



Lemkin Institute Statement on Refugee Shipwreck near Pylos, Greece

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The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention mourns the recent boat disaster in international waters off the coast of Pylos, Greece and condemns the cruel response of the Hellenic Coast Guard, which waited at least 13 hours to do anything about the clearly overburdened vessel. This catastrophic event has thus far claimed eighty-two innocent lives, left hundreds of refugees missing, and brought immense sorrow to families and communities. Only 104 people have been rescued alive. The victims are primarily Egyptians, Syrians, Pakistanis, Afghans, and Palestinians. The yawning gap between the international response to a refugee boat carrying about 750 people and to the Titan submersive vessel tragedy underscores the necessity that world leaders recognize and respect the inherent value of each and every human life. It also demonstrates the real possibility of rapid, coordinated, appropriate international action to prevent further loss of life during crises at sea.

The fishing boat carrying the estimated 750 people was believed to be en route from Libya to Italy when it sank at approximately 2:04 a.m. local time, on Wednesday, June 14. It went down about 50 miles southwest of the Greek town of Pylos. Both Greek and Italian authorities were well aware of the overburdened vessel, as they had been informed about it by Frontex — the EU's border agency — which had been monitoring the boat from the sky. Greek authorities have claimed they were in contact with the boat but were told that the refugees did not want to be rescued, as they were hoping to continue unimpededly to Italy. Nevertheless, humanitarian organizations have rejected such claims as an explanation for remaining idle; after all, a vessel in distress is in distress no matter what its passengers say. Two boats unrelated to the Greek or Italian coast guard did stop to provide food and water to passengers, at 6 p.m. and 9 p.m., respectively, on the evening before the boat capsized and sank. Witnesses have stated that the passengers, including dozens of children, were not wearing life jackets throughout their treacherous journey.

More recently, it came to light that a single village in Pakistan-administered Kashmir lost two dozen residents in the capsizing — a tenth of all casualties. Disproportionately affected by this disaster, the Kashmiri village symbolizes the horrific human impact of Europe's refusal to enact sane, safe, and just immigration policies. It underscores the interconnectedness of global migration and the responsibility of the Global North, including Europe at its core, to safeguard the well-being of immigrants from the Global South. With its horrific experience of racism and religious chauvinism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Europe bears a particular

responsibility to accept refugees and treat them with respect. For the continent to be a sanctuary — a “shining beacon” of hope and relief — it must confront its historical obligation anew.

The Lemkin Institute wishes to amplify the message put forth by UNHCR Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean Vincent Cochetel: “The boat was overcrowded, was unseaworthy and should have been rescued and people taken to safety....There was a responsibility for the Greek authorities to coordinate a rescue to bring those people safely to land.”

The Lemkin Institute calls upon the international community, governments, and relevant stakeholders to prioritize protecting human life and immediately prevent further calamities in the Mediterranean Sea and other migration routes. States must fulfill their obligations under international law by ensuring the safety of individuals at sea, providing timely and effective search and rescue operations, and addressing the root causes that force people to undertake treacherous journeys. These responsibilities are enshrined in various international legal instruments, namely, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR), the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Guidelines, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), the Geneva Conventions, and customary international law. By upholding these laws in praxis as in theory, states can contribute to the protection and well-being of refugees in perilous maritime situations.

Additionally, we urge governments and civil society to work together in creating comprehensive and sustainable solutions that address the complex challenges surrounding migration. This reality necessitates efforts to promote peace, stability, and human rights, particularly in regions affected by conflict and unrest. Furthermore, safe and legal pathways for migration must be established to ensure that vulnerable people are not compelled to resort to dangerous journeys, which often lead to exploitation, abuse, or the tragic yet preventable loss of life.

In line with our commitment to preventing genocide, the Lemkin Institute stands in solidarity with organizations like SOS Méditerranée, whose relentless efforts to save lives and provide humanitarian assistance to refugees are crucial in upholding the principles of humanity, compassion, and solidarity. We call upon governments and civil society to support and strengthen the work of these organizations, as their invaluable contributions play a pivotal role in preserving the rights and dignity of vulnerable immigrant populations, thereby inserting both a language and a practice of courage and compassion into a world that so often treats refugees, migrants, and other displaced and vulnerable people as useless bodies.

Finally, the Lemkin Institute recognizes that the right to seek asylum is a fundamental human right. Indeed, the international community is obliged to commit itself to safeguard human dignity and rights, as evident through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the aforementioned Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951. The Institute also encourages the international community to renew its commitment to the Global Compact on Refugees, an innovative framework endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly. The EU and its member states must likewise recommit to their shared responsibilities outlined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

At the core of this tragedy lies a critical question: How can we allow policies that treat human life as "superfluous" to persist? The high risks associated with such policies should not be underestimated, as they not only disregard the value and dignity of human life in general but also perpetuate conditions and discourses that are conducive to genocide. It is imperative that we recognize and address the deep-rooted issues driving desperate individuals to undertake dangerous journeys, from conflicts and political instability to economic hardships and the absence of safe and legal migration channels. We must collectively strive to build a world where no human life is considered "expendable," where policies are rooted in compassion and respect for human rights, and where the risk of genocide is diminished. Let us commit ourselves to a world where no one is forced to embark on dangerous journeys in search of safety, security, and dignity, for only in such a world can the principles of humanity, compassion, and solidarity prevail.