

Boat Carrying Migrants Capsizes off Italian Coast

April 6th, 2011- A boat carrying migrant men, women and children from North Africa capsized off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa today.

In a poignantly timed disaster, 213 migrants from North Africa drowned when the boat carrying them capsized off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa today. António Guterres, chief of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), expressed his shock at the tragedy.

The year 2011 marks the 60th anniversary of the 1951 United Nations (UN) Refugee Convention. At the beginning of this year, there were an estimated 10.4 million refugees living across the globe. But, in 1951, in the year the Convention was invoked and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was founded, there were one million people displaced from the Second World War in need of assistance.

Over the past month, at least 400,000 people have fled violence in Libya.

Some media reports put the number of dead from today's disaster as high as 300. Women and children are already counted among the list of casualties.

The boat left Libya three days ago, carrying migrants from Eritrea, Somalia and Côte d'Ivoire. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), survivors have indicated that there

were 350 people aboard the boat before it capsized, including 40 women and 2 children. Some migrants aboard the boat are also said to be from Bangladesh, Sudan, Chad and Cameroon as well.

Angelina Jolie is a Goodwill Ambassador for the UNHCR. She recently wrapped up a tour of Tunisia.

“I am deeply saddened by the large loss of life of people who were simply trying to escape war and find refuge. It is all the more devastating knowing that children were on board,” said Ms. Jolie.

Almost half of all persons of concern to the UNHCR are children (just under 18.2 million children). Under Article 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, refugee children are entitled to protection and humanitarian assistance.

In good news, the Italian coastguard was able to rescue 47 people, including one expecting mother. Another woman has also been rescued. An official working for the IOM confirmed that one man told the organization that he lost his infant son in the accident.

Since the beginning of the civil and political upheaval in North Africa, many migrants have fled the region for safety in Europe. But, this was not always the case. Before the unrest, Libya was a destination country for refugees and asylum seekers.

The sinking of the migrants' ship this morning may be the second disaster in the Mediterranean since the start of the civil unrest in countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Last weekend, a boat carrying 335 Eritrean migrants disappeared.

Across the Atlantic in Washington, D.C., the US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke in commemoration of the Refugee

Convention. Ms. Clinton was joined by survivors of genocide—people who had saved the lives of others during incomprehensibly trying times—in both Africa and Europe.

“All of these courageous people have one thing in common,” said Ms. Clinton. “They did not view people in trouble as strangers, as the other; they viewed them as fellow human beings, and they were unable to stand by and let brutality and violence and atrocities unfold.”