

Refugees escaping Libya 'found in sea with gunshot wounds'

By Jerome Taylor

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The bodies of sub-Saharan refugees who tried to escape Libya by boat have been found in the sea with gunshot wounds according to an Eritrean priest who tracks migrants as they make the perilous journey across the Mediterranean.

Father Mussie Zerai, a Catholic cleric based in Rome, told The Independent today that his contacts in Tripoli have seen five bodies in a hospital that were recently washed back onto the Libyan coast. They are thought to be part of a group of approximately 335 predominantly Eritrean and Ethiopian migrants who left Tajura on 22 March and have not been heard from since.

“There are five bodies in total, two women, two boys and an Egyptian who we believe was the boat’s captain,” Father Zerai said. “Their bodies have gunshot wounds in them. Somebody shot them after they left Libya.”

It is not clear who may have murdered the migrants and no photos of the bodies have yet emerged. But Father’s Zerai’s organisation,

Agenzia Habeshia, is known to have excellent contacts with both migrants and people traffickers across North Africa. Every day he receives calls from immigrants as they motor towards Europe often in over packed and rickety boats that are barely sea worthy.

The revelations are yet more evidence of the extraordinary risks taken by migrants to cross the Mediterranean to find work or asylum in Europe and how such journeys often end in tragedy.

The vast majority of recent arrivals are young Tunisian men who have taken advantage of the political chaos on their country to flock to the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa in their tens of thousands. But in recent weeks there has been a significant increase in boats coming from Libya, a much longer and more dangerous journey from a country now beset by two months of conflict.

Italian coastguard vessels were scrambled in the early hours of this morning to intercept a boat which capsized in rough weather just 40 miles from Lampedusa. The vessel was thought to be carrying up to 350 Eritrean, Somalian and Sudanese refugees and set sail from Libya two days ago. By lunchtime rescuers had been able to pluck just 48 people alive from the water. One of those rescued was a pregnant woman who promptly gave birth within hours of being airlifted to Sicily.

On Monday the United Nations said a further 400 people who were known to have left Libya on two separate boats have gone missing in the past fortnight. Two boats reportedly set out from

Libya on 22 and 25 March, one carrying 335 sub-Saharan Africans and the other carrying 68, according to relatives in Europe who spoke to the migrants before they left. Last week around 60 bodies were washed up on the Libyan coast and it is believed some of the bodies found with gunshot wounds may have come from one of those two boats.

Initial reports out of Libya suggested that the bodies had been quickly buried. But Father Zerai has since learned that some were taken to a hospital morgue and displayed violent trauma including gunshot wounds. The 36-year-old priest said his information came from Eritrean migrants in Libya and through Monsignor Giovanni Martinelli, the Catholic bishop of Tripoli. Reports suggest that one of the women had been shot in the chest, the other in the leg whilst one of the boys had been torn in half.

Human rights groups have called on the international community to investigate the killings and have blamed Nato for not doing more to try and locate boats that have gone missing in a corner of the Mediterranean that is now bristling with international vessels.

“These tragedies in the sea highlight the lack of rescue plans for refugees,” said Dario Picciau from Everyone Group, an Italian human rights body that specialises in people trafficking networks. “This is a murky affair which must be investigated.”

Father Zerai, meanwhile, expressed anger at how little has been done to evacuate sub-Saharan refugees from Libya. At the outbreak of war two months ago, western nations scrambled relief

flights to extract their citizens from Tripoli but thousands of sub-Saharanans were left behind. Those who were left behind in the rebel held regions run the risk of being accused by rebel militias of being paid mercenaries of Colonel Gaddafi.

“These were entirely preventable deaths,” Father Zerai said. “They could have been avoided if only Europe had heeded our pleas before the bombing began when we asked for the emergency evacuation of all refugees trapped on Libyan cities. So far only Italy has taken steps to evacuate around 110 refugees from Tripoli. Other European countries have preferred to take their time. As the refugees get more desperate they resort to making a dangerous journey across the Mediterranean on boats filled with desperate people hoping to rebuild their lives.”