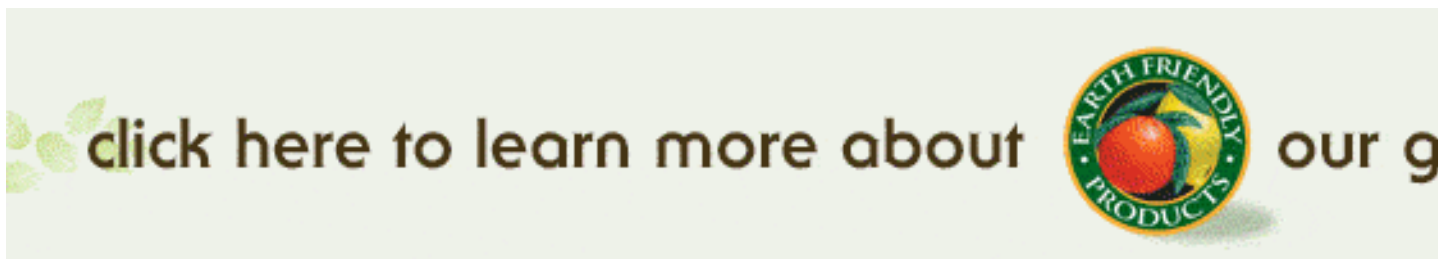


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Survivors of the migrant boat sinking near Turkey being held by the Greek Coast Guard

International organizations are continuing their calls for an investigation into a January 20th incident off a Greek island near the coast of Turkey in which a boat full of illegal immigrants being towed by the Greek Coast Guard capsized, leaving 12 missing and presumed dead.

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Survivors said they were threatened by the Greek crew members and charged nothing was done to save helpless victims, including women and children. The government said the Coast Guard did all it could to rescue people.

Some of the migrants charged the Coast Guard was trying to bring the small fishing boat crammed with 28 Syrian and Afghan immigrants back to Turkey when it was found near Farmakonisi.

Merchant Marine Minister Miltiadis Varvitsiotis told Parliament that Coast Guard officers have orders to “guard the country’s sea borders and save the lives of those at risk at sea,” not to conduct “violent pushbacks and behave inhumanely.”

“It is not at all true that the vessel was being towed at high speed toward Turkey,” Varvitsiotis said. “That is clear from the vessel’s coordinates, which we have at our disposal and that anyone who wants can see.”

With conflicting accounts of the incident, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Pro Asyl, and UNHCR said an investigation was needed to sort it out.

“We are concerned about the outright denial of the survivors’ accounts by the Minister of Maritime Affairs before any judicial investigation is concluded,” Eva Cosse, the Greece specialist for Human Rights Watch, told Southeast European Times.

She said if the survivors’ accounts are proved true, “Any guardsmen engaged in such illegal acts, as well as their commanding officers, should be subject to disciplinary sanction, and as appropriate, criminal prosecution.”

Greece is the entry point for as many as 90 percent of illegal immigrants seeking asylum in the EU and has complained it gets too little support to patrol its borders and seas.

Vice Admiral Dimitris Bandias said his crew tried to help. “We apologise to the families of the victims but to Greeks too for the situation that we put them in,” he said. “We did what we could.”

Officers on the vessel told a parliamentary committee the boat capsized when the passengers moved to one side. That coincided with what Ioannis Michaletos, an analyst at the Athens-based Institute for Security & Defence Analysis, said he gleaned from his sources.

“Similar incidents have happened in the past and will continue, as long as small boats by smugglers roam the Aegean with no safety regards for any passenger involved,” he told SETimes.

“Greece should really push the agenda of the EU to alert the rest of the nations of what exactly is going on in the region and also exercise political pressure on Turkish authorities to dismantle the smuggling groups that make huge profits by taking advantage of immigrants.”

Nils Muiznieks, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, which has criticised Greece’s handling of illegal immigrants, said the incident “appears to be a case of a failed collective expulsion.”

Greece’s ombudsman also said a review is warranted, as did the major opposition party Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA). European Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malmstrom, in Athens for an informal meeting with European Union home affairs and justice ministers, pressed for a probe as well.

“I note that there have been allegations of pushbacks,” she said. “I presume that the government is looking into that.”

Yunis Mohamed, head of the Afghan migrant community in Greece, said, “We are asking for the members of the community to come forward and give evidence in any inquiry if needed.”

Giorgos Tzarbopoulos, the head of the United Nations refugee agency office in Athens, said survivors told a UNHCR official that some of the Coast Guard crew were saying “back to Turkey” and swearing at them in English.

“They said that when the boat capsized they were not thrown ropes or lifejackets but had to swim to the patrol boat, and some said that as they were trying to get up they were hindered,” Tzarbopoulos said.

“There are clearly two different accounts, which is why we are asking for an in-depth investigation,” he said. “I don’t know where the truth lies, but what [the survivors] were saying is very serious.”

Elias Anagnostopoulos, director of Amnesty International’s Athens office, told SETimes that, “There is a tacit policy by Greek authorities of conducting pushbacks.”

He added: “Human rights are above border protection. That doesn’t mean we don’t need to protect the border but it’s the duty of the Coast Guard to rescue people. These are people who fled Syria and Afghan war zones looking for a better life and international protection and we wound up with a tragedy of women and children being drowned.

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Polycrates • 5 days ago

Actually a defective Siemens submarine sold to the Greek Navy during sea trials accidentally surfaced beneath the migrant's luxury yacht spilling their cocktails, hors d' oeuvres and passengers into the sea. This is all about story telling, hearsay and innuendo to forward an agenda. Unless there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary of testimony given by the Coast Guard crew and officials, the investigation has concluded.

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Polycrates → Fake Human rights • 5 days ago

Agree in part. The native Americans were wiped out by viruses like smallpox & they had little or no immunity to fight. Thereafter many were enslaved and die from work, starvation, hopelessness or refusal to convert and submit. The Left often use examples where nations of immigrants were successful, but they

always omit the fact that none of them were social-welfare states of today. Th critical values of hard work and sacrifice have yielded to "feelings" and "sensitivity" that are earmarks of a utopian society that exists only in their mir and no where else in the world..

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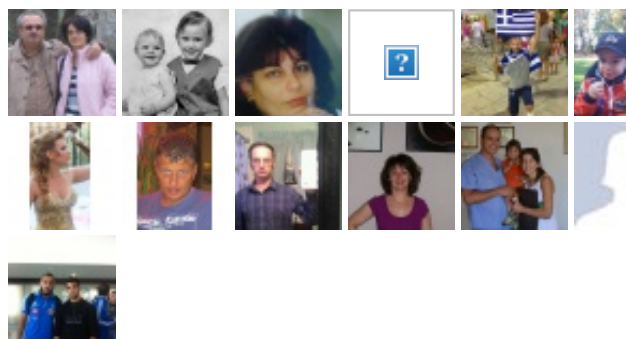
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