

27/05/2016

WatchTheMed Alarm Phone Statement in light of the current situation in the Mediterranean Sea and yesterday's events

The EU and Death at Sea: The calculated and monitored dying in the Central Mediterranean

Yesterday, on Thursday the 26th of May, it took more than four hours for rescue vessels to arrive. Four hours of worrying and of attempts to support the anxious people on board of an overcrowded wooden boat. In a SOS call at 6.21am, our WatchTheMed Alarm Phone shift team passed on the GPS coordinates to the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome. Shortly before, an emergency call had reached us via a satellite phone. The caller informed us about two boats carrying 500 people each, among them many Syrian and Iraqi refugees. At 10.31am, rescue finally approached but an hour earlier, the second boat had already capsized, within eyeshot. So far it is unclear how many people drowned or disappeared. MRCC Rome reported in their daily statement about one capsized boat and 96 survivors. Fatalities were not mentioned. However, the private rescue boat Sea-Watch, which arrived at the site of distress in the early afternoon, had to recover bodies of drowned people.

Calculated Dying

Over the past three days, and once again, thousands of refugees and migrants left the Libyan shores on overcrowded boats and moved toward Sicily: About 2600 people on Tuesday, 3000 on Wednesday and 4000 yesterday, Thursday. Nobody can still claim to be surprised, least of all those responsible for EU migration policies. But they refuse to abolish the deadly visa regime and to open up legal and safe routes. To the contrary: the Balkan route which migration movements had struggled to open up last summer, was violently closed down. Among yesterday's victims in the Central Mediterranean Sea are now again Syrian and Iraqi refugees. As a result of the closure of the Balkanroute and the inhumane EU-Turkey deal, refugees who arrive in Greece are being imprisoned on the Greek islands with the threat of being deported back to Turkey, while those on the Greek mainland are left without any perspective of leaving the country soon. These political changes force refugees onto the much more dangerous route via Libya.

Monitored Dying

For nearly one year now, the military operation EUNVFOR MED/Sophia seeks to monitor the Central Mediterranean Sea, between Libya and Italy. Its central mandate is the combating of the so-called smuggling networks. These 'smuggler-hunters' are equipped with all sorts of high-tech, the zone off the coast of Libya is amongst the best monitored maritime spaces of the world. How difficult could it be to send a small surveillance aircraft hourly along this well-known migration route in order to locate and immediately rescue refugee boats? Instead, and again and again, Italian coastguards, private initiatives and NGOs are those who prevent even worse disasters from occurring at sea. And when they then transport survivors to Sicily, capacities are simply lacking which means that situations as experienced yesterday occur, situations that are apparently wanted by the responsible authorities: the dying at sea continues. And as long as it is possible, disasters are being concealed, suppressed or played down in order to avoid renewed public outcries.

We do cry out, once more and time and again about the border deaths of the past 20 years, and about yesterday's deaths. If only there were legal and safe migration routes, nobody would have to die at sea. The dying at sea is not a natural catastrophe and also no accident. It is, in fact, the calculated outcome of the EU border and visa regime. The dying at sea is human-made and already

tomorrow, through the opening of borders and free access to ferries, it could fade into history as a dark chapter.

The long summer of migration in the Balkans has demonstrated that once borders are open, there are no 'smugglers' anymore. One pays high sums and takes dangerous paths only when one is forced to do so by Frontex and co.

A world without borders is possible and both Frontex and the 'smugglers' would then have disappeared.

In this sense, we say: Ferries not Frontex

WatchTheMed Alarm Phone (27.05.2016)

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Attachment:

Excerpts from the WTM-AP log book entries:

2016_05_25-CM-two boats in distress, direct call

Number of the boat: 0088216....376

5:25am, we received a direct call from a Thuraya number. The person speaks Arabic so we cannot understand. All we can hear is "Libya" and "Italy". It sounds like they might be on a boat as there are engine sounds in the back.

5:34am, Our translator gets back to us and says that the man was talking about 2 big boats that had left from Libya. Apparently they called the Italian coastguards but they were not responding. And apparently he spoke of 1000 people on the boats!

5:40-5.50: We try to call the Thuraya number in different ways but cannot reach them. In between we checked their Thuraya credit and it was good, over 70. We checked again a few minutes later and it had gone down to 69.71.

6.10am: We call the Italian coastguards and we pass on the Thuraya number. He checks and then says that they have the same number. Apparently they were called by the boat but had the same problem that we had: they could not establish their position.

6.16am: their credit has minimally decreased, 69.22 now.

6.17am: We reached the man on the boat. We try to give him instructions on how to find the GPS position on Thuraya but the call was cut off.

In the meantime, credit has gone down to 62.77

6.20-6.40: We receive more information from the boatpeople:

6.21am: We received their coordinates: N033 Deg 018'014.242 E012 Deg 029'037.940. The man is in panic and says they are about to sink. There are two boats, one boat is in a bad condition. The boats are metal boats (but later it became clear that they were wooden boats).

6.29-6.35am: We call MRCC Rome again and pass on the new details and the coordinates which they take.

6.51am: Credit has gone down to 56.32

6:58: We send an Email to MRCC and others with all details.

7:56am: the people on the boat called us again and we asked them to send us an update of their position. we receive the new position at 7.58: N33 23'57,062; E12 29'45.553

8:00am: we called MRCC Rome again, we provided them with the new coordinates.

8:12am: we sent an email to MRCC Rome and all the contacts we have, asking for urgent help and providing them with the new coordinates

8:19am: we received new GPS coordinates: N033 Deg 025'024.298 E012 Deg 029'052.131

8:21am: Credit on the phone of the migrants on the boats is 41

8:23am: the people on the boats called and told us, one of the big wooden boats is cracking and water started to fill the boat in the under level (the boat has obviously two levels), the people are trying desperately to empty the boat from water. in total there are around 1030 people on the three boats, the boats are made of wood. one of the big boats is dragging the other, on the small boat are 30 people. NEW: there are now three boats, because the two big boats, which were our case already the whole morning, we're crossing a third, small boat with migrant persons, and they continued to go on together, one big boat towing the two other boats!!!!

08:30am: we called the Italian Augusta Offshore company because their commercial boat ASSO VENTIQUATTRO IMO 9235294 is really close to the boats in distress. They provided us with their operations department number which could give us the number of the ship Asso Ventiquattro, but the operation center opens not before 9am, so we have to wait...

8:35am: Credit from the Thuraya-phone on the boat is 39.5

8.35am: we tried calling another boat that is close called Minerva Zen (there main center is in Ukraine), but the call didn't go through

8.40am: we called the Malta coastguard. they already know about the boats and are working on the case. we updated them. they have another 17 cases or so they are working on. they said they are doing their best. the operator was very stressed on the phone.

8:45am: the people on the boat are calling, they told us one of the boats just sank, 500 people are in the water and many already died ...

8:47am: the boat people confirmed that we should call Libyan coast guard, we tried to reach the Libyan Coast Guard. We also decided to call the Tunisian Coast Guard and explained them the distress situation, gave them all the infos we have.

09:00am: we call the operational center of the Augusta Offshore Company and explain the situation. They say that their ship ASSO VENTIGUATTRO already knows about the case (they were contacted by MRCC rom) and that it is on his way there now, going to help rescuing the people on the sinking boat

9.18am: obviously a lot of different "players" are informed about the case (MRCC Italy in Rome, Malta, Sea-Eye, Sea-Watch, private ships...) and going to help, but until now the migrants didn't see any ships close to them.

9.20am: contact to the people on the boat: a lot of people already dead, our contact on the boat saw people drowning. They asked us where they should heading to, they're 100 km away from Sabratak on the Libyan Coast and try to head in direction of Lampedusa. One big boat is broken, the second big Boat is now leaking too, the small boat is fine, but already full of people

9:28am: credit of the Thuraya-phone on the boat: 33

9.29am: we informed everybody, staying in touch with the people on the boat, but for the rest we're helpless

9.48am: we sent an SOS email with updates on the sinking boat:

Hello,

Thanks to everyone who is involved, we are aware that there are more than 10 boats, so thank you for your efforts.

We have received unfortunate information that one of the boats sank already around the position N033 Deg 023'057.062 E012 Deg 029'045.553. A lot of people died. But for sure, there are people who know how to swim and most probably they can be saved and pulled from the water.

Thank you,

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Watch the Med Alarm Phone

09:56am: We called the Libyan coast guard, they were friendly, maybe because we were talking in Arabic with them, they got all the info and will help as soon as possible

10:00am: no answer from the people on the boats

10:03am: the people on the boats saw a ship, they estimate the distance 15 minutes away from them, but then the ship disappeared. we asked for new coordinates and urged them to use whatever objects they have that can reflect the light of the sun and use it in all direction to help ships spot them

10:05am: Since a long time we're watching the "Minerva Zen", the Ship from the ukrainian company, on [Vesselfinder.com](https://www.vesselfinder.com) cruising around specific coordinates: N33 12 E12 42, looking like searching for something. This zone is close to the boat-people, but not exactly their latest coordinates we have. "Asso Ventiquattro", the italian Ship, is obviously also cruising more or less around the same area like the Minerva Zen

10:06am: credit of Thuraya phone on the boat is 22.6;

10.15am: the people on the boat do not answer

10.18am: The ship CP 324 SAR (search and rescue) is heading down to the area, now at N 33 deg 32'
E 12 deg 30'

10.31am: at last, we receive a positive Info: we spoke to the boat people, they just informed us that the small boat was rescued (corresponding to our contact on the boats by an Italian commercial ship)!!!!!!

10.37am: more ships on their way to the latest gps-position of the boats in distress: ooc tiger, Asso Venticinque, Ringho

11.00am: no answer from the people on the boat; we wrote them an sms asking for newer position and informing them that they have more credit now - no answer so far

11.20am: no news from nowhere at the moment - we hope that in this case no news are also good news, which means the people on the boats are save at last. Vesselfinder still shows ships roaming around the place of the boats of our case.