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SOCIAL-ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

Death voyages to Italian coasts do not prevent

from braving dangers

TUNIS, Sep. 23, 2012 (TAP) - "I risked being eaten by fish after the shipwreck. I almost turned into a memory for my family who might have looked for me among the corpses recovered by the Italian coast guards or among the missing," young Fethi Essalmani, a native of the Jelma region, in the Governorate of Sidi Bouzid, pointed out to TAP news agency special correspondent to the Lampedusa Immigrant Reception Centre.

Fethi said that he owes his survival to the intervention of a German warship which happened to pass near their shipwreck, after hours spent floating at the water surface in despair, not knowing how to swim.

This death voyage transporting him to the Italian coasts had been postponed by a night in view of an engine failure.

A second breakdown also took place fifteen minutes after the boat's departure. The "Harrak" (the person who organizes trips for illegal immigrants) dispatched two mechanics to repair the boat and proposed to the illegal travelers to return back to the Tunisian coasts, and not reclaim the trip expenses, but they refused.

Fethi went on saying that in the middle of the territorial waters, the boat had run out of petrol. A merchant vessel which happened to pass in the vicinity had supplied them with some petrol, helping them cross nearly 30 miles but the boat's ventilator broke up an hour after and water started to infiltrate.

This same version of the shipwreck incident was confirmed by young Adam Ben Mosbah who hanged onto a wood board for ten hours.

According to Fethi and Adam, they were constrained to take all these risks out of despair; being jobless, poor and unable to achieve their dreams.

These same arguments were given by the other survivals, when meeting with Foreign Minister Rafik Abdessalem during his visit to the Lampedusa centre last week.

They said that they do not want to return back to Tunisia, shouting: "If they oblige us to return to Tunisia, we will be ready to brave death and repeat the voyage once more. We must reach Italy whatever are the

conditions."

They were 56 survivors among the illegal immigrants on this boat. Their dreams evaporated on the dawn of Thursday, September 6, 2012, when water started to flood their boat with 140 illegal immigrants on board. After this tragedy, they had only one claim that of regularizing their situation, especially that the majority of them are recidivists.

The eleven-meter-long and three-meter-large boat sank in the Italian territorial waters some miles off Lampedusa island, according to the testimonies of the survivors who are still in a state of shock after this

tragedy.

The survivors dispersed by the sea after having been picked by the "Harrak" one after the other, through a network of intermediaries, according to the testimonies of some survivors who refused to reveal the identity of the trip's organizer.

Pale faces, barefoot, troubled memory and bodies still bruised following the hellish struggle against sea creatures. They do not hesitate to show visitors the bite and wound marks and to describe the ordeal they endured

for long hours in the sea in a life-or-death struggle.

In front of the reception centre, 86 Tunisian survivors of the death voyage took turns to describe the shipwreck.

Those who were in the front line started to speak first, relating identical scenarios of the incident.

They agreed that the tragedy had began when water had started to infiltrate inside the boat, which had sank around 4.30 p.m.. Calls for help were not answered by the Italian coast guards till 4 a.m..

The local Italian authorities asserted that they answered the first calls for help they received from a man and a woman speaking Italian.

Survivors said that they swam till the rock of Lampedusa which is far from the shipwreck. They set fire to their shirts to attract the attention of planes. This version was confirmed by the Lampedusa maritime forces, affirming that they found 40 wrecked who were massed on an area not exceeding ten square meters.

The front line survivors monopolised the discussion and prevented the others to speak and give their version of the incident, accusing those who were in the back of ignorance and ordering them to stop giving other versions of the incident that do not fit theirs.

Others tried to prevent that further information would be provided by some survivors, such as the testimonies of six among them who had revealed during the investigation by the Italian authorities the identity of the boat's captain and his assistant. Two suspects were actually arrested, according to an Italian security official.

There are 56 survivors. The number of recovered corpses is derisory according to the Italian authorities, who mobilised large means during research operations that took place over a 1,200 square meters.

Only four bodies were found without any confirmation that they belong to those on the boat.

The number of the missing is higher. Some among the survivors speak about 146, others say 136, not to mention the 20 persons who preferred to return back to the homeland since the first breakdown when the boat was still on the Tunisian territorial waters, according to a version reported by the family of the captain to some relatives of the missing.

Families of survivors and of those declared dead could not find peace. Grief of the families of the missing is very strong. They staged many protests claiming that truth be revealed on the circumstances of the incident and the bodies of those missing in the sea be recovered.

Several among the survivors asserted that they had seen corpses floating around them in the sea, as Rihem Ben Hafsia from El Mahrès, who was among the survivors of the September 8, 2012, crossing. She affirmed that the scene in which corpses float on the surface of the sea continues to haunt her sleep.

Some persons affirmed that they were the only survivors of this voyage, saying that 19 youths from Jebel Lahmer in Tunis are missing.

Another person pointed out that 10 youths from El Fahs are among the missing, and 12 others are from Sfax as cited by a survivor, whose friend speaks about 11 immigrants from Kabbaria.

The issue of the missing mentioned during this incident led to the opening of old files, with a view to give answers based on scientific and objective data regarding the circumstances of the incident.

These different versions could bring comfort to families who continue to demand the two countries' authorities to find their children or give them clues on their whereabouts.

Youth Mohamed Ghaney from Sfax, who is living in France, down with sorrow, came to Lampedusa looking for his brother and two neighbors (Slim Ghaney, Mohamed Ali Mansar and Abdessalem Ben Abdelhamid Ben Nasr).

Mohamed, who showed the photos of the missing as if looking for a lost child, followed the Foreign Minister from the airport of Palermo, to that of Lampedusa and even to the reception centre, searching for the merest

clue.

He doubted the version presented by the survivors after a phone conversation with young Rassem Al Gafsi, a neighbor who was among the survivors. Mr. Chaney affirmed that the information are false and ambiguous, accusing that "some survivors who were on board of the boat had not hesitated to throw some immigrants overboard, when the boat had started to sink," wondering "is it possible that after hours of swimming, the survivors could still have lighters allowing them to set fire into their clothes to call for help. Is it possible that these persons still had mobile phones that function and could still use them."

Mr. Ghaney added "is it possible that by chance only tramps and criminals could escape death. Are they all Olympic champions to be able to swim 12 hours in the high sea.

It appears from the testimonies and statements of Italian technicians that no boat or any trace of petrol, wood or plastic pieces were found floating in the site of the incident. This fact raised doubts about the circumstances of the incident and poses several questions to which no answer have been provided.

A joint investigation committee was set up at the end of a meeting between the Italian Interior Minister and the Tunisian Foreign Minister who said that the ambiguity surrounding the incident gives free rein to all possibilities, hence the need to set up an investigation committee.

The thousands of illegal immigrants who have been missing for long years have not discouraged the networks of "harrakas" to keep on organizing death voyages and fool youths, exploiting their social situation and promising them a dream that could totally destroy their future and even their lives.

(TAP)