

Pope mourns deaths of Libyan refugees

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI on Thursday (April 7) lamented the "tragedy" of a growing number of African migrants who have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while trying to reach Europe.

In the most recent incident, a boat carrying at least 200 people fleeing the civil war in Libya capsized Wednesday near the island of Lampedusa, Italy's southernmost territory, 70 miles north of Tunisia. Rescue workers saved at least 51 passengers but fear that many others have drowned.

The tiny island has received more than 20,000 immigrants, mostly from Tunisia, since that country's revolution in January. They have been joined more recently by Libyans fleeing the violence as U.S. and European forces try to unseat dictator Col. Moammar Gadhafi. The migrants reportedly pay at least \$1,000 each to make the voyage.

"The tragedy ... has profoundly stricken the Holy Father, who follows the affairs of migrants in this dramatic period with sympathy and concern," said the Rev. Federico Lombardi, director of the Holy See Press Office.

Lombardi said the pope was praying for "all the victims of every nationality and condition" but specifically noted that their number included Eritrean Catholics who had been living in Libya.