

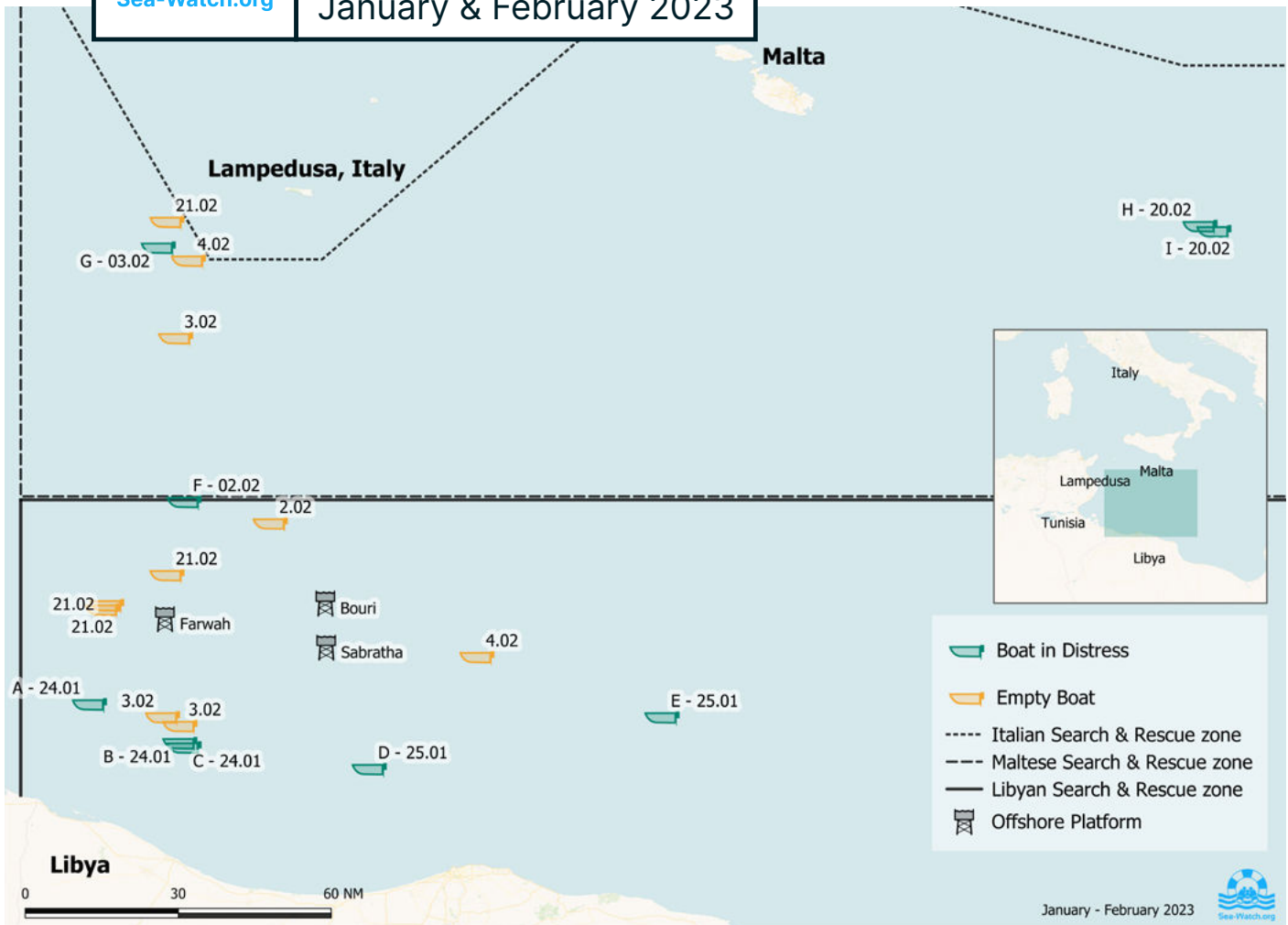


Airborne

Monthly Factsheet

January & February 2023

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This factsheet presents a summary of the distress cases witnessed in January and February 2023 by Sea-Watch's *Airborne Operations* with the aircraft *Seabird 2*.¹ In January and February 2023, we conducted **8 operations** over a total flight time of **56 hours and 41 minutes**. We spotted **9 boats, carrying around 517 persons**² in distress at sea.

1. Overview of boats in distress and empty boats spotted

Libyan Search and Rescue (SAR) zone

- 2 boats, around 125 persons, were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya
- 2 boats, 176 persons, were rescued by the NGO vessel *Geo Barents*³ and disembarked in La Spezia, Italy
- 1 boat, 95 persons, was rescued by the NGO vessel

¹ 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*.

² These numbers are based upon the estimations of *Seabird 2*'s crews as well as numbers which the initiatives *Watch The Med - Alarm Phone* and *Mediterranean Hope-FCEI* have provided to us.

³ The *Geo Barents* is operated by the NGO *Médecins Sans Frontières*.



*Ocean Viking*⁴ and disembarked in Carrara, Italy. Based upon testimonies from the rescued persons, **4 people went missing.**

Maltese Search and Rescue (SAR) zone

- 1 boat in distress, 30 persons, was rescued by the NGO vessel *Sea-Eye 4*⁵ and disembarked in Naples, Italy. **The crew had to recover 2 bodies from the boat during the rescue.**
- 2 boats, 54 persons, were rescued by the Italian authorities and disembarked in Italy
- The outcome for 1 boat, with around 37 persons, remains unknown

In January and February 2023, we must assume that the European Border and Coast Guard Agency *Frontex* was involved in the narratives for at least 3 boats sighted by *Seabird 2*. 1 boat was rescued by the NGO vessel *Sea-Eye 4*. 2 boats were rescued by the Italian authorities.

In January and February 2023, we sighted 10 empty boats, where 1 was sighted twice. 1 was likely the remains of a rescue operation conducted by the Italian authorities. The outcomes for the 9 other empty boats remain unknown.

2. Details and outcomes regarding selected boats in distress and empty boats

On 24.01.2023, *Airborne* resumed operations in the Libyan SAR zone after 10 months of illegal restrictions by the Libyan authorities.⁶

24.01., distress case A: **The *Geo Barents* was insulted and threatened by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.**

During the morning of 24.01., *Seabird 2*'s crew sighted 50 persons in distress in the Libyan SAR zone. The NGO vessel *Geo Barents* began heading to the position. Shortly before noon, *Geo Barents* and a so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat were on-scene. *Geo Barents*' crew sighted a person jumping overboard. **The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* reacted by insulting and threatening the NGO vessel with being shot and ordering them to stay away from the boat.**⁷

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

⁵ The *Sea-Eye 4* is operated by the NGO *Sea-Eye*.

⁶ For more information on the illegally demanded entry permit: sea-watch.org/en/seabird_takes_off/

⁷ https://twitter.com/MSF_Sea/status/1617898308617506816

The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* is equipped, financed and politically legitimised by the European Union as well as single Member States such as Italy and Malta.

We urge the European Union and European member states to immediately end their externalization policies to Libya!

02.02., distress case F: **A merchant vessel sheltered a boat in distress until an NGO vessel arrived, with 2 bodies found on board.**

On 02.02., *Seabird 2's* crew sighted the persons in distress in the Libyan SAR zone, and sent out a mayday relay⁸ over the radio. The merchant vessel *SW Julia I*, flying the flag of Panama, was the closest vessel - it did not react to our first attempt to reach out, but later headed to the position of the persons in distress. The NGO vessel *Sea-Eye 4* meanwhile reacted to the mayday relay and headed to the same position. The merchant vessel confirmed that it would standby until the *Sea-Eye 4* arrived. *Sea-Eye 4* conducted the rescue operation and found 2 bodies aboard the boat. Another person died upon the medical evacuation.

Around three and a half hours **before** *Seabird 2's* sighting, a *Frontex* drone orbited the vicinity of the reported position. As *Seabird 2* was sending out the mayday relay, another source that is believed to be the *Frontex* drone also relayed the exact same information, but over a channel only used in aviation.⁹ We must then conclude that the *Frontex* drone knew about the boat, but did not inform vessels in the vicinity which could potentially have carried out a rescue.

Frontex must pass on information about persons in distress at sea without exception, also to all civilian ships in the area, so that rescues can be conducted as quickly as possible and in compliance with international law.

19.-20.02., distress cases H and I: **The Maltese authorities instruct merchant vessels not to rescue and disseminate orders to their officers not to share information with NGOs.**

On 19.02., the initiative *Watch The Med – Alarm Phone* informed about persons in distress at sea. On the morning of 20.02., *Seabird 2's* ground

⁸ 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

⁹ *Frontex* used a channel that is solely used as aviation emergency frequency (121.500). Naval assets are mostly not monitoring this frequency, nor technically able to do so.

crew asked the Maltese *Rescue Coordination Centre* (RCC) for information regarding the case. The officer on the phone, however, said that he had received orders not to give any information to NGOs.

We demand that the officers at the Maltese RCC stop their cynical behaviour and share their information with all actors at sea in order to ensure rescues of persons in distress.

On the afternoon of 20.02., *Seabird 2's* crew found two boats in distress, distress cases H and I, in the Maltese SAR zone. The merchant vessel *Adarose*, flying the Liberian flag, first changed course towards the people, but then headed away and informed *Seabird 2's* crew that the shipmaster was in panic, stating that he did not want to rescue since the boat was not in distress, the Maltese RCC had not given instructions and that he was afraid the persons were "migrants". When *Seabird 2's* crew arrived on scene, the engines of the boats were off, with only a few people wearing life vests. The people had been at sea for several days already, and the boats were in a clear state of distress. On 21.02., when the ground crew called the Maltese authorities, they said that they had no information. The Italian authorities in a first call referred to the Maltese authorities and then hung up. In a second call, they only said they had no information. The people were rescued on 21.02 by the Italian authorities after two days of non-assistance. They were disembarked in Pozzallo, Italy.

We urge merchant vessels to comply with their duties enshrined in international law without any discrimination. We also denounce the Italian and Maltese authorities for exclusively relying on private actors that lack adequate equipment, while in the meantime criminalising NGOs and not launching their own rescue operations.