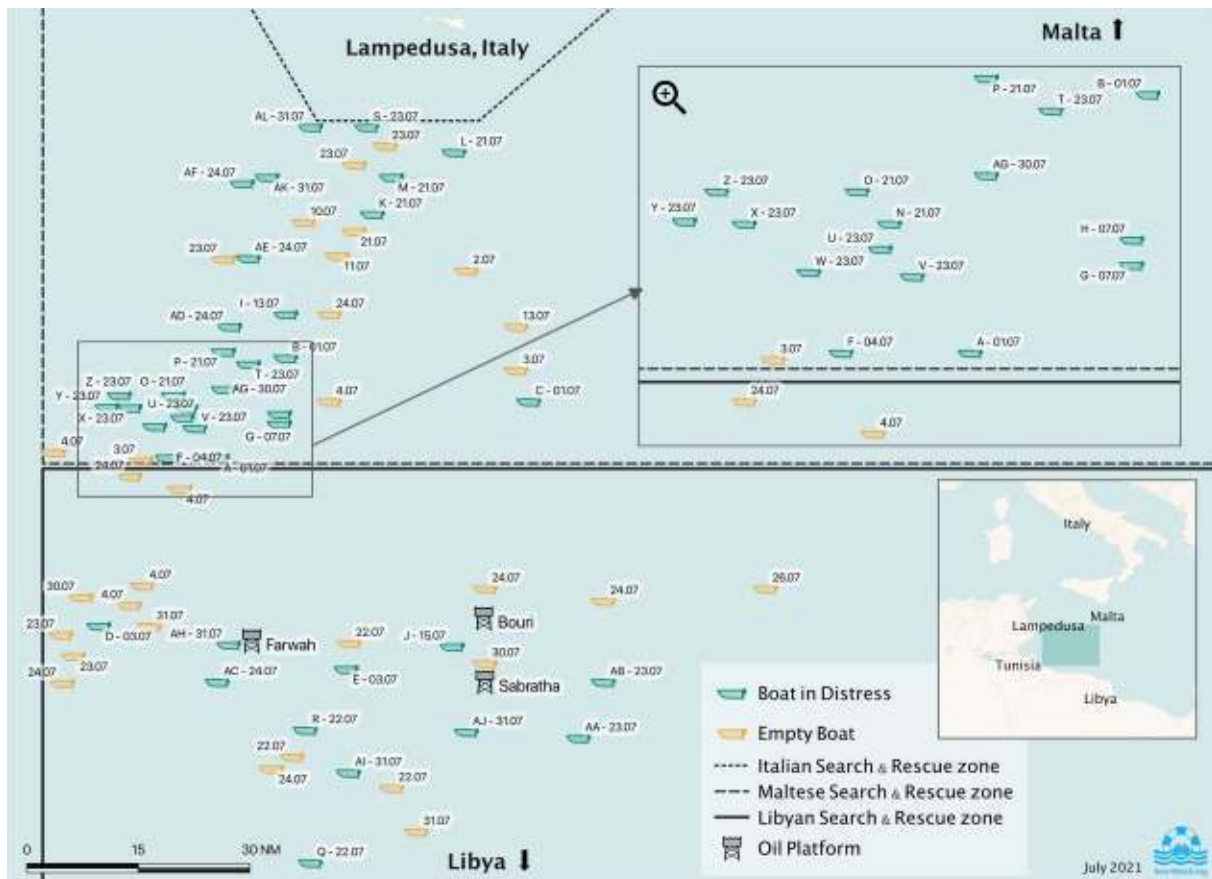


## Airborne Monthly Factsheet July 2021

This factsheet outlines a summary of the distress cases witnessed in July 2021 by *Sea-Watch's* Airborne crews from their two aircraft *Moonbird* and *Seabird*.<sup>1</sup> In July 2021 we conducted **19 operations**, with a total flight time of **114 hours and 54 minutes**. We spotted around **1.517 persons in distress aboard 38 different boats**.

<sup>1</sup> 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 boats in distress and empty boats spotted





## Maltese Search-and-Rescue (SAR) zone

- 2 boats in distress, with 44 persons, were rescued by the NGO vessel *Ocean Viking*<sup>2</sup> and disembarked in Italy
- 9 boats in distress, with around 312 persons, arrived to Europe independently or were rescued by the Italian authorities and disembarked in Italy
- 2 boats in distress, with around 30 persons, were intercepted within the Maltese SAR zone (!) by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya
- 1 boat in distress, with 81 persons, was rescued by the *Armed Forces of Malta* and disembarked in Malta
- The outcomes for 13 boats, with around 274 persons, remain unknown
- Estimated<sup>3</sup> number of persons in distress: 741

## Libyan Search-and-Rescue (SAR) zone

- 7 boats in distress, with around 441 persons, were likely intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya
- 2 boats in distress, with 85 persons, were rescued by the NGO vessel *Ocean Viking* and disembarked in Italy
- The outcomes for 2 boats in distress, with around 250 persons, remain unknown
- Estimated number of persons in distress: 776

<sup>2</sup> The vessel *Ocean Viking* is operated by the NGO *SOS MEDITERRANEE*.

<sup>3</sup> 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, Mediterranean Hope-FCEI*, the UNHCR and IOM have provided to us.

<sup>4</sup> The aircraft *Colibri 2* is operated by the NGO *Pilotes Volontaires*.

<sup>5</sup> "Nautical Miles" is the unit of measurement used at sea. 1 nautical mile is equal to 1,852 kilometers.

## 2. Details and outcome of selected distress cases

01.07., distress case A, with 30 persons: **Frontex drone likely involved, attempted interception by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* in the Maltese (!) Search-and-Rescue (SAR) zone, rescue by a civilian vessel.** The people in distress called the initiative *Watch The Med - Alarm Phone*, which immediately alerted the authorities. The NGO vessel *Ocean Viking*, and the NGO aircraft *Colibri 2*<sup>4</sup>, as well as our aircraft *Seabird*, were heading towards the position. Meanwhile, *Seabird*'s crew observed a so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat also heading at full speed in the direction of the people. The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and the NGO vessel *Ocean Viking* were both around 10 nautical miles (nm)<sup>5</sup> away from the people when *Seabird*'s crew found the people in the Maltese SAR zone. The patrol boat was later overheard urging the *Ocean*

*Viking* to “change course”. Around 20 minutes later, the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat was spotted heading away from the people. *Seabird*'s ground crew tried on two occasions to call the Maltese authorities: the first time, the officer took the information and stated that he was “only the operator” and refused to forward the ground crew to the “duty officer” since he/she was “busy” and “currently handling other cases”. The second time, the officer tried to forward the ground crew to the duty officer but “the call didn't go through”. Around 30 minutes later, the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and the *Ocean Viking* were both on-scene with the people in distress. The boat in distress was firstly near the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat, and then heading towards the *Ocean Viking*. In the end, the people were rescued by the NGO vessel *Ocean Viking* and disembarked in Augusta on 09th-10th of July.

Through a monitoring of *Frontex*'s drone's track, we have to assume that *Frontex*'s drone was involved in the attempted pullback. When the ground crew called Libyan authorities in the morning, the Libyan officers shared two positions which they had received “one hour ago”. One of these positions coincided with a position around which *Frontex* was orbiting and where the people in distress case A may have been. Hence we have strong reasons to believe that *Frontex* again attempted to coordinate a pullback to Libya.

03.07., **empty boat with so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat in the vicinity, likely results of an interception coordinated by *Frontex*.** *Seabird*'s crew spotted an empty boat without an engine at the boundary between the Libyan and Maltese SAR zone. Two patrol vessels of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* were also observed in the vicinity, one having around 20 persons on its deck. The *Frontex* drone was observed orbiting the position of the said boat in distress shortly beforehand. We have to assume that *Frontex* coordinated the interception and the consequent pullback to Libya.

04.07., distress case F, with 10 persons: **people trying to escape the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, a witnessed interception and consequent pullback to Libya from the Maltese (!) SAR zone.** *Seabird*'s crew spotted 10 persons in distress in the Maltese (!) SAR zone, who were trying to escape from the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat 648. Ultimately the people were intercepted and pulled back to Libya by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.



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13.07., distress case i, 81 persons, 3 deaths: **one merchant vessel involved, a NATO<sup>6</sup> Turkish navy vessel and helicopter monitoring the people in distress, delay in rendering assistance by the Maltese authorities.** The people in distress called the initiative *Watch The Med - Alarm Phone*, which immediately informed the authorities. *Moonbird's* crew later spotted the people adrift in the Maltese SAR zone. The oil tanker *Chembulk Barcelona*, flying the flag of the Marshall Islands, was instructed by the Maltese *Rescue Coordination Centre* (RCC) to proceed to the people. One hour later, a Turkish NATO warship called *Moonbird's* crew on the radio, stating that they were monitoring the situation and would send an aircraft. Indeed, a few minutes later a helicopter arrived on-scene. The merchant vessel *Chembulk Barcelona* was instructed by the Maltese RCC to "observe and report back". Later, the vessel informed *Moonbird's* crew that the Maltese authorities were coordinating and had launched a rescue boat. Meanwhile, the merchant vessel *Titan*, flying the flag of Moldova, was also in the vicinity and approaching the people, however an attempted contact from *Moonbird's* crew on the radio was unsuccessful. Around almost 4 hours later after *Moonbird's* ground crew alerted authorities, and more than 9 hours after *Alarm Phone's* first alert to the Maltese and Italian authorities, the *Chembulk Barcelona* informed *Moonbird's* crew that there were "3 people in the water" - who could not be spotted by *Moonbird's* crew - and that the vessel would assist them but not rescue them, as ordered by the Maltese RCC. The *Titan* was now heading away from the people in distress. Ultimately, the people were rescued by the *Armed Forces of Malta*. Local media reported that there were 3 dead bodies recovered - deaths which could have been avoided.<sup>7</sup>

On 21.07., ***Moonbird's* crew spotted 6 boats in distress, carrying around 247 persons, all of them in the Maltese SAR zone.** Four boats likely arrived in Lampedusa autonomously or were rescued by the Italian authorities and disembarked in Italy, while the outcomes for two boats remain unknown.

22.07., distress case Q, with around 150 persons: **a merchant vessel monitors a boat in distress but does not rescue.** The persons in the boat called the initiative *Watch the Med - Alarm Phone*, which informed the authorities. *Moonbird's* crew later spotted the people in the Libyan SAR zone, not wearing any life vests.

<sup>6</sup> The *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (NATO), a political-military alliance with 30 member states, including 28 European and 2 North American states. NATO's self-image is primarily a collective defense alliance.

<sup>7</sup> Xuereb M., "Three people found dead as AFM rescues 81 migrants at sea", *Times of Malta*, 14.07.2021, available at: <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/three-people-found-dead-as-afm-rescues-84-migrants-at-sea.886564>



The boat was banking to one side and was therefore at a high risk of capsizing, and the people were bailing water out of the boat. *Moonbird's* crew decided to send out a mayday relay<sup>8</sup> in order to urge any vessel in the vicinity to immediately render assistance. The oil tanker *Meteora*, flying the Italian flag, was in the vicinity and replied to *Moonbird's* crew that they had dangerous cargo on board and would inform the Italian authorities of the situation. *Moonbird's* crew then observed the *Meteora* changing its course towards the people. The Libyan authorities informed us that an "asset" was on its way. *Moonbird's* crew later overheard the *Meteora* exchanging with the *Tunisian Coast Guard*. The merchant vessel declared themselves in need of assistance to rescue the people. When *Moonbird* left scene, the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* were approaching the people and had deployed a RHIB<sup>9</sup> towards the people. The outcome for this boat remains uncertain.

On 23.07., ***Moonbird's* crew spotted 10 boats in distress carrying around 350 persons - including 2 "convoys" respectively of 2 and 3 boats.** The outcomes for 8 boats in distress spotted in the Maltese SAR zone remain unknown. Two boats in distress which were in the Libyan SAR zone were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.

23.07., **illegal transshipment of around 200 persons from the merchant vessel *Vos Aphrodite* to a so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat, almost one month after *Vos Triton's* transshipment.** *Moonbird's* crew spotted a so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat alongside the offshore supply vessel *Vos Aphrodite*<sup>10</sup>, flying the flag of Gibraltar. Around 200 persons had been transhipped from the *Vos Aphrodite* to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.

This illegal transshipment happens almost a month after a similar act of complicity in human rights violations perpetuated by the *Vos Triton*.<sup>11</sup> Both vessels belong to the Dutch shipping company *Vroon*.

30.07., distress case AG, 20 persons, **illegal interception and pull-back by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* in the Maltese (!) SAR zone, likely coordinated by *Frontex*, NGO vessel in the vicinity not informed.** *Seabird's* crew spotted the illegal interception of around 20 persons in the Maltese (!) SAR zone by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, which already had around 50 persons on its

8 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.

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

10 Footage is available <https://t.co/jyqJSNpk6M>

11 See: <https://sea-watch.org/en/shipping-company-vroon-complcit-in-forced-return/>.



deck. In the Maltese SAR zone, it is the duty of the Maltese authorities to coordinate rescue operations and to ensure that persons in distress are brought to a place of safety, as enshrined within international maritime law. As well as the monitoring aircraft *Seabird*, the rescue vessel *Sea-Watch 3* also had a visual on the interception and was the closest vessel with rescue capacity, though was never informed by any authority. The *Frontex* drone was on-scene with the distress case three times before the interception. We must then assume that *Frontex* coordinated the interception.

31.07, distress case AH, 11 persons: **non-assistance by the merchant vessel *Vos Apollo* and consequent interception and pull-back by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.** *Seabird's* crew spotted 11 persons in distress in the Libyan SAR zone. The merchant vessel *Vos Apollo*, flying the flag of Gibraltar, was in close vicinity to the people, but remained unresponsive to the calls of *Seabird's* crew on the radio and did not change course towards the boat in distress. The people were intercepted by a so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat shortly afterwards and pulled back to Libya.

31.07., **interceptions and pullbacks to Libya, two unknown persons driving the intercepted boat back to Libya.** On 2 occasions on 31.07., *Seabird's* crew were on-scene of interceptions by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* in the Libyan SAR zone, where the boats were already empty. In the first incident, 65 persons had been intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and were already on board their patrol boat when *Seabird's* crew arrived on-scene. In the second incident, when *Seabird's* crew arrived on-scene, the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat *Khalil*<sup>12</sup> had intercepted around 50 persons and the boat of said persons was empty. Whereas the *Khalil* was heading back to Tripoli, *Seabird's* crew observed that two unknown persons wearing civilian clothes, who likely went onboard the intercepted wooden boat from the patrol boat, were driving it back to Libya

<sup>12</sup> Based on Airborne's observations, this is the first time in months that the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* have operated with this patrol boat.



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In July 2021, we believe that *Frontex's drone* was involved in a total of at least 11 distress cases. This can be identified by matching Frontex flight tracks and the coordinates of boats in distress. Four of these were presumably intercepted and pulled back to Libya by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*. Four arrived independently or were rescued by the Italian authorities and the NGO vessel *Ocean Viking* and disembarked in Italy. The outcomes for three boats remain unknown.

In July 2021, the crews of *Seabird* and *Moonbird* spotted 31 empty boats: 12 in the Maltese SAR zone, 18 in the Libyan SAR zone and 1 at the Maltese and Libyan SAR boundary. None of these were likely boats spotted on the day before by the crews when there were still people on board. 1 boat was likely rescued by the Italian authorities and disembarked in Lampedusa. 7 boats are believed to have been intercepted and pulled back to Libya. The outcomes for the other 23 empty boats remain unknown.

### These missions highlight once again:

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