There has never been a better time to act. ■

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### About the Author

#### Rory O’Keeffe

Rory O’Keeffe is a humanitarian and journalist reporting on North Africa, the Western Middle East and refugee

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