

Alarm Phone Weekly Report, 10th to 17th of August 2015

The Alarm Phone received an unprecedented number of calls from the Aegean region over the past few weeks which gave us direct insights into the increasingly desperate situation along Turkish shores and on the Greek islands. Trying to reach EU territory, hundreds of people attempt the dangerous sea-journey between mainland Turkey and the many Greek islands daily. A few days ago it emerged that six Syrian refugees drowned, amongst them an infant, after their vessel had capsized. Distress situations were also actively produced by some forces of the Greek coastguards and unidentified actors who violently attacked refugee vessels, took away engines and petrol and, in some cases, even punctured the rubber vessels, leaving the travellers behind at sea and in acute danger. We have first-hand accounts from those who survived these practices and we published several reports in which we denounced these grave human rights violations in the strongest terms. We already called upon the Greek government to launch an official investigation into these attacks (<http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/page/index/18>).

Following Greek authorities, about 135.000 people have succeeded to reach Greece this year, a country suffering austerity-induced grievances and socio-economic hardship. There is an urgent need for the whole European community to show some solidarity and allow those who still seek to overcome the external maritime borders legal and safe ways into its territory. For those on the Greek islands, humanitarian emergency support is immediately required. While local communities and supporters do their utmost to accommodate and care for the newly arrived, resources simply are insufficient.

We currently witness a situation of humanitarian emergency and the use of cynical violence along Europe's border. However, we also witness how thousands, through their practices of subverting the European border regime, enact their freedom to move and encounter those in solidarity with them who welcome them as Europe's newest members. Some of our Alarm Phone members are currently on the Greek Island of Lesbos and have met inspiring individuals, families, groups and communities who escaped several countries and found their way to Europe (<http://lesvos.w2eu.net/>).

On Monday the 10th of August 2015, the Alarm Phone was informed by Nawal Soufi's activist collective shortly after midnight about an emergency situation in the Aegean Sea. They passed on a mobile phone number as well as the GPS position of the vessel in distress which was located near Bodrum/Turkey. The passengers could not be directly contacted. When we reached out to the Turkish coastguard they informed us that they had already heard about the case and had sent three rescue vessels to the position of the distressed travellers. The situation became more dramatic with travellers stating that water was entering their vessel and that some of them did not wear life vests.

At about 1.12am, the collective forwarded the position and a phone number of travellers on another vessel in distress, in close proximity to the first vessel. At about 2.04am, the Turkish coastguard stated that 4 groups on 4 different vessels had been rescued in the area, with nobody missing. We also received a confirmation from Nawal's network that the passengers from the first vessel had been rescued (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/206>).

On the same day, at approximately 8am, we were alerted to a vessel in distress in the Western Med, carrying 11 people. The vessel had left from Malabata/Morocco during the night and was without an engine. We contacted the travellers and, in several phone calls they reported that

they could see two vessels in vicinity. We then turned to the Spanish search and rescue organisation Salvamento Maritimo and informed them about the vessel. They confirmed that they had already heard about this emergency case but required further information on their position to launch a rescue operation. For a while afterwards, the travellers could not be reached until approximately 10:11am when they said that they could see a helicopter approaching. This was the last conversation we had with them. We contacted Salvamento and they confirmed at 12:40pm that the vessel had been rescued about an hour earlier. All 11 people were fine and would be disembarked in Tarifa/Spain.

At 12:30pm, our shift team received a direct distress call from a vessel that had left from Tangier/Morocco, carrying 9 people. After the initial call, contact could not be re-established until 2:23pm, when the travellers reported that they had been intercepted by the Moroccan Navy and already returned to Morocco (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/204>).

Again on Monday, at approximately 9am, Nawal's collective knew of a vessel carrying 30 people that had been stopped by Greek authorities who took away their engine, leaving them behind in an emergency situation. We sought to contact the travellers themselves but were unable to reach them. Shortly afterwards, we were told by the activist collective that the group had been rescued by the Turkish coastguard. Later on we found out that they had been released from the Turkish police station (<http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/207>).

Still on Monday, Father Mussie Zerai contacted the Alarm Phone and informed us about a vessel in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea, carrying approximately 85 people. Father Zerai forwarded a satellite phone number and told us that the vessel had left Tripoli/Libya about 10-11 hours earlier. They now were without food and had run out of petrol. We then contacted the travellers directly and asked them to send us their GPS position which, at first, did not work. We then alerted the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome. Shortly afterwards we received the coordinates of the vessel which we immediately passed on to MRCC Rome. At approximately 12:48pm, MRCC Rome confirmed that they had launched a rescue operation and only minutes later the travellers said that the vessel in vicinity was a military vessel. MRCC Rome then also stated that the vessel was a 'war ship' that would conduct the rescue operation. In the evening, they confirmed that the rescue operation had been concluded. There were 78 people in total on the vessel (<http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/205>).

On Tuesday the 11th of August, shortly after midnight, Nawal Soufi's collective informed our shift team about a group in distress in the Aegean Sea and passed on their GPS position as well as a phone number. We were able to reach the travellers directly and they were very clearly panicking and in a dangerous distress situation. After contacting the Greek authorities which denied responsibility we turned to the Turkish coastguards who knew of the case already and said that the vessel was still moving toward the island of Chios. They said that they would get in touch with the passengers themselves. At about 00:30am we received updated coordinates from the travellers and a message urging us to send help as quickly as possible. A few minutes later the Turkish coastguard stated that they were at the limit of their rescue capacities and also informed us that the weather was very rough at the moment so that the travellers should not proceed toward Chios but wait for rescue at their current position. When we could not reach the group we passed these information on to them via WhatsApp. Then, for several hours, the group could not be reached. At 2:50am, the Turkish authorities confirmed that the group had been rescued from their vessel that was on the verge of capsizing.

At approximately 7.23am, the Alarm Phone was contacted by Nawal's collective again and alerted to another emergency situation. They informed us about a group travelling from

Turkey to the Greek island of Samos and passed on a mobile phone number as well as the GPS position of the travellers. The emergency seemed very acute with travellers repeatedly stating that they were drowning. We immediately informed the Greek coastguards who promised to look into the situation. At 9.15am, the Greek authorities confirmed that they had rescued 4-5 vessels in the same area. At first, we were unable to verify the rescue of the group in question as their mobile phone was off. However, soon afterwards, we learned that the people had been rescued and were safe.

The same collective informed us about a third distress case in the Aegean Sea and, again, passed on coordinates as well as a phone number. The vessel was south of the Greek island of Chios. When speaking to the Greek coastguards they were willing to look into the situation while also stating that they had many ongoing emergency cases in the region. The travellers themselves could not be reached. We then learned that they were a group of approximately 45 people, amongst them children and at least one old woman. The travellers then repeatedly called us and it was clear that they were in great danger. The Greek coastguard then confirmed that a rescue vessel was on its way to the vessel and asked us to inform the passengers to make signals in order to draw attention to them. The Greek authorities then confirmed the rescue of the group about two hours later (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/211>).

Also on Tuesday, at about 7am, the Alarm Phone received a call from a person located in Sweden who informed our shift team about a vessel in distress in the Aegean Sea. She forwarded a number of one of the travellers and said that authorities had approached the vessel and taken away their engine. We immediately turned to the travellers with whom, at first, it was difficult to establish clear communications. At about 8am, an Arabic speaking member of the Alarm Phone spoke to the group at sea and was informed that there were 45 people on board, one of which was sick and required medical attention. They said that they were already close to Greece but reported that their engine and petrol had been taken away. Shortly afterwards they said that a vessel was approaching them, presumably to rescue them. In the early evening our contact person said that they had been rescued by Turkish authorities and were in a detention centre in Izmir. We were then able to communicate with the travellers who asked for support as they feared to be deported from Turkey. We told them that we would reach out to local human rights groups and ask for their assistance. We found out later on about the group's release. Some stated that their money had been taken away from them, leaving them in a precarious situation (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/208>).

On Wednesday the 12th, at approximately 4.10am, the Alarm Phone received a call from a vessel in distress near the Greek island of Kos. They were a group of 10 adults and one child and water was entering their vessel. They said that they were close to the island already, maybe only 1 kilometer away. We then reached out to the port authorities in Kos which told us that the group should call the international emergency number 112. We then passed this advice on to the travellers who, calling us back immediately, stated that 112 did not work. We then called the coastguards again and passed on the obtained mobile phone number of one of the passengers. At approximately 5.10am, the group stated that they were now very close to the island, maybe 100 meters away, with a coastguard vessel approaching them. They said they were safe now.

While dealing with the first emergency situation, a second distress call came in. At about 4.45am, we were contacted by someone who knew of a vessel with Syrian refugees on board between Turkey and Greece. While he was unable to provide us with more details he passed on a mobile phone number which, however could not be reached. We tried to contact them for several hours but were never able to get through to them.

In the afternoon we were informed by Nawal's collective about another distress situation in the Aegean Sea. They told us about 45 people who were on a vessel with a malfunctioning engine, in urgent need to be rescued. With the obtained phone number we tried several times to reach the group, but were unable to get through to them. The Greek coastguards suggested that the travellers should call 112 and, after suggesting that we could not get hold of them, merely stated that they could not help us. At approximately 20.28pm, the Turkish coastguards informed us that they had conducted several rescue operations in this area of the Aegean Sea, in which they rescued about 200 people. When asked about the number of travellers on these vessels, they listed 4 groups with 41-52 people. While no ultimate confirmation about the fate of the vessel in question could be obtained, it seems likely that it was amongst those rescued by Turkey (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/212>).

On Thursday the 13th of August, at approximately 3.15am, we received a distress call from a vessel in the Aegean Sea. They told us that they had left Izmir/Turkey about an hour earlier. Despite very difficult communications due to loud background noises, we understood that Turkish authorities were already in vicinity so that their rescue can be presumed.

At 4.15am, we received a second call from Turkey. This time a group was in distress somewhere between Bodrum/Turkey and Kos/Greece. Our contact person told us that there was a group of 40 people, including women and children. Following his account they were already close to Greece. We then reached out to the Greek coastguards who stated that they had several ongoing emergency cases so that we should tell the travellers to call the international emergency number 112. Later on, our Farsi-speaking Alarm Phone member was able to reach the travellers themselves. At 5.50am they told us that they had been able to find their GPS position and had passed it on to the Turkish coastguards who said that they would come for rescue. At 11.44am our contact person confirmed that the group had been rescued by Turkey and returned there. <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/214>

Also on Thursday, at approximately 9.22am, we learned through Nawal's collective about two emergency situations. One vessel seemed to be near the Turkish coast and could not be reached. When contacting the Turkish coastguard they confirmed that they would investigate the situation. Shortly before 3pm, the Turkish authorities called us to inform us about the rescue of a vessel close to the coordinates that we had provided to them. In the afternoon, at about 5.20pm, we finally heard from the group. They had been brought to Turkey and were fine.

The other vessel in distress, close to the Greek island of Samos, could also not be reached so that we passed on the GPS position and the number of the group to the Greek authorities at approximately 10.09am. About twenty minutes later the group passed on information to us via WhatsApp: they were about 40 people in total, including 10 children and 7 women. They passed on their updated GPS position which we quickly passed on to the Greek coastguards who confirmed that two vessels had been sent for their rescue. The travellers became increasingly worried as they could not see any vessel in vicinity and had run out of water. Afterwards, the travellers could not be reached, probably as their phones had run out of battery. At 12.15pm, the Greek coastguards confirmed that the vessel had been rescued and all travellers were safe.

At about 7.30pm, the collective contacted us again and informed us about a third distress case. We reached out to the travellers but the connection quickly broke down. Shortly afterwards we called the Greek coastguards who confirmed that they had launched a rescue operation near the island of Rhodes but were unable to fully confirm that this was the vessel in question. At about 8.42pm, we finally reached the travellers and a woman told us that they had been rescued and were already on the island (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/213>).

On Friday the 14th of August, the Alarm Phone received an emergency call from a vessel in the Western Mediterranean Sea. The woman on the phone reported that they had left Cap Spartel/Morocco an hour earlier and were a group of 11 people. They asked us to call Salvamento Maritimo. Shortly after, Salvamento confirmed to us that they would launch a rescue operation. After reaching out to the travellers to inform them about the rescue operation once more, they could not be contacted again for some time. When we succeeded to re-establish contact, they told us that they had been intercepted by Morocco and were already back in Tangier/Morocco. <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/209>

On Saturday the 15th of August, the Alarm Phone was contacted at approximately 7am by someone who, clearly in panic, reported that they were a group of 10 people on their way to Spain. Following his account, they were already close to Tarifa/Spain but some people had fallen into the water. We immediately contacted Salvamento Maritimo in Tarifa who already knew about the emergency situation and said that they launched a rescue operation, including a helicopter. As it was still dark, they could not estimate how long the search might take. We then reached out to the travellers and, despite very difficult communications, they understood that a rescue operation had been launched. At approximately 8:14am, we received a message from Salvamento, informing us that the group had been rescued/intercepted by the Moroccan Navy. Later on, the authorities in Rabat/Morocco also confirmed the rescue of the group in distress.

A few hours later we received a distress call from 5 people who had left hours earlier from Tangier. Due to an impeded phone connection it was difficult to receive further details. We then informed Salvamento about the case. The travellers later confirmed that they had been intercepted by the Moroccan Navy (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/210>).

Also on Saturday, the Alarm Phone was alerted to three emergency cases in the Aegean Sea. At about 11am, Nawal's collective passed on a number and the GPS position of a vessel in distress. They were still in Turkish waters and the Turkish coastguards in Ankara said that they would look into the situation. Already shortly afterwards, at about 11.51am, they confirmed the rescue of the vessel.

At approximately 1.32pm, we were contacted by a German woman who observed at a beach in Turkey how a vessel was rescued by the Turkish coastguards, shortly before of which, however, four travellers had jumped into the water. She said that they were swimming toward the island of Lesbos/Greece. She had already informed the Turkish coastguards but nobody had come. We reached out to the Greek coastguards on Lesbos and they said that they would send a vessel to the location. At 2pm we informed our contact person who said that she could not see the four anymore. We then passed on the phone number of the Greek coastguards to our contact person who, at about 2.55pm called again, saying that she had been informed about strong currents in the area. At 3.30pm the Greek coastguards said that they were informed about the case and that they could see that the four travellers were swimming back toward Turkey. At 4.55 our contact person reported that the Turkish coastguards confirmed the rescue of the travellers. Shortly afterwards, the Turkish authorities confirmed their rescue also to us.

At about 9.07pm, we received a call from someone stating that she knew of a vessel carrying about 40 people, including many children, near Izmir that was on the verge of capsizing. Shortly afterwards we received a phone number as well as GPS coordinates of the vessel. Our contact person said that the Turkish coastguards were not responding to her calls. We were also unable to reach different Turkish authorities until about 9.55pm when the Turkish coastguards confirmed that the vessel had been rescued. We passed this information on to our contact person (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/215>).

On Sunday the 16th of August, in the late afternoon, the Alarm Phone was contacted by Nawal's collective and alerted to a distress case on Nimos Island/Greece. They were 5 women and 2 babies who had arrived on the island about two and a half hours earlier. They were unable to walk and had run out of food and water. One of the babies needed urgent medical care. We contacted the Greek coastguards on Rhodes Island and passed on the details, including a phone number and their GPS position. The Hellenic Rescue Team said that they would look into the case and also the authorities in Rhodes stated that they would contact the port police on Symi Island, the closest island to the uninhabited island of Nimos. Later we were told that around 60 people, had been transferred from Nimos to Symi, including many women, children and newborn. While we cannot fully verify whether the group in question was amongst them, their rescue can be presumed (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/216>).