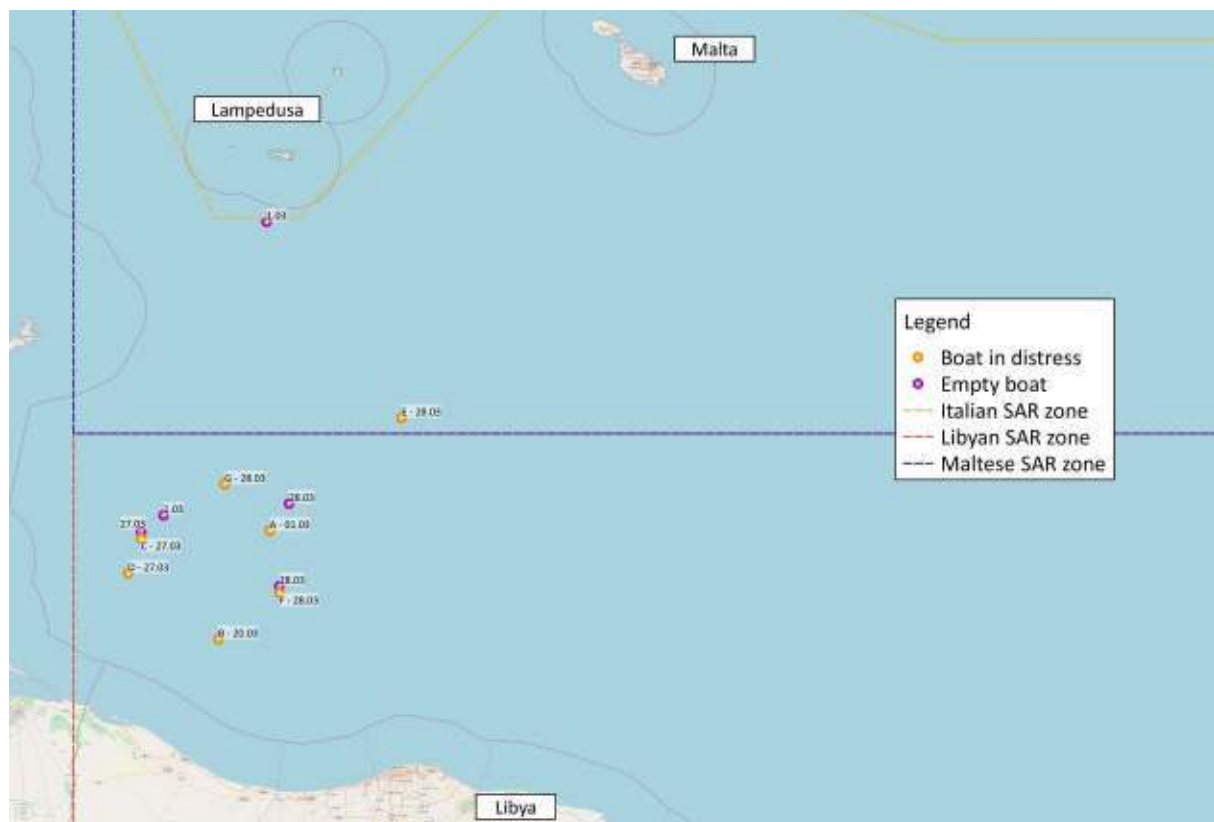


Airborne Monthly Factsheet March 2021

This factsheet outlines a summary of the distress cases witnessed in March 2021 by Sea-Watch's Airborne crew with their aircraft *Moonbird* and *Seabird*.¹ In March 2021 we flew **9 missions**, with a total flight time of **51 hours and 42 minutes**. We spotted **around 476 persons in distress in 7 different boats**.

¹ Since 2017, together with the Swiss NGO *Humanitarian Pilots Initiative*, Sea-Watch monitors the Central Mediterranean with the airplanes *Moonbird* and *Seabird*.

1. Overview of the distress cases and empty boats spotted



Maltese Search-and-Rescue (SAR) zone

- 1 distress case, around 20 persons, was intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya

Libyan Search-and-Rescue (SAR) zone

- 3 distress cases, around 235 persons, were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya
- 1 distress case, 106 persons, was rescued by the NGO vessel *Ocean Viking* and disembarked in Augusta, Italy
- The outcome for 2 distress cases, around 115 persons, is unknown
- Estimated² number of persons in distress: 456

² These numbers are based upon the estimations of *Moonbird* and *Seabird*'s crews, as well as numbers which the initiative *Watch The Med - Alarm Phone*, the UNHCR and IOM have provided to us.

³ "Nautical Miles" is the unit of measurement used at sea. 1 nautical mile is equal to 1,852 kilometers.

⁴ A "mayday relay" is an emergency procedure which provides information about a boat in distress via maritime or aerial radio, requesting any asset in the vicinity to assist.

⁵ A rigid inflatable boat is a fast, lightweight and stable boat usually used by the military for operations at sea.

2. Details and outcome of selected distress cases

01.03., distress case A, around 60 persons: **interception and delegation of the duty to render assistance to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, non-assistance by 2 merchant vessels.** *Moonbird*'s crew spotted around 60 persons in the Libyan Search-and-Rescue (SAR) zone. The Italian, Maltese and Libyan authorities were informed. The merchant vessels *Almisan* and *Asso Ventinove*, both flying the Italian flag, were around 8 nautical miles (nm)³ away from the people. Both were unresponsive on the radio, even to the mayday relay⁴ sent by *Moonbird*'s crew. The people were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya.

20.03., distress case B, 106 persons: **lack of European rescue operation, joint rescue operation undertaken by the civil fleet.** The initiative *Watch The Med - Alarm Phone* was called by the people in distress and immediately informed the authorities. *Seabird*'s crew spotted the people in the Libyan SAR zone, in an overcrowded boat with only few life vests. The NGO vessel *Ocean Viking* was in the vicinity and engaged in the rescue operation of the people. The people were disembarked on 23.03 in Augusta, Italy.

27.03., **lack of European rescue operation, joint rescue operation undertaken by the civil fleet.** On 27.03, *Seabird*'s crew observed the NGO vessel *Open Arms* engaged in a rescue operation of 38 persons in distress. The RHIBs⁵ of the *Open Arms* had already stabilized the situation and distributed life vests. The people in distress were rescued and disembarked on 01.04 in Pozzallo, Italy.

27.03., distress case C and D, respectively around 55 persons and around 120 persons: **likely delegation of the duty to render assistance to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, interception and pullback to Libya.** The civilian aircraft *Colibri 2* informed authorities and *Seabird* about around 55 persons (distress case C) in the Libyan SAR zone, also spotted later by *Seabird*. The boat was overcrowded and shaking. The merchant vessels *Vos Triton*, flying the flag of Gibraltar, and *Vos Thalassa*, flying the Italian flag, were around 8 nm away from the people, though did not respond to *Seabird* calling them on the radio, or even to the mayday relay that was issued by *Seabird*'s crew. *Seabird*'s crew then spotted around 120 persons (distress case D) and their interception by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*. In the afternoon, *Seabird*'s crew spotted an empty boat in the same area as distress case C that could be matched with the boat spotted in the morning. Considering the high number of persons (310) intercepted and pulled back to Libya according to the UNHCR this day, we assume that the people in distress case C were also intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya.

28.03., distress case E, around 20 persons: **likely interception in the Maltese SAR zone, coordinated by an unknown aircraft and a merchant vessel.** *Seabird*'s crew overheard a communication between an unknown source and the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat *Fezzan* on the radio, providing the Libyan boat with a position. *Seabird* proceeded to the given position and spotted around 20 persons in distress in the Maltese SAR zone. Later, *Seabird*'s crew overheard an unknown aircraft on the radio, naming itself "European aircraft in the area", exchanging with the merchant vessel *Saint George* (flying the Liberian flag) which had been ordered by RCC Malta to change its course and monitor the people. While heading back to their home base, *Seabird*'s crew overheard regular exchanges among (at least) these three actors. There, an unknown source, likely the same unknown aircraft, relayed positions of the people in distress via radio to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, hence coordinating a pushback from the Maltese SAR zone. We assume that the people were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pushed back to Libya. Additionally, the crew of the NGO vessel *Open Arms* confirmed to us that they also heard the coordination of the pushback on the radio from their position.

28.03., distress cases F and G, respectively around 40 and around 75 persons: **likely delegation of the duty to render assistance to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, interception and pullback to Libya.** *Seabird's* crew spotted the people in both cases in the Libyan SAR zone. The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* were around 8 nm away. A few hours later, *Seabird* spotted an empty boat which could be matched with the boat of distress case F. The RHIBs of the NGO vessel *Open Arms* were also inspecting the scene of the empty boat as *Seabird's* crew spotted it. In the late afternoon, *Seabird's* crew overheard an unknown source on the radio providing a position, and then actively guiding the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat *Fezzan* - ordering them to "head 300°" several times and then later stating "4 miles ahead rubber boat", which was assumed by the crew to be distress case G. The outcome of both cases is unsure, and thus based upon the communications overheard by *Seabird's* crew we assume that the people were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya.

In March, *Airborne* crews spotted 5 empty boats, 4 of which matched with boats spotted by earlier crews. Of these 5 empty boats, 1 is likely the remains of a rescue operation by the *Italian Coast Guard* and 2 were likely interceptions by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*. The outcome for 2 boats remains unknown.

These missions highlight once again:

- the deadly consequences of European migration and border policies
- the systematic non-assistance by European Member States and their delegation of rescue operations to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, even in European SAR zones
- the participation of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency *Frontex* in the interceptions and pullbacks undertaken by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*
- the involvement of merchant vessels in rescue operations due to the lack of a European sea rescue program
- the need for NGO vessels in the Central Mediterranean Sea in order to uphold the law and save human lives