

## Alarm Phone Weekly Report 7-13 September 2015

What we are currently witnessing is not a 'migration' crisis but a European crisis. Responding to increasing migration movements, especially to those through Greece and the Balkan countries, several EU member states have taken to introduce drastic and brutal deterrence measures. Recently, Denmark used excessive force, though only for a brief spell, to prevent travellers to move on to Sweden. A few days later they realised that they could not prevent people from moving - hundreds just continued to walk on, despite repression, and thereby re-opened the border to Sweden. Then, Germany resurrected internal border control measures last weekend, after days of allowing people into the country. This shameful move was quickly followed by Austria, Slovakia and the Netherlands. Hungary in turn announced that it would further criminalise 'irregular' movements into its territory and confirmed that it would extend its razor-wire border fence with Serbia to include parts of its border with Romania. Bulgaria reinforced border control measures to its neighbouring countries Serbia, Macedonia and Turkey. The Greek border fence with Turkey means that people cross the sea, where dozens of lives were lost again this week. The EU and its idea of internal freedom of movement are rapidly falling apart as its member states attempt to seal off their national borders. It is also clear, however, that these deterrence measures are mere attempts which, in reality, cannot and do not stop human movement. Germany's announcement to resurrect its borders has not led to a halt - every day thousands are still entering the country. Hungary's decisions has meant that travellers are seeking and finding new routes - many now pass through Croatia. When governments shut down train lines, people started to march instead, occupying highways, breaking through police lines, and thereby enacting their freedom of movement.

The Alarm Phone was as busy as never before in the past week and worked on 80 distress cases, 76 in the Aegean Sea and 4 in the Western Mediterranean Sea. Again we learned about 2 refugee vessels that had been attacked by face-mask wearing units, presumably Greek forces that stole the travellers' engine and left them behind in distress in Turkish waters. We were also contacted by a group of people who said that they had been taken hostage by smugglers in a forest in Southern Turkey. Over the course of the week it became clear to us that the conditions for sea migration had worsened as the weather had changed. Several of the travellers we were in touch with reported that waves were high, making the sea journey even more dangerous.

On Saturday, it emerged that 4 minors had gone missing north of Samos after their plastic vessel had overturned. They have not been found so far and concerns are growing that they have lost their lives. Also, following an official statement by the Greek coastguard, a 20 year old person went missing near Lesvos/Greece when trying to reach the island. Then, on Sunday, 34 people died in a shipwreck in the Aegean Sea, amongst them 15 babies and children. Following the Greek coastguard and news reports, 68 people were rescued from the water and another 30 were able to swim to the island. The Alarm Phone had been contacted about this vessel and we are shocked that, yet again, dozens of people had to die as they could not cross the borders into Europe in a legal and safe way. Please find summaries of our reports below as well as links to the individual reports.

On Monday the 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 15 emergency situations in the Aegean Sea, many of which took place near the Greek islands of Agathonisi, Lesvos, Leros, Chios, Samos, and Farmakonisi. Our shift teams worked tirelessly to support the travellers in their dangerous journeys. We have decided to report in greater detail on particularly challenging and novel distress situations and recapitulate the other situations afterwards, in less detail. In the

early hours of the day, our shift team was alerted to three emergency cases near the small Greek island of Agathonisi. It was here that a Syrian baby boy had died a few days earlier after his parents had reached the island but could not receive the urgently needed medical support. At 3.04am, we were called by a woman from Macedonia who informed us about a distress case near the island. She passed on three phone numbers which, however, could all not be reached. At 3.19am we informed the Greek coastguards about the situation and also send text messages to all three numbers, advising them to call the international emergency number 112. At 3.52am, the contact person told us that the vessel had reached the island independently by paddling after the engine had broken down. We passed this information on to the Greek coastguards. At 4.20am, we were notified about a group of 10 women, 32 men and 8 children that had stranded on the Agathonisi about an hour earlier and was without water and food. Through our contact person, we advised the group to move toward a nearby village. At 5.20am, Syrian friends informed us about another group that had stranded in the same region but this time on Nera, an even smaller island close to Agathonisi. They were about 40 people, including women and children. We contacted the Greek coastguards and passed on the GPS position of the group (for the other 11 cases see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/248>).

Also on Monday, we were alerted to 9 people who were at sea and in distress between Spain and Morocco. We contacted the Spanish search and rescue organisation Salvamento Maritimo who said that they would then launch a search and rescue operation. The travellers themselves could not be reached but at 10.58am, Salvamento confirmed the rescue of 9 people – they would be brought to Tarifa/Spain (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/257>).

On Tuesday the 8<sup>th</sup> of September 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 21 emergency cases in the Aegean Sea – so far the highest number of distress situations ever experienced in one day. On the day we learned about two cases in which travellers were violently attacked. At 1.34am, our shift team was alerted to a distress situation by Syrian friends of the Alarm Phone. They passed on a phone number and GPS coordinates of the vessel and informed us that there were 41 people on board. Following their account, the travellers had been attacked and beaten by masked men who also stole their engine. After many hours of informing both the Greek and Turkish coastguards about the situation, in the end, the Turkish authorities rescued the travellers from a small Turkish island where the group had stranded. We then established direct contact to them. Following their account, the men told them that they would bring them to Greece. However, they dragged them back to Turkish waters instead. A violent conflict escalated on board, leaving two travellers injured. The masked men, who are said to have been Greek, took away their petrol and the engine and left them behind in distress at sea.

On the day, another situation of distress was caused by an attack on a refugee vessel. At 8.55am we learned about a group of approximately 55 people, including 15 children, who were on a vessel in Turkish waters. They were on their way to Lesbos/Greece when they were attacked and their engine was taken away. We received a phone number and their GPS position by our contact person and were asked to notify the Turkish coastguards. We could not get through to the travellers themselves. We reached out to the Turkish authorities who confirmed that they would start to search for the vessel. Our contact person was in direct contact with the group and advised them to stay calm until the Turkish coastguard would arrive. At 10.08am, their rescue was confirmed (for more on these two cases and the other 19, please see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/249>).

On Wednesday the 9<sup>th</sup> of September, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 14 emergency cases in the Aegean Sea. Three situations were particularly challenging and unique for our shift teams. At

about 1.45am, the Alarm Phone was contacted by the brother of someone who had disappeared when trying to swim from Kas/Turkey to Kastellorizo/Greece. We spoke the brother and he asks us to notify the coastguards. Trying to cross the Aegean Sea by swimming is highly dangerous and, since the man had been missing for several hours already, we were very worried. But then, shortly afterwards, the contact person informed us that his brother had actually made it to Greece! We then spoke to the swimmer who asks us for support as he had no clothes and water, and was disoriented between some rocks on the island. Both police and emergency rescue services that we contacted refused to go search for him. Fortunately, shortly afterwards, he said that had found a road.

At 5.19am, we were informed about a group of 45 people, including 10 women and 12 children, who had entered a situation of distress at sea. We were given a phone number as well as coordinates. We reached the travellers and they said that they were very tired, waves were high and they had run out of patrol. We advised them to call the international emergency number 112 which they tried three times, without reaching anyone. At approximately 7.30am, the group told us about their new position, which showed them in Turkish waters. The Greek coastguard then claimed that the group had been rescued to Samos, which, however, was not the case at that point. At 7.54am, we received a new position, showing that they were drifting further south-east. The Greek coastguards told us that they had alerted the Turkish coastguards since the vessel was in their territory. At 8.10am, the Turkish coastguards asked us to confirm whether the vessel was in distress which we confirmed – the engine was clearly malfunctioning and they were drifting in high waves. At 9.23am, the rescue of the group was confirmed to us and a few minutes later the travellers confirmed that they arrived on Samos/Greece. They send us their updated positions, showing that they were moving toward the centre of the island. Asked about whether they needed further support, they just said: 'We want to go and win'.

In the night we were also alerted to a particularly dramatic and challenging situation. We were informed about a group near Kas/Turkey, who were said to have been taken hostage by smugglers. We received coordinates as well as a phone number. They told us that the smugglers had tried to force them onto a boat but that they refused. Amongst the group were 1 woman and a 3 months old baby who needed urgent medical care. They were now in a forest in the mountains. We informed the Turkish gendarme and explained the situation to them. They said that they could not do much at night. Apparently they had spotted the group from a police vessel but could not come closer to land. They also said that they could not send cars or helicopters due to the terrain. However, one of our contact persons contacted the UNHCR and they said that they would send a helicopter. After approximately 1.16am, we lost contact to the group until 5.58am when we were able to get in touch with them again via WhatsApp. They said that they were still being threatened by people with guns and needed urgent help. At 6.05am the Turkish gendarme confirmed that the coastguard was searching the area for them. At 6.10am we received an update from the group which said that they were already for 24 hours in the forest. The last information we received from the group directly was that the smugglers were moving them away. Then, for about two hours, no information could be obtained. At 8.37am, our contact person told us that they were now with the police. We then informed the UNHCR (for more on these cases and the other 11 cases, see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/250>).

On Thursday the 10<sup>th</sup> of September, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 11 emergency cases in the Aegean Sea, several through Facebook messages. Due to the workload and the many teams and individuals who were working on these cases on the day, we have kept the documentation so these cases brief. For 6 out of the 11 cases we have confirmations that the travellers had been rescued. For the remaining 5 it was often difficult to obtain such confirmation as we did not have

direct phone contact to the travellers (for short summaries of the 11 distress cases, see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/251>).

Also on Thursday, the Alarm Phone was contacted by someone who informed us about a vessel with 25 people on board, including 4 girls and 1 baby that had left Tan-Tan/Morocco at around midnight. We could not reach the travellers and asked the contact person to find out more details about the case. At 7pm, the contact person informed us that an airplane had spotted the vessel and the people on board were waiting for help. When we spoke to Salvamento Maritimo they confirmed that a rescue mission was underway. They said that their airplane had seen a group of about 15 people and while they were not certain, they seemed convinced that this would be the same vessel. However, since they were still in Moroccan waters, Salvamento Maritimo would not rescue themselves but notify the Moroccan authorities. Our contact person said that there could indeed be 15 people on the vessel and he was concerned that the Moroccan authorities would not go and rescue the vessel. At 7.40pm, he called us and told us that the people on board were very tired – they had stay for 4 days in a forest prior to their journey and not eaten for 2 days. At 7.50pm, Salvamento told us that a rescue operation was underway: two Spanish helicopters were in the area and two vessels from Morocco were approaching. At 8.40 Moroccan authorities also confirmed that they had sent rescue forces, including one of their helicopters. A few days later we were able to speak to one of the travellers who confirmed that they had all ben safely brought back to Morocco (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/259>).

On Friday the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, the Alarm Phone was alerted to three distress cases. We were contacted at 6.26am by a person residing in Germany whose friends had arrived on a Greek island and were without food and water. They were 24 people, including 8 women and 4 children and had lost orientation. We located them on the small island of Glaros, close to Mikro. We spoke to one man of the group at 6.56am. We contacted the Port Authorities on Samos who noted down the details of the case. However, he stated that he would not reach out to the travellers themselves as he would not make international calls – a very absurd statement. At 7.49am, the group said that they were worried about their children and there was also a 4 months old baby amongst them. When the UNHCR opened up at 8am, we called them and informed them about the case. They said that they would contact the Greek authorities as well. In the meantime we received more and more worrying updates from the group – they clearly were in need of immediate assistance. At 10.22am, the Samos coastguards said that they had spotted the group and were in the process of rescuing them. At 11.18am, the group reached out to us again – they had been rescued but not by the coastguards but by a fishing vessel (for more on this case and the other two cases see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/252>).

On Saturday the 12<sup>th</sup> of September, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 5 cases of distress in the Aegean Sea. It was clear that the conditions for sea migration had worsened as the weather had changed. Shortly after midnight, our Alarm Phone shift team was alerted by a Syrian activist collective as well as a person residing in Germany about a vessel in distress in the Aegean Sea, carrying about 30 people. We received their GPS position and the information that their engine had broken down. We located them in Greek waters, east of Lesbos Island. At 0:22am, we contacted the Greek coastguards who noted down all the details of the case. Both the Syrian collective and we ourselves tried to reach the travellers but contact could not be established. At 1.14am, the Greek coastguards stated that they were in the process of searching for the people and it became clear that the people had already fallen into the water! Shortly afterwards the contact person in Germany confirmed that the group had been rescued.

We then had two cases in the following hours, for which we have one confirmation of rescue for one vessel and presume the rescue of the second. At 7.19pm, our shift team learned about our fourth distress situation in the Aegean Sea, close to Lesbos Island/Greece. We obtained their GPS position as well as a phone number which we quickly passed on to the Greek coastguards as it was an urgent distress situation. They confirmed that they would send out a search and rescue vessel. At 7.44pm, we received a call from the boat – they were 50 people, including 20 children and 20 women who were very worried as waves were high and water was entering their vessel. Moreover, their engine had stopped working. At 7.55pm, the group informed us via WhatsApp that a small coastguard vessel was approaching them which, they felt, would not be big enough for the whole group. Nonetheless, at 8.58pm, we received the confirmation that they had all arrived on land. It turned out that they were 60 people in total. They were tired but happy and relieved to finally be safe (for more on these two and the other three cases, see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/253>).

On Sunday the 13<sup>th</sup> of September, we were alerted to 7 emergency situation in the Aegean Sea. At 1.05am, the Syrian activist collective informed us about a vessel in distress and passed on a GPS position via WhatsApp. The collective had learned about the case via Facebook - 40 people, including children, were on board of a vessel, at risk of capsizing. We then received a phone number of one of the travellers but he could not be reached. When we informed the Greek coastguards at 1.26am, they stated that they had already heard about the situation. They said that weather conditions were bad and that they would send out a search and rescue vessel. Shortly afterwards we received an update from our contact person, saying that the people had made it to the island independently. We then informed the Greek coastguards about it.

About one hour later we received a message about a vessel in the same area of the sea. There were about 100 people on board. The Greek coastguard knew already about the case and, as it later turned out, this was the vessel that capsized, leaving 34 people dead. We had 6 more cases on the day, for which we could obtain 5 confirmation of rescue. For these individual reports see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/254>).