

## International solidarity against mass drowning, detention and further border militarisation

WatchTheMed Alarm Phone Six Week Report

29<sup>th</sup> August – 10<sup>th</sup> October 2016

"FERRIES NOT FRONTEX" read the banner that Alarm Phone activists put up on the high-speed ferry between Tangier (Morocco) and Tarifa (Spain), on Monday the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2016. The ferry protest engaged passengers and crew in conversations about the Mediterranean as one of the deadliest and most militarised borders in the world, which gained a lot of interest and positive feedback, especially among passengers from Morocco (for a longer recap of the protest see: <http://ffm-online.org/2016/09/27/ferries-not-frontex-2/>). While thousands of tourists, mainly from the Global North, cross the Mediterranean on ferries with ease each year, others have to risk their lives when they want to cross over to the European side.

But not only in Morocco, also on the Greek islands such as Lesbos, the need for *ferries for all* is a pressing concern: after a fire broke out in the completely overcrowded Moria detention centre on the 19<sup>th</sup> of September during a revolt of the detainees,<sup>1</sup> the already unbearable living conditions for the thousands stuck there have further deteriorated. In 2015, travellers were still able to continue their journeys from Lesbos after registration. Now they are held in detention for about 25 days, before they are released and able to move on the island but without the possibility to board ferries to the Greek mainland. This untenable situation is a consequence of the so-called EU-Turkey deal, based on the presumption that keeping people imprisoned on the islands for unknown periods of times will deter others who would seek to cross the Aegean Sea.

Solidarity with those trying to overcome militarised borders is increasingly criminalized, as we witnessed in the cases of the three Spanish firemen and lifesavers Manuel Blanco, Enrique González, and Julio Latorre as well as the German retiree Bernd Keller, who were recently arrested and accused of trafficking. Similar is the case of Salam Aideen who is still forced to remain in Greece, not allowed to return to his family in Denmark simply because he had rescued refugees at sea.<sup>2</sup> Despite these attempts to suppress solidarity, creating international solidarity amongst the governed is the only way to contest regimes of control and deterrence.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-camp-lesbos-fire-thousands-flee-moria-greece-migrants-a7317336.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/49/49390/1.html>, <http://taz.de/16-Jahre-Haft-wegen-Schlepperei!/5336068/>, [https://www.change.org/p/council-of-the-european-union-allow-salam-aldeen-to-leave-greece?recruiter=597212192&utm\\_source=share\\_petition&utm\\_medium=facebook&utm\\_campaign=share\\_page&utm\\_term=des-lg-share\\_petition-custom\\_msg](https://www.change.org/p/council-of-the-european-union-allow-salam-aldeen-to-leave-greece?recruiter=597212192&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=share_page&utm_term=des-lg-share_petition-custom_msg)

We from the Alarm Phone network are continuing our work and just held our 5<sup>th</sup> general meeting in Morocco in late September with members coming together from 16 countries on both sides of the Mediterranean. At the same time, our daily struggle to support travellers in distress continues. At times, we speak to precarious travellers directly or we get contacted by close family members and friends of those who seek to cross borders. At other times, we are never able to engage directly but can charge satellite phones kept on refugee boats with credit so that they can keep making distress calls. This was the case in the Central Mediterranean on Monday the 29<sup>th</sup> of August (for full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/564>). About 5,500 people were rescued that day alone.

Throughout the past six weeks, the period that this report covers, numbers of rescued travellers in the Central Mediterranean Sea remained high. Approximately 24,141 people reached Italy through that part of the sea.<sup>3</sup> While thousands were rescued, there were, once again, many fatalities. Besides the unknown number of deaths of those who simply disappear at sea, hundreds drowned on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September when their vessel capsized off Egypt. More than 300 deaths are already accounted for, but the death toll is likely to rise significantly as many remain missing.<sup>4</sup>

From the 29<sup>th</sup> of August to the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2016, the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone was involved in 18 distress situations in total, of which 7 took place in the Western Mediterranean, 7 in the Central Mediterranean, and 4 in the Aegean Sea. In the same period last year, the Alarm Phone was involved in more than 360 emergency situations, many of which occurred in the Aegean Sea. This decrease does not suggest that fewer people need to cross the sea but merely that deterrence regimes at sea prevent people from leaving with ever-greater violence. The EU-Turkey deal in particular has established a trans- and supra-nationally coordinated deterrence regime that, ultimately, seeks to end migratory movements at sea.<sup>5</sup> This horrible deal that has caused human rights violations on a mass scale now seems to serve as a blue print for future deals with other third countries, especially Northern African ones.

Besides the already close ties to Tunisia and Morocco, collaborations between the EU and Libya are intensifying. Following an agreement signed on Tuesday the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, EU navies will train Libya's coastguard on a vessel part of the military mission Sophia, in order to intercept and return people seeking to escape Libya.<sup>6</sup> These novel co-operations have already led to the return of more than 11,000 people, following the account of Libyan authorities.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the well-documented mass violations of migrant rights in Libya, and not to mention the fact that Libya is a war-torn country, the EU actively assigns responsibility to those who admitted to have violently attacked and arrested

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<sup>3</sup> <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=502>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/23/death-toll-in-migrant-shipwreck-off-egypt-rises-to-300?CMP=twg\\_gu](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/23/death-toll-in-migrant-shipwreck-off-egypt-rises-to-300?CMP=twg_gu)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/maurice-stierl/every-refugee-boat-rebellion-supporting-border-transgressions-at-s>

<sup>6</sup> <https://euobserver.com/foreign/134732>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-libya-idUSKCN11M1AP>

humanitarian actors, such as the crews of Doctors without Borders and Sea-Eye.<sup>8</sup> While not openly shared by most representatives of EU institutions and member states, these deals and co-operations effectively create the “giant refugee city” in Libya that the racist Hungarian Prime Minister Orban called for in late September.<sup>9</sup> And not only there. The president of the European Parliament Martin Schulz now openly pressurised the Egyptian government to sign a deal similar to the one with Turkey, even tying the granting of IMF loans to such forms of cooperation.

The externalisation of EU borders to Northern Africa will further exacerbate the suffering that people on the move experience in places they need to escape from. As we have repeatedly made clear, and as shipwreck after shipwreck demonstrates, sea-migration will not cease to exist but occur through ever-more dangerous and deadly paths. The high numbers of fatalities off the coast of Libya and the latest mass tragedy off Egypt give evidence to that fact. At the same time, it is clear that these forms of border externalisation and deterrence agreements are deeply volatile and flawed - they can never fully deter unauthorised forms of migration from seeking out new paths and finding cracks in the border regime.

## Summaries of cases 29<sup>th</sup> August – 10<sup>th</sup> October:

### Central Mediterranean Sea

On Monday, the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, an Alarm Phone member was contacted by someone calling from a Thuraya satellite phone at 8.17am. While no information could be shared in the initial call, we were able to upload the satellite phone with credit, as it had nearly no credit left. After several unsuccessful attempts to reach the phone, we received a call from the Thuraya phone at 8.55am, but communications were difficult and eventually broke down. It was clear, however, that the caller was on a boat. At 9.02am we called the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Rome (MRCC) and passed on the phone number. At 9.11am we received a call from a contact person in Morocco who reported that a friend of his had informed him that he had successfully made it onto an Italian boat after having left Libya on a boat. [...]. At 5.35pm MRCC Rome confirmed that the boat in question had been rescued by an Italian vessel. All in all, about 5.500 people were rescued on the day (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/564>).

On Tuesday, the 30<sup>th</sup> of August, our Alarm Phone shift team was alerted to 3 cases of maritime distress in the Central Mediterranean. Around 9am, Father Mussie Zerai informed us about 2 vessels in distress off Libya. Vessel 1 carried about 100 people had had left about 7 hours earlier, presumably from Zuwarah. Vessel 2 had presumably also left from there but it was unclear how many people it carried. At 9.10am we were able to

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/28/libyan-navy-admits-confrontation-charity-rescue-boat-msf>, <http://www.all-in.de/nachrichten/rundschau/Eskalation-im-Mittelmeer-Libysche-Kuestenwache-setzt-Fluechtlingshelfer-68-aus-Ofterschwang-fest;art2757,2349973>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/europe-giant-refugee-city-libya-africa-hungary-prime-minister-viktor-orban-a7327931.html>

recharge one of the satellite phones with credit but we were unable to reach the boats. At 9.50am MRCC Rome confirmed that they knew about the boats in distress already. Our shift team reached vessel 2 at 10.01am and at 11.45am the travellers were able to pass on their GPS position. [...] At about 1pm we received information about a third vessel in distress, again via Father Zerai. The vessel had also left from Zuwarah in Libya. [...] At 3.34pm MRCC Rome confirmed that they were coordinating the rescue of all in all dozens of vessels and that the people would need to patiently wait for their rescue. At 6.25pm MRCC Rome confirmed the rescue of all vessels in distress in that area of the sea. All in all, about 3000 people were rescued in 30 SAR operations (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/565>).

On Monday, the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2016 at 7.20am, Father Mussie Zerai alerted the Alarm Phone to a boat in distress in the Central Med. On the boat were 140 travellers, amongst them many women and children. We passed on the information to the Italian coast guard, who informed us that they were already working on the case. In the evening, the Italian coast guard confirmed that the boat had been rescued as one of three vessels rescued that day, carrying a total of 350 travellers (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/573>).

On Tuesday, the 13<sup>th</sup> of September 2016 at 7.25am, Father Mussie Zerai alerted the Alarm Phone to 35 travellers in distress in the Central Med. We passed on the information to the Italian coast guard, who told us that they were already aware of the case. At 10.53 the Italian coast guard confirmed that all the travellers were on board of a merchant vessel. Later we found out that the travellers had been transferred to an Italian coast guard boat together with 310 other travellers rescued the same day from four different vessels (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/574>).

On Wednesday, the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 2016 at 6.16am, Father Mussie Zerai alerted the Alarm Phone to a group of around 130 travellers in distress in the Central Med. We informed the Italian coast guard about the situation, but they insisted that they could not do anything without knowing the exact position of the vessel. At 1.15pm we talked to the Italian coast guard again, and they informed us that all 124 travellers on the boat had been rescued by MOAS a few hours earlier (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/575>).

### **Western Mediterranean Sea**

On Wednesday, the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, the Alarm Phone was alerted at 9.36am to a case of distress in the Western Mediterranean Sea. A contact person informed our shift team about a boat that had left in the early hours of the day from Malabata in Morocco. [...] At 9.46am we received a second call from another contact person who informed us that there were 10 people on the boat, trying to reach Tarifa/Spain. Shortly afterwards the second contact person informed us that she could not reach the travellers anymore. Our shift team tried to contact the boat people, without success. About one hour later, the initial contact person informed us that the boat had been rescued by the Spanish

coastguards Salvamento Maritimo. We passed the information on to our second contact person (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/563>).

On Monday, the 5<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone was contacted at 8.03am by a person who informed us that he was on a boat in the Western Mediterranean Sea. We agreed for him to send us the GPS position but communication then broke down and we were unable to re-connect to him until 12.17pm. Unfortunately, the travellers had been intercepted by the Moroccan authorities and been returned to Morocco (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/577>).

On Thursday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, the Alarm Phone shift team was contacted at 6.27am by a person who was on a boat in distress with 7 other travellers. They had left from Tangier at approximately 5am. At 6.32 the Spanish search and rescue organisation Salvamento Maritimo confirmed that they were in contact with the boat and were looking for the 8 travellers. When we were able to get in touch with the group again at 6.58am, it was clear that they were seriously anxious and distressed and it was difficult to gather any further information about their situation. Salvamento Maritimo confirmed to us at 7.40am that the vessel had been found by the Moroccan Navy. The travellers were returned to Morocco (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/578>).

On Tuesday, the 13<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, at 7.15am, we received a call from a contact person from Morocco about 10 travellers in distress. They and another group of 7 travellers had left on two zodiacs from Tanger at 6.30am. Both boats were intercepted by the Marine Royal. Some of the 17 travellers were bussed to Kenitra close to Rabat, after being registered at the police station in Tanger. This is a usual practice in Morocco with the aim of preventing another attempt to cross the border (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/574>).

On Friday, the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, at 11.21am, the Alarm Phone shift team received a call from a Moroccan number, but the connection broke off and it was not possible to re-connect to the travellers. At 2.46 pm we received another call from the travellers. They informed us that everyone was safe and back in Morocco (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/570>).

On Thursday, the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 2016, at 9.38am, the Alarm Phone received a call from a number in Morocco. We learned that the person calling us was missing news from relatives on a boat. At 10.20am, we received the phone number of the travellers in distress, but were not able to reach them directly. At 11.30am, we alerted the Spanish rescue organization Salvamento Maritimo (S.M.). At 1.30pm, S.M. from Almeria informed us that they had just found a boat with 19 travellers on board, including a pregnant woman. At 2pm, one of the contact persons confirmed to us that the travellers on board of the boat in distress had been rescued (see <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/571>).

On Monday, the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, at 9.28am, the Alarm Phone was called from a Moroccan number and informed about 9 people on board of a boat in distress, who had

left from Tangier/Morocco to Tarifa/Spain. We were unable to reach the travellers directly, but stayed in contact with the person who had called us. At 3pm, we were able to speak to one of the travellers via this contact person. The group had been intercepted and brought back to Morocco by the Moroccan Marine Royal (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/572>).

### **Aegean Sea**

On Saturday, the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, at 5.45am, the Alarm Phone shift team was alerted by a contact person to a boat carrying 35 travellers, on their way from Turkey to Greece. The engine had stopped twice, but was working again. At 6.57 am the Greek coast guard confirmed that the travellers had been rescued by a Frontex vessel, and that they would be taken to Samos (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/567> for the full report).

On Sunday, the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, at 1.37am, the Alarm Phone shift team was alerted to a group of 10 people, 8 men and 2 women, who had stranded on Pasas Island. They were seeking shelter in the church on the island, and reported that they were very cold. At 7.13am the group confirmed that they had been rescued and that everyone was safe (for full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/568>).

On Thursday, the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 2016, at 5.16am a contact person sent us a position of a boat in distress. We checked the position and told him that the boat was in Greek waters. He told us that the Coastguard was already near the boat, but that he called because he was afraid of a push-back. At 6.13 the contact person sent us the number of a person on the boat. We reached out to the people in the boat, who told us that they had been rescued to the Greek island of Samos (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/579>).

On Sunday, the 9<sup>th</sup> of October 2016, at 3.15am, we received a call from travellers in distress near Milos. At 5.40am, the travellers confirmed that the Greek Coastguard had rescued them to Milos. 3 persons were arrested as traffickers (for the full report see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/580>).