

# Introduction

## The Alarm Phone after three years of Acting Disobediently at Sea

**Maurice Stierl**

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 2017, as so often before, our Alarm Phone shift team received a message from Father Mussie Zerai. He had been alerted by a boat in distress that carried about 100 travellers. They had embarked from Al Khums in Libya and were in an area nowhere near the main operational zone of the humanitarian NGOs. While we called them repeatedly, we could not get through to them. We were able, nonetheless, to charge the travellers' satellite phone with credit, so that they could keep reaching out - which they continuously did, as we could see from their decreasing credit levels. We informed the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome and contacted the Moonbird, an airborne reconnaissance mission launched by the NGO Sea-Watch and the Humanitarian Pilots Initiative. We forwarded the GPS coordinates of the boat and they promised to search the area. Soon after, the NGO plane took off, detected the boat, and passed its updated coordinates to us and the authorities. We received the confirmation of rescue a few hours later.

This distress case was one out of 1840 cases that the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone has dealt with in its first three years in operation. This case, as do many of our cases, exemplifies a novel form of activism, one where a myriad of actors, some who are unknown to one another, come together to form a complex chain of solidarity in order to intervene ever-more rapidly to support those crossing maritime borders. Father Zerai, widely known among East African communities and diasporas, received a SOS signal from a boat and in turn alerted one of our many shift teams that are located throughout Europe, Turkey and North Africa. While the Search and Rescue vessels of the many NGOs were out of reach, we could mobilise the Moonbird crew, based on Malta, to embark and carry out an aerial search. Both 'underground' and 'overground', these new alliances emerge to support the travellers in enacting their freedom of movement and their right to arrive safely. These solidarities form not out of thin air but are based on continuous grassroots engagement and exchange at, despite, and against the European border.

Our Alarm Phone turned three years old on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October 2017, on the fourth anniversary of a devastating shipwreck where more than 260 people lost their lives or who, more precisely, were left to die. Italian and Maltese authorities knew of their whereabouts and urgent distress but delayed rescue procedures intentionally and were therewith directly responsible for this horrific tragedy. Over the past three years, we have witnessed and taken part in dramatic transformations, from the unprecedented mass crossings in 2015 when over a million people survived their sea journeys and many marched onward and throughout Europe, the violent attempts to close the Balkan route and deter maritime migration via the Aegean Sea in 2016, to the cynical criminalisation and de-legitimisation campaigns directed against NGOs carrying out vital search and rescue operations at sea in 2017. All the while, the death toll in the Mediterranean kept and keeps rising - more than 11.000 fatalities were officially recorded over this period of time, but how many lives were really lost will remain unknown.

Currently, we are facing a time of repression, or what can be described as the 'roll back' of Europe's border regime. As reactions to the mass breakages through its barriers, especially in 2015 and early 2016, we now witness how the EU and its member states create

and reinforce cynical obstacles to movement - from border externalisation strategies and intensified cooperation with dictatorial allies, the criminalisation of non-governmental rescuers and the further militarisation of the Mediterranean, to the re-stabilising of the internal Dublin deportation regime and forceful expulsions from the territories of the EU. While some applaud these repressive measures, other societal actors, many of whom were politicised through the mass arrivals over the past years, mobilise against them - the current moment is characterised by an increasing polarisation of society.

In this climate of repression and uncertainty but also uplifting collective mobilisation and struggle, we will continue with our work: documenting, networking, intervening. From its contested border-zones, the architects and practitioners of the EU border regime seek to chase away non-governmental actors who support people on the move. They want to (re-)create a maritime void where their actions are not observed, where border violence is perpetrated without being seen, where the deaths of thousands receive no attention and go unpunished. It is precisely therefore that our ability to look, to listen, and to act 'disobediently' in these spaces remains crucial.

We know that people will continue to migrate, despite the roll back and ever-more violent borders and dangerous paths. In our times of turmoil, of conflict, war and economic exploitation, reasons for cross-border movement are manifold - there simply are so many who want to, and need to, escape. When hundreds break through the fences of the Spanish enclaves in Morocco or arrive by boat in southern Spain and shout 'boza!', when boats land on the Greek islands despite the EU-Turkey deal, or when thousands manage to escape the gruesome conditions in Libya and arrive in Italy, they demonstrate that despite repression migration finds its paths. It is their strength and struggle that inspire our activism, their tenacity that demonstrates an unwillingness to bow to what seems at times an insurmountable border apparatus. Not merely along the Mediterranean but also much further south and east, in countries of 'origin', groups and communities organise to enable and support unauthorised cross-border movements.

While the EU builds barriers, we mobilise along both of the Mediterranean shores to create bridges. The value of the Alarm Phone project cannot be deduced simply from the number of distress calls it receives, but also from the many initiatives, networks, and projects it has supported or helped establish. We imagine the Mediterranean not as a lethal borderzone but a space of encounter, connection, and community. Besides our everyday work of supporting people on the move through our phone activism, 'sister projects' have emerged, including the Desert Phone, Missing at Borders and Boza Tracks, which are presented also in this brochure. We have, moreover, engaged in public campaigns to counter the dramatic situation in the Mediterranean. In late September 2017, for example, our Tunisian Alarm Phone members organised a large conference in Tunis, where migrant communities, activists and NGOs from North Africa and elsewhere came together to debate 'Migration Movements around the Mediterranean: Realities and Challenges'. Around the same time in Berlin, more than 1.500 kilometres away, the large demonstration 'We'll Come United' took place, commemorating the March of Hope that broke through several European borders two years ago and thereby ushered the 'long summer of migration' which transformed Europe.

Just like the Alarm Phone network itself, this brochure is an assemblage. It provides analyses of the situations in the three main Mediterranean regions and reflections on some of the memorable experiences we have made over the past three years. It includes interviews, where the voices of some of our members, our friends, comrades, contact persons or travellers we encountered in situations of distress can be heard, and it provides an overview of the different networks and sister projects that the Alarm Phone is involved in.

**LET'S KEEP MOVING.**

**THE WATCHTHEMED ALARM PHONE**