

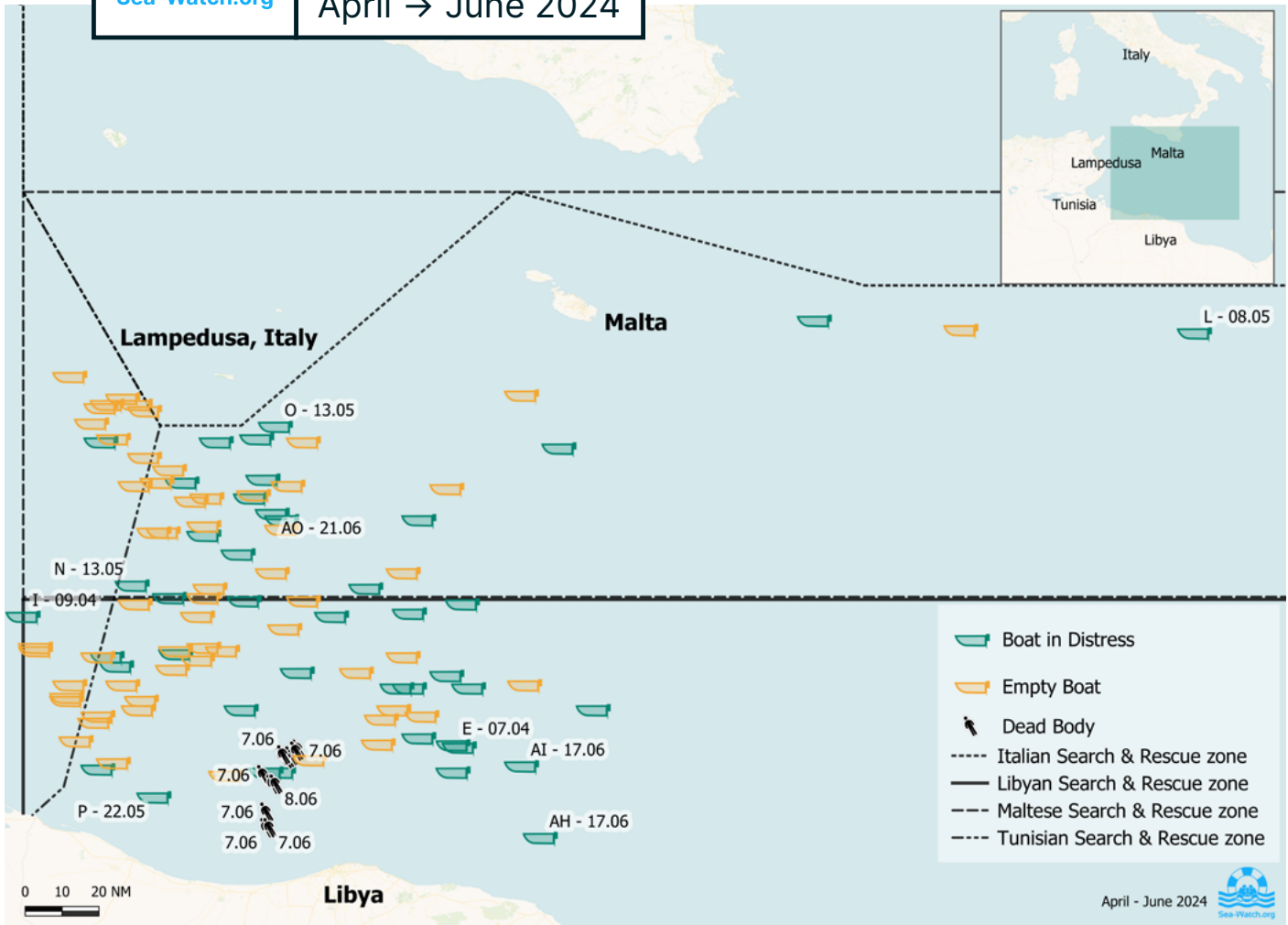


Airborne

Quarterly Factsheet

April → June 2024

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This factsheet outlines a summary of the distress cases witnessed in April – June 2024 by Airborne with *Seabird 1* and *Seabird 2*.¹

In April - June we conducted **35 operations**, with a total flight time of **213 hours and 42 minutes**. We spotted **approximately 1,878 persons in distress aboard 43 different boats**.

¹ Since 2017, together with the Swiss NGO *Humanitarian Pilots Initiative*, Sea-Watch monitors the central Mediterranean with its aircraft *Seabird 1* and *Seabird 2*.

1. Overview of boats in distress and empty boats spotted

Maltese Search and Rescue (SAR) zone

- 85 persons, on board 1 boat in distress, were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya
- 260 persons, on board 7 boats in distress, were rescued by the Italian authorities and disembarked in Italy
- 91 persons, on board 2 boats in distress, were rescued by the NGO vessels *Aurora* and *Geo Barents*,² and disembarked in Italy
- The outcomes for 233 persons, onboard 7 boats in distress, remain uncertain

Libyan Search and Rescue (SAR) zone

- 527 persons, on board 11 boats in distress, were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya
- 114 persons, on board 3 boats in distress, were rescued by the Italian authorities and disembarked in Italy
- 193 persons, on board 4 boats in distress, were rescued by the NGO vessels *Ocean Viking* and *Humanity 1*,³ and disembarked in Italy
- 60 persons, on board 1 boat in distress, were intercepted by the merchant vessel *Maridive Zohr 1*, illegally handed over to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and pulled back to Libya
- The outcomes for 315 persons, on board 7 boats in distress, remain uncertain

From April – June, we must assume that the European Border and Coast Guard Agency *Frontex* was involved in the narratives for at least 547 persons, on board 12 boats sighted by *Seabird 1* and *Seabird 2*. Of these, 4 boats, with 122 persons, were rescued by the Italian authorities. The outcomes for 2 boats in distress, carrying around 105 persons, remain unknown. Of these, **6 boats, with around 320 persons, were intercepted and pulled back to Libya by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.**

From April - June, we sighted 59 empty boats. The outcomes for these boats remain unknown.

² *Aurora* is operated by the NGO *Sea-Watch* and the *Geo Barents* is operated by the NGO *Médecins Sans Frontières*.

³ *Ocean Viking* is operated by the NGO *SOS MEDITERRANEE* and the vessel *Humanity 1* is operated by the NGO *SOS Humanity*.

2. Details and outcome of the distress cases

07.04., distress case E, 20 persons: **Interception by so-called Libyan Coast Guard witnessed after overhearing a position potentially communicated by the Armed Forces Malta.** During the morning of 7th of April, the people in distress called the initiative *Watch the Med – Alarm Phone*, which immediately alerted the authorities and NGOs with the position provided by the people in distress, in the Libyan SAR zone, along with the information that water had started entering the boat.

Seabird 2 was already airborne and overheard radio communications suspected by the crew to be between the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and an aircraft belonging to the *Armed Forces Malta*, although the authority did not identify itself on the radio. The position communicated appeared to match the location of the *Alarm Phone's* boat in distress. About an hour later, *Seabird 2* sighted the people in distress as they were being intercepted by a so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat. While the crew was on scene, the boat capsized and around 20 people fell into the water next to the patrol boat. Several people were on top of the capsized boat, while others swam underneath and around the boat. At the end of the interception, there were no people in the water, although *Seabird 2's* crew could not confirm that everyone had been retrieved from the water, as the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat was unresponsive via radio.

Based on the accent heard on the radio and on open sources, we strongly suspect that the *Armed Forces Malta* provided a position to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, facilitating this interception and pull-back to Libya, in violation of human rights and maritime law.

09.04., distress case I, approximately 80 persons: **The merchant vessel *Maridive 521* transferred rescued persons to the Tunisian Navy, although Tunisia is not a safe place to disembark persons in distress at sea.** On 9th of April, during the afternoon, *Seabird 2's* crew sighted the people in distress around 2 nautical miles (nm)⁴ away from Tunisian territorial waters and alerted the authorities accordingly. There was no life saving equipment on board for the approximately 80 people on board and waves were causing the boat to rock dangerously. As monitored by *Seabird 2's* ground crew, open sources show that *Frontex's* aircraft *Sparrow 4* was also conducting search patterns near the po-

⁴ Nautical Miles (nm) is a unit of measurement used at sea. 1 nautical mile is equal to 1,852 kilometers.



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sition of the distress case. Three hours later, the oil platform *Ashtart* confirmed to *Seabird 2*'s crew that the people in distress were aboard the merchant vessel *Maridive 521*, flying the flag of Belize, which was coordinating with the *Tunisian Navy* for a transshipment of the rescued persons, as later overheard by *Seabird 2*'s crew. The people were then transhipped onto a *Tunisian Navy* patrol boat and pushed back to Tunisia. **Tunisia is however not a safe place according to international human rights and maritime law, the private vessel Maridive 521 therefore is complicit in a violation of the law.**

5 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.

08.05., distress case L, approximately 30 persons: **Inaction by Maltese authorities leads to 14 hours of delay in conducting a rescue operation for persons in distress under Maltese responsibility.** During the morning of 8th of May, the initiative *Watch the Med – Alarm Phone* was called by persons in distress in the Maltese SAR zone and informed the authorities and NGOs accordingly. Later, *Seabird 2*'s ground crew observed using open sources that *Frontex*'s aircraft *Eagle 3* was potentially on scene with the people in distress. An unknown source then sent out a mayday relay, overheard by *Frontex*, as monitored by *Seabird 2*'s crew on the radio.⁵ Upon locating the boat, *Seabird 2* also issued a mayday relay. Several merchant vessels were in the vicinity and were directly contacted by *Seabird 2*'s crew: the merchant vessel *Yellow Fin*, flying the Maltese flag, acknowledged the mayday relay but informed the crew that it had no intention to change its course. The merchant vessels *Spar Ursa*, flying the Norwegian flag, *Safeen Baroness*, flying the flag of the Marshall Islands, and *Kohaku*, flying the flag of the Marshall Islands, were responsive to the mayday relay, but **all of these vessels were instructed by the Maltese authorities not to change course.** The Maltese *Rescue Coordination Centre* (RCC) even asked the merchant vessel *Safeen Baroness* whether they would provide fuel to the people in distress, which was refused, since the vessel did not have anything to provide.

Despite receiving updated positions from both the *Alarm Phone* and *Seabird 2*, and a second mayday relay two hours after the first one was transmitted, the Maltese authorities continued to fail to take any concrete action in initiating a prompt rescue operation according to their duties enshrined in the SAR Convention. The people were only rescued by the Italian authorities and disembarked **around 14 hours after the initial alert by the Alarm Phone.**

13.05. distress cases O and N, 21 and 24 persons respectively: **The civil fast rescue asset *Aurora* responds to two separate boats in distress without being informed by Frontex and fills the gap left by the authorities to rescue persons in distress.** During the morning of 13th of May, the initiative *Watch the Med – Alarm Phone* received information about a distress case carrying 21 people in the Maltese SAR zone about 65 nm south of Lampedusa, and informed the relevant authorities and operational NGOs. Based on open sources, *Seabird 2*'s ground crew could observe *Frontex*'s aircraft *Eagle 1* flying search patterns in the vicinity of the position of the people in distress – without informing any NGO about sightings of any persons in distress. Later, *Seabird 2*'s crew overheard radio communications from an unknown source about an overcrowded boat in distress. It is assumed that the source was Maltese, based on the accent in the communication. *Seabird 2*'s crew sighted the people in distress in the Maltese SAR zone, and informed the authorities that the vessel was clearly in no condition to reach a port independently. The *Aurora* later arrived on scene and stabilized the situation, while requesting further assistance from either the Maltese and Italian authorities. In the end, the people were rescued by an *Italian Coast Guard* patrol boat.

On the same day, *Seabird 2* sighted another boat in distress in the Libyan SAR zone and informed the authorities. Shortly after, *Frontex*'s aircraft *Eagle 1* was also on scene. Several NGO assets were ready to respond to assist the boat in distress. The *Aurora* took over the search for the boat, despite being 50 nm away from the position of the boat in distress. Seven hours after the initial alert by *Seabird 2*, the *Aurora* found the boat and distributed lifesaving equipment. For the following 5 hours, the NGO asset accompanied the boat towards Lampedusa, before a rescue was completed by the Italian authorities later in the evening.

22.05., distress case P, approximately 55 persons: **Assumed interception of a boat in distress, Frontex on-scene, merchant vessels unresponsive to mayday relays.** At around noon on 22nd of May, the initiative *Watch the Med – Alarm Phone* alerted the authorities and operational NGOs after receiving a distress call from 55 people in an overcrowded rubber boat taking on water in the Libyan SAR zone. *Seabird 2*'s crew arrived on scene shortly after and issued a mayday relay, noting that the people in the boat were trying to empty the boat of water

and that very few of them wore lifesaving equipment. Shortly afterward, *Seabird 2*'s crew noticed that *Frontex*'s aerial asset *Sparrow 4* was also on-scene. *Seabird 2*'s crew then tried to make contact with nearby merchant vessel *Maridive 701* and a fishing vessel, but both were unresponsive.

Seabird 2 and the *Alarm Phone* regularly provided authorities with updated positions, without any response. We have to assume that the people in distress were pulled back to Libya, in violation of international law.

07./08.06., **Seabird 2's crews discovers 12 bodies drifting at sea: NGOs again filling the gap left by the authorities and retrieving dead bodies at sea.** From 7th of June 7th to 8th of June, *Seabird 2*'s crews sighted and subsequently reported **12 dead bodies floating in international waters** to the Maltese, Italian and Libyan authorities.⁶ In cooperation with NGO vessels *Ocean Viking* and *Geo Barents*,⁷ which already had 160 people on board from a recent rescue operation, the bodies were recovered from the water. The *Ocean Viking* was then assigned the distant port of Genoa, 650 nm away from their original position. Calls to the Libyan authorities to assist in a wider search to recuperate any other possible deceased persons went unanswered. It cannot be confirmed that the 12 bodies recovered were indeed the same sighted by the *Seabird 2*'s crews, and due to the lack of response by Libyan, Maltese and Italian authorities and the failure to conduct a thorough search, it will never be known if more deaths occurred.

17.06., distress cases AH and AI, approximately 45 persons respectively: **Frontex on scene before two assumed interceptions by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard.** Early during the morning of 17th of June, people in distress called the initiative *Watch the Med – Alarm Phone*, which immediately alerted the authorities and NGOs about a rubber boat carrying around 50 people in the Libyan SAR zone. *Seabird 2*'s crew overheard a mayday relay from *Frontex* aerial asset *Sparrow 3*, which appeared to match the last known position of the boat. Once on-scene, *Seabird 2* immediately alerted the authorities that the boat was adrift, the engine was broken, and that the boat was dangerously overcrowded. The NGO vessel *Ocean Viking* changed course towards the boat in distress. Later however, *Seabird 2*'s crew spotted an empty rubber boat, matching the description and location of the distress case, as well as a nearby Libyan

⁶ For more information, see: sea-watch.org/en/12-bodies-discovered-by-sea-watch-monitoring-aircraft-in-the-mediterranean/

⁷ The *Geo Barents* is operated by the NGO *Médecins Sans Frontières*.



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patrol boat with around 80 people on board. We must assume that all of the people in distress were taken back to Libya in violation of international law, although an NGO asset was able to assist.

On the same day, *Seabird 2*'s crew overheard further communications by *Frontex*' aircraft *Sparrow 3* on the radio, regarding another rubber boat with around 40 people, without issuing a mayday relay. The NGO vessel *Ocean Viking* once again offered assistance. Later, *Seabird 2* sighted the boat in distress and informed the authorities and NGOs, noting that the overcrowded boat lacked adequate lifesaving equipment and was in need of immediate assistance. Shortly afterward, the crew overheard a mayday relay from an unidentified station. Two hours later, *Seabird 2*'s crew spotted an empty rubber boat. Like the previous case, we have to assume that once again, all of the people in distress were taken back to Libya in violation of international law.

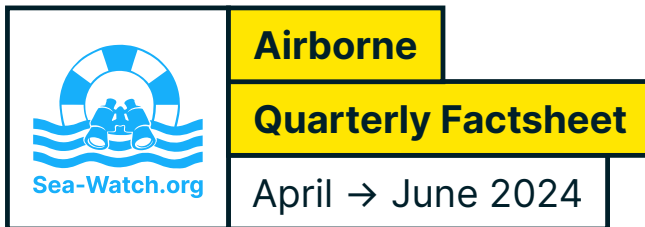
18.06., distress case AO, 61 persons: **Illegal transshipment of rescued people from the merchant vessel *Maridive Zhor 1* to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.** At midday on June 18th, *Seabird 2* spotted an empty rubber boat next to merchant vessel *Maridive Zhor 1*, flying the flag of Panama, and a so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* patrol boat. Nearby was a black RHIB⁸ that had been spotted by *Seabird 2* earlier, thought to be a Libyan asset. Approximately 60 people were aboard *Maridive Zhor 1* and were in the process of being transferred to Libyan patrol boat. *Seabird 2*'s crew communicated with the captain of the merchant vessel and informed them of their duty to ensure disembarkation of any rescued persons in a place of safety. The captain mentioned that he and his crew would be arrested if he did not comply with the order to transship the people. ***Seabird 2*'s crew witnessed an officer of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* beating rescued persons with a stick once the transshipment to the patrol boat was complete.**⁹ On that day, the NGO vessels *Geo Barents* and *Mare*Go* were also operational and were never reached out to for support.

From 19th of June onwards, Tunisia has officially declared a Tunisian SAR zone and a "competent" MRCC to the IMO. Tunisia is not a place of safety and the *Tunisian Coast Guard* is known for using violence against persons in distress.¹⁰ It is quite certain that more illegal pullbacks will occur, supported by authorities of European Member States and the European Union.

⁸ A rigid inflatable boat is a fast, lightweight, and stable boat usually used by the military for operations at sea.

⁹ Footage is available at: <https://x.com/seawatchcrew/status/1803482811485024713>

¹⁰ For more information on Tunisia not being a safe place or cases of violence by the *Tunisian Coast Guard*: <https://alarmphone.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Interrupted-sea-EN.pdf>, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur30/7587/2024/en/>, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/19/tunisia-no-safe-haven-black-african-migrants-refugees>



These missions highlight once again:

- the deadly consequences of European migration policies
- the systematic non-assistance of European Member States and the delegation of rescue operations to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*
- the systematic non-assistance of European Member States in their areas of competence
- 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 unjustified and systematic delays of European Member States to take action and save lives in their Search-and-Rescue (SAR) zones
- the need for NGO vessels in the Central Mediterranean in order to uphold the law and save human lives