

Solidarity at Sea is not a Crime!

WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 6 Week Report

1st of May 2017 – 11th of June 2017

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. (WatchTheMed Alarm Phone Statement, 27/05/2016)¹

One year ago, hundreds of people lost their lives in a shipwreck and we want to remember them today. On the 26th of May 2016, travellers on a precarious boat had reached out to us to tell us about their distress situation. Their boat, with over 500 people on board was pulling a second vessel that had no engine. The second boat carried also over 500 people and we had to witness how it capsized through the direct account of the passengers on the other boat. This was the deadliest incident that the Alarm Phone had to experience so far. Unfortunately, the situation has not improved, and this is why this report began with the exact words that we had written back then.

Over the past six weeks, once again hundreds of precarious travellers have lost their lives in the Mediterranean. On April 30th, the crew of a Médecins Sans Frontières rescue vessel found an empty rubber dinghy and four corpses, about 78km off the Libyan coast, and it can be expected that many more have lost their lives in this shipwreck.² On May 5th and 6th, at least 200 persons died while attempting to reach Italy.³ On the 24th of May, 31 bodies were recovered after around 200 people had fallen from an overcrowded vessel that carried between 500 and 700 travellers. The real number of fatalities remains unknown.⁴ On the 25th of May, 80 people were rescued in Libyan waters, clinging to their shipwrecked boat for two days - seven travellers did not survive.⁵ On Saturday the 10th of June, a boat with eight bodies was found by the Libyan coastguards east of Tripoli, and more than a hundred fatalities are feared.⁶ During an

interception of a migrant boat by the Libyan coastguard a violent incident occurred, during which one traveller was killed and three injured.⁷

The EU border regime continues to use the sea to kill. For families, friends and allies of those who died and disappeared while crossing borders, Boats4People has created an important resource, the guide entitled 'Dead and missing at sea - Information Guide for Families and their Supporters'. You can find here: <http://boats4people.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Cim.B4P.Familles-ANG-1.pdf>.

Despite these harrowing tragedies that have already led to the deaths of about 1853 people this year, delegitimisation and criminalisation campaigns against NGOs involved in large-scale rescue operations continue.⁸ Several NGOs and organisations, including the Alarm Phone, have been accused by various actors of facilitating 'smuggling' or of even collaborating with professional smugglers operating out of Libya. Given the fact that these are completely baseless accusations, the intention behind this smear campaign is clear: they want to undermine the public's support of non-governmental Search and Rescue operations at sea and, more generally, erode solidarity with people on the move.

While the EU border agency Frontex and the Italian prosecutor Carmelo Zuccaro had to take a step back, as they were unable to provide any evidence to support their cynical accusations against the NGOs,⁹ the prosecutor of Trapani/Italy has apparently opened a criminal investigation into one of the civilian rescue missions on May 3rd. The NGO is accused of having facilitated 'illegal immigration' by conducting a rescue operation without having received a prior request for intervention by the Italian authorities.¹⁰ These attempts to illegalise the work of NGOs in the Mediterranean resemble the criminalisation of acts of solidarity elsewhere within and at the outskirts of Europe, with many NGOs and especially activists facing increasingly harsh policing measures. Such developments are deeply worrying, not least as these NGOs shoulder a significant proportion of all rescue operations currently carried out in the Mediterranean.

A recent report by WatchTheMed co-founders Lorenzo Pezzani and Charles Heller (see: <https://blamingtherescuers.org/>) has provided evidence against this 'toxic narrative' concocted by European politicians and actors

to blame the rescuers.¹¹ They convincingly unmask the claims (a) that the SAR NGOs constitute a 'pull-factor', (b) that they are thus helping smugglers to perpetuate their business model and (c) that they, in turn, make the journeys even more dangerous for travellers. By 'untangling the threads of the multiple processes and actors that have shaped the dynamics of migration across the sea between 2015 and 2016' they clearly show that the accusations against SAR NGOs 'rest on biased analysis and spurious causality links', which conceal the responsibility of state actors, be it EUNAVFOR MED or FRONTEX.

What would happen if the NGOs were forced to terminate their work? The answer is clear: even more people would drown and disappear, and many others would be intercepted and returned to the awful conditions in Libya. The mortality rate is already staggering, with one in 35 travellers not surviving the journey from Libya to Italy.¹² In the meantime, the EU continues to turn a blind eye to the violence committed by some of the Libyan coastguards. On the 23rd of May, a unit of the Libyan coastguards opened fire on migrant vessels while several of the NGOs were carrying out a rescue operation and dozens of travellers jumped into the sea.¹³

EU representatives, however, continue to ignore such damning evidence, in order to further outsource border enforcement to particular Libyan authorities.¹⁴ It is clear that EU backed forces in Libya are increasingly entangled in maritime operations, with the number of pull-backs and interceptions steadily growing. Now that the training of the Libyan coastguards as part of operation EUNAVFOR MED/Sophia comes to an end, these authorities have called on Italy to arm their patrol boats, in order to allow them to 'fight against illegal immigration' - something we fear will only lead to more attacks on travellers and NGO crews.¹⁵ At the same time, Europe seeks to clamp down on unauthorised movements toward Libya through agreements with other state authorities and actors, including the Egyptian government. Currently, boats leaving from Egypt are rare and travellers are thus trying to cross the border to Libya, in order to then depart toward Europe. A spokesperson for the Egyptian armed forces announced in late May that borderguards had arrested 351 travellers who had attempted to reach Libya in the period of April 25 to May 12.

On a more positive note, the court of the Sicilian town Agrigent has opened a criminal investigation for murder against the commandants of an Italian Navy ship and the Italian coastguard, after recordings were leaked by the Italian newspaper L'Espresso. The recording reveals how Italian and Maltese authorities failed to respond to a distress call south of Lampedusa on the 11th of October 2013. Although an Italian Navy ship was in the vicinity it did not provide assistance to the travellers. 268 people, mainly Syrians, drowned.¹⁶ This left-to-die case prompted new mobilisations seeking to intervene more directly at sea and to support travellers, while also putting pressure on authorities, clearly signalling to them that they are being watched. Through encounters with one of the survivors of this shipwreck on Malta, the idea to create an alternative hotline for distressed travellers emerged and on the first anniversary of this tragedy, the Alarm Phone was launched.

Not only at sea does the European border policy threaten the lives of travellers. Since the 18th of April, 55 Syrians, including many women and children, have been stuck in the desert between Algeria and Morocco, whose governments are doing Europe's dirty work of preventing people from moving on and toward EU territory. The travellers have reported that they were intercepted after reaching Morocco, and then pushed back towards Algeria. However, since the Algerian authorities refuse to let them enter Algerian territory, they are now stuck in the 'no man's land', kept hostage of a political conflict between the two countries. Local inhabitants of Figuig, the nearest Moroccan town, have shown practical solidarity with the Syrians, and on Friday the 26th of April, a solidarity caravan from Oujda to Figuig was organised together with Alarm Phone Oujda.

One of our Alarm Phone comrades, who lived in Morocco until recently, has been deported to Cameroon after having been imprisoned in Morocco for more than three months. Together with 11 other people, he was arrested after having jumped the fences and reached the Spanish colony of Ceuta. He reports of violent treatment and human rights violations while they were in detention. You can find our full report here: <https://alarmphone.org/en/2017/06/08/mass-arrests-trials-and-deportations-report-by-our-alarm-phone-friend/>. But the struggle continues, and some succeed: On Tuesday the 9th of May, 110 people out

of a group of around 300 managed to jump the fences to the Spanish colony of Melilla. This is the biggest number of travellers entering Melilla so far this year.¹⁷

In Turkey, the activist Taner Kılıç, who is the chair of Amnesty International Turkey has been arrested in Izmir. He was the lawyer of Gabriele Del Grande while he was detained in Turkey and he offers legal support also to many precarious travellers in detention or when facing deportation. Amnesty International calls on the Turkish authorities to drop the charges and to immediately release him. You can sign a petition here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/free-taner/>.¹⁸

Finally, we as the Alarm Phone are amongst many groups and networks all over Europe and around the Mediterranean, who have called out for a range of mobilisations and protests in September. Around the second anniversary of the March of Hope, from September 2, these mobilisations will take place in decentralised actions and local meetings under the slogan 'Welcome United - Fighting for social rights':

We will not give up. We remember the summer of 2015. Hundreds of thousands opened Europe's borders. No one could stop them because they didn't let anyone stop them. They just began to walk. On Friday September 4th, thousands of migrants trapped in Hungary, at the Budapest train-station Keleti, took the road, starting the „march of hope“, opening the Austrian borders. And further on to their families and friends all over Europe. Freedom of movement did not remain a demand anymore. The movement took its freedom. For the right to have rights, for the right to presence, to protection, to help and to a future. The “march of hope” remains an unforgettable event in the long history. And in our collective memory of struggles for the right to escape and to migrate. (...)

In the transnational action days we want to create spaces for all those voices and stories that are usually not heard or that are supposed to remain unheard. Everyone who cares about the common good and solidarity should come out. Everyone who can no longer bear that people are forced to stay in miserable conditions or left to suffer and die at Europe's borders, should come out. We know well that many have fought

for years for their future. Now is the time to raise our voices together. We are more than we think! We'll come United!"

Then, on the 16th of September, delegations will come together in Berlin for a big antiracist parade: <http://www.welcome-united.org/de/home/>. We as the Alarm Phone will contribute as a network that is composed of transnational activists who are located and active in various places around the Mediterranean Sea and beyond.

Summaries of Alarm Phone Distress Cases

In the past 6 weeks, the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone was alerted to situations of distress in all three regions of the Mediterranean Sea. We were engaged in 7 distress cases, of which 2 took place in the Central Mediterranean, 2 in the Western Mediterranean and 3 in the Aegean Sea. You can find links to the individual reports of the past 6 weeks below.

Central Mediterranean Sea

On Friday the 26th of May 2017, at 4.53pm, Father Mussie Zerai alerted us to a boat in distress north of Libya, forwarding us their last position from 3.29pm. At 5.05pm we managed to reach the travellers who told us that they could see small boats in the distance, and that they were in urgent distress. We also managed to establish contact to the travellers a few more times, getting news about their situation and an updated position, which showed that the travellers were in international waters. The Italian coast guard was already informed about the case, but we could pass on information from the travellers, and forward the new position. The following morning, we contacted the coast guard to ask about the search and rescue operation, but they did not give us any information. Only on the 27th in the evening MRCC in Rome replied to our email, stating that they had not found the boat. Most probably the people of this boat were intercepted by Libyan coastguards (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/659>).

On Monday the 5th of June 2017, Father Mussie Zerai informed the Alarm Phone about a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea, with about 110 travellers on board. We were briefly able to establish

connection to them, but the calls broke down twice before we could ask them for their current position. The Italian MRCC told us that they had tracked the satellite phone and received a position still in Libyan territorial waters. We forwarded this position to the pilots of the Moonbird, who searched for the boat but were not able to spot it. At about noon, the Italian MRCC informed us that they had obtained another GPS position, indicating that the travellers were back in Libya. At 2.30pm, the Italian coastguard confirmed to us that Libyan authorities had intercepted the boat (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/660>).

Western Mediterranean Sea

On Wednesday the 31st of May 2017, we were alerted to two distress situations in the Western Mediterranean. A contact person in Morocco informed us about a plastic vessel that had left from Nador/Morocco with 32 people on board. Shortly afterwards we heard that it had been rescued. In the evening, at 8.35pm, the same contact person informed us about a second boat that had left from Nador, already during the night, at approximately 3am, carrying 33 people, including 2 women. He was concerned as he had not heard from them for quite some time. In a phone conversation with the Spanish search and rescue organisation Salvamento Maritimo at 1.40am, we were informed that a rescue operation was ongoing. They told us that they knew of two boats that had reached Alboran Island, a small Spanish island. At 3.26am our contact person confirmed that they had been rescued from the island. Later we learned that there were three boats in total that had been rescued to Spain that day (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/656>).

On Tuesday the 2nd of May 2017, we were called at 6.01am by a group of travellers in the Western Mediterranean Sea. They informed us that they were 6 people in total who had left Tangier/Morocco two hours earlier. They clearly stated that they were in a serious situation of distress and asked us to notify the authorities, even if it meant being returned to Morocco. We then alerted the Spanish Search and Rescue Organisation Salvamento Maritimo to the distress situation and they confirmed that they would start rescue proceedings. We tried several times to get in touch with the group of travellers again, but were not successful. At 8.23am Salvamento confirmed that the boat had been discovered by the Moroccan Navy. The 6 people were then returned to Morocco. Later on, we

learned that they were amongst 54 people who had been put onto a Moroccan police bus and were brought to an unknown destination (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/655>).

Aegean Sea

On Thursday, the 18th of May 2017, we received a WhatsApp message from a contact person about a group of travellers in the Aegean Sea, who had lost touch with their friends and family on the mainland. There were 9 adults and 2 children on the boat and they had left from Didem, Turkey at 4 am to Samos, Greece. As the travellers could not be reached, our contact person feared that they had maybe sunk or were in need of assistance. We immediately tried to get in touch with the travellers via WhatsApp and phone. We only reached an answering machine. Throughout the Thursday evening and the following morning, we tried to contact the travellers, but without success. We also kept in touch with the contact person. On Friday at 11.18am the contact person eventually confirmed to us that the travellers had reached their destination safely, despite some troubles underway. The boat had been leaking and the engine had stopped after 2 hours and 15 minutes, but they had made it to an island from where they had been picked up and brought to Samos (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/662>).

On Saturday, the 20th of May 2017, a contact person alerted us to 3 boats in distress in the Aegean Sea near Cesme. Their engines weren't working anymore and they were urgently asking for help. The contact person provided us with several numbers of people on the boat. We managed to reach them and communicate with them. Finally, our contact person confirmed that the boats had been rescued - 1 boat by the Greek Coastguard and 2 boats by the Turkish Coastguard (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/661>).

On Tuesday the 30th of May 2017, we were alerted by a contact person to a rubber boat in the Aegean Sea, carrying approximately 30 people. We localised the boat near the Greek island of Inousses/Chios. The Greek coastguards confirmed to us at about 1am that they had received a distress call about this case and would search for the boat. We received new GPS coordinates of the boat and passed them on to the Chios Port Authority at 1.24am. Shortly afterwards our contact person informed us

that the people had reached the island and were able to move on. In turn, we informed the Greek coastguards. At 2.24am the Greek authorities contacted us, asking for further information about the case. Our contact person informed us at 2.33am that the group required help as it was raining and one of the children was sick. At 2.55am, the coastguards confirmed that they would send an ambulance to the group. At 5.38am, our contact person told us that the group had been found and transferred by the local police (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/657>).

- 1 <https://alarmphone.org/en/2016/05/27/statement-in-light-of-the-current-situation-in-the-mediterranean-sea/>
- 2 <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/rescuers-find-4-bodies-empty-dinghy-coast-libya-2036922501>
- 3 <http://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/fluechtlinge-1805.html>
http://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/05/08/news/43_mila_migranti_salvati_in_mar_e-164896000/
- 4 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/24/dozens-drown-as-hundreds-fall-from-migrant-boat-off-libya>
- 5 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-libya-idUSKBN18M1EE>
- 6 http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN1910XM?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+reuters%2FAFRICAWorldNews+%28News+%2F+AFRICA+%2F+World+News%29&&rpc=401
- 7 <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/gunmen-assault-libyan-coastguards-patrol-570-intercepted-migrants-aboard>
- 8 <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>
- 9 <http://gcaptain.com/italy-prosecutor-says-theres-no-proof-of-wrongdoing-among-ngo-rescuers/>
- 10 http://www.ansa.it/sicilia/notizie/2017/05/03/migranti-inchiesta-su-ong-a-trapani_15c6eb8f-d383-4fb2-9c66-1f17651673d9.html
- 11 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-europe-rescue-boats-ngos-pull-factor-collusion-smugglers-report-debunked-goldmiths-a7782781.html>
- 12 <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>,
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/03/mediterranean-refugees-migrants-deaths>
- 13 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/libyan-coastguard-opens-fire-migrant-boats-ngos-170525100451559.html>,
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-deaths-mediterranean-libyan-coastguard-uk-eu-support-stop-shooting-charities-a7756156.html>
- 14 http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/politics/2017/05/24/eu-has-no-info-on-libyan-coast-guard-shooting-at-migrants_f639f9ad-631e-4dd2-bd50-1acaf67f7cd3.html
- 15 <http://www.libyanexpress.com/libya-requests-arming-coastguards-from-italy-officials-say/>
- 16 https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/05/09/italian-forces-ignored-a-sinking-ship-full-of-syrian-refugees-and-let-more-than-250-drown-says-leaked-audio/?utm_term=.c3cde25e97dc
- 17 <http://www.elmundo.es/sociedad/2017/05/09/59116462e5fdea8d068b4619.html>
- 18 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/06/turkey-imprisonment-of-amnesty-chair-is-a-devastating-injustice/>