

Two Libya shipwrecks in a day cost almost 100 lives

Sat, 2020-11-14 00:26

TRIPOLI: Twenty migrants have died in a shipwreck off the Libyan coast, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said, raising to almost 100 the death toll from two such Mediterranean tragedies the same day.

MSF teams in the northwestern city of Sorman "assisted three women as the lone survivors of another shipwreck (Thursday) where 20 people drowned," the group said on Twitter.

"Rescued by local fishermen, they were in shock and terrified; they saw loved ones disappear beneath the waves, dying in front of their eyes," MSF said.

Earlier, the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported "a devastating shipwreck which claimed the lives of at least 74 migrants today off the coast of Khoms," a port city 120 km east of the Libyan capital Tripoli.

It said 47 survivors had been brought back to shore and 31 bodies retrieved, adding that the boat was reported to be carrying more than 120 people.

Bodies from that shipwreck were lined up grimly along the beach on Thursday, some still wearing life jackets.

Traumatized survivors sat in shock on the shore, while others huddled under blankets as aid workers distributed food parcels.

The US Embassy in Tripoli said the shipwrecks amounted to "another horrific migrant tragedy – another reminder of the need for a settlement to the #Libya conflict now in order to focus on the prevention of tragedies like this."

SPEEDREAD

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European Ambassador Jose Sabadell said: "We need to work together to prevent these horrific events from happening again."

The IOM said on Friday that "many women and children" were aboard the two boats, adding that the body of a toddler was among those retrieved.

"Staff in the region reported that more bodies continued to wash ashore overnight," IOM added.

So far this year, more than 900 people have drowned in the Mediterranean trying to reach European shores, it said.

More than 11,000 others have been returned to Libya, it added, "putting them at risk of facing human rights violations."

Human traffickers have taken advantage of persistent violence in Libya since the 2011 overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi, turning the country into a key corridor for migrants fleeing war and poverty in desperate bids to reach Europe.

While many have drowned at sea, thousands have been intercepted by the Libyan coast guard, which has been backed by Italy and the EU, and returned to Libya.

They mostly end up in detention, often in horrific conditions.

The IOM called for “a change of approach to Libya and the most dangerous maritime route on earth that ends the return of migrants to the country” and establishes “predictable safe disembarkation mechanisms.”



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[A Kuwaiti NGO fights food waste while feeding needy households](#)

Sat, 2020-11-14 00:05

KUWAIT: Even to the most undiscerning of minds, Kuwait’s culture of hyper-consumption and food waste is obvious – almost the norm in fact. Restaurant tables with food left barely touched and garbage bins piled high with unopened packaging are seen all too often.

While the problem of waste disposal has long been an issue in Kuwait, the fact that almost 50 percent of this waste is solid food is especially harmful for the environment.

In 2014, when Maryam Aleisa returned from completing her studies in Barcelona, raring to start a social venture on her own, Kuwait's food-waste problem grabbed her attention.

"We do not have a practice of segregating or composting food waste – it is simply dumped into massive landfills, releasing methane gases into the environment, which is significantly more dangerous than carbon dioxide emissions for climate change," she said.



Maryam Aleisa returned from completing her studies in Barcelona in 2014 and decided to tackle Kuwait's problem of food-waste. (Supplied)

"The leachate, liquid caused by food waste and other factors in landfills, is equally dangerous as it seeps into the groundwater and causes contamination and pollution. I realized that the whole food-wastage problem was so unbelievable and unnecessary."

Meanwhile, underprivileged families struggle to afford basic necessities.

Having been raised in a home environment where her mother would often donate food to the needy, Aleisa decided to put her experience to good use. And so, Refood was born.

REFOODINNUMBERS

* 2014 Launch year of Kuwaiti social enterprise.

* \$4.2 million Value of food saved from being thrown away.

Launched in 2014, the non-profit aims to eliminate food waste through a process of re-channelling to help achieve a sustainable ecosystem. This means obtaining food products nearing their expiration date from suppliers and distributing it to those in need.

“To begin with, I looked at different food bank models to understand how they worked. We looked at the North African models, the ones operating in South Korea and we actually visited the Saudi Food Bank where we saw how cooked food waste was salvaged,” Aleisa said.

Although massive amounts of food waste is generated by hotels, limited resources and logistical issues meant Aleisa instead turned to the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry, which supplies food to retail outlets.

“I started speaking to these companies and realized that food products which were taken off the shelves before their expiration dates were simply thrown away,” she said. The companies, in turn, were eager to support the concept of re-channelling the food instead of throwing it away and began supplying a small number of dry food products.



Launched in 2014, the non-profit aims to eliminate food waste through a process of re-channelling to help achieve a sustainable ecosystem. (Supplied)

As the scheme grew, they soon offered their full range. “Once we gained the

trust of some of the larger food companies, the others joined in and we signed contracts with them to salvage the food before it gets categorized as waste and supply it to Refood instead,” Aleisa said.

Another key challenge was finding a location for storage and distribution – a problem solved when friends pitched in and permission was obtained to work from the warehouse of a government supermarket.

Initially, Aleisa, her mother and a few friends personally delivered the food donations to families in need. But thanks to their website and social media accounts, volunteers have poured in and the team has set up a registration system for helpers and beneficiaries.

In 2019, some 2,080 families were registered with Refood, more than 498 tons of food redistributed and 1,000 packages distributed every month. This meant that more than 1,292,640 KWD (\$4.2 million) worth of food was saved from being dumped into landfills.

COVID-19 has forced Refood to change its program, owing to a shortage of sponsors and many of its beneficiaries leaving the country. But Aleisa is confident the team will continue, as food waste remains a huge problem in Kuwait. And what is her ideal scenario? “To live in a world where Refood wouldn’t need to exist,” she said.

This report is being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.



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Saudi student's high-tech war on food wasteStartup of the Week: A Saudi Eco-friendly food waste startup brings value-added benefits

[Libya talks set December 2021 date for elections](#)

Fri, 2020-11-13 22:19

TUNIS: Libyans at UN-led talks agreed to hold elections in December next year, the United Nations said Friday.

Participants at the talks in Tunisia "agreed that national elections should take place on 24 December 2021," acting UN envoy Stephanie Williams told journalists in a virtual press conference.

The world body is convening talks near Tunis to hash out a deal for a new transitional government for the country, torn apart by conflict since the

2011 uprising that toppled dictator Moamer Kadhafi.

The administration would be charged with providing services and preparing for national polls, as well as tackling an economic crisis and a coronavirus outbreak that has killed over 900 people.

The political track of talks in Tunisia comes in parallel with military talks to fill in the details of a ceasefire deal in October, that formally ended over a year of fighting between eastern and western Libyan forces.

The 75 delegates at the Tunisia talks were selected by the UN to represent existing institutions and the diversity of Libyan society, but some Libyans have questioned their credibility and criticised the way they were selected. Analysts also fear a government resulting from the talks could struggle to gain legitimacy and face pushback from members of existing institutions. But Williams said the momentum was against “status quo” actors “trying to maintain their current privileges”.

“The international community has tools at its disposal to prevent spoilers, including through the use of sanctions,” she said.

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, which is helping to facilitate the talks, said the new government would not need a vote of confidence from Libya’s House of Representatives.

The HoR, elected in 2014, is based in Libya’s east and allied with military commander Khalifa Haftar, who launched an offensive in April 2019 to seize the capital Tripoli from a UN-recognised unity government.

Pro-unity government forces ended a bloody months-long stalemate in June by pushing Haftar’s forces back eastwards.

The two sides signed a landmark ceasefire deal in October, setting the scene for renewed diplomatic efforts for a political settlement to the long-running conflict.



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UN: 74 migrants drown after boat breaks down off Libya coast
Libyans to debate powers of transitional government

US criticism of religious freedom in Turkey stirs debate

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Fri, 2020-11-13 21:11

ANKARA: A US statement saying that its Secretary of State Mike Pompeo plans to “promote our strong stance on religious freedom” during his visit to Istanbul next week has drawn the ire of Ankara.

Pompeo’s visit is part of his planned tour of seven nations, including countries in the Middle East and the Gulf. During his time in Istanbul on Monday and Tuesday, the top diplomat is scheduled to meet the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I, but no Turkish officials.

Turkey’s Foreign Ministry criticized the US statement “as extremely inappropriate.”

“It would be more advisable for the United States to look in the mirror first and to show the necessary sensitivity to human rights violations such as racism, Islamophobia and hate crimes in its own country,” the ministry said in its own statement.

Pompeo is expected to run for the senate, and support from the Greek Orthodox community and evangelicals would be a boost to his hopes of election in Kansas.

“Religious freedom, more specifically issues facing Christians around the world, is a shared concern among many Republicans – especially influential evangelical and diaspora communities,” Ziya Meral, senior associate fellow at RUSI (Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies), told Arab News.

The tension surrounding Pompeo’s visit is just the tip of the iceberg, however. The incoming administration of US president-elect Joe Biden, who will assume office in less than three months, will also pressure Ankara over religious freedom in Turkey – an issue that has been in the spotlight recently following President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s decision to convert Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia into a mosque in July, which drew accusations that he was attempting to erase the cultural heritage of Orthodox Christians in the city. Turkey is also under increasing pressure to reopen the Greek

Orthodox theological school shut down in 1971.

Biden is expected to be a staunch supporter of religious freedom globally, including the rights of Greek Orthodox followers. Under former President Barack Obama, Biden became the only sitting vice president to visit the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which he did twice.

Turkey drew further criticism late in October when it opened the former monastery of Christ the Savior in Chora, an ancient Christian basilica, for Islamic prayer services, compromising the building's architectural and historical value. That decision was taken following a presidential decree claiming that the use of the building as a museum was illegal.

According to Meral, there is non-partisan anger at Turkey over a long list of issues from the reconversion of Hagia Sophia to the prolonged detainment of an American pastor and the termination of residency permits for foreign Christian church workers living in Turkey.

"Geopolitical issues from Greece to Armenia to northeastern Syria have now melted into the usual narratives of 'us versus Islamists,' which continues to politicize the issue of religious freedom beyond the actual concerns of religious minorities," Meral said.

While Meral expects the Biden administration to continue to raise these issues with Turkey, he said it "won't pursue a similar agenda on religious-freedom issues abroad (to the one) we saw Trump and Pompeo pursuing."

In June, the US Department of State published its 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom. It criticized Turkey for limiting the rights of non-Muslim religious minorities, especially Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Greek Orthodox Christians.

"The government continued to restrict efforts of minority religious groups to train their clergy," the report also noted.

Dr. Mine Yildirim, head of the Freedom of Belief Initiative and the Eurasia Civil Society Program at the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, said Turkey's long-standing key challenges in the area of freedom of religion or belief require fundamental changes.

"Some of the central legal issues include the lack of legal personality of religious or belief communities, the status of places of worship, and the glaring inequality related to the public funding of the Presidency of Religious Affairs and those individuals and communities that do not receive services from this institution," she told Arab News.

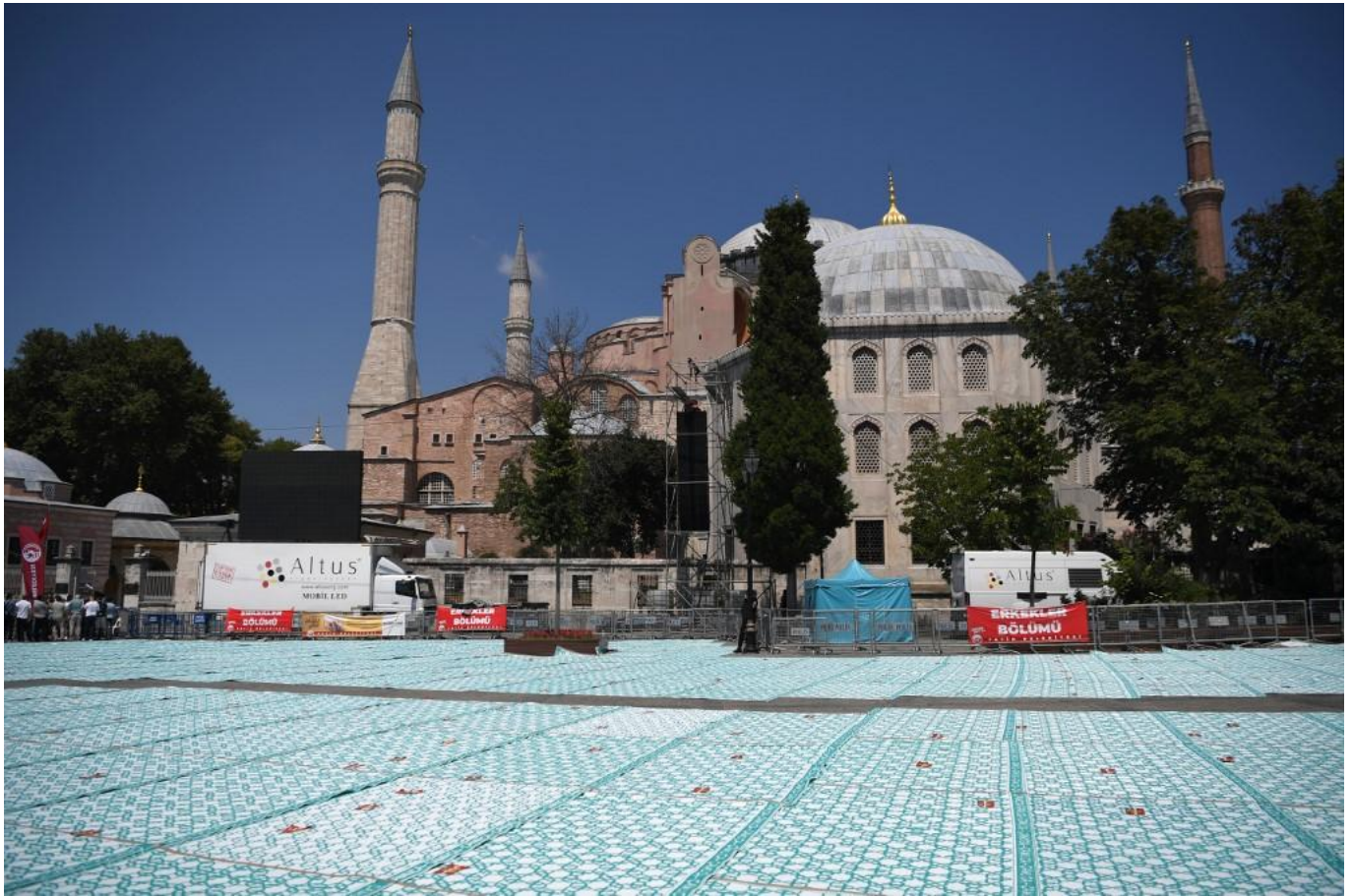
"Most of these issues have been the subject of judgments from the European Court of Human Rights. However, those judgments have not been effectively implemented. All states can hold each other accountable on account of their ratifications of international human rights instruments," Yildirim added. Experts underline that religious freedom is and will remain a foreign-policy priority for the US under the Biden administration.

Yildirim believes that, while multilateral initiatives are important, states should focus more on strengthening international human rights control mechanisms in order to contribute to the protection of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.

Anna Maria Beylunioglu Atli, a lecturer at MEF University in Istanbul, meanwhile, suggested that external pressure from the West can only go so far, and that real domestic change will only happen if there is a shift in mindset among policy makers in Ankara.

"Otherwise, we will only see cosmetic changes in religious freedom," she told

Arab News. "There has been serious regression in this area since 2013, and there has been no significant improvement so far."



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[Lebanon's Basecamp sets the pace for citizens' initiatives in fragile states](#)

Fri, 2020-11-13 20:37

BEIRUT: Volunteers from across Lebanon have flocked to support Basecamp, an initiative offering everything from food deliveries to garbage collection, from home repairs to mental health support.

Under the slogan “Together, we’re stronger; we are the real government,” Basecamp unites Embrace (Lebanon’s national mental health hotline), housing project Baytna Baytak, social justice movement Minteshreen and citizens’ organization Muwatin Lebne.

“We came up with the idea of providing alternative housing for medical heroes and Red Cross members who were in touch with COVID-19 patients,” said Bouchra Boustany of Baytna Baytak.

“It was launched among people who met during the revolution (in Oct. 2019), and we organized alternative housing for 450 people.”

Following the Aug. 4 Beirut port explosion, the hotlines reopened and members hit the streets once again to assist those affected.



Under the slogan “Together, we’re stronger; we are the real government,” Basecamp unites several of Lebanon’s volunteer services. (Supplied)

“The phone started ringing, and I realized people didn’t want to leave their houses because they were mainly elderly, and most of them have been here for ages,” Boustany said. “We are now (providing) alternative housing to around 20 percent of applicants, and 80 percent are only asking for house repairs.”

So far, Baytna Baytak has rehabilitated 225 homes, with 127 in progress and another 132 waiting on finance. “We have a double mission because COVID-19 is growing, so now we are receiving calls from medical heroes. Our aim is to reach 1,000 houses within Beirut alone,” Boustany said.

And reaching those who are living alone is a high priority. “Those people are really in pain, if not physically, then psychologically. They’re destroyed. What I am doing is part of a therapy – we just can’t let them down, and it’s a struggle because we don’t have any kind of hope that anything is going to

be ok.”

Samer Makarem, a strategist at Minteshreen, describes the movement as a national response. “We saw a lot happening and people trying to do things on their own. We decided that the country really needs unity, with everyone pooling their talents. We had a food box initiative before the explosion, so we were very active on a social front.”

FASTFACT

Basecamp

The initiative coordinates the voluntary services of Embrace, Baytna Baytak, Minteshreen and Muwatin Lebne.

Minteshreen’s intention is to form a political body to drive real political change, which Makarem says the country desperately needs. Following the blast, the organization worked on mapping operations across Beirut to dispatch the right people to the right places.

“It was very difficult to see your neighbors and compatriots being reduced to waiting in line for food boxes,” Makarem said. “None of us is trained in relief and emergency; we’re just citizens who love our country, and it felt like the right thing to do.”

“The trauma and emotional stress are there, and it’s pretty bleak to be in, unfortunately, but Basecamp was a beautiful experience.”



Muwatin Lebnene is another organization formed during the revolution to collect and recycle garbage, subsequently turning into a productive civic duty movement.

"When the blast took place, we also felt that we needed to be on the ground," said Muwatin Lebnene member Peter Mouracade. "(By the second day after the explosion), hundreds of selfless volunteers were there to help as much as

they could, but it was messy and chaotic.”

Basecamp was created to enable proper utilization of all resources and to coordinate activities, including the mapping of Beirut’s neighborhoods.



So far, Baytna Baytak has rehabilitated 225 homes, with 127 in progress and another 132 waiting on finance. (Supplied)

“We had access to 3,000 households and made sure we had all the data verified within the blast radius,” said Mouracade, who is also the managing director of the Toters delivery app and former CEO of the Beirut Marathon. “We also ensured we could recycle broken glass – we sorted close to 80 tonnes (88 US tons) of glass and provided shelter to those who no longer had a roof over their head.”

Basecamp has moved to a larger indoor facility in Gemmayze to provide an integrated solution. “We now have a huge warehouse, a medical center, an engineers’ station also dedicated to heritage preservation, and psychological relief on site (to dispatch where necessary),” Mouracade said.

“We helped rebuild close to 500 houses and provided food to 2,000 households. This is growing on a daily basis with the help of civil society, NGOs, the Lebanese diaspora and internationals who have been helping us.”

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How the port explosion rubbed raw Beirut's psychological scars
In blast-hit Beirut, 'invisible' elderly women face destitution