

Churches address refugee flight from Libyan chaos

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The World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches and the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe have expressed concern over the humanitarian situation in Libya after reports that 250 migrants fleeing the chaos were missing after their boat sank off the Italian coast.

In a joint statement released shortly after the April 6 tragedy, the ecumenical groups praised governments and aid agencies giving assistance but said the response needed widening "to provide aid and protection to refugees, migrant workers and other people at risk, and to enhance efforts to find peaceful and just solutions to the crisis in Libya."

Specific needs cited include protection and assistance for those who cannot return to their homes and keeping borders open for those fleeing from conflict, the church bodies said.

News

reports and a UN refugee commission said the boat was carrying about 300 people and capsized on its way to the Italian island of Lampedusa. UN commissioner António Guterres said, "These people were refugees twice. They fled war and persecution in their own countries and now, in their attempt to seek safety in Italy, they tragically lost their lives."

The UN and other humanitarian organizations have been on the lookout for refugees in distress, Guterres said. Thousands of people from nations such as Somalia, Nigeria and Ivory Coast who had been working in Libya are fleeing the country by land or sea as warfare between dictator Muammar Qaddafi and opposition forces escalated.

Guterres estimated on April 5 that 439,000 people have fled Libya.

Faith

coalitions such as ACT Alliance have provided relief at border camps such as the Ras Adjir crossing between Libya and Tunisia. The ACT team—staffed by ACT member bodies, including Norwegian Church Aid, FinnChurchAid, the Lutheran World Federation and the Church of Sweden—have coordinated work with UN units. The team is made up of experts in water and sanitation, emergency response and psychosocial activities. —ENInews