

## *At Least 60 Migrants Killed in Turkish Boat Disaster*

Rescuers continue to pull the bodies of victims from Lake Van, in eastern Turkey, more than three weeks after the fishing boat carrying them sank.

**By The New York Times**

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ISTANBUL — Turkish rescue teams have retrieved the bodies of 60 migrants after their boat sank in a lake in the east of the country, Turkish media reported on Monday, in one of the worst disasters involving migrants in Turkey in recent years.

The boat capsized late at night on June 27 with as many as 80 people on board, and the confirmed death toll has climbed steadily since then. At least two children were reported to be among the dead.

The accident occurred on Lake Van, a large inland lake in eastern Turkey, near the border with Iran. The migrants were crossing the lake on a fishing boat in an apparent attempt to avoid police checkpoints on the highways, on their journey toward western Turkey.

Early reports indicated some of the dead may have been Afghans and Pakistanis. Families from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran have started reaching out for information, said Mahmut Kacan, a lawyer who heads the migrant committee at the Van Bar Association.

For more than a year, migration officials have been reporting unusually large numbers of people crossing undocumented into Turkey and trying to reach Europe, warning that the figures are creeping back toward the levels seen at the height of the migration crisis in 2015.

Turkey apprehended 60,000 illegal migrants last year, double the number in 2018. The numbers kept climbing early this year, then fell in April and May, when the country was largely under lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic, and only authorized motorists were allowed on the roads.

But as the lockdown was lifted in June, the numbers began to rise again.

Turkey's interior minister, Suleyman Soylu, said more than 4,500 migrants had been apprehended already this year in the eastern Van region, and thousands more had been stopped at the border with Iran. Most came from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and African countries, he said earlier this month.

The Turkish Coast Guard reported intercepting more than 9,000 illegal migrants at sea in the first three months of this year — nearly three times as many as the same period last year. In January alone, 4,000 migrants were found, compared with 1,000 in January 2019.

“People are still trying, and they always will whether there is a pandemic or not,” said Lanna Walsh, spokesperson for the International Organization for Migration in Turkey.

But even as the flow of people into Turkey grows, the number of migrants crossing from there into Europe has fallen dramatically, largely thanks to aggressive pushbacks by Greece.



Migrants on board a Turkish coast guard boat following a failed attempt to cross to the Greek island of Lesbos in March. Umit Bektas/Reuters

In the first six months of this year, 11,900 illegal crossings by migrants were detected in the eastern Mediterranean region, barely half the number detected in the same period last year, Frontex, the European border and coast guard agency, reported last week. Only 200 were detected in June, one of the lowest totals recorded for that month since 2009.

There were 70 to 80 people aboard the ill-fated boat on Lake Van, according to a statement given to the military police by one of the men accused of trying to ferry them across the water. The statement, attributed to Medeni Akbas and seen in written form by The New York Times, said the group included one or two children and five or six women.

Mr. Akbas is the only survivor found so far. A relative of his, Servet Akbas, is still among the missing.

Mr. Akbas has been arrested, along with four others, and arrest warrants have been issued for 17 more people. His statement says his relative asked him to join him in smuggling the migrants across the lake, and offered him \$110 to mind the boat's engine and help if fights broke out among the passengers.

His relative was steering the boat when a wave hit it from the side and overturned it, throwing half the passengers into the water and trapping others under the hull, he said.

He held on to one of the migrant's bags and managed to stay afloat until the early hours of the next day. Servet Akbas was with him in the water but died, and Medeni Akbas said he could not hold on to his body and had to let him go. He called his family when he reached the shore.

Thirteen bodies were found in the lake soon after the accident, before the wreckage was located. Since then, Turkish officials have been using a submersible device to retrieve bodies from the wreck, which is lying at a depth of about 350 feet, the Demiroren news agency reported.

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The body of a victim was brought for an autopsy on June 30th. Mesut Varol/Anadolu Agency, via Getty Images

Twenty-five of the dead are Afghan, according to an Afghan embassy official, the BBC reported. The lawyer in Van, Mr. Kacan, said that families in touch with him had given him names of people thought to be on the boat.

“So far names of nine refugees were transmitted to us,” he said by telephone. “We will be presenting them to the prosecutor’s office.”

Van province has long been known as a crossing point for refugees from Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Mr. Kacan said that recently a small number of African migrants have been using the same routes. Known for its harsh winter season, it sometimes features in the news when bodies of migrants emerge on the mountains as the snows melt in the spring.

Seven migrants drowned in a similar accident last December on the lake, Mr. Kacan said.

“That’s how we learned about this route,” he said. “When we talk to locals, fishermen, we understand that this has been done for a long time and the law enforcement has been just looking the other way.”

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