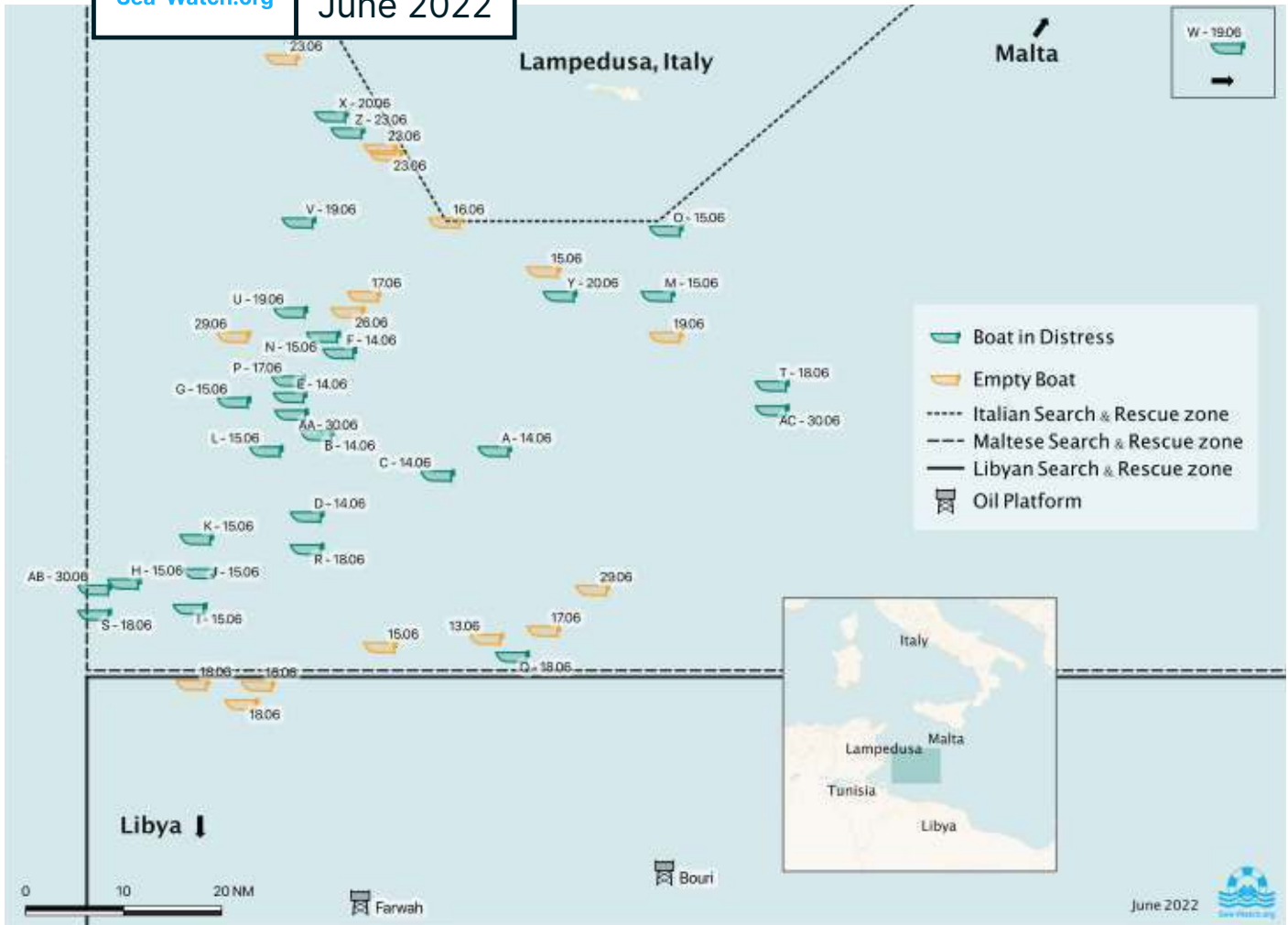




**Airborne**

**Monthly Factsheet**

**June 2022**



This factsheet outlines a summary of the distress cases witnessed in June 2022 by *Sea-Watch's Airborne Operations* with the aircraft *Seabird* and *Seabird 2*.<sup>1</sup> In February and March 2022 we conducted **12 operations**, with a total flight time of **69 hours and 2 minutes**. We spotted **29 boats**, carrying **around 1.190 persons in distress**.

Unfortunately, due to the illegal restrictions put into place by the Libyan Civil Aviation Authority,<sup>3</sup> *Airborne* was not able to monitor the Libyan Search-and-Rescue (SAR) zone and the human rights violations occurring there.

- <sup>1</sup> Since 2017, together with the Swiss NGO *Humanitarian Pilots Initiative*, *Sea-Watch* monitors the Central Mediterranean Sea with its aircraft *Seabird 1* and *Seabird 2*.
- <sup>2</sup> These numbers are based upon the estimations of *Seabird's* crews as well as numbers which the initiatives *Watch The Med - Alarm Phone* and *Mediterranean Hope-FCEI* have provided to us.
- <sup>3</sup> Since the beginning of March, the Libyan authorities illegally deny entry to the Libyan Flight Information Region (FIR) for our airplanes *Seabird 1* and *Seabird 2*. See [Airborne Monthly Factsheet February - March 2022](#).

## 1. Overview of boats in distress and empty boats spotted

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

- 11 boats in distress, 612 persons, were rescued by the Italian authorities or arrived independently to Lampedusa, Italy
- 1 boat in distress, 29 persons, was rescued by the NGO sailing vessel *Nadir*<sup>4</sup>, transhipped to the NGO vessel *Sea-Watch 4*<sup>5</sup> and disembarked on 28.06. in Porto Empedocle, Italy
- 1 boat in distress, 96 persons, was rescued by the merchant vessel *Aslihan*, transhipped to the NGO vessel *Sea-Watch 4* and disembarked on 28.06. in Porto Empedocle, Italy
- 2 boats in distress, around 114 persons, were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* (in the Maltese SAR zone!) and pulled back to Libya, presumably after coordination by *Frontex*
- 1 boat in distress, 23 persons, was rescued by the NGO Vessel *Sea-Watch 4* and disembarked on 28.06 in Porto Empedocle, Italy
- 1 boat, around 30 persons, likely arrived independently to Sicily from Benghazi
- 1 boat, 14 persons, was rescued by the NGO vessel *Ocean Viking*<sup>6</sup> and disembarked on 06./07.07 in Pozzallo, Italy
- The outcomes for 11 boats in distress, around 272 persons, are unknown

<sup>4</sup> The sailing vessel *Nadir* is operated by the NGO *RESQSHIP*.

<sup>5</sup> The vessel *Sea-Watch 4* is operated by the NGO *Sea-Watch*.

<sup>6</sup> The vessel *Ocean Viking* is operated by the NGO *SOS MEDITERRANEE*.

## 2. Details and outcomes for boats in distress and empty boats spotted<sup>4</sup>

**On 14.06., *Seabird 1*'s crew spotted 6 boats in distress in the Maltese SAR zone, with around 177 persons on board.** 1 boat arrived autonomously in Lampedusa. The outcomes for the other boats remain unknown.

**14.06., distress case E, around 15 persons: an US-American Army ship in the vicinity, unknown outcome.** *Seabird 1*'s crew spotted a boat in distress carrying around 15 people without lifevests, and informed the authorities. The US-American Army vessel *General Frank Besson* was in the vicinity, but did not assist the distress case and headed South. The outcome for the case remains unknown.

On 15.06., the Libyan JRCC informed our ground crew via phone about an interception of 90 people by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. Additionally, *Seabird 1*'s crew spotted 9 boats in distress in the Maltese SAR zone, with around 472 persons on board. 5 boats were rescued by the Italian authorities or arrived independently in Lampedusa, Italy. The outcomes for the 4 other boats remain unknown. Further, ***Seabird 1*'s crew sighted the so-called Libyan Coast Guard vessel Ubari in the Maltese SAR zone,** though with no intercepted persons visible on deck.

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

**15.06., distress case G, around 80 persons: fishing vessel assisting people in distress, NGO vessel stabilizing the situation, Italian Coast Guard rescuing the persons more than 7 hours after the first alert.** At around noon, *Seabird 1*'s crew spotted a wooden boat carrying around 80 persons, possibly with two decks, and informed the authorities accordingly. A fishing vessel was close by, supplying the people in distress with water but remaining unresponsive to our aircrew. The NGO sailing vessel *Nadir* reached the distress case in the late afternoon, sending out a mayday relay<sup>7</sup> and asking for immediate support. At the same time, the *Frontex* aircraft *Osprey 2* orbited above the position of the boat in distress. The *Nadir* confirmed that the people in distress were rescued by the *Italian Coast Guard* in the evening.

**18.06., distress case Q, 29 persons: European authorities ignoring their duty to coordinate a distress case, civil society again filling this gap.** On 18.06., when *Seabird 1*'s crew spotted a boat in distress and informed the authorities, the civil sailing vessel *Nadir* was already on scene and sent out a mayday relay on behalf of the people in distress, asking for immediate assistance. 10 hours after the issue of the mayday relay and without any support from any state authority, the situation of the people in distress deteriorated to the point that the *Nadir* took them on board. On 20.06, after the rescued persons had already been on board for more than 40 hours and despite several requests to authorities for assistance, which all remained unanswered, the *Sea-Watch 4* assessed the situation on board and confirmed that it was better equipped to take care of the people. The 29 persons were eventually embarked on board the *Sea-Watch 4*. Between the first alert about the distress case to authorities and the transshipment to the NGO vessel, **50 hours passed without any reaction, not to mention support from any state authority.**

**18.06., distress case S, 14 persons: illegal interception of a boat in distress by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard at the boundary of the Maltese and Tunisian SAR zones.** *Seabird 1*'s crew sighted the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* leaving the scene after intercepting persons and setting fire to an empty boat in the Libyan SAR zone. Later *Seabird 1*'s crew spotted a boat carrying 14 persons on board without lifejackets and saw the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat *Sabratah* approaching, already with a full deck of more than 100 persons from previous interception(s). The aircrew had to witness how the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* illegally intercepted the 14 persons outside the Libyan SAR zone. The *Frontex* aircraft *Osprey 2* orbited the position before and during the interception. **We therefore have to assume that Frontex again coordinated a pullback to Libya.**<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> A week later, on 24.06., the facilitation of another interception was attempted by a European aerial asset, namely a helicopter from the *Armed Forces of Malta*. The helicopter guided the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* to a boat in distress. The NGO vessel *Louise Michel* was however on scene with the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and fortunately managed to prevent an illegal pullback, taking all people safely on board: [twitter.com/MVLouiseMichel/status/15404110127-96633088](https://twitter.com/MVLouiseMichel/status/1540411012796633088)

**18.06., distress case T, 96 persons: merchant vessel left alone by European authorities after rescue of a boat in distress, transshipment to the NGO vessel Sea-Watch 4.** *Seabird 1*'s crew spotted a double-decked wooden boat carrying 96 persons in distress in the Maltese SAR zone. The merchant vessel *Aslihan* was close by and acknowledged the distress call made by our aircrew, changing course towards the boat. After completing the embarkation of the 96 persons, the *Aslihan* asked both the Italian and the Maltese RCCs for instructions but was left alone without support. On 19.06., the NGO vessel *Sea-Watch 4* headed to the *Aslihan* in order to assess the situation on board the merchant vessel, since no assistance had been given by any state authority. The *Sea-Watch 4*'s medical team confirmed that the guests were in need of medical treatment which could not be provided by the *Aslihan*. As the better equipped vessel, the *Sea-Watch 4* then embarked all 96 people safely on board. The people were disembarked on 28.06 in Porto Empedocle, Italy.

**19.06., distress cases U and V, respectively around 9 and 99 persons: Frontex exceptionally sending out mayday relays for two boats.**

On 19.06., *Seabird 1*'s crew overheard two mayday relays in the afternoon from *Frontex*, with two positions in the Maltese SAR zone. Around two hours after the mayday relays, *Seabird 1*'s crew sighted the persons in distress in the Maltese SAR zone, still without any rescue capacities in the vicinity to support them. *Seabird 1*'s crew then also sent out a mayday relay on the radio for distress case V, which remained unanswered. The people aboard both distress cases were ultimately rescued by the Italian authorities and disembarked in Lampedusa, Italy.

**19.06., distress case W, around 30 persons: severe case of non-assistance, shift of responsibility between Malta and Italy, a merchant vessel standing by, dangerous journey from Benghazi to Sicily.**

The people in distress called the initiative *Watch The Med – Alarm Phone* in the late morning, which informed the authorities and *Seabird 1*.

*Seabird 1*'s crew then sighted the persons in the Maltese SAR zone in the early evening. A merchant vessel, the *MTM Hamburg*, flying the flag of Singapore, responded to *Seabird 1*'s call and headed towards the boat.

*Seabird 1*'s crew supported the merchant vessel on their way to the people in distress, flying and orbiting above them. Refusing to undertake its duties and shifting the responsibility to Italy, the Maltese RCC then ordered the *MTM Hamburg* to standby instead of rescuing. During the night, the ship's master informed the ground crew that he had been released by RCC Malta from monitoring the people in distress and could head again to his intended destination, **despite the people still being in distress at sea**. The people arrived autonomously on 20.06 to Sicily.

**20.06., distress cases X and Y, respectively 22 and 23 persons:**

**Frontex involved, joint rescue efforts by civil actors.** In the afternoon, *Seabird 1*'s crew sighted the persons in distress of case X in the Maltese SAR zone. The NGO vessel *Louise Michel*<sup>9</sup> was already on scene and stabilizing the situation. Later, *Seabird 1*'s crew overheard a position being relayed via radio and sighted another boat in distress, case Y, at the given position. As a vessel in the vicinity with the capacity to assist, the NGO vessel *Sea-Watch 4* changed course to the position. Due to the distress situation, *Sea-Watch 4*'s crew then rescued the persons during the late afternoon. The people in distress case X were escorted by the *Louise Michel*, eventually being rescued by the *Guardia di Finanza* and disembarked in Lampedusa, Italy. Based upon open sources, *Frontex*'s aircraft *Osprey2* was also on scene with both cases after *Seabird 1*'s crew.

**30.06., distress case AB, around 100 persons: interception by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard in the Maltese (!) SAR zone, likely coordinated by Frontex.**<sup>10</sup>

In the afternoon, *Seabird 1*'s crew sighted the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat *Sabratah* pursuing a boat with around 100 persons on board, in the Maltese SAR zone. *Seabird 1*'s crew reminded the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* via radio that they were in the Maltese SAR zone and therefore have no authority in this area. No one responded. Upon the arrival of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* to the scene, the persons in distress stopped their engine. The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* then deployed a RHIB<sup>11</sup>, that they however did not

<sup>9</sup> The *Louise Michel* is operated by a group of activists.

<sup>10</sup> Footage available at: [twitter.com/seawatch\\_intl/status/1542791493961801728](https://twitter.com/seawatch_intl/status/1542791493961801728)

<sup>11</sup> A rigid inflatable boat is a fast, lightweight, and stable boat usually used by the military for operations at sea.



use to intercept the persons. Instead, they drove around the patrol boat in circles at high speed, close to the boat in distress. Even after the interception, the RHIB kept driving in circles.<sup>12</sup> *Seabird 1*'s crew observed the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* inspecting the empty wooden boat and burning the vessel. The people were pulled back to Libya. This boat in distress matches with previous orbits from a *Frontex* drone in the Libyan SAR zone, in the early morning and at noon. **It is therefore likely that *Frontex* again coordinated a pullback to Libya.**

In June 2022, we must assume that the European Coast Guard Agency ***Frontex*** was involved in the narratives for at least 7 boats in distress, concerning around 347 persons, sighted by *Seabird 1*'s crews in the Maltese SAR zone. Four of the boats in distress were rescued by the Italian authorities and disembarked in Lampedusa, Italy. One boat was rescued by the NGO vessel *Sea-Watch 4* and disembarked in Porto Empedocle, Italy. **Two boats were intercepted by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard in the Maltese (!) SAR zone** and pulled back to Libya.

In June 2022, *Seabird 1*'s crews spotted **16 empty boats**. Two empty boats match with the boats of the distress cases G and T, which were sighted by *Airborne* on the days prior. Due to markings, another empty boat could be matched with a rescue conducted by the NGO vessel *Aita Mari*.<sup>13</sup> Also due to markings, 4 other empty boats are believed to be the remains of rescue operations conducted by the Italian authorities. One boat is the remains of a likely interception by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* in the Libyan SAR zone. The outcomes for 8 boats remain unknown.

<sup>12</sup> Footage available at: [twitter.com/seawatchintl/status/1545045292235444225](https://twitter.com/seawatchintl/status/1545045292235444225)

<sup>13</sup> The *Aita Mari* is operated by the Spanish NGO *Salvamento Marítimo Humanitario*.



### 3. These operations 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 from the Maltese SAR zone
- the participation of *Frontex* in interceptions and pullbacks undertaken by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*
- the continuous involvement of merchant vessels with boats in distress at sea due to a failed politics of migration in Europe
- the unjustified and systematic delays by European Member States in fulfilling their obligations to conduct and coordinate sea rescue in their Search-and-Rescue zones
- the need for NGO vessels in the Central Mediterranean Sea in order to uphold the law and save human lives