

## **The end of the year approaches – Migration toward Europe continues in high numbers**

### **Weekly Alarm Phone Report, 21<sup>st</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> of December 2015**

In the past week, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 52 distress cases in the Aegean Sea and to 2 cases in the Central Mediterranean Sea. Despite the winter and increasingly harsh weather conditions, travellers keep struggling to overcome maritime borders to Europe. Data released by the UNHCR showed that nearly one million people reached Greek and Italian territories through sea crossings in 2016 (source 1). Nearly half a million people arrived on the small Greek island of Lesbos throughout the year and, quite incredibly, the number arrivals on this island was higher in December than in August, with an estimated 52,415 people arriving there up until the 27<sup>th</sup> of December alone. Struggles continue also in other regions of the Mediterranean. In the past week, more than 2200 people were rescued in the Central Mediterranean Sea, between Libya and Italy (source 2). About 400 people tried to overcome the border to the Spanish city of Ceuta in Northern Africa on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. The Guardia Civil had informed Moroccan military forces which made use of harsh violence, able to deter about half of them. More than 180 people succeeded to reach Ceuta, either by climbing over the border fences or by swimming around them. However, two people died and twelve others were injured, some severely (source 3).

Dozens of travellers died when seeking to overcome the Aegean Sea this week. On Tuesday, at least 13 people, including 7 children drowned (source 4) and on Thursday 20 people, including 11 children and one pregnant woman died (source 5). Our shift teams had been alerted to these two tragedies. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December we received a call from a woman who told us about a group that had stranded on Farmakonisi and she witnessed how a vessel near the island capsized. The Greek authorities reached the vessel but not in time, 13 people drowned and one person went missing. Two days later, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December, our shift team was told about a vessel in serious distress in Turkish waters. We alerted the Turkish coastguards and they went out to the location. They were able to rescue 21 lives but 20 people drowned.

This year we had to document too many tragedies like these. With regards to the two shipwrecks that we witnessed this week we felt that the coastguards did what they could to rescue those in distress but, clearly, it is not enough. The EU border regime incessantly creates these deadly conditions for travellers seeking to reach European territory. We will not cease to demand fundamental changes and will continue to denounce Europe's deadly border practices. 2015 has been the year of disobedient migration, where hundreds of thousands overcame borders by taking boats, by marching on, and by arriving in desired places. We as the Alarm Phone will

remain part of these struggles for the freedom of movement and for a different, a welcoming Europe also in 2016.

Please find short summaries of the distress calls that reached us in the past week below, as well as links to the full reports:

## **Aegean Sea**

On Monday the 21st of December 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 6 distress situations in the Aegean region. One large group of travellers was on their way to Farmakonisi and while their whereabouts and well-being remains unknown, it seems likely that they eventually reached the Greek island. Two groups had stranded on the island of Vatos and their rescue was later confirmed. The safe arrival of 4 other groups was also confirmed to us. They either reached the Greek islands independently (which seems likely in most of the cases) or were rescued by Greek coastguards (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/386>).

On Tuesday the 22nd of December 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 10 distress situations in the Aegean region. 2 or possibly 3 vessels were rescued by the Turkish coastguards while the Greek coastguards rescued 4 or possibly 5 vessels. One vessel made it independently to Lesbos Island and while the transfer of one group off the island of Farmakonisi could not be confirmed, it seems highly likely. We were alerted to another tragedy at sea, close to Farmakonisi, in which up to 13 people lost their lives, many of whom were children (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/387>).

On Wednesday the 23rd of December 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 9 distress situations in the Aegean region. One group stranded on Agathonisi Island and it is highly likely that they were able to walk to a village in the morning. 2 different groups had stranded on Samos Island and they were found and rescued as was another group that had stranded on Chios Island. The Greek coastguards rescued 2 vessels just beside one another near Chios Island, and 1 vessel off Lesbos Island. One group had reached Strongyli Island independently and were subsequently found and rescued by the Greek coastguard. The Turkish coastguards rescued 2 vessels that were in distress in Turkish waters (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/388>).

On Thursday the 24th of December 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 7 distress situations in the Aegean region. Three vessels in distress were rescued by the Turkish coastguards and their passengers were returned to Turkey. One group made it to Lesbos independently while another group was rescued near the island by the Greek coastguards. One group stranded on Pasas and was found by the Greek

coastguards. One vessel near Lesvos capsized and while the Greek coastguards were able to rescue 21 people, 20 lives were lost (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/389>).

On Friday the 25th of December 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 7 distress situations in the Aegean region. One large group of travellers seemed to be at risk of push-back in Northern Greece, at the Greece-Turkey border. They now seem to have been brought to a Greek reception facility. Our shift team was alerted to 4 distress cases close to Lesvos Island. The rescue of 3 vessels by the Greek coastguards was confirmed and the rescue of the fourth one by the coastguards seems highly likely. Another group had stranded on the small island of Ro and was later found and transferred by the Greek coastguards. We were also alerted to a group stuck on Farmakonisi Island. The Greek coastguards confirmed that they would launch a rescue operation (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/390>).

On Saturday the 26th of December 2015, our Alarm Phone shift team was alerted to 7 emergency situations in the Aegean region. One group had stranded on Farmakonisi and needed help. Eventually we lost contact but believe that they were later transferred off the island by the Greek coastguards. One group was rescued at sea by the Turkish coastguards while two other groups were rescued by the Greek coastguards. Two vessels reached Greek islands independently. Two groups had stranded on the island of Pasas and were later found and rescued by Greek authorities (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/392>).

On Sunday the 27th of December 2015, our Alarm Phone shift team was alerted to 6 emergency situations in the Aegean region. Two groups made it independently to Lesvos Island while another group was rescued by Greek coastguards near Samos Island. Two groups had stranded on different Greek islands (Ro and Pasas) and were later found and rescued by Greek coastguards. One group was in distress in Turkish waters and was rescued by Turkish authorities (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/393>).

## **Central Med**

On the 25th of December 2015, our Alarm Phone shift team was alerted by Father Mussie Zerai to two distress cases in the Central Mediterranean Sea. On this day, a total of 751 people were rescued in that area in six rescue operations. At 7.05am Father Zerai sent us information about two vessels in distress. The first one carried 100 people, including 6 women (some of whom were pregnant) who had left Libya seven hours earlier. About 200 people were on the second vessel. With the satellite phone numbers we could see how much credit the travellers had left. Although we

did not speak to them directly, the passengers of both vessels clearly used their phones as their credit went down and so we re-charged both of them, allowing them to continue making calls. We informed Father Zerai that we would monitor the phones and add credit again if needed. On the next day, at about 10am, we could receive confirmation about the rescue of vessel 1. The confirmation of the second vessel's rescue came in on the following day, in the afternoon (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/391>).

Source 1: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>

Source 2 : <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/fluechtlinge-kuestenwache-rettet-zu-weihnachten-tausende-im-mittelmeer-a-1069547.html>

Source 3 : <http://ffm-online.org/2015/12/26/ceuta-eu-zaun-weihnachtsnacht-flucht-reportage/>

Source 4: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/13-fluechtlinge-vor-griechischer-insel-ertrunken-a-1069421.html>

Source 5: <http://www.dailysabah.com/nation/2015/12/24/refugee-boat-sinks-off-turkeys-western-coast-20-dead>