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24 DAILY MIRROR MONDAY 05.01,2015

SHOCKING TALE OF MIGRANTS LEFT ON GHOST SHIPS



PRAWLED on thin foam mattresses in a makeshift rescue centre are 185 survivors of a treacherous illegal sea crossing.

They come from trouble spots around Nigeria, Mali, Syria and Eritrea.

Just like more than 1,200 migrants found on two ghost ships off Italy last week - the Blue Sky M and the Ezadeen - these individuals were cast adrift by the human traffickers to whom they entrusted their futures.

After being abandoned by the ruthless crew who had taken their life savings for guaranteed safe passage to Europe, they drifted for days without food and water.

By sheer chance, they were spotted by the Italian Coast Guard's patrol ship.

This chaotic converted sports hall in Pozzallo, Sicily, is the front line of an unprecedented worldwide crisis. More than 170,000 migrants poured into Italy in 2014. This small port alone received 27,000 people last year. Meanwhile 3,400 have died in the sea

between here and North Africa, drowned or suffocated inside rust bucket vessels. Children and pregnant women were

among the 450 Syrian migrants taken off the Ezadeen, a 50-year-old livestock carrier, after it was towed to shore in rough seas on Friday.
Both that vessel and the Blue Sky M –

discovered on Wednesday - had been left on auto-pilot. One migrant on the Ezadeen reportedly said in a distress call: "We're without crew, we're heading towards the Italian coast and have no one to steer."

Syrian businessman Hani, 59, at the centre with wife Samah, 40, and their three children, tells me he paid £15,000 to get here. "We had no choice but to leave Syria so I gave them what they asked for," he says. "It was an old fishing boat. There were about 500 of us.

"We were under the deck – they were asking even more to be on deck in the open air. If you don't have enough you are put below deck, in the hold, which they

crowded. One night the crew - three Egyptian motor boat tied to the back and left us.

"For seven days we were floating. We had hardly any food. The water we had taken had run out. I felt helpless as a father. I just thought, 'We're going to die'. When the Italians cam

S we talk, news filters through that the bodies of 18 migrants have been found in the hull of another unseaworthy boat that departed from Libyan capital Tripoli.

These less fortunate passengers were they send out a mayday signal in the hope victims of hypothermia and dehydration. the coastguard will reach them in time. Untold more have vanished into shallow desert graves in lawless Libya. Many migrants gangs that thrive in the power vacuum that in Pozzallo talk of being enslaved for up to Libya has become since Colonel Gaddafi

vorldwide fleeing war and poverty - more terranean with limited resources. than any time since the Second World War refugees are a growth market for criminals. Pressure group Finance Against Trafficking says the trade has earned smuggling syndicates £100billion in the last year alone more than illegal drugs. In Italy, the finger of blame is pointed

quarely at Britain for helping get rid of addafi, but leaving anarchy in his wake. The Foreign Office is also under fire for nnouncing in October that it would refuse

to fund future rescue operations in the Med. Maurice Wren, chief executive of Britain's Refugee Council, says: "The British Government seems oblivious to the fact that the world is in the grip of the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War. Traffickers plying the Libyan coastline hire

year before they secured a berth on one

captains who know their vessel is ill-equipped

for a journey to Italy. Once in Italian waters,

The captains are paid danger money by

the leaky former fishing trawlers.

"People fleeing atrocities will not stop oming if we stop throwing them life-rings; boarding a rickety boat in Libya will remain a seemingly rational decision if you're running

for your life and your country is in flames. Since November the EU's border agency Frontex has been conducting its Operation

vas toppled in 2011. With 50 million people Triton over a very specific part of the Medi-

UT the project has no national

justice system behind it, so people traffickers are less afraid to operate the smuggling routes.

Vincent Cochetel, of UN refugee agency UNHCR, said last week's rescue was "part of a worrying situation that can no longer be ignored by European governments". Sicily is cracking under the strain.

A short walk from the Pozzallo refuge is the boat graveyard - the resting place of floating coffins dumped once the bodies of suffocated refugees were removed.

The shell of a fishing trawler in which 45 people died below deck rots in the sun. There checking whether the is no wheel and the navigation instruments have been ripped out. Its deck is littered with empty water bottles and abandoned clothes.

Behind the trawler is a collapsed inflatable. Demba, 16, of Senegal, was one of 90 to make evidence traffickers force the two-night journey in one of the migrants to sell their organs dinghies. "We were praying," he says. "There as payment for their

was no water to drink. We only had biscuits. I thought we'd drown, but God saved us.

"People were vomiting, it stank of petrol. keep thinking it will end but it doesn't." Last month Italian police arrested 11

people smugglers, including the alleged ringleader behind a crossing which killed 244 people off Libya in June. Another probe revealed evidence of gangs

siphoning off cash from the migrant boom. Anti-corruption politicians say mafia families in Sicily are getting government deals to house refugees in hotels and schools. Senator Mario Michele Giarrusso

said: "There's a river of money, millions of euros, handed out without tenders and without certificates. It's an enormous scandal

Investigators have also found

Samba exclaims, pointing to thin scars running down his arm. "This is where they

Samba Jaihl, 30, tells how he was exploited The waves were coming over the top. You in his native Gambia, a repressive police state. Bundled into a car for a journey across Senegal, Burkina Faso, Niger and Libya, he was not warned of the risks he would face.

He left behind his wife and children – a to get enough money to be on a boat. I didn't daughter, three, and a son, two. "There was me and my brother-in-law from our village Samba says, watched by 100 room-mates who all sleep around him on the floor.

"We were chased from our homes and badly abused. The driver kept demanding more. When we got to Libya we were kidnapped. They took all my money." "Look,"

Nearly 13,000 unaccompanied children like Demba have arrived in Italy this year. Meanwhile charities say thousands of youngsters rescued at sea are forced into the

have enough to sit on the deck."

slashed me with knives. I was hit with sticks

This is what Libyans do to black migrants.

eight months until I had paid my debt. Then

they let me go to Tripoli, where I had to work

"Criminals made me work on a farm for

sex industry or slave labour when they arrive Elvira Iovino, who runs a shelter in Sicilian city Catania, says: "They are locked in houses If the family can't pay for them to be released they have to work selling drugs, through

ostitution or working in agriculture." As I leave the windowless Pozzallo ware house, chanting and dancing breaks out. Refugees with no common language

are united by the danger they have faced and the knowledge that, despite their bleak situation, they are lucky to be alive.

