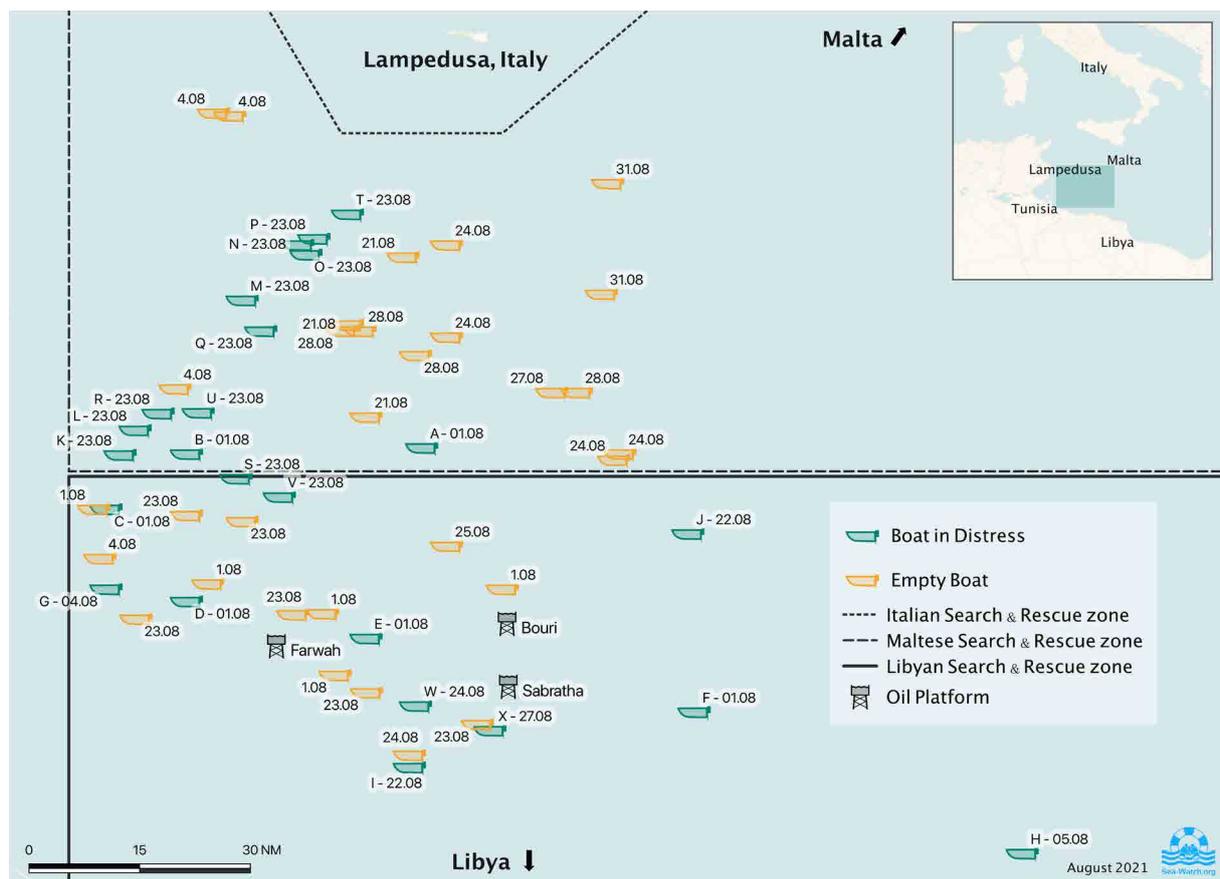


Airborne Monthly Factsheet August 2021

This factsheet outlines a summary of the distress cases witnessed in August 2021 by *Sea-Watch's* Airborne crews with their two aircraft *Moonbird* and *Seabird*.¹ In August 2021 we conducted **13 operations**, with a total flight time of **78 hours and 22 minutes**. We spotted around **1.030 persons in distress aboard 24 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 boats in distress and empty boats spotted





Maltese Search-and-Rescue (SAR) zone

- 1 boat in distress, with 26 persons, was rescued by the NGO vessel *Sea-Watch 3*² and disembarked in Italy
- 2 boats in distress, with 115 persons, were rescued by the Italian authorities or arrived independently in Lampedusa, Italy
- The outcomes for 9 boats in distress, with around 191 persons, remain unknown
- Estimated³ number of persons in distress: 332

Libyan Search-and-Rescue (SAR) zone

- 4 boats in distress, with around 330 persons, were rescued by the Italian authorities or arrived independently in Lampedusa, Italy
- 1 boat in distress, with around 41 persons, was rescued by the *Armed Forces of Malta* and disembarked in Malta
- 6 boats in distress, with around 302 persons, were intercepted and pulled back to Libya by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*
- 1 boat in distress, with around 25 persons, was rescued by the NGO vessel *Ocean Viking*⁴ and disembarked in Italy
- Estimated number of persons in distress: 698

² The vessel *Sea-Watch 3* is operated by the NGO *Sea-Watch*.

³ 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.

⁴ The vessel *Ocean Viking* is operated by the NGO *SOS MEDITERRANEE*.

2. Details and outcome of selected distress cases

On 01.08., *Seabird's* crew spotted 6 distress cases with a total of around 537 persons. One was rescued by the NGO vessel *Sea-Watch 3* and disembarked in Italy. Three were rescued by the Italian authorities and disembarked in Italy. One was rescued by the *Armed Forces of Malta* and disembarked in Malta. One was intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya.

01.08. distress case A, 26 persons: **Italian military aircraft providing positions to NGOs, rescues by the civil fleet.** *Seabird's* crew, as well as the NGO vessels *Sea-Watch 3* and *Ocean Viking*, were called via radio by an Italian military aircraft operated by the *Guardia di Finanza*, which provided them with a position. One hour later, the same military aircraft alerted both vessels about a second boat in distress. At the first given position, *Seabird's* crew found 26 persons adrift in the Maltese SAR zone. The Italian military aircraft remained unresponsive to any attempts at con-



SEA-RESCUE AT EUROPE'S BORDERS

Airborne Monthly Factsheet
August 2021

3 / 7

tact from *Seabird's* crew on the radio. The 26 people in distress were ultimately rescued by the NGO vessel *Sea-Watch 3* and disembarked in Italy on 7th and 8th of August. At the second given position, *Seabird's* crew observed the ongoing rescue operation conducted by the *Ocean Viking*. The people were disembarked in Italy on 8th to the 11th of August.

01.08., distress case D, 80 persons: **merchant vessel unresponsive on the radio, delay in rendering assistance by the Italian authorities.** *Seabird's* crew spotted the persons in distress in the Libyan SAR zone. The merchant vessel *Sukran S*, flying the Turkish flag, was in the vicinity, but was not responding to any contact attempts from *Seabird's* crew on the radio. Later, the shipping company replied to one of *Sea-Watch's* emails, stating that they had attempted to reach their vessel but could not. In the evening, relatives of the people in distress called the initiative *Watch the Med - Alarm Phone*, providing positions of the boat in the Maltese SAR zone. On the next day, the NGO vessel *Sea-Watch 3* assisted the people and stabilized the boat. The people were finally rescued by the *Italian Coast Guard* and disembarked in Lampedusa, more than 18 hours after *Seabird's* first alert.

01.08., distress case F, around 88 persons: **likely involvement of an asset from the EUNAVFOR MED Operation *Iriní*⁵, interception and pullback to Libya by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.** The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* informed *Seabird's* ground crew that they had received the position of a boat in distress. Later, the people in distress called the initiative *Watch The Med - Alarm Phone*, which informed the authorities and *Sea-Watch's* Airborne operations. When the ground crew monitored the track of the EUNAVFOR MED aircraft *Seagull* on open sources, it appeared to have been at the scene of the people in distress shortly before *Seabird*. *Seabird's* crew observed that almost all of the people were wearing life vests and that the rubber boat was deflating. The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat 648 was approaching with around 20 persons already onboard. The people were intercepted and pulled back to Libya.

⁵ The European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED) Operation *IRINI* is a EU military operation launched on 31st March 2020, which contributes to the capacity building of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*. It only deploys aircraft on the Central Mediterranean migration route between Libya, Malta and Italy.



SEA-RESCUE AT EUROPE'S BORDERS

Airborne Monthly Factsheet
August 2021

4 / 7

05.08., distress case H, around 100 persons: **merchant vessel in the vicinity not rescuing, unknown helicopter on-scene, interception and pullback by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* to Libya.** *Seabird's* crew spotted the people in the Libyan SAR zone. A fishing vessel, the *Zarga 2*, flying the Libyan flag, was in the vicinity but did not respond to any attempts at contact by *Seabird* over the radio. *Seabird* issued a mayday relay⁶ which was not responded to. Later, an unknown helicopter was also observed on-scene before leaving, as monitored by *Seabird's* crew. One hour after the first mayday relay, *Seabird* sent a second one, and again unsuccessfully tried to reach the fishing vessel *Zarga 2*. In the end, the Libyan authorities confirmed to us via phone that they had intercepted the people and pulled them back to Libya.

22.08., distress case i, around 30 persons: **Frontex cooperating with the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, interception and pullback to Libya.** *Moonbird's* crew spotted the people in the Libyan SAR zone. *Frontex* was on-scene shortly after. On the next day when ground crew called the Libyan authorities, they confirmed that the boat had been intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*. They also informed us that they were “having a lot of information from *Frontex* drone” and that the *Frontex* drone had shared the position of the people beforehand. We must then conclude that *Frontex* again coordinated an interception and pullback to Libya.

22.08. distress case J, 22 persons: **delay in rendering assistance by Italian authorities, NGO vessel assisting.** *Moonbird's* crew spotted the people in the Libyan SAR zone. The NGO sailing boat *Nadir*⁷ changed course towards the boat. Meanwhile, the people in distress called the initiative *Watch The Med - Alarm Phone*, which immediately alerted the authorities. The *Nadir* found the people and assisted them, stabilizing the situation. On the next day, more than 19 hours after the first alert was sent out by *Moonbird's* ground crew, the Italian authorities rescued the people and disembarked them in Italy.

On 23.08., *Moonbird* spotted 12 boats in distress, with around 242 persons. There was one convoy of 3 boats which was spotted in the Maltese SAR zone. One boat observed in the Libyan SAR zone was intercepted and pulled back to Libya by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*. Another one was eventually rescued by the Italian

6 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.

7 The vessel *Nadir* is operated by the NGO RESQSHIP.



SEA-RESCUE AT EUROPE'S BORDERS

Airborne Monthly Factsheet
August 2021

5 / 7

authorities. One boat spotted in the Maltese SAR zone was eventually rescued by the Italian authorities as well. The outcomes regarding the other 9 boats spotted in the same area remain unknown.

23.08., distress case V, 28 persons: **interception potentially avoided because of NGO presence, Frontex involved.** The civilian aircraft *Colibri 2*⁸ spotted the people in the Libyan SAR zone. Later, *Frontex's* drone was observed on-scene by *Moonbird's* ground crew. *Moonbird's* crew spotted the people and informed the authorities. The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* were seemingly heading towards the position of the people. The NGO vessel *Nadir* attended to the boat in distress, stabilizing the situation - and hence possibly managed to avoid an interception by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*. In the end, the people were rescued by the Italian authorities.

27.08., distress case X, 34 persons, 5 missing: **capsized boat, merchant vessels unresponsive, illegal transshipment of rescued persons to the so-called Libyan Coast Guard by a merchant vessel, pullback to Libya.** *Moonbird's* crew found a wooden boat that had capsized, with around 20 persons sitting on the hull and several persons with life vests in the water. The crew immediately sent out a mayday relay on the radio - where one station requested a repeat of the broadcast without stating its identity. The closest merchant vessels in the vicinity, *Asso Venticinque* and *Asso Trenta*, both flying the Italian flag, as well as the oil platform *Sabratha*, were unresponsive. A Turkish military aircraft informed *Moonbird's* crew via radio that the Maltese RCC was informed about the situation. One and a half hours after the first sighting, a so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat, already with around 150 persons on its deck, was heading to the position, and ordered the merchant vessel *Asso Venticinque* to proceed to the people. While the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* were intercepting the people, under observation by *Asso Venticinque*, *Moonbird's* crew noticed that many more people were still in the water. The *Asso Venticinque* changed course towards these people, but asked the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* to take them on board. The *Asso Venticinque* then launched a RHIB⁹ in order to rescue 2 persons in the water, and confirmed that they would be disembarked in Italy. The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* requested to take the people, for

⁸ The aircraft *Colibri 2* is operated by the NGO *Pilotes Volontaires*.

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



SEA-RESCUE AT EUROPE'S BORDERS

Airborne Monthly Factsheet
August 2021

6 / 7

the purposes of family reunification. Via radio, the merchant vessel confirmed to us that the transshipment of the 2 rescued people would happen due to an alleged need for “medical assistance”. The vessel handed these people over to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, despite reminders by *Seabird's* crew about the illegality of this action. The *Asso Venticinque* informed via the radio that it was “in contact with the Italian MRCC”, likely regarding this whole operation. The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* also declared via radio that the intercepted people had reported that 5 persons were still missing. The persons could not be found despite an extensive search by *Seabird's* crew. 34 persons were pulled back to Libya by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.

A shipmaster and a representative of *Asso's* shipping company, *Augusta Offshore S.p.A.*, were recently condemned for having illegally returned people to Libya in 2018.¹⁰ According to international maritime and human rights law, **Libya is not a place of safety.**

During August 2021, we must assume that **Frontex** was involved in at least 3 distress cases. Two were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya. One was rescued by the Italian authorities and disembarked in Italy.

During August 2021, *Moonbird's* and *Seabird's* crews spotted **31 empty boats** - 14 in the Libyan SAR zone and 17 in the Maltese SAR zone. One empty boat was spotted on two occasions, namely 23.08 and 24.08. One was likely rescued by the authorities and disembarked in Lampedusa. The outcomes for the 30 other empty boats remain unknown.

¹⁰ See: <https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/migranti-consegnati-ai-libici-prima-condanna-in-italia>



SEA-RESCUE AT EUROPE'S BORDERS

Airborne Monthly Factsheet
August 2021

7 / 7

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*
- the participation of European aircraft and *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 failed migration politics in Europe
- the need for NGO vessels in the Central Mediterranean Sea in order to uphold the law and save human lives