

African Migrants Risk Lives to Flee War, Persecution

The latest tragic incident of hundreds of African migrants drowning in European waters tells a wider story.

Scratch beneath the surface and for many of the migrants, their stories are not only of wanting a better life. Often they will be of fleeing persecution or conflict at home, and paying their life savings to smugglers who promise their passage to the safety of European shores.

The sinking of a boat carrying around 500 migrants Thursday, killing at least 232 of them, is the latest in a long line of accidents in which vulnerable migrants pay with their lives after the failure of vessels often described as “unseaworthy.”

Father Mussie Zerai, chairman of the Habeshia Agency, which works on behalf of these migrants, says he believes the majority of those involved in last’s week’s shipwreck were Christians.

“I look at the list of the survivors and 90 percent is Christian,” he said. “They are coming from Eritrea and Ethiopia. The situation is very bad because politically in Eritrea there is a dictator and they live without any type of freedom or democracy. Many Christians are persecuted because of their faith. It’s not easy for them to live in Eritrea at this moment.”

An Ethiopian migrant who survived the same crossing hit the European media last year when five human rights groups wrote a letter to the Netherlands then-minister of immigration and asylum affairs, to plead for him to be given the right to remain.

Abu Kurke Kebato, in his early 20s, was one of only nine

survivors in a boat carrying 72, which had left Libya, only to languish at sea for two weeks before drifting back to Libyan shores.

Kurke Kebato told the BBC that he had then been arrested by the Libyan authorities while “on his way to church” after his arrival back in Libya.

“Upon his forced return to Libya in 2010, Mr. Kurke Kebato was then detained for eight months during which time he alleges he was subjected to torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment,” wrote the five human rights organizations.

He then made a second attempt to reach Europe, with his wife, and this time they were successful. However, the couple were set to be deported from the Netherlands until human rights organizations intervened. He now lives there and says he is “happy in a democracy.”

The U.N. High Commission for Refugees’ Adrian Edwards agrees that many migrants seem to have little choice but to flee their home countries when it becomes a matter of life and death.

“You have to think of the tragedy that lies behind this, which is that many of these people are likely to have been fleeing war, fleeing persecution, fleeing human rights abuses in their own countries, so this is a tremendous tragedy of multiple layers,” he told the BBC.

The ship had traveled from Libya, but many of its passengers had already traveled a great distance in their quest to reach Europe. According to the U.N., most of the passengers on the boat—which sank nearby the island of Lampedusa off the coast of Italy—were from Eritrea and Somalia, about 2,000 miles from Libya’s coast.

The number of immigrants dying while attempting to reach Europe’s borders in the last 25 years has risen to almost

20,000.

Pope Francis, whose first official visit was to the island in July to witness the mass migrant arrivals, condemned “global indifference” to the plight of immigrants, and said the incident was an “outrage,” calling Friday a “day of tears.”

Figures from the U.N. say 3,000 people try to flee Eritrea each month, while human rights groups have said the country is becoming a giant jail, with estimates of around 10,000 political prisoners.

Somalia, meanwhile, has been ravaged by two decades of war and large parts of it are under the control of Islamist militant group al-Shabab.

More than 30,000 immigrants have journeyed to Italy by sea so far this year, including 7,500 each from Eritrea and Syria and 3,000 from Somalia, according to the U.N.

Zerai says the international community must do more. Granting asylum to a few is not enough, he says.

“All mass media, all international organizations and civic society need to push the international community to do something to change the situation,” he told World Watch Monitor. “In Eritrea, even in Ethiopia, we need more freedom, democracy and peace. That is the solution. We can give them asylum, but that is not the solution.”

In May, World Watch Monitor reported that religious persecution in Eritrea is at its “highest ever level and getting worse,” according to Christian charity Open Doors International.

The number of Christians incarcerated in Eritrea because of their faith is thought to be around 1,200, according to the charity, although some estimates claim the figure is as high as 3,000.

Eritrea is ranked 10th on the World Watch List, which ranks the 50 countries in which Christians are most under pressure for their faith.

“When Christians [in Eritrea] are discovered, they are arrested and held in shipping containers in military camps. At least 105 Christians were arrested in 2012, and 31 Christians were reported to have died in prison,” the World Watch List reports.