

Alarm Phone Weekly Report 14-20 September 2015

In the last week thousands of people on the move continued their struggle to reach Central Europe by crossing the Balkans, supported by local and international solidarity networks. Although several countries in the region tried to close their borders and push travellers back and forth, these desperate efforts were unable to deter the majority from moving further north. Rather, they seem to be condemned to fail, given the strength and will of so many to claim their right to the freedom of movement.

Meanwhile, in Turkey protest against the closure of Europe's external borders arose again. More than 3000 travellers gathered in the Turkish town of Edirne, fighting together for their right to free and safe movement. They started to march to the Turkish/Greek border and demanded a safe crossing, unwilling to risk their lives on dangerous journeys across the Aegean Sea anymore. But instead of free passage, they had to face the brutality of Turkish forces, which hindered them from crossing into Greece and detained at least 1000 of them in a stadium in the city centre of Edirne.

The urgency and importance of their refusal to risk their lives at sea was once more tragically attested last week. At least 108 persons drowned in at least four fatal accidents in the Aegean Sea. But also for those who managed to arrive on Greek islands, the situation remains unbearable. On the island of Lesbos alone, between 2000 and 4000 travellers arrived each day, exceeding the island's capacity to cope, especially with appropriate accommodation and medical care largely missing. In this situation, only the opening of regular ferry services to Greek mainland can provide relief. This claim also holds true for the Mediterranean Sea in general, as the last week's experiences of the Alarm Phone elucidate once again, and we call unremittingly for 'Ferries not Frontex'.

In the past week, the Alarm Phone was alerted to a total of 43 emergency situations, 35 of which occurred in the Aegean Sea, 3 in the Central Mediterranean and 5 in the Western Mediterranean Sea. A summary and links to the individual reports can be found below.

On Monday the 14th of September 2015, the Alarm Phone was informed about three vessels in distress in the Aegean Sea, close to the Greek islands of Lesbos and Samos. In the early morning the Alarm Phone received an emergency call from Nawal Soufi's activist collective, which alerted us to a boat in distress with many children on board and provided us with its GPS coordinates. As these showed the travellers close to the shores of the Greek island of Lesbos, our shift team immediately called the Greek coastguard. Some time later, our contact person informed us that the travellers had reached Lesbos Island independently. In a similar case we received the position and telephone number of a boat between the Turkish coast and the northern shore of Lesbos via Facebook. After speaking directly to the travellers we could confirm that they were safe and had presumably already reached Lesbos. Already in the early morning a contact person had informed us via WhatsApp about a boat in distress north east of the Greek island of Samos. Unfortunately, direct contact to the boat could not be established, thus rescue cannot be confirmed (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/260>).

Also on Monday the 14th of September 2015, in the early morning, the Alarm Phone was called directly from a rubber boat in the Western Mediterranean Sea, with ten persons on board. The boat lost air shortly after it had started its journey from Tangier/Morocco to Tarifa/Spain and the travellers asked for immediate help. During this call, a boat, presumably from the Moroccan

Navy, passed by but did not interfere. The Alarm Phone forwarded this information to the Spanish search and rescue organisation Salvamento Maritimo in Tarifa, but as the boat was still in Moroccan waters, they passed it on to the Moroccan Navy. Although further attempts to get in contact with the travellers on board failed, in the early afternoon our contact person in Morocco confirmed that the travellers had been intercepted and rescued by the Moroccan Navy.

In the following night, at 11.15pm, a contact person in Morocco alerted us to a boat in distress with 14 people on board, including one child. Their boat was leaking and water was entering. We immediately informed Salvamento Maritimo in Tarifa and established direct contact to the travellers on board. As the boat began to sink, they asked us to call the Moroccan Coast Guard as well. At about 2am in the morning, contact persons in Morocco informed us that the Moroccan Navy had intercepted and rescued the 14 people on board (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/264>).

On Tuesday the 15th of September 2015 the Alarm Phone dealt with a total of eight cases in the Aegean Sea, partly with boats in distress at sea and partly with groups of travellers who had successfully crossed the sea but were stranded on remote Greek islands. In one case, we witnessed again an attack on one boat.

30 minutes past midnight, our shift team was informed about a boat in severe distress quite close to the Turkish coast, south of Izmir. We immediately alerted the Turkish coastguard. Although they promised to send a rescue boat within one hour, the situation became increasingly dangerous: at 1.30am a contact person reported to us that there some travellers felt overboard and that help had still not arrived. Again, the shift team reached out to the Turkish coastguard and explained the urgent distress situation. Finally, at 2.52am, the shift team got a WhatsApp message from a contact person stating that the Turkish coastguard had rescued all 42 people on board.

In the following hours, the shift team was engaged in three similar cases. Via contact persons, we were informed about 43 people in distress near Cesme/Turkey, about 42 people in distress near Kos/Greece and about another boat in distress close to Chios/Greece. After direct contact with all three boats, the shift team alerted the respective coastguards. While Turkish authorities rescued the first boat, the second one was rescued by Greek authorities. In the third case, the boat even arrived by itself on the Greek island of Chios.

Around midday the Alarm Phone received a message via Facebook, informing us about a boat that had successfully reached Lesvos but, according to eyewitnesses, had been attacked by the Turkish coastguard on its way from Behram/Turkey to Lesvos/Greece. At least one of its passengers is said to have fallen overboard during this assault. We called a contact person who met the group on Lesvos. Meanwhile, we called the Turkish Maritime Rescue Coordination Center and at least got to know that two passengers who fall overboard were rescued and their families had been informed. The officer even knew the name of one of them, and this name matches the information that we have. The Alarm Phone will continue to investigate this case.

On the same day we also supported three groups of travellers who had stranded on several remote Greek islands. At 10.35am the shift team was informed of a group of 30 women, 10 children and 60 men, who had stranded in the very north east of Samos. We talked to the travellers and alerted the port authorities of Samos, the Greek coastguard in Piraeus, the Greek police as well as the UNHCR in Greece via mail and phone. Only two days later, on Thursday, 17th of September 2015, one of the travellers finally confirmed to us the rescue of the whole group.

Tuesday night, two similar cases reached us. At 8.38pm a contact person informed us about a group of 300 people who had run ashore on a small, uninhabited Greek island on Tuesday morning. Unfortunately, we were neither able to reach the group, nor to locate them.

We passed the phone numbers of the Greek coastguard and the UNHCR Greece to our contact person and he informed the coastguard already in the same night. On the next morning, we spoke to UNHCR Greece about this case. Finally, on Wednesday at 2.50pm we again talked to our contact person who confirmed to us that all 300 people safely arrived on Kos on Tuesday evening. In another case a group of about 50 people, including 20 children had stranded on the tiny Greek military island Farmakonisi. After obtaining these information directly form the travellers, we alerted the port authorities and the police of Leros, the closest inhabited Greek island. In the following two days we stayed in touch with the police as well as the UNHCR Greece. Finally, on Thursday, both sides confirmed to us that the group from Farmakonisi would be brought to Leros in the early evening.

(see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/261>)

Also on Tuesday the 15th of September 2015, the Alarm Phone was called directly from a boat in distress in the Western Mediterranean Sea at about 9am. With five people on board, the group was paddling north and asked us to inform the Spanish search and rescue organisation Salvamento Maritimo. When speaking to the Spanish authorities we were informed that they were already aware of this boat and that both, the Spanish and the Moroccan Navy were looking for it. One hour later, the shift team could again establish contact to the travellers on board. They were still in distress, although they were able to see some boats in the distance. At 10.15am a contact person from Morocco informed us that the five travellers have been intercepted by the Moroccan Navy and were being returned to Tangier (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/265>).

On Wednesday the 16th of September, as on the day before, the Alarm Phone was alerted to eight groups in distress in the Aegean Sea, involving more than 200 travellers. While in four cases they succeeded to reach the Greek islands by themselves, Turkish authorities rescued three groups, and to two groups the Alarm Phone provided support after they had stranded on small islands. For detailed information on the individual cases see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/273>.

Also on Wednesday the 16th of September 2015 the Alarm Phone was called from a boat in international waters between Morocco and Spain, with nine persons on board. Although in distress, a vessel quite close to them refused to help or rescue them. Quite to the contrary, it blocked their way further toward Spain. Some hours later, the Alarm Phone was again in direct contact with the travellers. As it turned out, the vessel that had refused to rescue them was Spanish. It forced them to wait until the Moroccan Navy came who returned them to Morocco. The Alarm Phone is still investigating, whether the Spanish vessel was one of Salvamento Maritimo or of the Spanish Guardia Civil (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/266>).

On Thursday the 17th of September 2015 the Alarm Phone dealt with three emergency situations in the Aegean Sea. At 6.46am a contact person informed us about a group stuck on the tiny Greek island of Padas between Cesme/Turkey and Chios/Greece. The group of 94 people, including children and women, had stranded there two hours earlier. One young man was injured and not able to walk. We alerted the Greek authorities and the UNHCR Greece via mail and called the Greek coastguard in Piraeus. At 7.50am the contact person told us that the group would be transferred to the Greek island of Chios by the Greek military.

On the same day we were informed about two boats in distress between the Turkish coast and the Greek islands of Lesvos and Samos, respectively. We alerted the responsible

authorities and in both cases the contact persons who had informed us finally confirmed rescue (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/262>).

On Friday the 18th of September 2015 the Alarm Phone dealt with four emergency situations in the Aegean Sea, near the Greek islands of Samos and Lesvos.

At 00.40am a contact person sent us a WhatsApp message with a phone number of a group of 35 travellers and their coordinates, which showed them between the Turkish mainland and the Greek island of Samos. As their position was very close to the Turkish coast, we alerted the Turkish search and rescue coordination centre in Ankara, both by phone and by e-mail. During the night, we were not able to speak to the travellers again. At 6.10am the Turkish coastguard reported to us that they had not been able to find a vessel at the position in question. But at 8am a contact person confirmed that the group had safely and independently arrived on the Greek island of Samos. In a similar case we were alerted to 41 travellers, whose engine had broken down between the Turkish coast and Lesvos/Greece. We called the group and advised them to call back in case of distress. At about 9am they informed us that they had safely arrived on Lesvos.

On the same day, Nawal Soufi's activist collective informed us about two cases of distress at sea as well. While in one case no contact to the travellers could have been established, in the other case we directly spoke to a group of 45 travellers, whose engine had broken down on their way from Atatürk/Turkey to the Greek island of Samos. We called the Greek coastguard in Piraeus and provided them with an approximate position of the boat. Two hours later we again reached the boat. The travellers confirmed that they had safely arrived on Samos in the meantime (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/269>).

Also on Friday the 18th of September 2015 a boat in distress between Tangier/Morocco and Tarifa/Spain called the Alarm Phone. 11 travellers had left Tangier at 5am and asked us to alert the Spanish rescue organization Salvamento Maritimo in Tarifa. At 9.40am Salvamento Maritimo confirmed to us that they had been in contact with this boat and had started a search and rescue operation. From 11am onwards, the shift team established direct contact to the boat several times. The travellers were calm but still in distress and told us that the coastguard had not yet arrived. At 11.48am we learned from Salvamento Maritimo in Tarifa that the Moroccan Navy had intercepted the boat. A couple of minutes later we called the travellers again, who had indeed been brought to a police station in the port of Tangier-Med. At around noon we alerted several contact persons in Tangier and at 12.30pm they also confirmed that the 11 travellers were back in Morocco (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/267>).

On Saturday the 19th of September 2015 the Alarm Phone dealt with five emergency situations in the Aegean Sea. In three cases the travellers safely arrived on Greek islands and in two cases they had been returned to Turkey.

Around midnight Nawal Soufi's activist network informed us about two boats in distress near the Greek islands of Lesvos and Chios. While in the case near Lesvos the travellers asked us to alert the Turkish coastguard, who conducted a rescue operation, in the other case we were later informed that the group of travellers had arrived on the island of Chios independently.

At 6am we received a call informing us about a boat in distress near the Greek island of Lesvos. We reached the travellers at 6.20am, a group of 49 people. Their engine had broken down and they had lost orientation, unable to provide us with their current position. They saw another boat not far away that had been rescued by the Turkish coastguard. But as they were supposed to be in Greek territorial waters, the Turkish coastguard refused to help them. Shortly

afterwards we alerted the Greek coastguard in Piraeus. In the afternoon, a contact person informed us that the group had arrived safely on Lesbos.

Another case of distress near the northern shore of Lesbos was forwarded to us at 10.20am. We informed the Greek coastguard in Piraeus about the distress situation via e-mail and tried to contact the travellers. At 11.45am we got in touch with them, a group of around 50 people, including many women and children. They provided us with their current position via WhatsApp, which we immediately forwarded to the Greek coastguard. The person on duty told us that they had sent a patrol boat already but had found nobody. Obviously this was false, as we had spoken to the travellers in distress just a couple of minutes earlier. Afterwards we wrote another e-mail to the Greek and the Turkish coastguards, providing them with the latest GPS position that clearly indicated that the travellers in distress were in Greek waters. At 4.20pm we talked to travellers again. We learned that they had safely arrived in Greece.

At 12.40pm a friend reported another distress case to us, this time between Behram/Turkey and Lesbos. The engine of the vessel had stopped and at 1pm the contact person urged us to call the Turkish coastguard as the situation had worsened and the travellers were still close to the Turkish coast. We alerted the Turkish coastguard and they assured us that they would send a rescue vessel and call us back as soon as they had results. At 1.40pm we forwarded the latest position of the boat in distress to the coastguard. About an hour later, at 2.45pm, both our contact person as well as the Turkish coastguard confirmed to us that the travellers had been rescued and were returned to Turkey (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/270>).

Also on Saturday the 19th of September 2015 Father Mussie Zerai alerted the Alarm Phone to three boats in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea. The Alarm Phone had direct contact to two of them and, in the end, the Italian coastguard confirmed the rescue of all three boats. On that day, due to good weather conditions, a total of 20 boats had left the Libyan coast and prompted yet another large-scale search and rescue operation in the Central Mediterranean Sea. According to the Italian coastguard, at least 4343 travellers had been saved in more than 20 operations, involving 12 rescue vessels.

At 2am Father Mussie Zerai informed the Alarm Phone about a distress call he had received. We got a hold of the travellers on the phone at 2.13am. We learned that they were 500 people and had started in Zuwara/Libya some hours earlier. They also told us their GPS position, which was about 27 kilometres north east of Zuwara. Immediately afterwards, we called the Italian coastguard and provided them with all the information we had obtained so far. In several phone calls with Médecins sans Frontières' rescue vessel, the Bourbon Argos, which was in vicinity to the boat in distress, we learned that a military vessel was even closer to the boat in distress and had been advised by the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) to launch a rescue operation. In the following hours we continuously tried to get in contact with the travellers on board. But although the phone was ringing, nobody picked up. In another phone call with the crew of the Bourbon Argon in the afternoon, they confirmed to us that the military vessel had indeed rescued the boat in distress in the early morning.

At 6.23am Father Mussie Zerai alerted us to another boat in distress with 300 travellers on board and forwarded a satellite phone number. Despite several attempts we were not able to reach the travellers and thus could not obtain any information about their position. At 7.07am we called the Italian coastguard and informed about this boat. Afterwards, contact to the travellers could not be established anymore. But in a phone call at 3.34pm the Italian coastguard confirmed their rescue.

A third alert of Father Mussie Zerai reached the Alarm Phone via WhatsApp at 7am. A rubber boat with 100 persons on board, including pregnant women and children, was in distress

north of Misrata/Libya, in the eastern part of the Central Mediterranean Sea. We immediately informed the Italian coastguard and forwarded the GPS position and the satellite phone number of the boat in distress. At about 8am the Italian MRCC called us back and asked for the latest position of this particular boat, as the initial one seemed to be outdated. We talked to the travellers again and they gave us an update on their position, which was indeed 14.5 kilometres further north east. We informed the Italian coastguard accordingly. At 9am the travellers called back, stressing the urgency of their situation. In the following four hours we were in constant exchange with the boat in distress and immediately forwarded the latest position to the coastguard by phone. After having received and forwarded a last update on their position at 12.55pm, the connection to the boat broke down. At 3.34pm, we called the Italian coastguard again and asked about this particular case and also about the two others we had alerted them about. In this phone call they confirmed that in the meantime all three boats were rescued and that all travellers were safe (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/272>).

On Sunday the 20th of September 2015 the Alarm Phone dealt with four emergency situations in the Aegean Sea, near the Greek island of Samos and Farmakonisi. While in one case the travellers had finally arrived on the island of Samos independently, in the three remaining cases we learned that the boats in distress had been rescued and returned by the Turkish coastguard (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/271>).