

Survivors report 240 dead in 2 Mediterranean shipwrecks off Libya, says UN refugee agency

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Milan: As many as 240 people have died in two shipwrecks in Mediterranean off Libya, United Nations refugee agency said on Thursday, citing survivors' testimony.

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The latest causality brings this year's toll to more than 4,220 migrants dead or missing in risky Mediterranean Sea crossings, the highest count on record.

31 survivors of two shipwrecks who arrived on the southern Italian island of Lampedusa reported that the rubber dinghies they were traveling in had capsized Wednesday in heavy seas shortly after leaving Libya, Carlotta Sami, a UNHCR spokeswoman in Italy, said.

The first dinghy "which carried around 140 people, including six children and about 20 women, some pregnant" sank when wooden planks laid at the bottom broke, causing the dinghy to capsize 25 miles (40 kilometers) off the Libyan coast, the UNHCR said. Twenty-nine people were rescued, and 12 bodies were recovered.

In a separate operation, two women found swimming at sea told rescuers that 128 other people had died in their wreck.

UNHCR emphasized that the number of dead was an estimate.

International agencies rely heavily on survivor accounts to tally the number of people dead or missing in the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean in smugglers' boats. Often the boats sink in high seas, where it is difficult if not impossible to recover any bodies.

In both cases reported Thursday, most people on board appeared to have been sub-Saharan Africans.

UNHCR said the increased number of deaths this year is partly due to the fact that smugglers are often using rubber dinghies, which are prone to deflating, capsizing and losing people who fall overboard. In addition, more migrants are arriving with severe burns from being exposed to fuel mixed with sea water in the bottom of the dinghies. Smugglers are using rubber dinghies because they are cheaper and easier to obtain.

- (With AP inputs)