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1. Executive summary

January – June 2026 at a glance

- *Sea-Watch* aircraft conducted **76 missions** and documented **44 boats in distress carrying more than 2027 people**.
- More than **758 people were forcibly returned to Libya and Tunisia**, while over **95 people's fate remains unknown**.
- *Frontex* continued to be involved in interceptions leading to returns to Libya without any transparency or accountability
- Our *Sea-Watch 5* was again attacked and shot at by Libyan Militias
- Italy further escalated the criminalisation of civil search and rescue through repeated detentions of NGO vessels and opening of an investigation against our captain to further intimidate our work
- Courts increasingly questioned these practices, suspending several detentions of NGO rescue ships

The first half of 2026 was marked by continued human rights violations in the Central Mediterranean, increasing violence by Libyan actors, persistent shortcomings in European search and rescue coordination, and the further criminalisation of civilian search and rescue organisations.

Throughout the reporting period, *Sea-Watch* continued to document recurring patterns rather than isolated incidents. These included unlawful interceptions by Libyan actors, delayed or insufficient rescue coordination by European authorities, repeated failures to provide assistance to people in distress, and increasing reliance on merchant vessels and civilian rescue organisations to fill protection gaps at sea.

Sea-Watch also documented repeated involvement of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency *Frontex* in incidents that resulted in pullbacks to Libya or prolonged distress situations. While *Frontex* aerial assets were present in numerous operations, transparency regarding subsequent coordination, operational decisions and accountability remains absent.

At the political level, Italy further intensified its policy of obstructing civilian search and rescue. Rescue vessels continued to be detained under the *Piantadosi* framework for refusing to cooperate with Libyan authorities, despite growing judicial recognition that such cooperation conflicts with international law.

The reporting period was further characterised by an escalation of violence against civilian rescue actors. In May 2026, the *Sea-Watch 5* was fired upon by armed units identifying themselves as the so-called *Libyan coastguard* shortly after completing a rescue in international waters. Despite repeated distress calls, neither European nor national authorities intervened to protect the vessel. Instead, criminal investigations were subsequently initiated against the shipmaster upon arrival in Italy.

At the same time, several Italian courts continued to question the legality of administrative measures imposed on civilian rescue organisations, suspending detentions or ruling on the merits of cases. These decisions further reinforce longstanding concerns regarding the compatibility of current Italian practices with international and European law.

2. Operational findings from our aerial operations

A. Overview of our aircraft' documentation

- More than **530 people** onboard 11 boats in distress were intercepted by the so-called *Libyan coastguard* and forcibly returned to Libya
- At least **75 people** onboard 3 boats in distress were intercepted by the *General Administration for Coastal Security (GACS)*
- At least **125 people** onboard 2 boats in distress were intercepted and forcibly returned to Libya by unknown actors
- **657 persons** onboard 13 boats in distress were rescued by civilian

- search and rescue organisations and disembarked in Italy
- **449 persons** onboard 9 boats in distress were rescued by the Italian authorities
- **28 persons** onboard 1 boat in distress were intercepted by the *Tunisian National Guard* and returned to Tunisia, while **10 remaining persons** were rescued by the NGO *Solidaire*
- **58 persons** onboard 2 boats in distress were rescued by merchant vessels and disembarked in Italy
- The fate of **more than 95 people** onboard 3 boats in distress remains unknown
- At least **102 people died or went missing** in incidents documented by *Sea-Watch's* aircraft during the reporting period

These figures represent the incidents directly monitored by *Sea-Watch's* aerial assets and therefore provide only a partial picture of developments in the Central Mediterranean Sea.

B. Main operational trends

Persistent unlawful interceptions by Libyan actors

Forced returns to Libya remained one of the defining characteristics of the reporting period. People intercepted at sea continue to be returned to a country that cannot be considered a place of safety under international maritime law. Numerous reports by the United Nations and other international organisations have documented systematic arbitrary detention, torture, sexual violence and other serious human rights violations against migrants and refugees in Libya. *Sea-Watch* continues to observe that European policies facilitating interceptions at sea expose people to these well-documented risks.

Frontex surveillance continues to enable unlawful pullbacks

From January to March only, **Frontex was involved in over half of the boats in distress sighted by *Sea-Watch's* aircraft. Over 40% of the boats involving *Frontex* were pulled back to Libya and Tunisia.** Transparency and related accountability over those cases are still missing.

The repeated presence of *Frontex* in incidents that result in unlawful pullbacks raises persistent concerns about the Agency's role in facilitating interceptions at sea. Despite its operational involvement, there

is still no meaningful transparency regarding how information collected through *Frontex* aerial surveillance is shared, which authorities receive operational alerts, how rescue decisions are taken following aerial detections, or whether the Agency assesses the human rights consequences of its operational support.

¹ 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.

Distress communication is increasingly manipulated

During the reporting period, *Sea-Watch* repeatedly documented irregular radio communications that complicated search and rescue operations.

On several occasions, unidentified stations broadcast incomplete, misleading or unverifiable distress positions that did not comply with established international procedures for mayday relay¹ communications. These transmissions caused confusion among rescue actors operating in the area, delayed search efforts and, in several documented cases, preceded interceptions by Libyan actors. On February 11th, *Seabird 1* overheard a communication “migrant boat needing assistance” in a specific position. The communication was not repeated, as would be required for a proper “mayday relay” communication, which hindered our aircrew to understand the position correctly. On March 14th, *Seabird* overheard 8 different positions being repeated by an unknown source, without time stamps or any further information. These positions were communicated on open channels in a repeated manner (around 20 times) within one hour and a half. When *Seabird 1* reacted to the first position, no one responded on the radio. *Seabird 1* checked several positions shared and did not spot anything.

Search and rescue at sea depends on reliable communication and rapid coordination. The increasing occurrence of unidentified radio transmissions without sufficient information raises serious concerns regarding navigational safety, operational transparency and the protection of people in distress.

Persistent failures in rescue coordination

Sea-Watch continued to document structural shortcomings in rescue coordination across the Central Mediterranean. Rather than coordinating timely rescues leading to disembarkation in a place of safety, European authorities repeatedly relied on indirect measures, delayed responses to distress alerts, or instructions requiring merchant ves-

sels to remain on standby instead of immediately assisting people in distress. As a consequence, civilian rescue organisations and merchant vessels repeatedly filled operational gaps left by responsible authorities. Several incidents documented during the reporting period illustrate how delayed coordination increased risks for people in distress and contributed to preventable loss of life.

3. Political developments

Italy continues the criminalisation of civilian search and rescue

Italy continued to use administrative measures to obstruct civilian search and rescue operations throughout the reporting period.

Since the *Piantadosi* Decree-Law (Law 15/2023) entered into force in January 2023 and the *Flussi* Decree-Law (Law 145/2024)², Italian authorities have detained civilian rescue vessels on more than forty occasions, preventing ships from operating for a combined period of nearly three years. During the first half of 2026 alone, NGO rescue vessels were detained on 5 occasions, including *Sea-Watch 5* and *Aurora*, primarily for refusing to establish operational communication with Libyan authorities during rescue operations.³ These detentions form part of a broader policy aimed at restricting civilian rescue activities in the Central Mediterranean. The cumulative effect has been a significant reduction in available rescue capacity while deaths at sea continue to rise.

Italian courts increasingly challenge these practices

While administrative restrictions continued, Italian courts increasingly questioned their legality. On at least 5 occasions,⁴ courts suspended detention orders imposed on civilian rescue vessels. Seven other rulings on the merits of cases confirmed the unlawfulness of previous detentions.⁵ In particular, a ruling recognised that instructions requiring cooperation with Libyan authorities may conflict with international maritime law and the obligation to ensure disembarkation in a place of safety.⁶ These decisions reinforce longstanding legal concerns regarding the compatibility of current Italian administrative practices with international obligations governing search and rescue at sea. Although many rulings on the merits are still pending, these decisions represent important judicial scrutiny of measures that have significantly restricted civilian rescue capacity.

² [Sea-Watch Quarterly factsheet - October to December 2024](#)

³ [The Sea-Watch 5, the Humanity 1, the Sea-Watch 5, the Aurora and the Trotamar III](#) were detained for a total of 145 days.

⁴ Civil Court of Agrigento - 28 January 2026, Civil Court of Catania - 18 February 2026, Civil Court of Chieti - 12 March 2026, Civil Court of Catania - 1 April 2026; Civil Court of Agrigento - 11 May 2026.

⁵ Civil Court of Agrigento - 19 January 2026; Civil Court of Genova - 16 February 2026; Civil Court of Ragusa - 9 March 2026; Civil Court of Salerno - 27 March 2026; Civil Court of Trapani - 3 April 2026; Civil Court of Massa - 28 April 2026; Civil Court of Chieti - 21 May 2026.

⁶ [Civil Court of Trapani - 3 April 2026](#).

4. Selected cases from aerial monitoring and maritime operations

Merchant vessel resisted pressure to facilitate a pullback to Libya

On March 22nd, the Italian merchant vessel Bos Prudence rescued 26 people from a boat in distress in the Libyan Search and Rescue Region. The incident demonstrates how commercial vessels may face pressure from Libyan actors while fulfilling their obligations under international maritime law. It also highlights the importance of clear coordination by responsible Rescue Coordination Centres in ensuring that rescues result in disembarkation in a place of safety.

After recovering survivors in the Libyan search and rescue (SAR) zone, the crew of *Bos Prudence* repeatedly attempted to establish radio contact with the so-called *Libyan coastguard*. No response was received. Shortly afterwards, *Seabird 1* observed a Libyan patrol boat following the merchant vessel. Once the merchant vessel confirmed that it was operating under the coordination of the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) and instructed the Libyan patrol boat to cease following them, the patrol boat left the scene. The survivors were later transferred to the Italian coastguard and safely disembarked in Italy.

19 people died after authorities failed to act

On April 1st, the Italian coastguard disembarked 58 survivors and recovered 19 bodies after rescuing a rubber boat in distress north of Libya. European authorities had information about the distress case more than 24 hours before the rescue took place but failed to initiate a timely rescue operation.

On the evening of March 30th, a *Frontex* aircraft sent two mayday relay communications on the radio, reporting a rubber boat carrying approximately 70 people in distress. *Sea-Watch's* rescue vessel *Aurora* immediately attempted to establish radio contact with the aircraft several times to obtain further information but received no response. *Aurora* proceeded to the reported position but was unable to locate the boat in deteriorating weather conditions and limited visibility. The following day, publicly available flight data showed an Italian military aircraft operating in the same area where the rescue ultimately took place. During the night of 31st of March to 1st of April, an Italian coastguard patrol vessel recovered 58 survivors and 11 deceased people. Survivors reported that they had departed from Libya, on March, 30th, matching the information contained in *Frontex's* earlier distress alerts.

The evidence collected by *Sea-Watch* indicates that the boat reported by *Frontex* on March 30th, and the boat rescued more than 24 hours later were the same vessel. Despite being alerted to the distress situation, the responsible authorities failed to launch a timely rescue operation. Nineteen people died while European authorities had knowledge of the boat in distress.

***Sea-Watch* calls for an independent investigation into the actions and omissions of the responsible national and European authorities, including *Frontex*, and for full disclosure of all operational communications, flight records and coordination decisions relating to this incident.⁷**

Authorities refused to rescue - A fishing vessel did

This case exemplifies a pattern repeatedly documented by Sea-Watch: European authorities receive distress information, yet merchant vessels are left to carry out rescues that fall squarely within states' obligations under international maritime law. Once again, lives were saved because a commercial vessel intervened where state authorities failed to do so.

On June 7th, at least eleven people died in a shipwreck approximately 45 nautical miles⁸ south of Malta, within the Maltese SAR zone. Although the distress case was known to the responsible authorities, it was not a state rescue asset but the Turkish fishing vessel *Tuncay Sagun-2* that reached the survivors first and carried out the rescue. When *Seabird 1* arrived over the scene, survivors had already been rescued by the *Tuncay Sagun-2*. Publicly available information shows that Maltese and Italian authorities, as well as *Frontex* and the European military operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI,⁹ were aware of the distress case and had operational assets in the area several hours before survivors were rescued.

Despite this, no state rescue asset reached the boat in time. Approximately 53 survivors were eventually disembarked in Malta, while at least eleven people died. The number of people who remain missing is unknown.

***Sea-Watch* calls for full transparency regarding the operational decisions taken by the Maltese authorities and all other actors involved, including *Frontex* and EUNAVFOR MED IRINI.** The available evidence underlines that an earlier state response could have saved the lives of the people who were victims of Fortress Europe on that day.¹⁰

⁷ See *Sea-Watch's* press release: [19 dead after hours without help: New evidence incriminates European authorities.](#)

⁸ Nautical Miles is the unit of measurement used at sea. 1 nautical mile is equal to 1,852 kilometers.

⁹ At the time of the editorial timeline, the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFORMED) Irini is European military operation to enforce the UN arms embargo to Libya. Under EUNAVFOR MED IRINI, capacity building of the so-called Libyan coastguard takes place. On the flight route in the Central Mediterranean, IRINI operates exclusively with aircraft.

¹⁰ See *Sea-Watch's* press release: [Was this negligent manslaughter? 11 dead after shipwreck off Malta.](#)

5. Our vessels at sea

Sea-Watch 5: Rescue operations under escalating violence

The Sea-Watch 5 was attacked by the so-called Libyan coastguard. Upon disembarkation, the Italian authorities opened criminal investigations for “aiding and abetting illegal immigration” - against Sea-Watch 5’s shipmaster.

On May 11th, shortly after rescuing 90 people in international waters north of Libya, *Sea-Watch 5* came under armed attack by units identifying themselves as the so-called *Libyan coastguard*. The attackers fired multiple live rounds at the rescue vessel and threatened to board the ship and forcibly return those on board to Libya. The crew immediately issued a mayday call and informed the responsible Italian and German authorities. No state authority intervened to protect the vessel while the attack was ongoing.

Following the incident, *Sea-Watch* publicly called for an end to European cooperation with Libyan actors responsible for repeated attacks against people on the move and humanitarian organisations. The attack represented a further escalation of violence that *Sea-Watch* and partner organisations have documented for years in the Central Mediterranean.¹¹

Rather than receiving protection following the attack, *Sea-Watch 5* was assigned a distant port of disembarkation more than four days away. Shortly after arriving in Italy, criminal investigations were initiated against the vessel's captain on allegations of facilitating irregular migration, despite the rescue having been conducted in accordance with international maritime obligations.¹²

Our Auroras: Expanding rescue capacity despite systematic obstruction

In April 2026, *Aurora* rescued 44 people who had been stranded for several days on the abandoned oil platform *Didon*, after European authorities failed to provide assistance. Instead of investigating why people had been left without rescue for days, Italian authorities detained the vessel under the *Piantadosi* and *Flussi* Decree-Laws, accusing the crew of failing to cooperate with Libyan authorities during the operation.¹³

The detention is part of a broader strategy to obstruct civilian search and rescue through administrative sanctions. Under the *Piantadosi* framework, humanitarian organisations are expected to coordinate with Libyan actors despite overwhelming evidence of systematic human rights violations, ar-

¹¹ See the list of incidents on the alliance Justice Fleet's website: [Violent Incidents with Libyan Militias](#).

¹² See *Sea-Watch's* press release: [BREAKING: After attack on Sea-Watch 5, Italy opens criminal investigation against captain](#).

¹³ See *Sea-Watch's* press release: [Italy detains rescue ship Aurora despite 71 people missing in Mediterranean Sea](#).

bitrary detention, torture and unlawful interceptions. *Sea-Watch* rejects this approach as fundamentally incompatible with international maritime law, the principle of non-refoulement and the obligation to disembark rescued people in a place of safety.

In June 2026, we commissioned *Aurora 2*, ensuring that rescue operations can continue even when one vessel is unlawfully blocked in port. The deployment of a second fast rescue vessel is a direct response to the increasing criminalisation and administrative obstruction of civilian search and rescue.¹⁴

¹⁴ See *Sea-Watch's* press release: [New Rescue Vessel *Aurora 2*: *Sea-Watch's* Response to Political Blockades of Civilian Sea Rescue.](#)

6. Conclusion

For more than a decade, the same evidence has been documented over and over again. People are left to die at Europe's borders. Survivors are intercepted and returned to places where they face arbitrary detention, torture and other grave human rights violations. Civilian rescue organisations are obstructed, criminalised and attacked for doing what states are legally obliged to do.

The first half of 2026 does not tell a new story. Deaths at sea, unlawful pullbacks and attacks on those defending human rights are not unfortunate side effects of European migration policy. **They are the foreseeable consequences of a system built on deterrence, externalisation and impunity.** What we document is the systematic erosion of the rule of law at Europe's borders. International maritime law is ignored, refugee law is circumvented, human rights obligations are treated as optional whenever they concern people on the move.

This development reaches far beyond the Central Mediterranean Sea. Across Europe, organisations defending fundamental rights, supporting people on the move and holding governments accountable are increasingly portrayed as obstacles rather than essential pillars of democratic societies. The erosion of civic space and the erosion of the rights of people on the move are not separate developments, but two sides of the same political project.

A society that accepts the suspension of rights for one group ultimately weakens those rights for everyone.

Sea-Watch stands for freedom of movement for all.