January 2016: One of the deadliest months ever in the Aegean Sea
Alarm Phone Bi-Weekly Report 18th – 31st January 2016

In January 2016, the Alarm Phone witnessed the most deadly month ever in the Aegean Sea. On a daily basis, reports about capsized boats and drowned travellers reached us and in several cases the Alarm Phone was directly alerted to shipwrecks with dozens of fatalities. 257 migrants drowned in the cold sea while trying to cross from Turkey to the Greek islands this month and at least 26 travellers died trying to reach Italy. At the same time, the number of people who successfully crossed the European border remains very high: in January 2016 more than 60.000 travellers reached Greece. This high number is comparable to the number of successful sea crossings of last year's summer months (July 2015: 55.000), rather than to the winter months (January 2015: 1.700).

In the last two weeks of this deadly month, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 80 cases of emergency in the Aegean Sea. In many of these cases we were able to support travellers to safely reach Greek shores, but we also witnessed tragic incidents. On Friday the 22nd of January 2016, the Alarm Phone was informed about a wooden sailing boat with 70 to 100 travellers on board, which had capsized northeast of the Greek island of Kalolimnos. Only 26 travellers could be saved, while 34 bodies were found and many more people went missing. One week after this fatal accident, on Saturday the 30th of January, the Alarm Phone was in contact with a boat that sank near the Greek island of Samos. According to a contact person who informed us about this case and whose wife and children had been on the boat, some people survived the shipwreck, while others lost their lives.

The Alarm Phone also observed increasing attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea via the central route from Libya to Italy again. On Thursday the 21st of January 2016 we were in contact with a boat in distress, carrying 500 travellers north of the Libyan coast, which was rescued. In the following four days, the Italian coastguard rescued 1211 people in 10 different operations. And again, on the 30th and 31st of January more than 700 travellers were picked up and transferred to Italy in 3 rescue operations.

Against this background, the Alarm Phone stresses the importance of activist and civil society groups, who provide direct flight-help and assistance and struggle together with people on the move to overcome the European border regime. But we also witness how these actors have come increasingly under pressure. Many of our friends on the Greek islands have been subjected to processes of criminalization in the past weeks. According to Statewatch, this practice might increase in the future: currently, the Council of the European Union seeks "to equate the concept of migrant 'smuggling' with migrant 'trafficking'".[1] This equation would illegalize some forms of humanitarian assistance and flight-help and would "potentially criminalize and marginalize NGOs, local people and volunteers, who for months have been welcoming and helping refugees and migrants arriving in the EU."

Finally, we would like to announce the publication of the Alarm Phone one-year anniversary documentation, which provides information and an evaluation of the ongoing social struggles in the Mediterranean. The brochure is available in English. A German version will be published in the beginning of March

(see: http://alarmphone.org/en/intros/1-year-documentation/)

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[1] http://statewatch.org/news/2016/jan/eu-med-crisis-criminalising-civil-society.htm

Summary of the Alarm Phone cases
In the past two weeks, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 84 emergency situations, 80 of which occurred in the Aegean Sea, 1 in the Central Mediterranean Sea and 3 in the Western Mediterranean Sea. Summaries and links to the individual reports can be found below.

Western Mediterranean Sea
On Monday the 18th of January 2016 at 8.02am, the Alarm Phone was directly called from a boat in the Western Mediterranean Sea going in the direction of Tarifa/Spain. 10 travellers had left Tangier Med in Morocco at 3am and asked us to alert the Spanish coastguard. We called the Spanish rescue organization Salvamiento Maritimo (S.M.) in Tarifa and urged them to start a rescue operation. We stayed in contact with the travellers, but at 10.08am we were told that the boat had been intercepted by the Moroccan Marine (see: http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/430).

On Tuesday the 19th of January 2016 at 7.46am, the Alarm Phone was called from a Moroccan phone number and alerted to a boat in distress in the Western Mediterranean Sea. We were provided with a phone number of the travellers on board and called them immediately afterwards. We reached them at 7.51am and learned that the boat had left from Tetouan/Morocco, with 15 persons on board, among them 2 women. The boat's engine had stopped and the travellers were not able to move on. They explicitly asked us to call the Moroccan coastguard (see: http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/431).

On Saturday the 30th of January 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to a push-back between Morocco and the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. At 4:44 we received a call from a contact person in Morocco, who connected us to travellers on a boat. They were 13 men and two women and worried, as their engine was not working anymore. They had no means to send us their GPS coordinates, but said that they were at the border to Ceuta. They asked us to contact the Red Cross, because they were afraid of being pushed back by Spanish authorities. At 5.22, we called the group to inquire about more details, but had suffered an illegal pushback: they had arrived on Spanish soil, but were put on a boat of the Morocco Marine Royal and brought back to Morocco.
(see: http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/433)

Central Mediterranean Sea
On Thursday the 21st of January 2016 at 9.46am, Father Mussie Zerai alerted the Alarm Phone to a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea. He provided us with the GPS position and a satellite phone number of the travellers and told us that there were about 500 persons on board of the boat in distress, including 50 women and 10 children. We communicated with the travellers on board in Arabic, charged their satellite phone credit and forwarded updated GPS positions. In the late evening, at 11pm, Father Zerai confirmed to us that the boat had been rescued and all 500 travellers were saved by the Italian coastguard (see: http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/432).

Aegean Sea

On Tuesday the 19th of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was informed about a boat in distress on its way to the Greek island of Farmakonisi. After we had alerted the Greek coastguard, the boat was able to arrive on the island independently. However, we stayed in contact with the travellers and monitored how the authorities dealt with the group (see: http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/416).

On Wednesday the 20th of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 17 groups in distress on their way to the Greek island of Lesvos, Chios, Farmakonisi, Pasas and Samos. Two groups had stranded on the islands of Farmakonisi and Pasas and were transferred to larger islands by the Greek port authorities. The Greek coastguard rescued 4 boats, while another 7 boats arrived independently on Lesvos and Chios. 4 boats were rescued and transferred back to Turkey by the Turkish coastguard (see: http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/417).

On Thursday the 21st of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 8 boats of distress in the Aegean Sea, close to the Greek islands of Lesvos, Kastellorizo and Samos. In all cases the travellers arrived safely in Greece. The Greek coastguard rescued three boats, while 5 boats reached the Greek islands independently (see: http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/418).

On Friday the 22nd of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to a tragic shipwreck northeast of the Greek island of Kalolimnos, in which at least 34 people died while 26 were rescued and many more went missing. At the same day the Alarm Phone was in contact with 5 boats in distress on their way to the Greek island of Lesvos and 4 groups of travellers who had stranded on the islands of Farmakonisi, Samos and Pasas. All of them were rescued by the Greek coastguard, local authorities and independent rescue organizations (see: http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/419).

On Saturday the 23rd of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to a group of travellers, whose boat had crashed against the rocky coast of the Greek island of Ro. We alerted the Greek coastguard and constantly stayed in contact with the travellers. Within one hour that had been picked up by the Greek coastguard and had been transferred to a bigger island (see: http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/420).

On Sunday the 24th of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to a group of travellers with motor problem between the Turkish coast and the Greek island of Lesvos. We contacted both the Turkish and the Greek coastguard, but in the end the travellers were able to reach the Greek island of Lesvos independently (see: http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/422).

On Monday the 25th of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 2 cases of distress in the Aegean: in one case a group of travellers had stranded on Samos. Their rescue could be confirmed one and a half hours after the alert had first reached us. The other alert concerned a boat supposedly in distress on its way to Lesvos. However, the boat reached Greece without any assistance (see: http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/421).

On Tuesday the 26th of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 5 cases of distress in the Aegean Sea, near Lesvos, Samos and Pasas. In all cases the safe arrival of the travellers could be confirmed. In one case, a group of 12 travellers, stuck between rocks off the Turkish coast was rescued by the Turkish Coastguard. In two cases the boats had trouble with their engine, but managed to start it back up and to reach Lesvos without any assistance. In one case travellers were stuck on Pasas, from where they were picked up and probably brought to Chios. In the last case, the Greek coastguard saved travellers near Samos (see: http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/423).

On Wednesday the 27th of January the Alarm Phone was alerted to 11 cases of distress in the Aegean Sea, near the Greek islands of Lesvos, Samos, Ro, Chios, and Pasas. However, we only became active in 9 cases. In four cases travellers had stranded on the Greek islands, of Samos, Ro and Pasas. In one case on Samos, the travellers were found by the local authorities, in another case - also on Samos- we lost contact with the group. The group that had stranded on Pasas joined two other groups of travellers who were stuck on the island, so that a total of 120 persons had to spent a night on Pasas, but they were luckily picked up by the Chios Port Authorities in the morning. The five other cases concerned travellers in distress at sea. In one case, the travellers made it to Lesvos without any assistance, in one case they were accompanied by Médecins sans Frontières and Greenpeace, in one case they were rescued by the Turkish Coastguard and brought back to Turkey and in one case the travellers were saved by the Greek Coastguard. The last case possibly concerned two boats, if so, we could not obtain a final confirmation of the safe arrival of one of them (see: http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/424).

On Thursday the 28th of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 6 cases of distress in the Aegean Sea: 3 cases of distress at sea near Lesvos and several cases of persons stranded on Pasas island. All travellers could be rescued. The Chios Port Authority picked up all people who had stranded on Pasas. In two cases of distress at sea, the Turkish Coastguard rescued the boats and brought back all travellers to Turkey. In the other case, the Greek Coastguard rescued and brought the travellers to Greece (see: http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/425).

On Friday the 29th of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 8 cases of distress in the Aegean Sea: 3 cases concerned travellers stranded on Pasas, in 2 cases travellers had stranded on Samos, and in 3 cases on the military island Farmakonisi. In all cases, the travellers were picked up. In one case, they reported however, that after having picked up from Farmakonisi, they were put in a camp in Kos, with out any food or water (see: http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/426).

On Saturday the 30th of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 6 cases of distress in the Aegean Sea, near Chios, Samos, Pasas, Lesvos and Pserimos. In one case the rescue could not be confirmed. According to a contact person, whose wife and children had been on a boat in distress near Samos, the boat had sank (probably around or after 1.30am). Some people survived the shipwreck, while others lost their lives. In the case of distress between Turkey and Chios, the travellers were rescued by the Turkish Coastguard. A group of travellers stranded on Pasas was picked up by the Chios Port Authorities in the morning. Another group had trouble to disembark from their boat close to Pserimos. Eventually fisher helped them out of the boat and they confirmed their safe arrival

(see: http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/428).

On Sunday the 31st of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 6 cases in the Aegean, near Lesvos, Pasas, and Kastellorizo. In all cases the safe arrival of the travellers could be confirmed. One boat that had trouble with their engine eventually arrived without assistance in Lesvos. Another boat in distress was rescued by the Turkish coastguard. All travellers stranded on Pasas were picked up by the Port Authorities of Chios and those stranded on Kastellorizo were picked up by the local Port Police
(see: http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/429).