

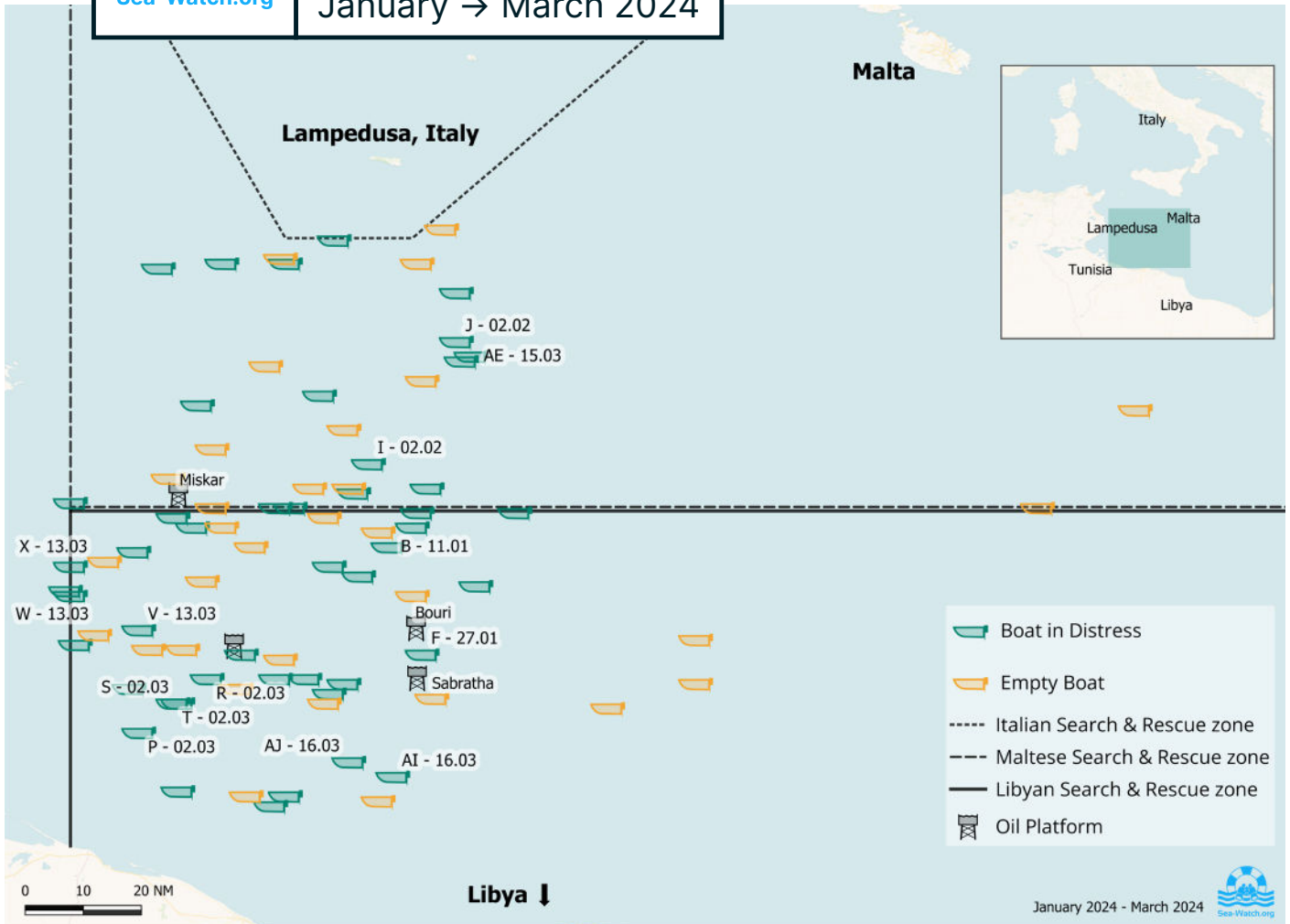


**Airborne**

**Quarterly Factsheet**

**January → March 2024**

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This factsheet outlines a summary of the distress cases witnessed January - March 2024 by Airborne with *Seabird 1* and *Seabird 2*.<sup>1</sup>

In January - March we conducted **40 operations**, with a total flight time of **205 hours and 38 minutes**. We spotted around **2.755 persons in distress aboard 47 different boats**.

<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*.

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

### Maltese Search and Rescue (SAR) zone

- 180 persons, onboard 2 boats in distress, were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya
- 219 persons, onboard 5 boats in distress, were rescued by the Italian authorities or arrived independently in Italy
- 205 persons, onboard 3 boats in distress, were rescued by the NGO vessel *Sea-Eye 4*, *Life Support* and *Mare Jonio*,<sup>2</sup> and disembarked in Italy
- 142 persons, onboard 1 boat in distress, were rescued by the merchant vessel *Vault* and disembarked in Italy
- The outcomes for 135 persons, onboard 5 boats in distress, remain uncertain

### Libyan Search and Rescue (SAR) zone

- 543 persons, onboard 10 boats in distress, were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya
- 78 persons, onboard 2 boats in distress, were rescued by the Italian authorities or arrived independently in Italy
- 773 persons, onboard 11 boats in distress, were rescued by the NGO vessels *Ocean Viking*, *Sea-Watch 5*, *Humanity 1*, *Geo Barents*, *Life Support*, in 1 rescue supported by the NGO sailing boat *Trotamar III*,<sup>3</sup> and disembarked in Italy
- 40 persons, onboard 1 boat, completely disappeared and probably drowned close to Lampedusa.
- The outcomes for 440 persons, onboard 7 boats in distress, remain uncertain

We must assume that the European Border and Coast Guard Agency *Frontex* was involved in the narratives for at least 978 persons, on board 18 boats sighted by *Seabird 1* and *Seabird 2*. Of these, 3 boats, carrying 90 persons, were partly rescued by the NGO vessel *Humanity 1*.<sup>4</sup> 3 boats, with around 143 persons, were rescued by the Italian authorities or arrived independently to Italy. 1 boat in distress with 142 persons on board was rescued by a merchant vessel and disembarked in Italy. The outcomes for 3 boats in distress, with around 105 persons, remain unknown. **8 boats in distress, around 498 persons, were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya. Therefore, we must**

<sup>2</sup> *Sea-Eye 4* is operated by the NGO *Sea-Eye*, *Life Support* by *Emergency* and *Mare Jonio* by *Mediterranea Saving Humans*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ocean Viking* is operated by the NGO *SOS Mediterranean*, *Sea-Watch 5* by *Sea-Watch*, *Humanity 1* by *SOS Humanity*, *Geo Barents* by *MSF* and *Trotamar III* by *Compass Collective*.

<sup>4</sup> Please see distress cases R, S, T.



**conclude that Frontex likely facilitated at least 8 interceptions and subsequent pullbacks to Libya.**

In the months of January - March 2024, we sighted 32 empty boats. The outcomes of 27 empty boats remain unknown, 3 were rescued by NGOs and 2 were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.

## 2. Details and outcome of the distress cases

11.01., distress case B, around 40 persons: **non-assistance of state actors, boat completely disappeared.** Around midday on 11th of January *Seabird's* crew spotted the people in distress in the northern Libyan SAR zone and alerted the authorities accordingly. In the evening a relative of people on the boat called the initiative *Watch the Med - Alarm Phone* who could give an updated GPS-position. By then they already entered the Maltese SAR zone. During the night to 12th of January *Alarm Phone* continuously shared updated positions of the boat. The last update came at the end of the night. The situation for the people in distress kept deteriorating because of high waves and strong wind.

According to the relative the people on board saw a helicopter above them, putting light on them or taking pictures. This matches with the *Frontex* aircraft *Eagle1* which was flying around the last known position at exactly the same time. It is to assume that *Eagle1* did locate the boat that night in the Maltese SAR zone, less than 30 nautical miles from Lampedusa. **Even though this was already more than 15 hours after *Seabird* alerted the authorities the first time and around 9 hours after *Alarm Phone* informed the authorities, the authorities still did not launch any rescue operation.**

The aerial search activities continued but without success: *Seabird* was flying again on 12th and 13th but could not find the people in distress or any signs of them again. From the 12th until the 14th three different *Frontex* aircraft covered the area around Lampedusa and north up to Sicily, as well as Italian state assets.

*Alarm Phone* contacted the competent authorities but none gave any information about the missing people. On 16th of January the *Italian Coast Guard* published a press release where they admitted that on 12th

of January a *Frontex* aircraft had sighted the boat. The *Italian Coast Guard* had sent distress alerts (Inmarsat) to all ships in the area from the 12th until the 22nd of January but never provided a GPS-position of the distress case even though the boat had been seen and located by different actors. The *Italian and Maltese Coast Guards* are responsible for a long non-assistance that led to the disappearance of 40 persons. Moreover the Italian authorities did not provide all information available that could have helped to find the persons again.

The fate of the missing persons could never be fully reconstructed, but we have to assume they have drowned close to Lampedusa.

27.01., distress case F, 49 persons: **6 people illegally pushed back to Libya. Merchant vessel *Maridive 701* transshipped to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.** In the morning on 27 January the initiative *Watch the Med – Alarm Phone* got informed about people in distress in the Libyan SAR zone. Two hours later *Seabird's* crew was able to find the boat with 49 people. No one was wearing life jackets, the weather was quite bad with high waves. *Seabird* called the merchant vessel *Maridive 701* which was in the vicinity. First the merchant vessel did not answer the calls, but after some time altered course to head towards the distress case. When *Maridive 701* arrived on scene the boat was next to the oil platform *Bouri*. The oil platform informed *Seabird* that they instructed *Maridive 701* to stay close to the boat in distress and that the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* was approaching. While *Maridive 701* was next to the boat in distress 6 people fell into the water and were taken on board the merchant vessel. The remaining persons on the boat in distress moved away from the scene. The NGO vessels *Humanity 1* and *Ocean Viking* offered assistance via e-mail and started to head towards the position of the boat in distress. In the late afternoon when *Seabird* had to leave the scene, the boat in distress was proceeding north and *Maridive 701* followed with some distance. In the evening the merchant vessel confirmed via email that they had transshipped the 6 people to the so-called *Libyan Cost Guard*. The vessels *Humanity 1* and *Ocean Viking* could have been on scene the next morning. With the transshipment to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* the *Maridive 701* denied the 6 people their right to be disembarked in a place of safety. On the next day *Seabird* could find the boat in distress with the remaining persons again more than 50nm further north in the Maltese SAR

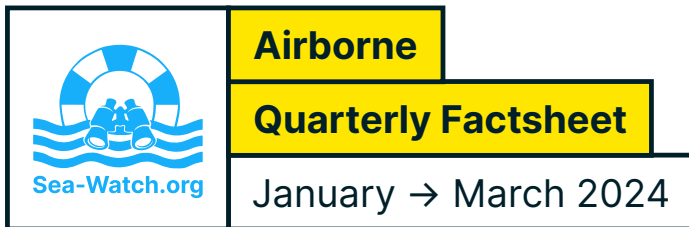
zone. Finally the remaining 43 people in distress were taken on board of a vessel by the *Italian Coast Guard* under assistance of *Humanity 1* and were brought to Lampedusa.

01./02.02., distress case I, around 125 persons: **illegal interception by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* in the Maltese SAR zone. Frontex presumably sighted the persons before.** The people in distress called the initiative *Watch the Med – Alarm Phone* shortly before midnight on 1<sup>st</sup> February which immediately alerted the authorities about the distress case in the Maltese SAR zone. During the day of 2<sup>nd</sup> February, the *Alarm Phone* continuously updated the position of the boat, reporting the boat being stationary throughout the whole night. In the morning, *Seabird* was able to locate the boat. The heavily overcrowded double decker wooden boat was stationary. 70-80 persons were visible on the upper deck, no one was wearing life saving equipment and the boat was heavily rolling in the waves. The merchant vessels in the vicinity, *Majed* and *Maridive 208*, both flying the Egyptian flag, did not answer to *Seabirds* call for assistance. Later on *Seabird* returned to the position of the boat and documented the interception conducted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* vessel *Fezzan*.

Based on open sources, we must assume that *Frontex* aircraft *Osprey3* sighted the persons on two occasions on the 1<sup>st</sup> February in the late afternoon and the early evening.

02.02., distress case J, 13 persons: **1 person died due to several hours of delay of assistance by the Italian authorities close to Lampedusa.**

In the early morning of 2<sup>nd</sup> February, *Seabird* overheard radio communication between a fishing vessel and Lampedusa radio, reporting a boat in distress. Shortly after, *Seabird* was able to spot the boat and informed the authorities accordingly. Lampedusa radio stated to the fishing vessel that an Italian *Guardia di Finanza* vessel is on its way. In the next hours, the fishing vessel repeatedly called the authorities, urgently asking for support since 1 person was in very poor health condition. When *Seabird* spotted the boat again, the fishing vessel was towing it and the people were fetching out water. Shortly after *Seabird* had to head back to Lampedusa and still no state rescue capacity was in sight. Even though the first overheard position of the boat in distress was less than 40 nm away from Lampedusa and the fishing vessel was



stressing the severe urgency of the distress case, it at least took the *Italian Coast Guard* 6 hours to get there. Later on, 12 persons disembarked in Lampedusa – **with 1 body who did not survive the crossing. The Italian authorities delayed rescue operations for several hours despite having the information about the boat in distress early on and despite of being informed about the deteriorating health state of one person on the boat.**

02.03., distress cases P, R, S, T, around 50, 30, 30, 30 persons respectively: **interceptions and several dangerous interferences by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard while NGO vessel Humanity 1 was on scene. At least one person missing.** Around midday the vessel *Humanity 1* operated by the NGO *SOS Humanity* overheard a mayday relay issued by the *Fontex* aircraft *Eagle1* for around 50 people in distress on a boat off the Libyan shore. When *Humanity 1* arrived on scene about one hour later, the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* was already with the boat in distress. *Humanity 1* offered its ability to rescue and assist the people in distress in accordance with international law but the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* started an attempt to take the people from the boat in distress on board their vessel. *Seabird* arrived on scene and could observe that there were people in the water, swimming away from the Libyan patrol boat. **The so-called Libyan Coast Guard ordered Humanity 1 to proceed north and threatened to shoot them with a gun if they would not leave with full speed. Humanity 1 therefore had to leave the scene. Seabird stayed on scene until all persons were recovered from the water.**

Later in the afternoon *Humanity 1* was close to three boats in distress at the same time. *Seabird* arrived on scene and the NGO vessel launched their RHIBs to start the rescue operation. The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* arrived shortly after and ordered *Humanity 1* to proceed north and threatened again to shoot if *Humanity 1* would not be complying. *Humanity 1* repeated several times that they are in the middle of a rescue operation and that they will comply once the rescue is finished. The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* also deployed a tender and approached the boat in distress and the rescue boats of *Humanity 1* in a dangerous maneuver. At least one officer boarded the distress vessel and started to proceed to their patrol boat, which caused several persons to fall / jump into the water. **Additionally, the so-called Libyan Coast Guard fired shots in the water.** The people in the water were

partly recovered by the Libyan patrol boat and partly by *Humanity 1*. From two of the distress cases people were therefore partly intercepted by so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and partly rescued by *Humanity 1*.  
**At least one person is missing and probably drowned.**

13.03., distress cases V, W, X, around 45, 40, 40 persons respectively:  
**Seabird witnessed three interceptions by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard.** Around midday *Seabird*'s crew spotted people in distress, only moving slowly and erratically on an unseaworthy boat. Later on *Seabird* observed the boat was alongside a patrol boat of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, which then intercepted the people in the end. The second boat *Seabird* sighted was already being intercepted by a vessel of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* shortly after *Seabird* arrived on scene. When *Seabird* spotted the third boat in distress, a patrol boat of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* was only a few miles away, heading towards the distress case with full speed. Shortly after *Seabird*'s crew could only document the empty boat being left behind. We therefore have to assume that all people were taken back to Libya in violation of international law.

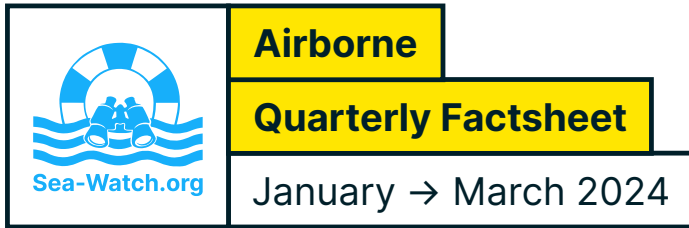
15.03., distress case AE, around 80 persons: **illegal interception conducted by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard deep in the Maltese SAR zone.** *Seabird* overheard a mayday relay issued by the *Frontex* aircraft *Sparow4*. An unknown Libyan station copied the information. Shortly after *Seabird* arrived on scene as well and found the boat in distress in the Maltese SAR zone, only 40 nautical miles off Lampedusa with around 80 people on board. The boat was adrift as both engines were not working anymore. The boat was highly overcrowded and had no life saving equipment. Two hours later, when still no rescue asset was approaching *Seabird* issued another mayday relay. Later on the *Frontex* aircraft *Eagle1* was also on scene and a fishing vessel issued one more mayday relay. In the evening the vessel *Geo Barents* was passing by Lampedusa and informed authorities that they would be able to assist the boat in distress, but when they arrived on scene in the night they witnessed an interception by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*. **The Libyan Coast Guard patrol boat reported to Geo Barents that it was coordinated by the RCC Malta.** The interception happened around seven hours after the first mayday relay. The *Italian Coast Guard* could have arrived from Lampedusa way earlier.

The duty of Malta, as the responsible RCC for the Maltese SAR zone, is to ensure that a rescue operation takes place with the subsequent disembarkation in a safe port. Instead the *RCC Malta* and *Frontex* cooperate with the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and again violate international law.

16.03., distress cases AI and AJ, around 10 and 140 persons respectively: **so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* interfered in a rescue operation of the NGO vessel *Geo Barents* by blocking the RHIBs with dangerous manoeuvres and severely endangered the people in distress.** In the morning the people in distress of the first boat called the initiative *Watch the Med – Alarm Phone*, who alerted the authorities. Shortly afterwards *Seabird's* crew could find the boat in distress and observe that it got rescued by the vessel *Geo Barents*. Shortly after the rescue operation the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* appeared on scene and took the empty boat alongside, removed the engine and took it with them.

*Seabird* spotted nearby another boat in distress and *Geo Barents* was proceeding to rescue that boat as well. When their RHIBs were deployed to bring the people on board of *Geo Barents*, the same Libyan patrol boat was following. It then started to do dangerous manoeuvres, chasing one of the RHIBs of *Geo Barents* and trying to embark it. The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* hindered the RHIBs to perform and complete the rescue operation. It positioned their boat between the NGO ship and the boat in distress and disturbed for more than two hours the rescue operation by trying to prevent the embarkation of all people in distress to the *Geo Barents*. Finally the ship's crew of *Médecins Sans Frontières* managed to take all people on board.





### **These events highlight once again:**

- the deadly consequences of European migration policies
- the systematic non-assistance of European Member States and the delegation of interceptions to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, even in a European SAR zone
- the systematic delays of European Member States to take action and save lives in their SAR zones
- the participation of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency *Frontex* in the interceptions and pull-backs undertaken by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*
- the need for NGO vessels in the Central Mediterranean in order to uphold the law and save human lives