

Around 90 migrants feared to have drowned off the coast of Libya

Around 90 migrants are believed to have drowned off the coast of Libya after their boat overturned, the UN's migration agency says. Many of them are believed to be Pakistani.

"At least 90 migrants are reported to have drowned when a boat capsized off the coast of Libya this morning", the International Organisation for Migration said in a statement.

It added that "10 bodies are reported to have washed up on Libyan shores" near the town of Zuwara. Eight of the dead were Pakistani and two Libyan.

Two survivors were reported to have swum to shore, while another was rescued by a fishing boat. There has been a recent increase in the number of Pakistanis trying to make the boat crossing from Libya towards Italy.

Last year, just over 3,100 Pakistanis reached Italy by sea, making them the 13th largest nationality among migrants. This year, however, they are already the third most numerous nationality - around 240 made the crossing in January.

Humanitarian organisations are unclear as to why the number of Pakistanis is on the rise.



Migrants and refugees panic as they fall in the water during a rescue operation | AFP  
PHOTO / ANDREAS SOLARO

"We're trying to figure it out, It's quite a jump in numbers but it is unclear whether it will be a trend that will continue throughout the rest of the year," said Olivia Headon of the IOM.

She continued "Smugglers sell migrants the idea of Europe as a kind of paradise, they are very good salesmen. Migrants may know the risks of the sea crossing but they think it will be worth it."

Trafficking networks are quick to identify new markets, routes and nationalities in a highly fluid situation. Last year 119,000 migrants and refugees managed to reach Italy, most of them after being rescued at sea by European navies and coast guards as well as vessels

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operated by humanitarian NGOs.

The year before, 181,000 made it to Italy. Migration has become a key issue in Italy's election campaign, with voters due to go to the polls on March 4.

Major parties, including Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the Right-wing League, formerly the Northern League, have said Italy can no longer accept such high numbers and have called for hundreds of thousands of migrants already in the country to be repatriated.

"In the last few years, Italy repatriated 15,000 migrants. It would be my aim to triple that number," said Matteo Salvini, the head of the League.

If countries in Africa and elsewhere refused to take back migrants, then excise duties would be imposed on their exports to Italy, Mr Salvini said.

"Either they collaborate on migration or we hit them with excise duties," he told La Stampa in an interview on Friday. Last month he said that if he was elected prime minister, he would aim to expel half a million migrants currently living in Italy.

The League is in an uneasy alliance with Mr Berlusconi's party and a hard-Right party, Brothers of Italy, and together they are predicted to win around 35 percent of the vote - the largest share of any political bloc.

In order to form a government, they would have to forge a coalition with another party, possibly the centre-Left Democratic Party of former prime minister Matteo Renzi.

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