

## **Violence against migrants and NGOs escalates – Record numbers of crossings and deaths in the Central Med**

WatchTheMed Alarm Phone 6 Weeks Report  
10<sup>th</sup> October – 20<sup>th</sup> November 2016

In the six-week period covered by this report, the violence in the Central Mediterranean Sea has escalated. We witnessed numerous shipwrecks, a soaring death toll, and repeated attacks against migrant boats and civil rescue vessels by Libyan authorities. Instead of increasing rescue capacities, the EU is concentrating its efforts on deterring unwanted travellers. In late October, the EU's naval operation *EUNAVFOR MED/Sophia* has started to train the so-called Libyan coast guard on their vessels, showing them how to do the dirty job of preventing travellers from leaving Libyan waters. Moreover, in early October, the EU transformed its border agency *Frontex* into the *European Border and Coastguard Agency*, providing it with further competencies and responsibilities, an increased budget, and for the first time with its own equipment and staff. The transformed structures are not intended to improve the agency's rescue capacities but to more effectively combat unwanted travellers trying to reach Europe and to facilitate deportations.

Contrary to the usual seasonal decline in autumn, we saw in October the highest number of crossings to Italy in all of 2016. Not only that, never before have so many people crossed the Central Med in a single month – more than 27,200 travellers in October – and the numbers remain high in November. With winter approaching, and despite the worsening weather conditions, thousands of travellers try to quickly escape the violent and devastating situation in Libya, not least as even harsher deterrence practices are anticipated for the months to come. They take the risk to depart on unseaworthy and ever-more overcrowded boats. Meanwhile, many civilian rescue initiatives have stopped their missions in the Mediterranean Sea, which leads to a further decrease in rescue capacities off the coast of Libya.

In the 6 weeks that this report covers, Europe's deterrence policies have caused the deaths of more than 1,000 travellers who were on their way to Italy, and who lost their lives in numerous shipwrecks: Between November

14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, in five shipwrecks close to the Libyan coast, at least 340 people died<sup>12</sup>, raising the Mediterranean death toll to an all-time high. In 2016, 4,690 fatalities have been officially counted, of which more than 4,150 occurred in the Central Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> On November the 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016, two rubber boats capsized close to the Libyan coast, causing the deaths of at least 230 travellers. Many of them had been forced to enter the unseaworthy vessels, according to the testimonies of 31 survivors. From the first boat, carrying about 140 travellers, among whom were many women and children, 29 people were rescued and 12 bodies recovered, after their vessel's wooden hull broke and the boat sank. From the second shipwreck, only 2 women were found still alive at sea, who later reported that about 128 fellow travellers had drowned.<sup>4</sup>

In the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, the Libyan coast guard intervened in an ongoing rescue operation carried out by the humanitarian rescue vessel *Sea-Watch 2*. The Libyan coast guard boarded the overcrowded migrant boat, prevented *Sea-Watch* from distributing life jackets and caused panic on the migrants' boat when the Libyan officials started to violently harass travellers, which led to the majority of the 150 travellers falling into the water. Although the *Sea-Watch* crew was able to rescue more than 100 travellers, the attack caused the drowning of around 30 people.<sup>5</sup> Members of this 'coast guard' also attacked the rescue vessel of *Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders* with firearms back in August, and arrested two crew-members of the German civilian rescue actor *Sea-Eye* and detained them in Libya in September. The EU has decided to cooperate closely with these authorities - anything seems possible when it comes to deterring migration toward Europe.

This partnership is sought to be strengthened by the newly launched training program initiated by the EU, which is part of the ongoing operation *Sophia*.

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1 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-italy-arrivals-idUSKBN13B12T>

2 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-idUSKBN13C1YQ>

3 <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean>

4 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/03/migrant-boats-sink-libya-un-mediterranean>; <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/hundreds-feared-dead-refugee-shipwrecks-libya-161103130925708.html>

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/21/men-on-libyan-coastguard-boat-reportedly-attack-dinghy-of-refugees-and-migrants>; <http://sea-watch.org/en/breaking-news-libyan-coast-guard-attack-on-sea-watch-rescue-operation-causes-multiple-dead/>

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of October, 78 members of the Libyan coast guard embarked on the two vessels *San Giorgio* and *Rotterdam* of the operation *Sophia*, on which several member states as well as Frontex are represented, in order to receive training. The first phase of this training is scheduled for 3 months and 2 weeks, and it aims to enable Libyan forces to “secure Libyan territorial waters” by May 2017. Under the pretext of combating smugglers and traffickers, the operation *Sophia* seeks to destroy the vessels that migrants use to travel to Europe, and to criminalise and persecute the people organising the border crossings. This means a further externalisation of EU borders, where security forces within the war-torn Libya will act as Europe’s watchdog and frontier guard, preventing migrants from leaving its territory and intercepting them while they are still in Libyan waters.

The EU has made similar deals with many other North African countries from where migrants seek to depart. And the externalisation of borders goes even further than Europe’s Mediterranean neighbours. This October, the German chancellor Angela Merkel went on an “Africa Tour” to Mali, Niger and Ethiopia, with the so-called combat of the causes of flight as the central point on her agenda. She announced a 27 million Euro aid package for Niger to combat “irregular immigration”. As part of this deal, 10 million Euro will be used to equip the military forces of Niger.<sup>6</sup>

Violence against travellers has also escalated on the Greek Aegean islands, where more than 15,000 persons who have managed to reach Europe are still forced to live in camps and are detained from leaving the islands. Far-right supporters of the fascist Golden Dawn party attacked the Souda camp on the Greek island of Chios on three consecutive days, throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails on the camps’ tents and attacking some travellers directly.<sup>7</sup> One man was seriously injured when a stone hit his head, and dozens of inhabitants, including pregnant women and children, were forced to spend the night out in the cold on Thursday, the 17<sup>th</sup> of November, fearing to be attacked again after their tents burned down.

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6 <http://www.euractiv.com/section/development-policy/news/merkel-announces-niger-aid-package-to-stem-migrant-flow-during-africa-trip/>

7 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/greece-souda-refugee-camp-chios-island-attacked-161118174747457.html>

Meanwhile, travellers are still trying to reach the Greek islands, with the number of arrivals remaining constant at about 3,000 per month.<sup>8</sup> Yet, in the last week, at least 16 travellers drowned or went missing in two shipwrecks close to the Greek islands of Agathonisi on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November<sup>9</sup> and between Samothraki and Thassos on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2016<sup>10</sup>. In the 6 weeks this report covers, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 4 cases of distress in the Aegean Sea and was able to prompt rescue operations and to assist travellers stranded on remote coastal areas.

In the Western Mediterranean, the number of travellers trying to cross the sea to mainland Spain remains high, despite changing weather conditions that make sea crossings even more dangerous. In the last 6 weeks, we witnessed two successful attempts to overcome the fences to the Spanish colonial enclaves Ceuta and Melilla. The first instance took place the 13<sup>th</sup> of October, when an estimated 70 people, out of a group of 400, managed to enter Melilla. The second attempt took place on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, when 232 people, again out of a group of around 400, managed to overcome the fences and enter Ceuta. Following these two attacks, more than 100 people were transferred to mainland Spain, mainly Madrid, as the CETIs (reception centres) in both Ceuta and Melilla were overcrowded. However, the number of people in the CETIs remains higher than their maximum capacity, which means that some people have to sleep outside in tents. Shortly after the 232 people entered Ceuta in late October, repressions toward Sub-Saharan migrants living in Tangier increased. The police carried out mass arrests and deportations away from the border, including people holding legal status in Morocco. Moreover, the forest where people have been living since the “anti-squatting campaign” in summer 2015, was evicted on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November, leaving many to sleep outside in the cold.

To counter the increasing fatalities in the Mediterranean Sea, the externalisation of the EU borders, and the violence against migrants and NGOs, transnational forms of solidarity and action is urgently needed. To this end, we are trying to strengthen our cooperation with partners on the

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8 <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>

9 <http://www.efsyn.gr/arthro/nayagio-me-treis-nekroys-anatolika-toy-agathonisioy>

10 <http://www.ekathimerini.com/213773/article/ekathimerini/news/four-migrants-dead-in-crippled-boat-15-saved>

southern side of the Mediterranean. Last month, the Alarm Phone, together with the collective No Borders Morocco, published a brochure, *Voices From the Border*, with articles, testimonies, analyses and artistic contributions, mainly written by North and West African activists. The brochure can be downloaded here: <https://beatingborders.wordpress.com/2016/10/28/new-publication-brochure-voices-from-the-border/>.

Lastly, and importantly, to continue our work, we urgently need financial support! We just published a very detailed call for donations with our evaluation of what is happening in the three regions of the Mediterranean Sea and an overview of our experiences and achievements of the last two years: <https://alarmphone.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/25/2016/11/Ap-Spenden2016-EN-Web.pdf>.

### **Summaries of cases 10<sup>th</sup> October – 20<sup>th</sup> November 2016:**

In the period that this report covers, the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone was alerted to situations of distress in all three regions of the Mediterranean Sea. We were engaged in 11 distress cases, of which 5 took place in the Central Mediterranean, 4 in the Aegean Sea and 2 in the Western Mediterranean. You can find links to the individual reports of the past 6 weeks below.

#### **Central Mediterranean Sea**

On Tuesday the 11<sup>th</sup> of October 2016 at 11.17am, the Alarm Phone was alerted to a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea carrying 312 travellers. We passed on the information to the Italian coast guard, who were already working on the case. It was not possible for our shift team to establish direct contact to the boat. Later our contact person informed us that the rescue operation had been completed shortly after 10pm by the vessel of *Safe the Children, Vos Hestia*, with the support of *Sea Eye*. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/582>.

On Thursday the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2016, the Alarm Phone shift team was alerted to a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea by Father Zerai.

He told us at 5.24am that there were about 100 people on a boat that had left from Libya. We received only partial GPS coordinates and also a phone number. Despite repeated calls, we were unable to reach the boat. We could detect, however, that the Thuraya satellite phone was in use and their credit was decreasing. In the afternoon we received the confirmation from the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre that the people in question had been rescued. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/589>.

On Friday the 21<sup>st</sup> of October 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to a case of distress in the Central Med. At 3.29am, our Alarm Phone shift team was contacted by a person situated in Libya who stated that friends of his had left with two boats from Sabratha/Libya. Following his estimates, there were between 120-140 people on the boats. We got in touch with the humanitarian rescue vessel *Sea-Watch*, which was roaming the waters off the coast of Libya. The *Sea-Watch* crew stated that they had no information about the two vessels and suggested that all vessels coming from Sabratha would come their way. At 2.03pm we learned that while the *Sea-Watch* crew was conducting a Search and Rescue operation, they were interrupted by the Libyan coastguards who then attacked the refugee boat. Later we heard that about 150 travellers had fallen into the water and dozens drowned. On the day about 3,300 travellers were rescued in the Central Med. Weeks later our initial contact person informed us that the boat-people had reached out to him and confirmed that they were safe.

See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/588>.

On Thursday the 27<sup>th</sup> of October 2016, Father Mussie Zerai informed the Alarm Phone about a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea, with about 180 travellers on board, among them many women and children. We stayed in contact with boat for several hours, charged their satellite phone and forwarded information to the Italian coast guard. Eventually, the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre confirmed to us that the boat had been rescued. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/584>.

On Saturday the 12<sup>th</sup> of November 2016 at 6.11am, Father Mussie Zerai alerted the Alarm Phone to a zodiac carrying 200 travellers in the Central Med. Our shift team was not able to establish contact to the travellers, and by monitoring the credit of their Thuraya phone, we could see that they were

also not in contact with anyone else. At 8.40am we called the Italian coast guard and passed on all the information we had. At 3.10pm we got a confirmation from the Italian coast guard that a rescued operation of the vessel was ongoing. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/591>.

### **Western Mediterranean Sea**

On Thursday the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2016 at about 9.15am, several contact persons alerted the Alarm Phone to a boat in distress in the Western Mediterranean Sea, with 7 men on board. Although we established a phone connection to the travellers, it was difficult to obtain further information. We alerted the Spanish rescue organization *Salvamento Marítimo*, which in turn informed us at about 2pm that the travellers had been intercepted by the Moroccan Marine Royale. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/581>.

On Thursday the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 2016 at 9.15am, the Alarm Phone was informed about a boat in distress, which had departed from Tangier/Morocco at 2am, carrying 10 travellers including one pregnant woman. We were not able to reach the travellers directly but called the Spanish rescue organization *Salvamento Marítimo* (S.M.) and reported about the boat. However, S.M. informed us that the Moroccan Marine Royal had already intercepted the boat. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/585>.

### **Aegean Sea**

On Thursday the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2016, our Alarm Phone received a message from a contact person who informed us about a boat that had already reached Greek waters but was 'pulled-back' by the Turkish coastguards. They had been returned already. We reached out to the travellers but were at first not able to get through. There were 45 people on the boat, including 10 women and 4 children. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of November we received the last position that the boat-people had forwarded to the contact person. While the position indicates that they were still in Turkish waters, the contact person informed us that the boat had moved on afterwards, so that it is unclear where they were exactly when the Turkish coastguards intercepted. While the precise location of the vessel in question cannot be verified, it is clear that these

practices of pull-back are not uncommon and occur regularly in the Aegean Sea. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/590>.

On Monday the 7<sup>th</sup> of November 2016, a contact person alerted the Alarm Phone to a group of 17 travellers, including nine children and seven women, one of them pregnant, who were stranded on the Greek island Kastellorizo. The police at the island insisted that they would have to walk to the police station, something which was very difficult as the situation of the pregnant woman was getting increasingly worse. Finally, after a long time of difficult communication with the authorities, the pregnant woman together with an elderly person was picked up by car, while the rest of the group had to make the way to the police station on their own.

See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/583>.

On Friday the 18<sup>th</sup> of November 2016, one of our activist informants inquired at 8.12am whether we had information about a boat that had tried to reach the island of Farmakonisi/Greece. According to her, it was not clear whether they had reached the island. We received a phone number of the travellers and reached out to them, without success. Based on a voice message that was passed on to us, we heard the boat-people stating that they were “in the middle of the sea”. At 10.53am we learned through a contact person that the boat carrying 32 people had been intercepted by the Turkish coastguards. The boat-people confirmed at 2.23pm that they had been intercepted but were fine. The same day we were informed about a shipwreck in Turkish waters, near Agathonisi, with six people confirmed dead, four rescued, and several people still missing. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/586>.

On Saturday the 19<sup>th</sup> of November 2016, our Alarm Phone was informed by a contact person about a vessel that was moving toward Lesbos. We received two phone numbers of the travellers which, however, could not be reached. We also informed members of ERCI who run a watch-post on Lesbos about the situation. One of our contact persons had been informed by the relatives of the travellers and at 1.31am she informed us that the travellers had been found by a Frontex vessel. There were 22-23 people on the boat, one person had fallen into the water. They had been rescued and brought to the Greek island. See: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/587>.