

Persistent attempts to reach Europe on evermore dangerous routes

Bi-Weekly Alarm Phone Report, April 11th – 24th 2016

Arrivals by boat on the Greek islands have increased again in the last two weeks, despite various attempts by the EU and Turkey to close down Aegean borders and prevent travellers from crossing.¹ In the last two weeks, the UNHCR registered 553 and 782 arrivals on Greek islands respectively.² The Alarm Phone was in direct contact with 8 boats in the Aegean Sea, and witnessed besides several interceptions by the Turkish Coastguard also successful crossings. On Thursday the 14th of April for example, the Alarm Phone documented a case, in which a NATO vessel supported the Turkish Coastguard to intercept a boat in Turkish territorial waters. In other cases, however, the Turkish Coastguard did not interfere and travellers were able to reach Greek waters, where the Greek Coastguard rescued them. What seems clear is that Turkey is not willing to completely prevent all crossings, and that Frontex and NATO are unable to do so on their own.

In the Central Mediterranean Sea, the Alarm Phone was again involved in a rescue operation: On Tuesday the 12th of April, we were in contact with a boat in distress north-east of Tripoli/Libya, which was eventually rescued by the Italian Coastguard. That day and the day before, about 4.000 travellers were rescued in the Central Mediterranean Sea. Next to the many rescues, however, we also had to witness another shipwreck: exactly one year after the fatal shipwreck of April 2015 with more than 800 deaths, it emerged on Monday the 18th of April 2016 that hundreds of travellers had died north of Libya. A boat capsized, when travellers from one boat were transferred to another, already overcrowded boat. In total, there were presumably more than 500 people on both boats. Only 41 people survived.³

Europe's answer to last year's tragedies is more military presence in the Mediterranean – allegedly to prevent further deaths by launching a 'war on smugglers'. This policy has obviously failed to stop the crossings and the dying at sea. While last year's fatal shipwrecks were partly caused by inexperienced crews of cargo ships, trying to save travellers (see the new 'Death by Rescue' report by WatchTheMed co-founders Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani: <https://deathbyrescue.org/>), the recent tragedy was not even noticed by Europe's surveillance apparatus in the Central Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, military ships just like cargo vessels are ill-suited for rescue operations in general. The last two weeks have shown that the attempts to leave Libya are likely to increase in the coming weeks and months. Any attempt to prevent the recurring tragedies needs to take into account that these are an effect of the European border regime. Thus, only opening safe and legal pathways to Europe would stop the incessant dying in the Mediterranean Sea.

As stated by MEP Barbara Spinelli in the foreword to the 'Death by Rescue' report: "The European Union's actions will one day be judged as a crime against humanity. These manoeuvres will also have proved useless, because those who are trying to flee from wars and dictatorships will not stop – and cannot stop – trying to escape."⁴ The Alarm Phone shares this belief and will continue to struggle alongside all people on the move – not only in the Aegean Sea and the Central Mediterranean, but also in the Western Mediterranean Sea.

¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-iom-idUSKCN0XJoZF>

² <http://data.unhcr.org/>, see also <http://migration.iom.int/europe/>

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/20/hundreds-feared-dead-in-migrant-shipwreck-off-libya>

⁴ <https://deathbyrescue.org/foreword/>

In the last two weeks, we witnessed two successful cases of border crossing between Morocco and Spain. On Saturday the 23rd of April, more than 100 travellers successfully circumvented the fortified fences of the Spanish enclave Ceuta and reached European territory. But also in other parts of the European border zone, like in the closed detention centres on the Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios, in Athens, Piraeus and Thessaloniki, or at the Greek-Macedonian border in Idomeni, people on the move continue to struggle for their right to freedom of movement.⁵ On a daily basis, they protest against the effects of the EU-Turkey deal, which forced them into fenced and closed facilities such as Moria camp on Lesbos, where even their most basic needs are neglected and where they are subjected to the despotism of European authorities. Also on the Greek mainland, migrant activists resist against the rejection of freedom of movement in various ways. In Piraeus people refused to leave the military camps, meanwhile they experienced violence from police forces as well as from fascists. In Idomeni, protests continued and one man died after a police car hit him. All over the Greek mainland, migrants protest, block highways and occupy houses and point out that they will not accept to be excluded and marginalized.

In order to support these struggles and regarding the intensified migration movements in the upcoming summer months, the Alarm Phone's presence in the Mediterranean Sea is as urgent as it has been in the last 18 months. To continue our work, we need financial support and kindly ask for your donations. Please find our Call for Donations in English and several other languages here: <http://alarmphone.org/en/2016/04/12/april-2016-call-for-donations-for-the-watchthemed-alarm-phone/>

Summary of cases

In the past two weeks, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 10 emergency situations, 6 of which occurred in the Aegean Sea, 1 in the Central Mediterranean Sea and 3 in the Western Mediterranean Sea. Summaries and links to the individual reports can be found below.

Aegean Sea

On Wednesday the 13th of April 2016, the Alarm Phone was called by a person, whose parents were on their way from Turkey to the Greek island of Samos. We were provided with the travellers' phone number and their GPS position, which showed them already in Greek territorial waters. We alerted the Greek coastguard and forwarded the received GPS position and phone numbers. Afterwards, we were in contact with the travellers on board and learnt that the Greek coastguard had started to rescue the group. We called the person who had initially informed us about the boat in distress and he confirmed that his parents had been rescued. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/500>.

On Thursday the 14th of April 2016, several contact persons informed the Alarm Phone about a boat, which had left the Turkish coast east of the Greek island of Lesbos, but was still in Turkish territorial waters. We were also informed that two vessels of the Turkish coastguard and probably of the NATO fleet were close to the boat. Later on, one of the contact persons informed us that the travellers had been intercepted and were on their way back to Turkey. On marinetraffic.com, we observed that both a Turkish coastguard vessel and a NATO military ship had been present at the position of the travellers' boat. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/501>.

On Saturday the 16th of April 2016, a contact person informed the Alarm Phone about a boat in distress in the Aegean Sea, with 50 travellers on board. We received their coordinates, showing them southeast of the Greek island of Lesbos, already in Greek territorial waters. We called the

⁵ For daily updates see: <http://moving-europe.org/category/ticker/>

Greek coastguard, forwarded the GPS position and were told that the coastguard would take care of the boat in distress. Afterwards, the contact person told us that the Greek coastguard was approaching the boat and later on confirmed to us that the boat had been rescued. In another call to the Greek coastguard, we were also told that all 50 travellers had been rescued. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/503>.

On Monday the 18th of April 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 2 distress cases in the Aegean Sea: in one case, twenty travellers had stranded on the Greek island of Farmakonisi. The Leros Port Authorities picked them up and they were transferred to a camp on Leros. In the second case, a boat had run out of fuel on the way to Kos. They were picked up by the Greek Coastguard. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/505>

On Tuesday the 19th of April 2016, the Alarm Phone received an alert about a rubber boat in urgent distress near Lesvos in Greek territorial waters. We immediately informed the Greek Coastguard about the case. They promised to send help. However, a few minutes later a NATO ship rescued the travellers and brought them to Greece. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/506>

Central Mediterranean Sea

On Tuesday the 12th of April 2016, Father Mussie Zerai alerted the Alarm Phone to a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea, with 120 people on board. We called the travellers and they sent us their GPS position and told us that water was entering their rubber boat. We informed the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome and forwarded the travellers' latest position and their satellite phone number. In the following hours, we stayed in contact with the travellers and updated the Italian coastguard regularly about their position. At around midday we called the MRCC Rome again and were told that all travellers on the boat had been rescued in the meantime. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/498>.

Western Mediterranean Sea

On Thursday the 13th of April 2016, the Alarm Phone was informed via Facebook about a boat in distress north of the Moroccan coast. With 28 travellers on board, the boat's engine had stopped and the travellers tried to get back to the Moroccan coast. Although we were not able to directly contact the travellers, we decided to call the Spanish rescue organization Salvamento Marítimo (S.M.) and the Moroccan coastguard. S.M. in Almería / Spain told us that they had been already informed about the boat in distress and that they were searching for it with a helicopter. Beyond that, we were told that the Moroccan authorities were also searching for the boat. After several hours of exchange with both agencies, we were finally able to speak to one of the contact persons who had initially alerted us to this boat in distress. He confirmed to us that the travellers had reached the Moroccan coast again. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/499>.

On Thursday the 14th of April 2016, the Alarm Phone was informed by a contact person about 21 travellers in the Western Mediterranean Sea, who had left from Nador/Morocco and were on their way to Spain. We called the Spanish rescue organization Salvamento Marítimo (S.M.) in Almería/Spain. We learned that S.M. was already informed about the boat and that they had sent a rescue vessel and were also searching for the boat with the help of a helicopter. Some hours later, we called S.M. in Almería again and were told that their helicopter had found the boat and that the vessel had rescued all 21 travellers, 19 men and 2 women, who were all in a good condition. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/502>.

On Saturday the 23rd of April 2016, we were informed about a group of persons trying to cross to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. We asked a solidarity group in Ceuta to monitor the situation 'on the ground' and they confirmed to us, twenty minutes later, that a group of about 100 persons had successfully entered Spanish territory. The group remained on the rocks at the beach of Benzú, afraid of being pushed back to Morocco. Along with the local group and the NGO Caminando Fronteras, we made the case public. The Red Cross sent a team to the beach, who took care of the injured. Most people were transferred to a temporary shelter. 7 persons were brought to the hospital. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/507>