

WATCH THE MED
ALARM PHONE'S
1 YEAR ANNIVERSARY
STATEMENT

12.11.2015

„While we are confronted with a lot of despair, we have also been inspired uncountable times by the willingness to overcome the sea and to move on to desired places throughout Europe.“

They grew stronger, louder and more visible every day in the past months: the incredible social and political struggles of refugees and migrants for the freedom of movement. To overcome the Mediterranean Sea in small overcrowded boats is one of the most dangerous aspects of these migration journeys towards the European Union as safe and legal pathways are closed down and fenced off by its government.

Especially since April this year, our Alarm Phone is called every day by people in distress at sea, or by their families, communities and friends. We try to ensure that their calls are being heard and that rescue operations are quickly being launched. In the Central and Western Mediterranean Sea as well as in the Aegean Sea, we have been engaged in hundreds of distress situations and have also documented grave human rights violations.

On the 11 of october 2015, the Alarm Phone turned one year old. We consciously chose that date last year to launch our project as it was the anniversary of a shipwreck that had caused the death of more than 200 people. The vessel's precarious situation had been known, but the Maltese and Italian authorities were unwilling to rapidly respond to the distress of more than 400 people in the Central Mediterranean Sea. A year later we began to operate the so-called Alarm Phone, a hotline for people in distress at sea when trying to cross maritime borders. Back then we asked: What would have happened if the boatpeople could have directed a second call to an independent phone-hotline through which a team of civil society members could raise alarm and put immediate pressure on authorities to rescue?



We did not want to stand by any longer as more and more atrocities were unfolding before our eyes and we did not want to merely condemn responsible authorities in the aftermath of mass deaths. We decided to directly intervene in the most deadly border-zone of the world and created a phone line that is available 24/7 and run by a transnational network of activist and migrant groups, located in various settings on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea. While we are not able to physically intervene, with no rescue vessels at our disposal, we offer advice and raise alarm when people in immediate distress are not promptly rescued or even attacked and pushed-back by European border authorities.

In the past year, our network of activists has grown and we are now more than 100 people situated in various cities and countries. We gained the support of many migrant communities, individual members of civil society, as well as human rights activists and organisations. We now also cooperate with various activist collectives that support people on the move throughout and beyond Europe. We want to thank to all of them, because we have learned so much in the process of engaging with you. We want to particularly thank our young Syrian friends who bravely support travellers on boats every night and inform us in cases of distress.

When we launched the Alarm Phone, we could not have imagined how dramatic the situation along Europe's maritime borders would become in 2015, with more than half a million people able to cross them by the end of September and with, once again, more than 3000 people disappearing, drowning, and dying.

Within one single week in April, more than 1200 people died in shipwrecks in the Central Mediterranean Sea, off the coast of Libya. These deaths were the direct consequence of Europe's unwillingness to create an adequate and large-scale rescue operation at sea. In the aftermath, the EU did not introduce measures to prevent the dying but extended its policies of deterrence by launching a military 'anti-smuggler' campaign called Eunavfor Med and by tripling the budget for the operation Triton of Europe's border control agency Frontex. Various civilian humanitarian rescue vessels, such as those of MSF, MOAS and Sea-Watch, have tried to fill the void and have rescued thousands of lives.

In the summer months, more and more people drowned also in the Aegean Sea which has become the most frequented sea route into Europe. While the stretches between Turkey and Greece are short, the sea, its currents and strong winds turn journeys from time to time into incredibly dangerous endeavours. And, to make matters worse, we have witnessed several times how masked border units attacked refugee vessels, threatened their passengers, stole their engine and at times punctured their boats. Nevertheless, thousands continue to arrive daily on the small Greek islands and never was their movement towards their destination as fast as it is today.

The least frequented sea route currently is the one between Morocco and Spain but also there dozens of deaths were recorded. More often than not, the Moroccan Navy forcibly intercepted travellers on precarious vessels and returned them to the place they seek to escape.

In hundreds of distress situations we assisted people in urgent need. We were often able to locate their vessels through GPS data, obtain information about their emergency situation and give psychological assistance, to then alarm the responsible rescue services and make pressure so that they would intervene as quickly as possible. While we are confronted with a lot of despair and human suffering in moments of distress at sea which is not easy to deal with for our shift teams, we have also been inspired uncountable times by the willingness to struggle on, to overcome the sea, and then move to desired places throughout Europe.

This summer of migration has still not come to an end but what we have witnessed in the past months is truly historic already. The movement of hundreds of thousands of people provoked the biggest crisis of the European border regime up to date. While Europe's policies of deterrence seek to turn journeys into struggles over life and death, these people simply enacted their freedom of movement by disobediendly crossing one border after the other. While countries tried to resurrect their borders, positioned police and military forces along them, and built higher razor-wired fences, they failed to block these human mobilities. These travellers are Europe's newest members and they will change and transform Europe forever. Thousands of European citizens have welcomed them and struggled in solidarity with them, for safe passage and arrival, for rights and accommodation, and against repression and deportation.

The Alarm Phone is now one year old and we wish we could say that our work is no longer needed as there now are safe ways of entry for those who are escaping for various reasons. While this is not in sight in the near future and the border regimes seeks to find new ways to violently exclude people on the move, we promise to struggle on. We understand ourselves as a movement for global justice and informed by this perspective we call for 'Ferries not Frontex', the freedom of movement for all, safe and legal pathways into Europe and a welcoming culture for those who newly arrive.

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We would like to thank all those who supported the Alarm Phone during the past year politically and socially, with their signatures and donations. We would like to thank in particular:

- All the hundreds of refugees on boats who called us: your confidence and courage were gifts to us. It is your determination that animates us and allows us to struggle on.
- Father Mussie Zerai; all the networks of Syrian activists; Nawal Soufi and her whole team; the Macedonian collective and all others who do a similar job like us and inspired us with your knowledge and commitment.
- All the brave fisherman who saved hundreds of people in distress in Turkish and Greek waters; our friends from Sea-Watch; the crews of Médecins Sans Frontières and MOAS.
- All the crews of cargo vessels who did not hesitate to quickly react to SOS calls and helped, even if they were not equipped or trained to conduct rescue operations.
- All those coastguard members in rescue operation centres and those who went out to sea and gave their best to rescue migrants and refugees in distress and who, unlike some of their colleagues, were not involved in violent and inhumane practices, including non-rescue, push backs, attacks and interceptions.

We also thank all our friends who shared their own experiences of crossing the sea on boats with us: Exchanging with you gave us a much better understanding of the whole situation. And all of the uncountable friends who listen to our shift-team members when they need someone to speak to. All of you who struggle every day for the freedom of movement.

Last but not least, we are always happy to receive donations for our project:

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