

Most deadly week of 2015 in the Aegean Sea, Alarm Phone alerted to 100 distress cases

Alarm Phone Weekly Report 26 October - 1 November 2015

Between the 26th of October and the 1st of November, the Alarm Phone experienced the most emergency cases since its launch about one year ago. Within just 7 days we were alerted to a total of 100 cases of distress – all but one in the Aegean Sea – and were able to provide help and support to several thousands of travellers both on boats in distress at sea and to those who had stranded on several Greek islands. In doing so, we cooperated with and relied on the invaluable work of numerous volunteers, contact persons and support networks, who forwarded distress calls to us, provided us with information and helped us to follow-up on the many incidents. The sharp rise of alerts to the Alarm Phone also reflects the enormous increase of border crossings in the Aegean Sea, where more than 210.000 travellers have entered the European Union within the last month alone – about as many as in the entire year of 2014.¹ Without any prospect of legal entry and with weather conditions becoming even worse in the weeks ahead, travellers in need of protection seek to use their last chances to enter Europe through dangerous and life-threatening sea crossings.

As a fatal consequence, the past week was also the most deadly week of this year in the Aegean Sea, where since January more than 450 people lost their lives. Last week, in at least 7 fatal shipwrecks, more than 100 travellers drowned, including many children and infants, and many more are still missing.² It was only due to the brave and self-sacrificing actions of Greek and Turkish fishermen and many lifesaving volunteers, who went to the sea to rescue women, children and men who went over-board, that hundreds of further deaths could be prevented.³ The Alarm Phone was alerted to and directly witnessed the dramatic shipwreck of a wooden boat with more than 300 travellers on board, which had capsized north of the Greek island of Lesbos on Wednesday the 28th of October. After this incident alone, more than 50 travellers were found dead or are still missing. In another alert on the same day, the Alarm Phone was informed about a 5-years old boy whose life was lost after a group of travellers had stranded on Agathonisi and whose body was washed ashore on the following day. However, fatal incidents not only occurred in the Aegean Sea. At least 39 travellers lost their lives in the Western Mediterranean Sea, after Spanish authorities had only belatedly responded to SOS calls by activists and thus had protracted a swift rescue operation.⁴

Against this background, calls for a radical change in European border politics are getting louder and louder. Spyros Galinos, the mayor of Lesbos, proposed to make use of passenger ships in order to carry travellers safely from the Turkish coast to the Greek islands. Other Greek politicians have urged prime minister Alexis Tsipras to tear down the Evros fence and to open the border between Greece and Turkey, in order to stop travellers from risking their lives in the Aegean Sea.⁵ In the Greek village of Kastanies, on Saturday the 31st of October, about 500 protestors have marched to the border fence and called for its destruction. The Alarm Phone has for a long time stressed the necessity of such ferry lines and of safe entry routes. Last week's dramatic events have once again demonstrated that there is no alternative to opening the borders of Europe in order to stop the numerous and unbearable deaths at sea.

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/02/record-218000-people-crossed-mediterranean-in-october-un-says>

² <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/en/migrants-continue-flow-greece-balkans>

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/30/world/europe/as-more-children-drown-volunteers-on-greek-island-say-rescues-are-left-largely-to-them.html>; for a statement of the Spanish lifeguards from 'Proactiva Open Arms' see: <https://www.facebook.com/HumansOfTheRefuge/posts/905500376165323>

⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/29/oestp-inmigracion-marruecos-espa-a-idESKCN0SN2I20151029>

⁵ <http://www.ekathimerini.com/202994/article/ekathimerini/news/new-refugee-drownings-in-aegean-prompt-tsipras-outcry>; <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/global-europe/tsipras-under-pressure-tear-down-turkish-border-fence-319103>

Summary of cases

In total, in the past week the Alarm Phone was alerted to 100 emergency situations, 99 of which occurred in the Aegean Sea and 1 in the Central Mediterranean Sea. Summaries of the cases and links to the more detailed reports on <http://watchthemed.net> can be found below.

Aegean Sea

On Monday the 26th of October 2015 the Alarm Phone dealt with a total of 11 emergency situations in the Aegean Sea. One traveller died after he and his group had stranded on the Greek islands of Agathonisi. The Greek coastguard rescued 6 boats in distress near Lesbos, Chios and Samos. Two groups of travellers arrived in Greece on their own and two were returned back to Turkey by the Turkish coastguard. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/320>.

On Tuesday the 27th of October 2015 the Alarm Phone was alerted to a total of 12 emergency situations in the Aegean Sea, near the Greek islands of Nera/Agathonisi, Farmakonisi, Lesbos and Chios. Around midnight we were informed about three groups of travellers who were in distress on their way to the Greek island of Agathonisi or had already stranded on the uninhabited rocky island Nera, close to Agathonisi. All travellers were rescued before midday. Three other groups the Alarm Phone was in contact with arrived independently on Farmakonisi, Lesbos and Chios. Beyond that, while the Turkish coastguard rescued three boats in distress, in three other cases it is likely that the Greek coastguard conducted rescue operations and had brought the travellers to Greece. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/321>.

On Wednesday the 28th of October 2015 the Alarm Phone witnessed the most deadly day in the Aegean Sea this year. At least more than 50 travellers had drowned in several shipwrecks near Lesbos, Samos and Agathonisi. The Alarm Phone was alerted to at least 14 boats in distress in the Aegean Sea, near the Greek islands of Lesbos, Farmakonisi, Chios and Samos. North of Lesbos we witnessed the dramatic rescue of 274 travellers whose boat has capsized, with at least 75 people drowned. From Agathonisi we learned about a missing boy, who was washed up dead at the coast at the next day. In 4 cases the Greek coastguard conducted rescue operations following our calls. Beyond that, three groups had stranded on Greek and Turkish island, two groups were rescued by the Turkish coastguard and another two groups managed to arrive in Greece on their own. In some further cases the whereabouts of travellers in distress could not be verified after we had alerted the Greek or Turkish coastguards. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/323>.

On Thursday the 29th of October 2015 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 14 groups of travellers in distress in the Aegean Sea, near the Greek islands of Chios, Kos, Samos, Lesbos and on the islands of Agathonisi and Ro. While the Greek coastguard rescued 4 boats, 6 groups of travellers reached the Greek islands on their own or were rescued by Greek fishing vessels. Two groups of travellers had stranded on the Greek islands of Agathonisi and Ro respectively, but were eventually provided with help. In two cases rescue can only be assumed. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/324>.

On Friday the 30th of October 2015 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 14 boats in distress in the Aegean Sea, near the Greek islands of Samos, Chios, Lesbos and Agathonisi. In three cases the travellers eventually arrived on Greek islands independently and one group returned to Turkey after their engine had broken down. The Greek coastguard rescued 4 boats and the Turkish coastguard 3 boats. In three other cases we were not able to establish contact to the travellers following the initial distress calls. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/325>.

On Saturday the 31st of October 2015 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 23 cases of distress in the Aegean Sea, near the Greek islands of Lesbos, Chios, Ro, Agathonisi, Pasas, Samos, Farmakonisi and Kos. In 16 cases we were able to contribute to rescue operations either on land or at sea by informing the responsible authorities or we provided valuable information to the travellers. In all other cases different support networks took care about the travellers or the provided information did not allow us to take action. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/326>.

On Sunday the 1st of November 2015 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 11 groups of travellers in distress in the Aegean Sea. While 7 boats were in distress at sea near the Greek islands of Chios, Kos, Farmakonisi and Samos, 4 groups had stranded on Glaros, Nera, Farmakonisi and Kastellorizo. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/327>.

Central Mediterranean Sea

On Wednesday the 28th of October 2015 the activist network 'Safe the Migrants' alerted the Alarm Phone to a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea and passed on a satellite phone number. Although we could not reach the travellers directly and thus had no further information, we alerted the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome and forwarded the satellite phone number. The MRCC had already talked to the travellers in distress and was in possession of their current position. In the following hours we constantly checked the credit of the satellite phone and tried to call them. In another phone call at 10.40am the MRCC in Rome confirmed the rescue of the boat in distress. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/322>.