

Weekly Alarm Phone Report 19-25 October 2015

In the past week the Alarm Phone was once again alerted to dozens of distress cases in the Aegean Sea. Despite changing weather conditions people are still making the dangerous journey across maritime borders toward Europe. Some members of the activist collectives Alarm Phone and Welcome to Europe went to Lesbos to assist the newly arrived and to gain insights into the workings of the newly installed EU 'hotspot' in Moria that the border agency Frontex is running. As part of the European Agenda on Migration, hotspots are now being deployed by Frontex to support so-called 'frontline EU states' in systematically identifying and screening travellers who 'illegally' entered EU territory. One of Frontex' main tasks is to speed up the 'return process', thus the deportation of those who Frontex 'identifies' as not coming from a country of war and/or as not having valid grounds for asylum in Europe.

What we witnessed is truly shocking. Since Frontex has entered the scene, registration processes were dramatically slowed down. Frontex procedures of 'screening' individuals takes a long time which has caused great delays and thus created a situation of humanitarian emergency for the hundreds of people waiting outside. The official opening of this hotspot on Lesbos coincided with increased numbers of new arrivals and deteriorating weather conditions. While it rained non-stop in the past few days, dinghies kept arriving from Turkey. In the absence of any functioning queuing system and any form of crowd management by the authorities, and without access to shelter (protecting people from the harsh weather conditions), sanitary infrastructures such as toilets, as well as to food, water, dry clothing, medication and doctors, hundreds of desperate refugees are left to survive in between mud and piles of garbage outside of Moria's fences. What we have seen outside of Moria and on the island of Lesbos more generally reminded us of scenes from war-zones. We have published a statement jointly with Welcome to Europe in which we condemn Frontex' involvement and the appalling humanitarian situation on the island (see: <http://infomobile.w2eu.net/2015/10/24/frontex-slows-down-registration-procedures-in-hot-spot-moria-leaving-refugees-for-days-in-life-threatening-conditions/>).

In the past weeks we have seen record numbers of people arriving on Greek islands and it shows that the beginning of winter has not changed people's willingness to cross borders. However, the route has become even more dangerous and we again learned about tragedies at sea: In a shipwreck on Wednesday 14-15 people went missing near Samos and are feared dead and on Sunday a vessel collided with a rock near Lesbos and the bodies of 1 woman and 2 children have already been found and 10 more are still missing. There have been circulating news account of more tragedies, including six more deaths and another person gone missing. Another gruesome tragedy occurred in the Central Mediterranean Sea, presumably with more than 70 casualties. At least 43 bodies were washed up on Libyan shores and another 30 people from the shipwreck are still missing, also feared dead.

The start of winter makes the journeys toward and across Europe incredibly hard and dangerous. We see how people are still walking throughout Europe toward northern countries and have to endure the rain and the cold. There is an urgent need for widespread humanitarian aid and for European countries to open their borders to travellers – without rapid measures, the coming weeks will be even more deadly.

Summary of Alarm Phone cases

In the past week, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 25 emergency situations. Summaries and links to the individual reports can be found below.

On Monday the 19th of October 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted to six emergency situations in the Aegean Sea. At 1.10am we were notified through WhatsApp about a vessel in distress between the Turkish city of Kusadasi and the Greek island of Samos (case 1). Our contact person informed us that there were 45 people on the vessel with water entering. After several attempts our shift team was able to reach the travellers directly on their phone and were told that the engine had stopped working. They sent us updated GPS coordinates that showed them close to Greek territory. We informed the Greek borderguards in Piraeus who confirmed that they would notify the authorities on Samos Island. At 4.03am the Greek authorities confirmed that the travellers had been rescued.

With regards to the five other cases of the day we received the confirmation that all groups in question were fine: A disoriented family found a village on the island of Kastellorizo (case 2); a group aboard of a vessel was able to reach Farmakonisi Island (case 3); a group on Agathonisi Island needed immediate support and informed us later that they were at the local police station (case 4); a group in distress at sea that was rescued to Chios (case 5); and a group stranded on Nera that had found help (case 6) (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/313>).

On Tuesday the 20th of October, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 4 cases of distress in the Aegean Sea. The first case reached us at 2.28am when a Syrian activist collective informed us about 10 people on a wooden boat who had been at sea for several hours with a malfunctioning engine (case 1). Our contact stayed in touch with them regularly and informed us at 3.22am that their position had changed in the meantime. While they had been in Greek waters earlier, the new coordinates showed them in Turkish territory. At 3.37am we were told that they had been pushed-back by a large vessel. We contacted the Turkish coastguards who knew already about the case. For several hours afterwards no new information could be obtained until around 8.30am when the Turkish authorities confirmed that the travellers had been brought back to Turkey and were safe.

With regards to the other three cases we received confirmation that two groups were fine; one group had been found by fishermen on the island of Nera and were being transferred elsewhere (case 2), the other group was rescued by Greek coastguards and brought to Lesbos Island (case 4). For one group near Lesbos we could not obtain any confirmation (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/314>).

On Wednesday the 21st of October, the Alarm Phone was informed by Father Mussie Zerai about a vessel in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea. He told us about a vessel carrying about 100 people on a small plastic vessel and passed on a satellite phone number. Shortly afterwards he added that there were 30 women, including 4 pregnant women on board. When the travellers could not be directly reached, we notified the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome at 6.46am. They took down the information and said that they would look into the situation. At 7.15am, Father Zerai sent us GPS coordinates which we then passed on to MRCC Rome. In the following hours, the travellers could not be

reached but then, at about 12.45pm, MRCC Rome confirmed the rescue of the travellers (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/316>).

On Wednesday the 21st of October, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 6 emergency situations in the Aegean Sea, most of which occurred near the Greek islands of Kos, Samos, Lesvos and Chios. At 6.51pm we were informed about a vessel carrying 60 people, again between Turkey and Lesvos Island (case 4). With the obtained coordinates we could see that they were still in Turkish waters. We then spoke to the travellers directly who reported that their engine had broken down and that an 8 year old on the vessel was injured. Shortly afterwards they were able to re-start their engine and move on. We informed the Greek coastguards at 7.15pm and passed on their new coordinates. They said that they would look into the situation. Shortly afterwards, our initial informant told us that the vessel had been rescued, which was also confirmed by the travellers themselves via WhatsApp at 7.48pm.

With regards to the five other cases, we received the confirmation that two vessels had been rescued by Turkish authorities (case 1 and 3) and one vessel near Samos and one group on Samos by Greek coastguards (case 2 and 6). One vessel reached Chios Island independently (case 5) (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/318>).

On Thursday the 22nd of October 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 4 distress situations in the Aegean Sea. The first case reached us at around 1am when we were informed about 250 people who had stranded on the small Greek military island of Farmakonisi (case 1). We then received the GPS position of the group. After trying to obtain and verify information about the size of the group, our contact person alerted the Greek coastguards to the group. The Greek authorities had no knowledge of the case and confirmed that they would take action. Our contact person then also informed the group that authorities were notified. At 9.12am we received a WhatsApp message that stated that help had arrived. However, at about 1.58pm we received a call from the group. They were angry and said that about 85 people, including many children, were still on the island. In the afternoon, the Greek coastguards said that the weather was too bad to approach the island and transfer the group - they would pick them up on the next day. Our contact person then informed the group on the island.

With regards to the other 3 cases, we could obtain the confirmation that one group had reached the island of Samos independently (case 2), and another one was rescued by the Greek coastguard (case 3). For one vessel we were unable to find out if they had reached Lesvos Island or not (case 4) (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/315>).

On Friday the 23rd of October, the Alarm Phone was alerted to two emergency cases in the Aegean Sea. At 1.20am an informant told us that there were 80 people on a vessel and she had already informed the Greek coastguard. When we reached one of the travellers directly at 1.30am one of them said that they were not at sea anymore but were back on Turkish mainland. We asked for updated coordinates which we then received shortly afterwards via WhatsApp. The man told us that one child had died and several people were in a bad medical condition. We were unable to verify the information about the child. They had already called the international emergency number 112 and were waiting for help. They did not want us to notify the police and said that they might try and wait until the morning and then attempt the border crossing once more.

The same informant told us about the second case: 35 people were on a boat moving toward Samos. Already shortly afterwards we learned that they had safely reached Samos Island see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/317>).

On Sunday the 25th of October, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 2 emergency situations in the Aegean Sea. At 11.50am we were alerted by a woman in France who said that she had learned about a distress case through Facebook (case 1). She told us about an emergency situation near Lesbos Island with several people in immediate danger. Shortly afterwards she was able to provide us with further details and a phone number of one of the travellers which, however, could not be reached. We sent an email with the information to the Greek coastguard which then called us at 12.45pm and told us to inform the Turkish coastguards. When we finally reached the Turkish coastguard at 1.17pm, they told us that they had received information about this case through the Greek coastguard. At 1.21pm, one of our Alarm Phone members on Lesbos informed us that a helicopter was sent out to search for them. They had already found three bodies of women and children. More than 10 people were still missing (see source 1). Afterwards, no further information could be gathered but we will try to find out more about this distress case and the fatalities it caused.

At 12.57pm, we were contacted by a group who were on an island in the Aegean region and needed assistance (case 2). They were first unable to send us their location but from their messages we gathered that they were on the small island of Nisides Tomakia, close to Lesbos Island. At 2.05pm, we informed the Greek coastguard on Lesbos about the situation and they said that they would send out a patrol boat. In the meantime we learned that they were about 40 people, including 9 children who were all wet after their vessel had crashed and they needed medical support. At 2.13pm the Greek coastguard confirmed that they were on their way to the island. At 3.40pm we learned that they were being transferred from the island. We then found out that they were not transferred by the coastguard but in fact by fishermen. They had been able to rescue the whole group from the island but in that process their vessel had hit against rocks and was damaged. Fortunately, everyone remained uninjured. Alarm Phone members went to the harbour to welcome the survivors and to provide them with dry clothes (see also newspaper report, source 2). We encountered the group, including also one little boy who had proudly 'rescued' a cat from the island. We were then able to transport the families with children to Pikpa, a self-organized Welcome center that offers shelter for the most vulnerable cases so that they can take a rest before going to Moria for registration. We also met with the fishermen and used our funds to hand them 400 Euro so that they could fix the damages to their vessel. They also said that this had not been their first rescue mission (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/319>).