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Hotline for boatpeople in distress.
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Amid Criminalization, Delayed Rescue, and Mass Dying, the Struggle for Freedom of Movement continues

WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 2 Month Report
16th January 2017 - 19th March 2017

Over the past two months, the Alarm Phone witnessed several incidents off the coast of Libya - scenes that will presumably become even more common if the EU realizes its recently reinforced plans to shut down the sea-migration route across the Central Mediterranean Sea with the help of a future Libyan coastguard. In conjunction with the latest accusations against NGOs conducting Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in this area, this EU strategy will only prolong the suffering of people imprisoned in inhuman conditions in Libya and will make their maritime journeys ever-more dangerous.

On Friday the 24th of February, the Alarm Phone was alerted to a boat in distress in international waters north of Al-Khums/Libya, carrying more than 100 people. Although we immediately informed the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome and forwarded the boat's position, due to a complete lack of rescue assets in the Central Mediterranean on that day, it took another 11 hours of desperately waiting and drifting until two small Italian coastguard vessels reached the travellers and conducted a SAR operation. Following the emergency call, the coastguard vessels embarked from the Italian island of Lampedusa, which was about 370 kilometres or 200 nautical miles away from the boat in distress. Merely four days before this incident, on Monday, the 20th of February, at least 87 bodies were washed ashore the Libyan city of Zawiya.¹ The boat of the travellers had capsized after it was attacked and its engine removed within Libyan territorial waters.² As an Italian journalist reported, the Libyan 'coastguard' unit of Zawiya is allegedly involved in both people smuggling³ and attacks on travellers in distress in that area.⁴

Both of these cases vividly illustrate the violent effects of EU border deterrence which can be expected to exacerbate in light of the plans and announcements that the EU has advanced over the past weeks. On the one hand, the EU increasingly relies on Libyan forces to act as their watchdog and henchmen over the Central Mediterranean route by training and collaborating with Libyan naval forces to pull-back migrant boats.⁵ On the other hand, the EU and particularly its

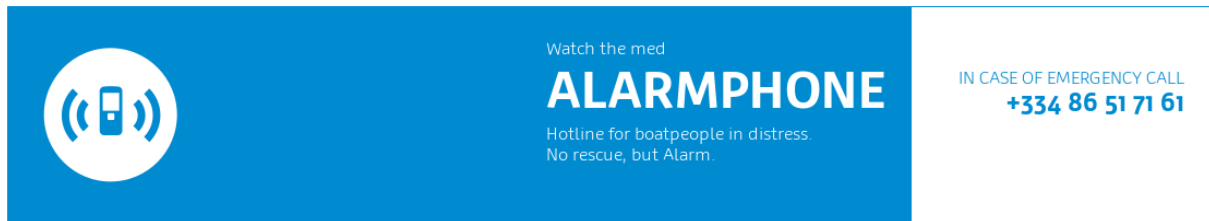
¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-39037251>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/21/bodies-of-74-migrants-wash-ashore-libya-zawiya>

³ <http://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-kingpin-of-libyas-human-trafficking-mafia-301505>

⁴ <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/video-shows-libyan-coastguard-whipping-rescued-migrants-6d8g2jgz6>

⁵ <http://themigrantproject.org/ieua8e/>; Video on EU NAVFOR MED training (France24): <https://youtu.be/b3WiKjCRE68>



Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex seek to delegitimize and undermine the humanitarian work of civil NGOs who form an important presence in the deadliest zone off Libya and continue to save thousands of lives. Media and NGO reports about the involvement of the 'Libyan coastguard' in attacks on travellers and civil rescue boats such as Sea-Watch are ignored or discredited.

Since Libya is to play a key role in EU migration 'management' schemes in the Mediterranean, the EU turns a blind eye to the unstable political situation and the grave human rights violations on a mass scale there, as they did in the case of the EU-Turkey deal. In early February, EU leaders met in Malta to strategize about how to fight unauthorized sea-migration, seeking to pave the way for an EU-Libya deal and similar plans to push-back travellers to Tunisia and Egypt.⁶ The Malta declaration envisions to create 'adequate reception capacities in Libya', while of course knowing that human rights violations occurring within Libya and against refugees are simply staggering.⁷

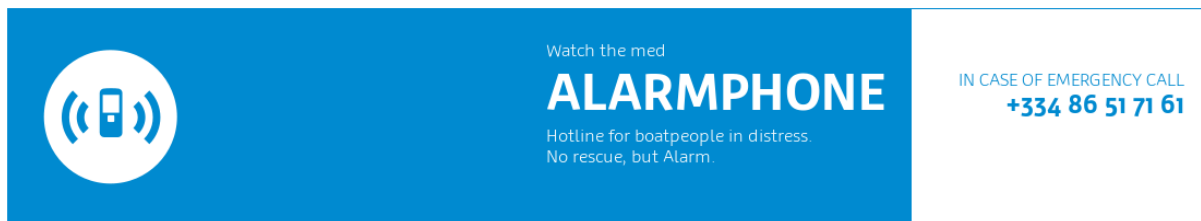
What we see here is a political strategy that we have observed for many years now, the so-called externalisation of the European border. In the case of Libya this is done by establishing and training a Libyan coastguard that does not yet exist, so that migrant boats are prevented from reaching international waters where they could potentially be rescued by European actors and brought to Italy. Libya's UN-backed prime minister Al-Serraj, who still only holds control over a fraction of the country, has already suggested that NATO and EU forces could be allowed to operate within Libyan waters.⁸ Yet, other leaders of different militias in the war-torn country have already made clear that they would not accept such intervention.

EU leaders also seek to support rival actors within Libya with money, know-how and technology to securitize its southern border, so that people won't be able to get anywhere near the sea. Perversely but not surprisingly, this is all done in the name of humanitarian action. EU leaders continue to suggest that this would be an adequate strategy to fight the smuggling business and to thereby protect precarious travelers. But we know that the opposite is the case: the harder it is for people to cross borders, the more support they require, thus the need for smugglers in the first place. The longer the journey, the costlier, the more dangerous, and the deadlier it becomes. More than 500 deaths in the Mediterranean have been officially counted since the beginning of 2017, while

⁶ Declaration of the EU-Malta summit: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2017/02/03-informal-meeting/>

⁷ See for example the UNICEF reports about migrant detention in Libya: Reports from Libyan detention centers: https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/EN_UNICEF_Central_Mediterranean_Migration.pdf and <https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/libyan-detention-centres/>

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/01/nato-eu-ships-tackle-people-trafficking-libya-mediterranean-refugees-migrants>



the number of travellers who crossed the sea has increased by 50% compared to the same period in 2015 and 2016.⁹

Civilian actors with the sole mission to rescue people in distress have recently become the target of cynical campaigns seeking to criminalize and undermine their humanitarian efforts, led amongst others by the director of the EU border agency Frontex, Fabrice Leggeri.¹⁰ We were amongst a group of organizations that have forcefully responded to these allegations in a public statement. Together with Sea-Watch, Jugend Rettet e.V., Lifeline, Borderline Europe, Menschenrechte ohne Grenzen e.V., and Cadus we stated: “People do not migrate because there are smuggling networks. Smuggling networks exist because people have to flee. ... It is cynical to now discredit those organizations that save people at sea. Our mandate differs very clearly from that of the war ships in the area. Our crews are not deployed to disband trafficking networks but rather to provide humanitarian aid. Contrary to Leggeri’s claims, there are no attempts to provide ways of legal immigration. The closing of the Balkan route, the EU-Turkey Deal and the training of the Libyan Coast Guard are measures aimed at preventing immigration to Europe, thereby worsening the desperate situation and insecurity of refugees. Instead of providing safe and legal ways to enter the EU, migration is being criminalized.”¹¹

Also beyond the Central Mediterranean, the struggle for freedom of movement and for the rights of those on the move continues. In the Aegean Sea, the situation has considerably worsened since the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal one year ago. A recent report by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) on the situation of migrants in the region confirms that the deal is having a disastrous impact on the health of migrants and contributes to making them even more vulnerable.¹² While the EU-Turkey deal enables the EU to officially send back travellers arriving from Turkey in Greece, this has not put an end to the ‘illegal’ push-backs carried out in the region. In early February, Turkish leaders accused Greek authorities of pushing back refugees via the river Maritza. According to Turkish officials, more than 3000 people were illegally pushed back to Turkey between October and February.¹³

In the Western Mediterranean, people continue to overcome borders and fences. In the morning of the 17th and 20th of February, around 850 people out of much larger groups successfully reached the Spanish colony Ceuta. As is usually the

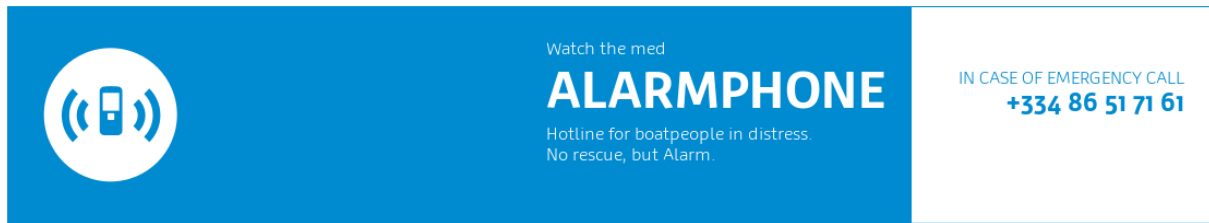
⁹ <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>

¹⁰ <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article162394787/Rettungseinsatze-vor-Libyen-muessen-auf-den-Pruefstand.html>

¹¹ <https://sea-watch.org/en/european-civil-rescue-organizations-stand-up-against-smuggling-allegations/>

¹² http://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/one_year_on_from_the_eu-turkey_deal.pdf

¹³ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ankara-says-greece-has-forcefully-sent-thousands-of-migrants-back-to-turkey.aspx?pageID=238&nID=109319&NewsCatID=359>



case when people try to enter the Spanish enclaves, all the people caught by the Spanish Guardia Civil were pushed back to Morocco, from where they were deported to cities in the south. Amongst the travellers who managed to reach the CETI (Spanish reception centre) and the people pushed back to Morocco, many were injured as a result of police violence. The Spanish activist group Caminando Fronteras noted that during the attempt, there was less police presence on the Moroccan side of the fence than usual. This occurred just after Morocco had threatened to relax its border control, following the EU's decision to change trade agreements with Morocco so that they would exclude products from the illegally occupied West Sahara. This shows, once again, how migrants are used as political hostages by Morocco in negotiations with the EU.

After these last jumps, there are now around 1400 people waiting to be sent to mainland Spain in the CETI in Ceuta, which has the capacity to accommodate only 512 people.¹⁴ Following the jumps, the Spanish Minister of Interior requested drones to control the border between Morocco and Ceuta and Melilla, and the Guardia Civil called for a further reinforcement of their troops. However, resistance at the border and acts of solidarity continue to challenge this border fortification - as vividly shown in the mass jumps and also in the mass demonstration in Barcelona where over 160.000 people took to the streets to demand the opening of borders.¹⁵


In the meantime, the Alarm Phone is strengthening its trans-Mediterranean ties and reach, and further building toward a growing network to counter Europe's maritime border violence. In March 2017, a general meeting took place in Palermo/Italy where activists from 15 countries, including from Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Turkey, came together to strategize, and share experiences, tactics and knowledges. Beyond that, we exchanged with representatives of MSF and Borderline Sicily and also reached out to the public when several Alarm Phone members from different regions presented our collective work. Our trans-border solidarity inspires, strengthens and guides our struggle for the freedom of movement for all.

Summaries of Alarm Phone Distress Cases

In the past two months, the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone was alerted to situations of distress in all three regions of the Mediterranean Sea. We were engaged in 13 distress cases, of which 4 took place in the Central Mediterranean, 3 in the Western Mediterranean and 6 in the Aegean Sea. You can find links to the individual reports of the past 9 weeks below.

¹⁴ http://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/Cerca-personas-saltan-valla_0_613488679.html and http://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/inmigrantes-vuelven-entrar-Ceuta-salto_0_614538573.html

¹⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39017265>



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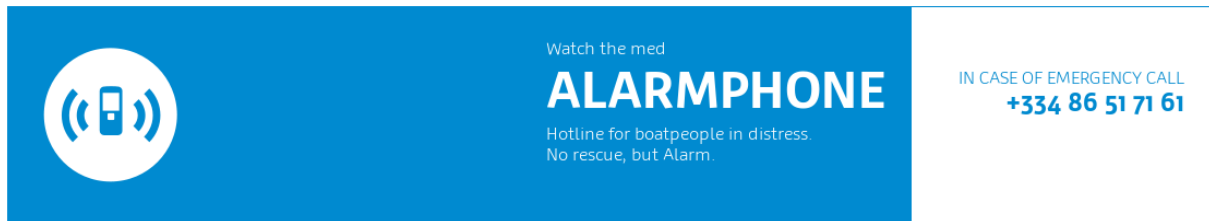
Central Mediterranean Sea

On Friday, the 27th of January 2017, our WatchTheMed Alarm Phone shift team was alerted by Father Zerai to a boat in the Central Mediterranean Sea. We immediately reached out to the travellers, who told us that they were about 100 persons. We could not get their GPS position, but forwarded the distress call to the Italian Coastguard. After our first contact, we did not manage to reach the travellers again, but we recharged the credit of their satellite phone. We called back the Italian Coastguard several times, who confirmed that they were working on the case. On the 7th of February, the Italian Coastguard wrote us that they had employed a merchant vessel to rescue the boat in question. However, the merchant vessel reported that the boat in distress and another boat were in fact in Libyan territorial waters and that they were picked up by the Libyan navy and "escorted back to the Libyan shore". (See: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/645>)

On Saturday, the 4th of February 2017, Father Zerai forwarded us the Thuraya number of a boat in distress. At 10.17am we alerted the Italian coast guard to the case. When we reached the travellers we learned that they were 105 people, including one pregnant woman and small children, heading towards Malta. We were in contact with the travellers several times, and could hear that the travellers were getting desperate as rescue was taking a long time to reach them. At 3.52pm we spoke to the Italian coast guard again, and they informed us that the rescue operation was ongoing, and at 5.07pm, they could confirm that the rescue had been carried out (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/643>).

On Friday, the 24th of February 2017, our shift team was alerted by Father Zerai to 100 persons in distress on a rubber boat in the Central Mediterranean Sea. They had started their journey to Italy the night before near Al Khums, Libya at 11pm local time. When they called us, they had spent already 9 hours at sea. We immediately informed the Italian Coastguard about the case and they immediately sent for rescue. However, the rescue vessels departed from Lampedusa, far away from the vessel in distress, so that the travellers were rescued many hours later - at 5pm (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/636>).

On Thursday the 2nd of March 2017, our shift team learned via Father Zerai of a vessel in distress off the coast of Libya. We received a satellite phone number, but no GPS coordinates. We tried to reach the travellers but were unable to do so, despite several attempts. However, we were able to see that their satellite phone credit decreased and we thus recharged their phone so that they could continue to make calls. In the evening, we learned from the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Rome that the people had been rescued. However, the next morning we heard through Father Zerai that the travellers had returned to



Libya - it thus remains unclear what exactly happened in this case (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/637>).

Western Mediterranean Sea

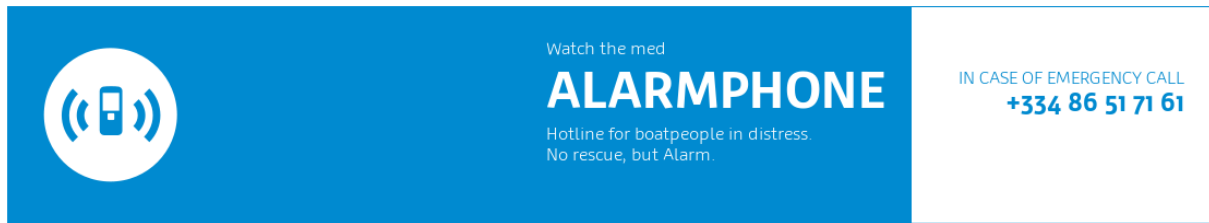
On Friday the 17th of February 2017, a contact person alerted the Alarm Phone to a rubber boat in distress with 28 travellers on board, who had left Nador/Morocco. We were able to speak directly to the travellers and alerted the Spanish rescue organization Salvamento Maritimo (S.M.) in Almeria at 9.45am. Yet, S.M. refrained from conducting a search and rescue operation, as they were supposedly not allowed to enter Moroccan territorial waters. With the help of the Spanish UNHCR we pressurized S.M. and at 1.30pm, one of S.M.'s vessels from Melilla/Spain started to search for the boat in distress. Yet, the travellers were intercepted and picked up by the Moroccan Navy and brought back to Nador at about 5pm (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/639>).

On Wednesday the 1st of March 2017, we were contacted by a contact person in Morocco whose friends had left a few hours earlier from the north coast of Morocco. The 9 travellers, including one woman, had left at approximately 2am and were on a small boat with no engine and no phone on board. Our contact person informed us at 8.25am that he had spoken to the Spanish search and rescue organisation Salvamento Maritimo and that they had confirmed the people had been intercepted and returned by the Moroccan Navy. Apart from the woman, all travellers were imprisoned. A few days later we heard that they had been released and were back in Tangier (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/638>).

On Thursday, the 9th of March 2017, the Alarm Phone was alerted by a contact person to a group of 55 travellers, amongst them four women, on their way to mainland Spain. The contact person had lost contact to the group, who had left Morocco between 3am and 4am. Our shift team was not able to establish direct contact to the travellers. At 5.49pm we decided to call the Spanish search and rescue organisation Salvamento Maritimo, who informed us that the travellers had reached the island of Alboran, from where they would be brought to mainland Spain. Shortly afterwards we learned from a Twitter post by a Spanish activist that the 55 travellers had been rescued (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/644>).

Aegean Sea

On Thursday the 2nd of February 2017 at 1am, a contact person alerted the Alarm Phone shift team to a group of travellers in distress in the Aegean Sea. The contact person forwarded the position of the vessel and told us that the travellers had problems with their engine, but did not provide us with any further information about the group. At 1.11am we received a new position showing that



the vessel was moving very slowly towards the Greek island of Chios. Shortly after, the contact person informed us that the Turkish coast guard was carrying out the rescue operation. At 1.51am we got a confirmation that the travellers had been rescued (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/633>).

In the night of Saturday the 4th of February 2017, the Alarm Phone shift team was alerted by a contact person to a group of 45 travellers in distress on their way to the Greek island of Lesbos. We tried to reach the travellers many times, but did not reach them. We called the Greek coast guard and passed on the information we had. 90 minutes later we were told that they searched for the boat, but without success. The following evening at 6.30pm, we called the Turkish coast guard, and they informed us that they had rescued a boat with 45 travellers the night before. Amongst them was a 22-year-old Ethiopian woman who had died in the boat, as a result of the boat being over-crowded, which had caused panic (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/634>).

On Tuesday, the 21st of February 2017, around 5pm, the Alarm Phone was alerted by different contact persons to a boat in distress close to the Greek island of Chios. According to the contact persons, there were about 15 people on board. We immediately called the Greek coastguard. They took the coordinates, but said that they would not search for the boat. We thus called the Turkish Coastguard. They took the coordinates and hung up on us. We called the Turkish Coastguard again several times. At 5.18 pm they told to us that they had just saved a boat with 14 passengers. We could not reach the people on the boat directly, but an hour later a few of our contact persons confirmed that the boat had been rescued by the Turkish Coastguard. The passengers were taken back to Turkey (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/635>).

On Monday the 13th of March 2017 at 1.20am, a contact person informed the Alarm Phone about a group of travellers who were stranded on an Greek island close to the island of Chios. After receiving several phone numbers of the travellers, we tried to reach them directly, but without success. At 2am, the contact person forwarded the travellers' GPS position to us, which was located on the uninhabited island Pasas. At 2.30am, we called the port authorities on Chios and learned that they had already rescued a group of 15 travellers from the neighbouring island Inousses during the night (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/640>).

On Thursday the 16th of March 2017 at 1.30am, a contact person forwarded the phone number and GPS position of a group in distress to us, who had stranded on the tiny Greek island of Pasas. At 1.45am, we established direct contact to the group and received an updated position. At 2am, we called the Greek coastguard in Piraeus and asked them to rescue the travellers from the uninhabited island. At 6.42am, we talked to the Greek coastguard again and they confirmed to us that the group of 12 travellers had been picked up and brought to the island of



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Chios. Afterwards, we informed both contact person and forwarded a link to the Welcome 2 Europe guide to the travellers (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/641>).

On Saturday the 18th of March 2017 at about 7pm, the Alarm Phone was alerted to a group of travellers in distress, stranded on the shores of the Greek island of Vatos. At 7.15pm, we were able to speak directly to the travellers and learned that they were a group of 28, including many women and children. At 7.25pm, we forwarded the travellers' position to the Greek Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) in Piraeus via email and also called the Greek JRCC at 7.30pm. They promised to take care of the stranded travellers. At 0.22am, we called the port authorities on the neighbouring island Chios and they confirmed to us that the travellers had safely arrived on Chios (See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/642>).