



UN refugee chief voices deep shock after more than 200 migrants drown off Italy



Italian immigration lawyers await the arrival of migrants at the port of Lampedusa

6 April 2011 – The head of the United Nations refugee agency expressed deep shock today at the apparent drowning of more than 200 migrants attempting to make their way to Italy from conflict and unrest in North Africa.

Media reports indicate that 213 people, including many Somalis, Eritreans and Ivorians, died this morning after the boat in which they were travelling experienced difficulties in rough seas near the Italian island of Lampedusa. The boat had left Libya three days ago.

Italy's coastguard has rescued 47 people, including a pregnant woman, but the other passengers are all feared to have drowned.

António Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (**UNHCR**), issued a **statement** lamenting the disaster and noting that many of the passengers had been refugees twice over.

"They fled war and persecution in their own countries and now, in their attempt to seek safety in Italy, they tragically lost their lives," he said.

Mr. Guterres urged all countries patrolling the waters of the Mediterranean Sea to do everything possible to help boats in distress.

Since pro-freedom protests erupted across North Africa and the Middle East earlier this year, large numbers of people – notably including people fleeing unrest in Tunisia and Libya – have taken to boats to try to reach Europe. Lampedusa has experienced a particularly high influx of arrivals.

UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie, who just wrapped up a visit to Tunisia to see the agency's work there, expressed her sorrow at the news of the drownings.

"It is all the more devastating knowing that children were on board," Ms. Jolie said, calling for urgent solutions to help civilians caught in the crossfire of fighting in Libya.

Until the recent fighting Libya has served as transit and destination country for refugees, with UNHCR recognizing at least 8,000 refugees inside the country and another 3,000 people seeking asylum.

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