

Interceptions, Push-Backs, and Drownings: Another Summer in the Mediterranean Sea

WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2-Month Report, 27th June – 28th August 2016

One year ago, the European border regime was on the verge of an unprecedented upheaval: Merely in the months of July and August, more than 200,000 travellers crossed the Mediterranean Sea, paving the way for what has been referred to as the 'long summer of migration'. From September 2015 onwards, mass movements did not abate, as they did in earlier years, but even increased over the autumn months. They were the result of escalating conflicts in many regions of the world, coupled with the strong desire of many to no longer endure unbearable living conditions and to search for protection and a better life. The inability to deter these movements can, arguably, be understood as the most fundamental crisis the European border regime has faced ever since it came into existence.

While in last year's summer and autumn months Europe's maritime borders were crossed by up to 10,000 unauthorized travellers per day, this year's numbers have decreased significantly and stand at similar levels as in years preceding 2015. As a result of attempts to reconstitute the border regime, especially routes through the Aegean Sea have been increasingly closed down. Following the EU-Turkey deal of March 2016 and Europe's desire to prevent departures of clandestine vessels from the Turkish coast, reported arrivals decreased to about 2,000 per month. As recently documented by the UNHCR in Turkey, since the beginning of 2016, and particularly after March, Turkish authorities have apprehended or intercepted almost 35,000 travellers on their journeys to the Greek islands.¹ 80% of these actions were carried out at the maritime border in order to stop travellers who were nearly exclusively of Syrian or Afghan nationality. Push-backs by the Greek coastguards have been exposed dozens of times before, also by the Alarm Phone, and further evidence has emerged, clearly proving not only the incredibly violent actions taken by Greek coastguards to stop refugee vessels with force but also Frontex' involvement in and knowledge of these actions.²

While the crossings in the Aegean have decreased through these deterrence measures, the number of reported fatalities has actually increased: 383 deaths have

¹ For an overview on the numbers of apprehensions and interceptions by Turkish authorities as of 15th

² See <https://theintercept.com/2016/08/22/coast-guard-fired-at-migrant-boats-european-border-agency-documents-show/>

so far been registered in the Aegean Sea in 2016, compared to 61 deaths in the same period in 2015, and 21 in 2014. The latest tragedy occurred only a few days ago, when the vessel of a group of 15 travellers capsized near Çeşme/Turkey. One Syrian woman died and two people remain missing.³

Unlike in the Aegean Sea, sea crossings via the Central Mediterranean remain high and are as precarious and deadly as always. In the time since we published our last Alarm Phone report in late June, about 40,000 travellers have crossed the Mediterranean Sea, mainly departing from Libya and arriving in Italy.⁴ In that time, the number of reported fatalities has since risen, from 2,896 to 3,167 in 2016. Thus, at least another 270 people have lost their lives due to Europe's deadly border regime. Around Sabratha in Western Libya alone, more than 120 bodies were washed up in July. It is clear that the real figure of human disappearances and losses at sea will always remain unknown.⁵ Also, and as anticipated, there are clear indications that migratory routes shift in light of the EU-Turkey deal and that people resort to lengthier and more dangerous paths, for example via Libya. In mid-August, a vessel capsized with 27 travellers on board, mostly from Syria, leaving 5 people dead in the sea.

This is not to say, of course, that large rescue operations are not being carried out in the Central Mediterranean Sea. Quite the opposite: merely between the 20th and 24th of July, for example, about 8,000 people were rescued.⁶ It is often due to the commitment of non-governmental actors, both humanitarians and crews of cargo vessels, that these large scale Search and Rescue operations take place, and that not more tragedies occur at sea. And it is clear that they operate under increasingly dangerous conditions, as the attack on a vessel of Doctors without Borders has shown a couple of days ago.⁷ In the past few months, civil rescue missions in the Central Mediterranean have grown: Besides the new rescue vessel acquired by Sea-Watch, called Sea-Watch II, the NGO ProActiva Open Arms from Barcelona and the Berlin based association Jugend Rettet have entered this maritime borderzone. Despite all these humanitarian actors at sea, it is clear that rescue capacities remain insufficient.

³<http://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/egede-gocmen-teknesi-batti-1-olu-2-kisi-kayip>

⁴In total, 40.000 people crossed the Mediterranean Sea in July and August (data as of 25th of August 2016, see: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>), 35.000 of them via the Central Mediterranean Sea (see: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=105>).

⁵ In July and August 2016 alone, 242 deaths were recorded in the Central Mediterranean Sea, 10 in the Aegean Sea and 12 in the Western Med, see: <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean>.

⁶<http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=502>

⁷<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/25/msf-mediterranean-bourbon-argos-armed-raid-libya-coast>

As we have witnessed time and again, the arrival of rescue operators at scenes of distress takes many hours, as in an Alarm Phone case from the 5th of August, when it took 6 hours until the travellers were rescued (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/552>). It is beyond doubt that it is mainly due to the absence of a political will to rescue that not more rescue capacities are in the most-deadly maritime areas, off the coast of Libya.

In the Western Mediterranean Sea, numbers of arrivals have been high in the past two months with hundreds of travellers arriving at the Andalusian coast and in the two Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Melilla. Groups of travellers who reached Spanish territory were on several occasions met with instant criminalisation, as the Spanish police carried out arrests of those they appoint as the 'captain' of the boat. Forms of repression following the increasing arrivals to Spain were even more evident on the Moroccan side of the border. Here, the Moroccan police carried out revenge actions, as seen on the 1st of June, when they raided the forest which is home to migrants waiting to depart. This can be understood as a direct response to the arrival of 143 travellers within 24 hours. The past two months have also seen a high number of push-backs/pull-backs, interceptions (as several of our reports have documented) and disappearances. As always, the push-backs and pull-backs carried out at sea in the Western Mediterranean remain difficult to document. The commissioner of Human Rights of the European Council has requested transparency concerning the push-backs from Ceuta and Melilla, as these practices are an obvious violation of international law. The Spanish minister of interior, nonetheless and despite evidence of these push-backs, continues to deny that the Guardia Civil would violate any law.

In the past two months, the period that this report covers, the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone was frequently alerted to situations of distress in all three regions of the Mediterranean Sea. We were engaged in 38 distress cases, of which 18 took place in the Central Mediterranean, 7 in the Aegean Sea and 13 in the Western Mediterranean (please find links to the individual reports of the past two months below). While in most cases the safe arrival of all travellers could be confirmed, in some cases we had to witness the loss of life and human rights violations.

Against the continued dying in the Mediterranean and the European border regime which has created an obstacle course and made dangerous sea-crossings necessary in the first place, migrant and solidarity activists, including Alarm Phone members, organized a NoBorder Camp in the Greek city of Thessaloniki between the 15th and

24th of July.⁸ Among thousands of (migrant) activists, the Alarm Phone took part in the camp. Shortly after the solidarity camp had ended, three solidarity squats in Thessaloniki were brutally evicted by the police. Several activists were arrested and non-European comrades were transported to a military camp outside the city. However, such unnecessary repression and violence only adds more fuel to the on-going struggles for the freedom of movement and a different Europe.

Western Mediterranean Sea

On Wednesday, the 29th of June 2016, at 4.50am, the Alarm Phone was directly called from a boat in distress 5km off the Moroccan coast. The travellers asked us to call the Moroccan coastguard. We urged them to call the international emergency number 112 and promised to call the Moroccan coastguard ourselves. We did so immediately afterwards and forwarded all the information we had obtained. One hour later, the travellers confirmed to us that they had been rescued by the Moroccan coastguard (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/535>).

On Friday, the 1st of July 2016, the Alarm Phone was informed about two boats in distress in the Western Mediterranean Sea, with 11 persons on board of each of the boats. One boat had already reached Spanish territorial waters, thus we called the Spanish Search and Rescue Agency Salvamento Marítimo, which eventually rescued the travellers. Later on, we learned that the second boat was intercepted by the Moroccan Marine Royale (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/536>).

On Saturday, the 7th of July 2016, at 8.08am, the Alarm Phone was directly called from a boat in distress with 10 persons on board, who had left from Tangier/Morocco at 11pm. At 8.40am, we talked again to the travellers and learned that they had reached international waters, thus we called the Spanish rescue agency Salvamento Marítimo (S.M.) and asked them to rescue the travellers at 9am. Afterwards we were not able to speak to the travellers again, however, at 9.40am, S.M. informed us that the boat in distress had been intercepted by the Moroccan Marine Royale (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/539>).

⁸<http://noborder2016.espiblogs.net/>

On Monday, the 11th of July 2016, at 7.15am, the Alarm Phone received a distress call, but the connection was interrupted, before communication was possible. At 9.40am, after several failed attempts, we finally managed to reach the travellers. They told us that they had been intercepted by the Moroccan Navy and were now back in Morocco (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/532>.)

On Thursday, the 14th of July 2016, at 8.32am, the Alarm Phone was alerted to a distress case involving seven persons, including one who was ill, who had left from Tangier at 3.30am. The travellers informed us that the sea was rough and that water was entering the boat. At 9.22am, we informed the Spanish Search and Rescue Agency Salvamento Marítimo (S.M.). At 9.30pm we called back S.M. and they confirmed that 7 travellers had been rescued by the Moroccan Navy. (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/533>).

On Sunday, the 24th of July 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to one distress situation in the Western Mediterranean Sea. The travellers told us that they had left from a certain location in Tangier toward Tarifa and were in need of rescue. We passed on the details to the Spanish Search and Rescue organisation Salvamento Marítimo and they took on the case. At 10.55am, Salvamento Marítimo confirmed that all 7 people had been rescued by a helicopter and were being brought to Spain (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/544>).

On Thursday, the 28th of July 2016, at 6.58am, a contact person in Morocco informed the Alarm Phone about 10 persons who had left towards the Spanish enclave Ceuta at 4am. We were told that their boat had disappeared. We later learned that there were four vessels that had been intercepted by the Moroccan Navy (for a full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/545>).

On Saturday, the 30th of July 2016, at 7am, a person called the Alarm Phone from Morocco and informed us about his brother, who had left the Moroccan coast together with 10 other people at 5.15am and was not reachable anymore. At 7.35am, we alerted Salvamento Marítimo in Tarifa. Later on, we were able to talk to one of the travellers and he informed us that they had been intercepted by the Moroccan Marine Royal and had been brought to a Moroccan camp (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/547>).

On Sunday, the 31st of July 2016, at 1.35pm, the Alarm Phone was informed about a boat in distress, carrying 29 people, including one child. They had left from Nador/Morocco at 5am. At 1.51pm, we called Salvamento Marítimo (S.M.) in Almeria and forwarded all information we had obtained so far. At about 4pm, S.M. informed us that the boat in distress had been rescued and that all 35 people on board were on their way to Spain (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/548>).

On Tuesday, the 9th of August 2016, the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone was alerted at 2.45am to a boat carrying 11 people, 9 men and 2 women, in the Western Mediterranean Sea. They had left Tangier at midnight and reported that they were in urgent distress and facing difficult weather conditions. Our shift team immediately reached out to Salvamento Marítimo, the Spanish Search and Rescue organisation, and passed on all the obtained information about the distress case. At 9.49am, Salvamento informed us that the Moroccan forces may have found and returned the vessel. At 11.28am, they confirmed that the Moroccan Navy had discovered and returned two vessels, one of which had carried 11 people. We verified the phone numbers and it became clear that it was the vessel in question (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/554>).

On Thursday, the 11th of August 2016, at 7.47am, the Alarm Phone received a call from a contact person in Morocco who informed us about a vessel in distress in the Western Mediterranean Sea, carrying 7 people. They had left about 4 hours earlier from Morocco and were heading toward Tarifa/Spain. We alerted the Spanish Search and Rescue organisation Salvamento Marítimo at 8.12am and stayed in regular contact with the travellers. At 9.09am, Salvamento Marítimo informed us that the Moroccan Navy had discovered and intercepted the travellers (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/555>).

On Friday, the 19th of August 2016, at 6.20am, the Alarm Phone received a call from Morocco and was informed about a boat that had left Tangier 5 hours earlier in the direction of Spain. We reached the travellers at 6.35am and were asked to call the Spanish coastguard, because water was entering their boat. At 6.50am, we alerted the Spanish rescue organization Salvamento Marítimo (S.M.) in Madrid and forwarded all information we had obtained to them. At 7.45am, S.M. confirmed that they had found the boat in distress and rescued the travellers on board. They were on their way back to Tarifa/Spain. (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/557>).

Aegean Sea

On Monday, the 4th of July, at 6pm, a contact person called the Alarm Phone and informed us about a group of travellers who had stranded on the Greek island of Samos. We called the port police on Samos, forwarded the travellers' phone number and position and urged them to pick the travellers up. At 7pm, we called the police on Samos again and learned that they were working on the case. Finally, at 9.44pm, a contact person confirmed to us that the travellers had been rescued and that everyone was fine (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/534>).

On Tuesday, the 2nd of August 2016, at 9am, the Alarm Phone was alerted by a contact person to a case of travellers stranded on an island in the Greek Evros river. Amongst the travellers was a boy with cancer in a very bad condition, according to the travellers. We informed the Greek police about the group. Eventually, the group was found, the ill boy was hospitalized and later brought to the Police Station with the rest of the group, according to Team Humanity, a local support group (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/550>).

On Sunday, the 7th of August 2016, at 7.10am, a contact person alerted the Alarm Phone to a boat carrying 40 travellers between Çeşme/Turkey and the Greek island of Chios. Through regular GPS updates from the travellers, our shift team was able to monitor the trajectory of the boat as it got closer to Greek waters. At 09.29am, we received a confirmation from our contact person that the travellers had safely arrived in Chios (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/549>).

On Wednesday, the 17th of August 2016, at around 7am, the Alarm Phone was directly called from two boats in distress in the Aegean Sea. We alerted the Greek Coastguard to both boats and were able to stay in contact with the travellers of one of them. At about 9am, the coastguard confirmed to us, that this boat had been rescued and that the travellers had been brought to Greece. Because no shipwrecks were reported on this day, we suppose that the second boat was rescued as well (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/556>).

On Saturday, the 20th of August 2016, at 4.40am, a contact person alerted the Alarm Phone to a group of stranded travellers on the Greek island of Kastellorizo. We

contacted the group and alerted the local police on the island. At 5.47am, the travellers wrote to us that they had been rescued (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/559>).

On Wednesday the 24th of August 2016, at 5.05 am, the Alarm Phone was alerted to a group of travellers leaving from Turkey towards Lesvos. There were 37 people on board, including 8 children. At 5.55 am we received a position showing that the travellers were getting close to the maritime border. After this point however, the contact person was no longer able to establish communication with the group. At 8.59 am we learned that the boat had been intercepted by the Turkish coast guard. (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/admin/reports/edit/562/saved>)

Central Mediterranean Sea

On Tuesday, the 5th of July 2016, at 9.48am, Father Mussie Zerai alerted the Alarm Phone to a boat in distress in the Central Med, with 110 travellers on board. He forwarded their GPS position and their satellite phone number to us. Although we were not able to reach the travellers directly, we checked and charged their phone's credit several times. Beyond that, we established contact to the private rescue vessel AQUARIUS, which had been tasked with a rescue operation by the MRCC in Rome, and monitored its trajectory. At 2.45pm, the crew of the AQUARIUS confirmed to us that they had rescued the travellers on board of the boat in distress (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/537>).

On Wednesday, the 6th of July 2016, at 9.23am, Father Mussie Zerai informed the Alarm Phone about two boats in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea. We checked and charged their satellite phones' credit several times and sent SMS to their phones, in order to receive their GPS positions. However, we were not able to establish direct contact to them. In a call at 11am, we learned from the Italian coastguard's MRCC that they were already aware of both boats. At 4.20pm, the MRCC informed us that the travellers of one of the boats had returned to Libya by themselves and that the second boat had been rescued by the Italian coastguard (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/538>).

On Tuesday, the 12th of July 2016, at 8.23am, the Alarm Phone was alerted by Father Mussie Zerai to a boat in the Central Mediterranean Sea. At 8.47pm, Father Zerai informed us that the boat had been rescued by the Libyan Coastguards. The travellers

had not managed to leave Libyan waters. 945 other travellers were rescued in over 6 rescue operations carried out amongst others by Sea Watch, MSF and MOAS and coordinated by the Italian Coastguard. In one vessel, four bodies were found according to a press release by the Italian Coastguard (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/540>).

On Monday, the 18th of July 2016, at 5.06am, a contact person alerted the Alarm Phone to a wooden boat with 500 travellers in the central Mediterranean that had left about 2 hours earlier from Tripoli. At 7.16am, we informed the Italian Coastguard about the case. We were not in direct contact with the travellers, but stayed in touch with both the contact person and the Coastguard, who launched a Search and Rescue mission. At 3.06pm, our contact person confirmed to us that the travellers had been rescued (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/541>).

On Tuesday, the 19th of July 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 3 boats in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea. We were able to establish contact to two of them and monitored their rescue. While rescue of all three vessels cannot be undoubtedly verified, it seems highly likely that they were rescued and the passengers disembarked in Italy. MRCC Rome later announced that they had rescued 3200 people in 25 SAR operations that day. They had also discovered one fatality on one of the rescued boats (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/542>).

On Friday, the 22nd of July 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted, via Father Mussie Zerai, to three distress situations in the Central Mediterranean Sea. In all three cases, Father Zerai had made an initial call to the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome and the Alarm Phone also established contact to the travellers. In all three cases, rescue was later confirmed by the Italian coastguard (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/543>).

On Friday, the 29th of July 2016 at 8.04am, Father Mussie Zerai alerted the Alarm Phone to a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea and forwarded the travellers' satellite phone number to us. He informed us that there were 150 travellers on board and that their boat was located northeast of Tripoli/Libya. We called the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome and forwarded the satellite phone number of the travellers, and were able to receive their GPS position afterwards. During the whole day, we stayed in contact with the travellers and monitored their rescue. Finally, at 5.30pm, Médecins Sans Frontières posted on

Twitter that the rescue vessel AQUARIUS had rescued the travellers. At the same day, a record number of more than 3.400 persons had been rescued in 34 separate rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean Sea (for the full see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/546>).

On Tuesday, the 2nd of August 2016, at 9.05am, Father Mussie Zerai alerted us and the Italian Coastguard to a boat in distress carrying about 250 travellers in the Central Mediterranean. Their engine had stopped in the Northwest of Al Khoms and water was entering the boat. At 6.50pm, the Italian Coastguard confirmed that they had rescued the travellers and would bring them to Italy (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/551>).

On Friday, the 5th of August 2016, at 7.30am, the Alarm Phone received an SOS message from Father Mussie Zerai, however we only reached the travellers in distress at 8.15am, after many unsuccessful attempts. They said that they were about 150 people on board of a white plastic boat. Finally, at 1.45pm, they were rescued by Doctors without Borders, as the DIGNITY I crew confirmed to us at 2.50pm. It took again about six hours from the first SOS call of the people on the boat until their final rescue (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/552>).

On Wednesday, the 10th of August 2016, in the morning, the Alarm Phone was alerted by Father Mussie Zerai to a situation of maritime distress off the coast of Libya. Our shift team tried to reach the boat-people at 8.15am, and repeatedly afterwards, without success. However, we were able to charge their satellite phone with credit. We contacted the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome at 8.22am and they knew already about the distress situation. Finally, at 3.20pm, MRCC Rome confirmed that all vessels in distress on that day had been discovered and rescued (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/553>).

On Friday, the 19th of August 2016, at 8.40am, Father Mussie Zerai informed the Alarm Phone about a boat in distress with 105 travellers on board, who had started from Libya. At 9.45am, he told us that the DIGNITY I was already on its way to the travellers in distress. Afterwards, we regularly checked and uploaded the credit of the travellers' Thuraya satellite phone. Finally, at 4pm, the crew of the DIGNITY I confirmed to us that the rescue of the travellers in distress has successfully been accomplished (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/558>).

On Saturday, the 20th of August 2016, at 7.27am, Father Mussie Zerai informed the Alarm Phone about a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea. We called the travellers back and were asked to alert the Italian coastguard, what we immediately did. At 2.10pm, the Italian coastguard confirmed to us that they had rescued 95 travellers. In the evening, at 8.35pm, we were told that all rescue operations on that day had been successfully accomplished, with 573 travellers rescued in total (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/560>).

On Sunday, the 21st of August 2016 at 9.31am, the Alarm Phone was directly called by people in distress at sea from a Thuraya satellite phone. They had left Libya 2 hours earlier. At 9.45am, we informed the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome about the boat in distress. Afterwards, we stayed in contact with the travellers, until their rescued was confirmed by the Italian coastguard at 1pm (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/561>).