

This factsheet provides a summary of political developments and operational updates regarding our ships and aircraft.

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1. Political developments

Sea Rescue organisations joined the criminal trial regarding the shipwreck in Crotone, Italy

On February 26th 2023, a boat in distress sank and at least 94 persons died off Crotone, South Italy. The European Coast Guard agency *Frontex* had been on-scene and did not send out a mayday relay.¹ Instead of sending a rescue ship from the *Italian Coast Guard*, the Italian authorities sent two small ships attached to the *Guardia di Finanza*, which then had to come back due to the bad weather.² Six Italian officers face criminal charges for multiple counts of manslaughter and negligence leading to shipwreck. On March 5th 2025, the search and rescue organisations *EMERGENCY*, *Louise Michel*, *Mediterranea Saving Humans*, *Sea-Watch*, *SOS Humanity* and *SOS MEDITERRANEE* announced being ready to join the criminal trial as civil parties in order to support the families of the victims in their position in court and ensure that justice is served. This shipwreck is not an isolated case - rather it is embedded within widespread practices of non-assistance, the outsourcing of responsibilities and thereby failures to launch timely rescue operations, ultimately leading to deaths at sea. Every responsible element of conduct, including that of higher authorities, must be assessed and be held accountable in case of violations of the law.

¹ See: www.lighthouseports.com/investigation/the-crotone-cover-up/

² See: euractiv.it/section/migrazioni/news/frontex-aveva-avvertito-litalia-di-un-possibile-gran-numero-di-persone-prima-del-naufragio/

Italy held responsible for a pushback to Libya: a survivor is granted a visa to Italy

On June 14th 2021, the merchant vessel *Vos Triton* illegally transhipped around 170 persons to a so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* vessel, as witnessed by *Sea-Watch's* aircraft *Seabird 1*.³ One survivor

managed to request a humanitarian visa to Italy. In its ruling on the visa, the court clarified that the Italian authorities played a substantial supporting role in the entire operation and are therefore responsible “to ensure the rescue of all survivors from recovery at sea to disembarkation in a safe place, something that Libya could never and can never be considered”. This first legal decision is a milestone and clarifies for the first time that Italy is responsible for persons in distress seeking asylum on the high seas, and for facilitating and cooperating their pullbacks to Libya.⁴

2. Updates on our aerial operations with *Seabird 1*

Overview of boats in distress spotted

From January - March we conducted 27 operations with our aircraft *Seabird 1*,⁵ with a total flight time of 136 hours, equivalent to 5 days and 16 hours. We spotted approximately 997 persons in distress aboard 22 different boats.

- 260 persons, on board 6 boats in distress, including 3 boats from the Maltese and 1 from the Tunisian SAR zones, were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and the Libyan “Coastal Security” and pulled back to Libya
- 455 persons, on board 10 boats in distress, were rescued by the Italian authorities or arrived independently and disembarked in Italy
- 54 persons, on board 1 boat in distress, were rescued by a *Frontex* ship in the Italian SAR zone, after the NGO ship *Astral* stabilised the situation
- 208 persons, on board 4 boats in distress, were rescued by NGO vessels and disembarked in Italy
- The outcomes for 20 persons, on board 1 boat in distress, remain uncertain.

From January – March, we must assume that the European Border and Coast Guard Agency *Frontex*⁶ was involved in the narratives for at least 697 persons on board 15 boats in distress sighted by *Seabird 1*. Six of these boats in distress, carrying 254 persons, were rescued by the Italian authorities or arrived independently in Lampedusa. One boat was rescued by *Frontex*’ Danish ship after

³ See: sea-watch.org/en/shipping-company-vroon-complcit-in-forced-return/

⁴ See the press release: sea-watch.org/en/ita-court-grants-survivor-visa/

⁵ Since 2017, together with the Swiss NGO *Humanitarian Pilots Initiative*, *Sea-Watch* monitors the central Mediterranean with its aircraft *Seabird 1* and *Seabird 2*.

⁶ For more information on *Frontex*’ activity in the central Mediterranean Sea: sea-watch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Frontex-Factsheet-2nd-Report.pdf

stabilisation by the NGO ship *Astral*, in the Italian SAR zone. The outcome for 1 boat in distress, carrying around 20 persons, remains unknown. Four boats in distress, with 208 persons, were rescued by NGO ships. Finally, **4 boats, with around 215 persons, were intercepted and pulled back to Libya by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, even from the Maltese SAR zone.**

The use of “Inmarsat” messages by the Italian authorities

In this period, *Sea-Watch*’s ground crew also observed that the Italian authorities issued “Inmarsat” messages⁷ for at least 9 boats in distress monitored by *Seabird 1*. In the central Mediterranean sea, “Inmarsat” messages are sometimes used by RCCs to inform ships about boats in distress. While the issue of Inmarsats is not new to *Sea-Watch*’s operations, their frequency has increased significantly during the past months. For all 9 boats in distress involving *Seabird 1* for which the Italian authorities issued an inmarsat, the Libyan authorities and even the Tunisian MRCC were referred to, instead of the prompt coordination and launch of a rescue operation, ensuring disembarkation in a safe place. While most of the boats were rescued to Italy, **the outcome for one boat remains uncertain, and we must assume that two other boats were very likely intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*.** Instead of complying with their duties and coordinating and launching rescue operations, the Italian authorities continuously refer to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and Tunisian authorities and therefore facilitate illegal interceptions to unsafe places.

Details and outcomes of selected boats in distress

Between January and March 2025, *Sea-Watch*’s aerial operations documented the systematic outsourcing of rescue operations by Italy and Malta to the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and the “Coastal Security”. This practice led to Italy disseminating Inmarsat messages on behalf of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* instead of launching operations, and ultimately to multiple interceptions, **half of them in the Maltese SAR zone**, involving *Frontex*.

The Libyan militia “Coastal Security”⁸ requested that a fishing vessel stay away and conducted an interception in the Maltese SAR zone

On the morning of February 5th, the civilian hotline *Watch the Med - Alarm Phone* alerted authorities as well as *Seabird 1* about a boat in distress in the Maltese SAR zone with 20 persons on board. Around 40

⁷ An International Maritime Satellite is a satellite telecommunication system transmitting messages from ship-to-shore, shore-to-ship, and ship-to-ship. This system is particularly used by *Rescue Coordination Centres* to inform ships at sea about vessels in distress.

⁸ The “General Administration of Coastal Security” is a Libyan militia, supported and trained by the EU and single Member States, and under the responsibility of the Libyan Ministry of Interior. They usually only operate in the Libyan territorial waters.

minutes after the alert, *Seabird 1* arrived on scene and observed the boat in distress in the Maltese (!) SAR zone, next to a fishing vessel, with patrol boat P301 of the Libyan “*Coastal Security*” in the vicinity and coming closer. On the radio, the fishing vessel forwarded the position of the boat in distress, whereupon the Libyan “*Coastal Security*” patrol boat instructed the ship to stay away, stating “don’t let them on your boat”. Shortly afterward, the patrol boat arrived on-scene and intercepted the persons 18 nautical miles⁹ (nm) inside of the Maltese SAR zone. After all of the persons were embarked on the patrol boat, the “*Coastal Security*” removed the engine of the now empty boat, shot at it in order to set it on fire and then left the burning boat behind, pulling the people back to Libya. **The “*Coastal Security*” is supported and trained by the European Union and EU Member States to pull people back to Libya, even from an area under the responsibility of Malta, an EU member State - which is against the law.**

⁹ Nautical Miles is the unit of measurement used at sea. 1 nautical mile is equal to 1,852 kilometers, therefore 18 nautical miles equals 33 kilometers.

¹⁰ An International Maritime Satellite is a satellite telecommunication system transmitting messages from ship-to-shore, shore-to-ship, and ship-to-ship. This system is particularly used by Rescue Coordination Centres to inform ships at sea about vessels in distress. As mentioned above, Italy has particularly issued those recently.

The so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* intercepted 40 persons deep in the Maltese SAR region, presumably following an orbit by Frontex’ aircraft Eagle3

On the afternoon of February 5th, the civilian hotline *Watch the Med - Alarm Phone* repeatedly informed the authorities and relevant NGOs about around 40 people in distress, in a position 20 nm within the Maltese SAR zone. Subsequently, *Seabird 1*’s crew searched for the boat on the morning of February 6th, but could only find an empty boat that would fit the description of the vessel *Alarm Phone* had alerted about. Later, the *Alarm Phone* learned from relatives of the people in distress that they had been intercepted by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and were pulled back to Libya.

According to open sources, Frontex’s aircraft *Eagle3* was orbiting in the area of the boat in distress during the night. Therefore, we must assume that Frontex was involved in this interception by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* deep in the Maltese (!) SAR zone. Transparency regarding the chain of events that led to such an interception, and any potential accountability, are still missing.

The Italian authorities issued an “Inmarsat” message on behalf of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* and thus facilitated an interception to Libya

On the morning of February 25th, the *Italian Coast Guard* issued an Inmarsat message¹⁰ “on behalf” of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* about a rubber boat with around 60 people on board. About two and a half

hours later, the crew of *Seabird 1*, which was searching for this distress case, could only find an empty rubber boat nearby the position shared via the Inmarsat. Shortly afterward, the crew observed a patrol boat from the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* heading away from the area with 60 persons on board. Therefore, we must assume that the people in distress were intercepted and pulled back to Libya, with direct support at least from the Italian authorities - who issued an Inmarsat instead of coordinating and launching a rescue operation with disembarkation ensured in a safe place.

11 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.

Another interception in the Maltese SAR zone, following orbits by a Frontex aerial asset

In the early morning hours of February 26th, the initiative *Watch the Med - Alarm Phone* informed about a boat in distress within the Maltese SAR zone. According to open source data, *Frontex*’ aircraft *Osprey3* went to the described position and flew several orbits within the area during the morning but, to our knowledge, did not send a mayday relay.¹¹ When *Seabird 1* arrived on scene with the boat carrying around 70 people on board, the crew observed another *Frontex* asset flying in the area and a patrol boat of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* intercepting the people in the Maltese SAR zone.

Italy sends out an Inmarsat on behalf of the so-called Libyan Coast Guard, civil society fills the gap left by the authorities

On March 24th, *Seabird 1* spotted a boat with 60 persons on board in the Libyan SAR zone, and informed authorities as well as the vessels *Nadir* and *Humanity* which were in the area. Both NGOs changed course towards the boat in distress. In the meantime, *Seabird 1* informed the merchant vessel *SNP Galaxy*, flying under the flag of Barbados, about the boat in distress - for which the captain also changed course. In the evening, persons on board the boat in distress alerted the civilian hotline *Watch the Med - Alarm Phone* and the Italian MRCC issued an “Inmarsat” message on behalf of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, requesting ships to keep a sharp lookout and report to the Libyan authorities. All persons in distress were eventually rescued by the NGO ship *Humanity 1*, with the support of the *Nadir*, filling the gap left by the authorities and complying with international law.

People are left to die at sea for multiple days, Italy issues an Inmarsat instead of launching a rescue operation, and in the end the civil society fills the gap left by the authorities

On March 31st, the civilian hotline *Watch the Med - Alarm Phone* was contacted by the relatives of people on board a boat in distress, probably

located between the Tunisian-Maltese and Italian SAR zones. *Frontex's* aircraft *Sparow1* was observed operating only around Lampedusa. With the deteriorating weather and no information of any search and rescue operations launched by Italian authorities, *Seabird 1* launched operations and unsuccessfully searched for the persons. *Seabird 1's* ground crew called the Italian and Maltese authorities on multiple occasions to call for the launch of a rescue mission. The officer on duty was either “not available” and asked to be informed via email, or claimed that they were “working on it” without providing more information. On the evening of April 2nd, the NGO ship *Humanity 1* was eventually able to find the boat in distress and rescued the 40 persons who had been left at sea for 3 days despite deteriorating weather conditions.

The Italian authorities issued multiple “inmarsat” messages regarding this boat in distress, first urging ships to reach out to them, and then in other messages only referring ships to the so-called *Libyan* and *Tunisian Coast Guard*. As shown by the NGO aircraft *Seabird 1* and the NGO ship *Humanity 1*, a search and rescue operation could have been possible the entire time - instead, the Italian authorities continuously outsourced their duties to the Libyan and Tunisian authorities with the aim to facilitate interceptions to unsafe places.

3. Updates on our operations at sea with *Sea-Eye 4* and *Aurora*

Between January and March 2025, *Sea-Watch* conducted 3 rescue operations with the ships *Aurora* and *Sea-Eye 4*. The crews were able to rescue 115 persons in distress from 3 boats.

On February 17th 2025, *Sea-Watch* and *Sea-Eye* launched a joint operation in the central Mediterranean sea, operating the ship *Sea-Eye 4* together. On February 22nd, the *Sea-Eye 4* rescued 41 persons in distress and was assigned to the distant port of Naples. The crossing took three days, unnecessarily exposing persons on board to further unsettling situations. The people disembarked on February 25th 2025. On March 8th, together with crews from the SAR NGO *Mediterranea Saving Humans*, we were able to rescue 42 persons. The Italian authorities assigned the port of Crotone, which was 740 kilometers away. However, further boats were in distress. Abiding by our duty to render assistance, we then rescued 80 persons from three boats in distress. The Italian authorities assigned the port of Vibo Valentia to disembark the survivors, obliging us to take a 30 hour

crossing to successfully disembark persons on March 10th 2025, and therefore removing SAR capacities from the Mediterranean Sea.

On the morning of March 1st, the initiative *Watch the Med - Alarm Phone* informed about a boat adrift with 32 persons on board, about which the Italian authorities issued an “Inmarsat” “on behalf” of the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*. In the afternoon, *Seabird 1* spotted the empty boat, and the persons in distress on the gas platform *Miskar*, which is located in the Tunisian and the Maltese SAR zones. A *Frontex* aircraft was likely orbiting above but did not respond to *Seabird 1*’s calls. The platform confirmed to *Seabird 1*’s crew that the so-called *Tunisian Coast Guard* would intercept the people the next morning. However, this did not happen. The 32 persons remained stranded on the platform for more than 3 days, as witnessed again on March 3rd by *Seabird 1*. This whole time, the authorities knew about the dangerous situation the people were in¹², that a gas platform is not a safe place, and even deployed aerial assets to monitor the situation. In the end, civil society filled the gap left by the authorities: *Sea-Watch*’s ship *Aurora* rescued the persons on March 4th, and disembarked them in Lampedusa, Italy. The survivors reported that one person had died during the ordeal.

¹² Following a request for interim measures by the NGOs *StraLi*, *SOS Humanity*, *Uprights* on behalf of the survivors, the UN Human Rights Committee urged Malta to launch a rescue operation - which did not happen. More information available: sos-humanity.org/en/press/miskar-rescue/.