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<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/26/world/europe/migrants-mediterranean-deaths-united-nations.html>

**‘The Worst We Have Ever Seen’: Fewer Migrants, More Death**

In the Mediterranean, about 12 miles off Libya. Credit Aris Messinis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

GENEVA — The harrowing journey across the Mediterranean from North Africa to Europe has become increasingly deadly for asylum seekers desperate to find a better life.

Nearly as many migrants have died at sea this year as all of last year, even though far fewer have attempted the perilous crossing, the United Nations refugee agency said on Tuesday.

“This is by far the worst we have ever seen,” William Spindler, a spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, said on Tuesday.

Waiting to be rescued from a sinking rubber boat off the coast of Libya this month. Credit Aris Messinis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Here are some of the reasons the Mediterranean crossing has become increasingly dangerous.

More Dangerous Methods

The sharp rise in fatalities — 3,740 people died through this week — can be attributed in part to the changing tactics used by smugglers. They are loading thousands of people at a time and using less seaworthy boats, including inflatable rubber rafts that do not last the crossing.

“Smuggling has become big business: It’s being done on an almost industrial scale,” Mr. Spindler told reporters.

The smugglers are trying to raise profits and reduce the risk of detection, he said.

Trying Over and Over

So far this year, 327,800 people have crossed the Mediterranean, about half the number who crossed in the same period last year.

The bodies of these Europe-bound migrants were found in this boat. Credit Aris Messinis/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Most migrants are heading to [Italy](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/italy/index.html?inline=nyt-geo), desperate to flee conflict or hardship in Nigeria, Eritrea and other African countries. They expect to be turned back and make several tries to get across the Mediterranean, said Joel Millman, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration.

Rescuers’ Resources Strained

The smugglers are straining the capacity of rescue services to cope. The Italian Navy and Coast Guard rescued more than 6,000 migrants in a single day early this month and on Monday pulled 2,200 more to safety in the course of 21 rescue operations.

Among the latest casualties were four migrants said to have drowned after a speedboat identified as belonging to the Libyan Coast Guard attacked a rubber dinghy packed with around 150 people on Friday. The dinghy’s inflated tubes collapsed and most of the passengers fell into the sea.

The Libyan Coast Guard has denied any involvement in the incident, but Sea-Watch, a rescue organization that retrieved four bodies and rescued around 120 people in the incident, says the speedboat was labeled Libyan Coast Guard.

Correction: October 25, 2016

An earlier version of this article attributed a quotation incorrectly. It was William Spindler, not Joel Millman, who said, “Smuggling has become big business: It’s being done on an almost industrial scale.”

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