



Open Letter by the Alarm Phone

Supporting migrants and refugees in distress: Against sensationalist and undignified practices by volunteers and journalists

Over the past months and years, the Alarm Phone network has witnessed, supported and/or become part of the uncountable volunteer projects and initiatives that have emerged in light of the current mass movements of people toward and throughout Europe. From (humanitarian) assistance at sea to convoys on land, soup kitchens, clothes donations, or free accommodations, thousands of volunteers have sought to alleviate the suffering of those who seek to cross borders and arrive somewhere in Europe. It is due to these novel solidarity networks that the European border regime has not caused the loss of even more lives. While we consider ourselves fortunate to be part of these coalitions in solidarity with people on the move, we have seen practices of volunteers, journalists and organisations, including those with whom we cooperate in situations of emergency at sea, that we find highly problematic.

With this public letter we seek to highlight some practices that we consider undignified and harmful to the people concerned. We ask for more cautious, ethical and principled practices when dealing with travellers who are commonly in a highly precarious and vulnerable situation. What prompted this letter was a shared concern amongst Alarm Phone members that emerged after seeing images and footage from a rescue operation at sea, conducted by the Migrant Aid Offshore Station (MOAS). MOAS is a humanitarian actor rescuing people in distress at sea, mostly in the Central Mediterranean Sea but also more recently in the Aegean Sea. We cooperated several times with them when emergency situations were brought to our attention through the Alarm Phone hotline. We have written a private email in which we voiced our concerns but so far we have not received a response.

The images and footage that were taken on board of the MOAS vessel showed how the rescue team was called to a distress situation in the Aegean Sea. While many distressed travellers were rescued, sadly, three little children lost their lives. In the aftermath of the rescue operation, highly sensationalist and undignified scenes took place on board of the MOAS vessel: the Greek coastguards who had entered the vessel forced a Turkish man, the alleged driver of the capsized migrant boat, to kneel and look at the bodies of the deceased children while their father was also brought

to the scene to identify them. The alleged driver had himself just been rescued out of the water and while he may have been involved in wrongdoings, the presumption of his innocence was clearly breached in this rather macabre act. Moreover, we were highly troubled by the behaviour of reporters who had been invited onto the MOAS vessel. They not only filmed the people in life-threatening distress, including close-ups of their faces, they were also allowed to interview some survivors as well as the alleged driver afterwards. Filming and/or interviewing those who just escaped death, with some severely traumatised after having lost loved ones, is highly unethical and endangers the (mental) health of survivors. We consider both inviting these reporters onto the vessel and publicising their images that show people undergoing moments of unbearable loss and shock reckless and highly irresponsible.

We know that images of suffering or even dead refugees are, at times, taken to denounce the violence of the European border regime and we know that publicity is important to demand for greater rescue capacities or to scandalise the deadly effects of the border regime. However, moments of loss and grief have to be respected and we demand much greater care, respect and responsibility when taking and circulating images and footage showing refugees. We ask for that in order to respect the dignity of the victims/survivors but also to maintain dignity ourselves, so that we can create a community and society in which the privacy and dignity of all people are valued and respected.

Press contacts: <http://alarmphone.org/contact/>

Facebook: [fb.com/watchthemed.alarmphone](https://www.facebook.com/watchthemed.alarmphone)

Twitter: https://twitter.com/alarm_phone