



**MED REPORT**  
DECEMBER 2024

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# 17TH MISSION IN UKRAINE LED BY MEDITERRANEA

## A COUNTRY GRAPPLING WITH ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRISES

The 17th mission bringing humanitarian aid to war refugees in Ukraine has found the country in a state of profound economic, social and psychological crisis. Many people bear signs of war-induced mutilations while others are in hiding to avoid conscription, trying to survive. In the meantime, business groups from European countries are eagerly rubbing their hands thinking about the country's reconstruction.

## Ukraine in crisis, between war and economic collapse

The 17th mission by Mediterranea Saving Humans, delivering humanitarian aid to war refugees in Ukraine, took place during the 2024-2025 winter. Organized by the Ground Teams of Bolzano, Trento, and Belluno, the humanitarian convoy distributed aid in refugee camps in Lviv. After more than three years of war, these camps continue to shelter refugees from the western regions of the country, occupied by Russian troops.

Our activists found the country in a state of profound crisis. We at Mediterranea witness a fertile ground for injustices among the population. The nationwide crisis, coupled with relentless inflation, has made purchasing basic necessities a strenuous task for citizens. Moreover, the tension of war is palpable. The social and psychological damage caused by the war environment, including Russian missile and drone bombings, remains profoundly evident.

During our former missions in the Lviv oblast, men were almost entirely absent. This time, however, we caught a glimpse of some, as they had obtained Christmas leave from the front. Many show signs of war-induced mutilations. Among the younger population, the fear of mandatory enlistment is intensifying. Street roundups are frequent for anyone who cannot present a “valid” justification for not being at the front. Many resort to hiding from the call to arms in an attempt to survive, often at the cost of losing their jobs. Anyone caught not updating their personal data faces a fine of around €500. For those ignoring the call, the state responds by freezing their bank accounts and blocking access to public sector jobs.

The military cemetery, which consisted of small rows of graves in June 2022, has undergone a significant expansion and is now divided into dozens of sectors. At the Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, funerals take place every day.

Meanwhile, business groups from European countries are eagerly anticipating Ukraine’s reconstruction projects. The country is currently operating on loans provided by European nations and the United States, which will eventually need to be repaid. This creates an inequitable situation, leaving Ukraine at the mercy of European and American economic powers.

As part of our distribution of essential items to war refugees, we provided blankets from Sheep Italia. This marks the renewal of our collaboration with them, united in the spirit of solidarity.

With us once again, the music therapists from the Music&Resilience project have fostered moments of communication, emotion, sensory connection, and vitality among war refugees in camps and informal shelter locations. This kind of musical activity is warmly welcomed by the refugee population, given the profound impact of their current circumstances on their well-being. Mediterranea Saving Humans will broaden its collaboration with Music&Resilience in its missions in Ukraine to support the population not only by providing humanitarian aid but also by creating and developing precious moments of social interaction and community spirit.

STORIES FROM THE BORDER

EFFORTS BY  
THE EU FOR THE  
EXTERNALIZATION OF  
BORDER CONTROLS IN  
MAURITANIA

Given its geographical position, Mauritania serves as both a geographical and cultural bridge between North-african Maghreb and Western Sub-Saharan Africa. This dual physical and symbolic role places the country at the center of the migratory routes crossing Africa towards Europe.

### **Another in a long series of European attempts to close its borders**

As it often happens in Africa, Mauritania plays different roles in the migration field, being simultaneously an emigration country, a country of destination and a transit country. Indeed, thousands of its citizens moved abroad, the majority of which lives in other African countries, like Senegal and Mali, but also in the EU, particularly in France and Spain. However, as shown by an UNHCR report, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, published a few months ago, the country hosts more than 275.000 refugees and asylum seekers, out of a total population of less than 5 million. Most of them are located in the south-eastern region of the country, near the Malian border, where the Mbera refugee camp hosts around 112.000 people. Moreover, every year, thousands of people cross its territory in their path towards Europe. The main migratory route starting in Mauritania is directed towards the Canary Islands, in Spain. As of October 31, 2024, 34.087 migrants had arrived, representing a 12% increase compared to the previous year.

It's in light of this increased relevance in the migratory routes towards Europe that the latter is trying to include Mauritania in the process of externalization of its borders, and to make it one of its allies in the fight against immigration. In this context, the agreements made in the last months between the country and the EU need to be taken into account, defined as a "partnership and dialogue on migration" only in order to hide the actual reason and aim behind them.

The aforementioned agreements occurred after Ursula Von der Leyen, the current President of the European Commission, visited the country in February 2024. During the visit, the President announced the employment of 210 millions of euros in the country aimed at sustaining “the management of migration”, fighting against the traffic of migrant people, promoting security and stability, providing humanitarian aid and supporting the local population. According to the agreement, the first 60 millions will be employed to reduce the number of people crossing the Routa Atlantica.

Additionally, a negotiation on the potential deployment of Frontex teams, the European agency of border and coastal guard, in the African country is underway between Mauritania and the EU. This would be the first time in which the European Agency exercises its executive powers on the territory of a third country with no borders in common with a EU country, nor geographically situated in Europe, going from an informal and temporary involvement to a long-lasting and official one. In 2022, Frontex had already established a Risk Analysis Cell, aiming at getting more information on the illegal crossings occurring in the Mediterranean and on the groups acting as human traffickers. As a matter of fact, the collaboration with the Mauritanian government had begun even earlier, in 2006, when more than 32.000 people arrived in the Canary Islands from Senegal and Mauritania. In this case, Frontex used its operations “Hera I” and “Hera II” to track the boats directed in Spain.

Over the years, thanks to the practical support provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the economic one provided by Europe, 48 spots were created in Mauritania, aimed at monitoring entries and exits in the countries and to improve the infrastructures along the border. Moreover, border guards were deployed in two cities along the banks of the Senegal river, using the OIM’s Personal identification and registration system (Pirs). Such a system allows to organize the data of people on the move inside of a database shared with Interpol through biometric identifiers. In addition, border guards use the Universal forensic extraction device (Ufed) to trace, going through sms, calls and GPS location, the ones who are trying to migrate towards Europe.

In her report of November 2023, the MEP Tineke Strik had already stated that the enforcement of such agreements would lead to a further violation of migrant people’s fundamental rights, since Mauritania does not apply European standards in this context. However, it’s still not clear whether nor when the agreements could be confirmed and enforced. What’s clear, though, is another in a long series of reckless and inconsiderate attempts made by Europe to close its borders, even if that would mean neglecting migrant people’s rights and safety.



**SYRIAN REFUGEES  
IN EUROPE**

**A PAINFUL PAST  
AND UNCERTAIN  
PRESENT**





For many Syrian refugees in Europe, the illusion of being able to return home after the recent fall of the Assad regime in Syria is colliding with a reality of obstacles, precarity and policy decisions that seem to ignore fundamental rights. Indeed, some European states are already suspending consideration of their asylum applications or are planning repatriations, raising serious concerns about respect for human rights.

### **Syrian refugees in Europe: some countries are suspending asylum claims**

With the recent fall of the Assad regime in Syria, an event that marks an historic turning point after years of conflict and oppression, one would have expected a renewed international focus on reconstruction and protection for the victims of the conflict. However, for many Syrian refugees in Europe, the illusion of being able to return home collides with a reality of obstacles, precarity and political decisions that seem to ignore fundamental rights. Some European states are already suspending consideration of their asylum applications or planning repatriations, raising serious concerns about respect for human rights. The refugee issue remains crucial, requiring immediate attention and long-term solutions from the European Union (EU) and the international community.

### **A past of suffering and a present of uncertainty**

The Syrian civil war has forced more than 13 million people to flee their homes. Of them, more than 6 million have found refuge in neighboring countries, while about 1 million have sought protection in Europe. These refugees, who fled bombing, persecution, and destruction, had pinned their hopes on the promise of safety and dignity that Europe represented.

Despite the fall of the Assad regime, the country remains devastated and returning is an unfeasible proposition for many refugees due to destroyed infrastructure, lack of essential services, unresolved political tensions and the constant threat of reprisals or forced conscription. However, some European governments seem to ignore this reality, pushing for repatriation

or suspending consideration of asylum applications, acts that amount to a denial of the right to international protection.

### **Europe and a fading welcome**

While the European Union has played an important role in accepting Syrian refugees, Member States' policies have always reflected fragmented and often contradictory approaches. Germany, under the leadership of Angela Merkel, had opened its doors to more than 600,000 Syrians in 2015-2016, accompanying this with integration programs that represented a model of solidarity. However, this humanitarian spirit is now starkly contrasted by the direction taken by several European governments.

In recent months, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands have announced the suspension or review of Syrian refugee asylum applications, justifying the decisions based on the supposed improvement of the situation in Syria. This change of course reflects not only an erosion of humanitarian values, but also a surrender to the populist and xenophobic discourses that dominate the European political landscape.

### **An attack on the non-refoulement principle**

The suspension of asylum applications is a serious violation of the non-refoulement principle enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention. Forcibly returning a person to a country where he or she risks persecution, torture or inhumane treatment constitutes not only an illegal act, but also a betrayal of the European Union's founding principles.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented how Syria remains a highly insecure place.

Arbitrary arrests, torture, enforced disappearances and reprisals are the order of the day. To ignore these testimonies is to turn a blind eye to an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly ruled that repatriation to unsafe countries violates the right to life and the prohibition of degrading treatment, fundamental principles of the European Convention on Human Rights. Yet some European governments continue to promote policies that put thousands of lives at risk, turning the right to asylum into an arbitrary and precarious concession.

### **Irresponsible European leadership**

The narrative that Syria is "safe" is nothing more than a political expedient to justify restrictive migration policies and fuel electoral consensus among those who see refugees as a burden or threat. This approach not only betrays the rights of refugees but undermines Europe's credibility as a moral and political leader on the international stage.

Syrian refugees cannot be abandoned to politics of convenience. Europe has the opportunity—and the responsibility—to demonstrate that human rights are non-negotiable. Ensuring protection, security and integration opportunities is not just a legal obligation, but an ethical duty.

The suspension of Syrian refugee asylum claims is more than an administrative issue, it is an open wound to Europe's commitment to human rights. Only through decisive, coordinated action that puts people's dignity and safety at the center will Europe be able to redeem its role as a guarantor of basic rights.

# MSH MONTHLY REPORT ON MIGRATIONS





## **Mauritania, 6 December**

200 people who sailed from Mauritania were captured and deported to the same African country by local authorities.

## **Syria, 12 December**

Many Syrian refugees who fled 14 years of civil war started returning home from Lebanon and Turkey after the fall of Assad regime.

## **Morocco, 20 December**

During a rescue operation conducted by Moroccan authorities in the Atlantic, a boat capsized, causing about 79 casualties, with only 9 survivors.

## **Morocco, 25 December**

Refugees in Libya reports that some warehouses in Morocco are being used as detention centers for people on the move thanks to European Union funding.

## **Albania, 1-2 December**

The transnational network Network Against Migrants Detention organized a demonstration in front of the diplomatic representations of Italy and the European Union and the Albanian government building in Tirana and at the Shenjin and Gjader centers to denounce the Italy-Albania protocol.

## **Greece-Turkey, 2 December**

6 people near Kastanies in the Evros River border area were pushed back to Turkey by Greek police.

## **Albania, 10 December**

An Albanian TV report showed that agents, sent to Albania by the Italian government to guard the currently empty identification and deportation centers, are engaging in tourism.

## **Spain, 12 December**

The bodies of 6 dead people were found aboard 2 boats that arrived in the Canary Islands. In less than 24 hours, 4 boats with 284 people on board arrived in El Hierro.

## **Spain, 14 December**

Salvamento Marítimo rescued a boat in distress off the Canary Islands that had left Mauritania four days earlier.

## **European Union, 17 December**

European Commission President Von Der Leyen, in a letter addressed to the European Council, wrote that the European Union should consider building new repatriation hubs in third countries and modifying the Asylum Procedures Regulation, starting with a redefinition of the “safe country” concept.

## **Spain, 19 December**

4 dead bodies were found off the Canary Islands aboard 2 boats after being spotted by Moroccan authorities, but they did not intervene. The 50 people rescued by Spanish authorities were transferred to Lanzarote.

## **France-United Kingdom, 25 December**

107 people were rescued in the English Channel thanks to 12 operations by French authorities during Christmas Day.

## **Spain, 26 December**

The Spanish NGO Caminando Fronteras denounces that 10,457 people died while trying to reach Spain in 2024.

## **Libya, 2 December**

During an operation in the Maltese SAR area to capture and deport a boat carrying 70 people to Libya by the so-called Libyan coast guard, a child drowned and a man died in the hospital.

## **Civil Fleet, 3 December**

Humanity 1 (SOS Humanity) rescued 80 people aboard a boat in distress and disembarked them in the port of Reggio Calabria.

## **Malta, 3 December**

83 people aboard a boat that sailed from Libya were rescued by a merchant ship following a report from Alarm Phone and disembarked in Malta.

## **Civil Fleet, 4 December**

Geo Barents (Doctors Without Borders) rescued a boat carrying 45 people and disembarked them in the port of Taranto.

## **Spain, 4 December**

A person was found dead aboard a boat that arrived independently in Spain from the western Mediterranean. 14 people survived.

## **Almeria, 7 December**

9 people who were aboard a boat that sailed from northern Morocco and remained at sea for more than 8 days are missing. The 11 survivors arrived independently in Almeria.

### **Sfax, 11 December**

According to Tunisian authorities, a shipwreck off Sfax left 9 people dead and several people missing, while 27 people survived.

### **Civil Fleet 12 December**

Life Support (Emergency) rescued 34 people aboard a boat in distress and disembarked them in the port of Ancona.

### **Sfax, 12 December**

A boat with 45 people on board wrecked off Sfax. The only survivor is a girl rescued by Trotamar III (Compass Collective).

### **Civil Fleet, 13 December**

Thanks to a report from Alarm Phone, Louise Michel rescued 35 people aboard a boat in distress and landed them in Pozzallo.

### **Civil Fleet, 13-14 December**

Ocean Viking completed 3 operations rescuing 163 people and landed them in the faraway port of Ravenna. After the first two rescues, a patrol boat of the so-called Libyan coast guard approached the NGO ship menacingly.

### **Gavdos, 14 December**

A boat carrying about 80 people wrecked off Gavdos, near Crete: a person died and about 40 people are missing, while about 37 have been rescued.

### **Libya, 14 December**

ResQ People documented the interception of 2 boats by the so-called Libyan coast guard in the Maltese SAR zone.

### **Lampedusa, 15 December**

About 60 people aboard a boat in distress were rescued by Italian authorities and landed in Lampedusa.

### **Libya, 15 December**

37 people aboard a boat in distress were intercepted and deported to Libya by the merchant ship Lena.

### **Lampedusa, 15 December**

55 people aboard a boat reported by Alarm Phone arrived independently in Lampedusa.

### **Civil Fleet, 15 December**

**ResQ People rescued a boat in distress with 63 people on board and disembarked them in Porto Empedocle.**

### **Tunisia, 16 December**

A person who fell into the water from a boat off Sfax is missing. The other 47 people were intercepted and deported to Tunisia by the Tunisian Garde Nationale.



### **Chebba, 18 December**

A shipwreck of a boat that sailed from Chebba resulted in at least 20 deaths, while 5 people were rescued and deported to Tunisia by the Tunisian Garde Nationale.

### **Libya, 19 December**

A boat off the coast of Libya sank: an estimated 15 people are missing, while 82 were rescued and deported by the so-called Libyan coast guard.

### **Samos, 19 December**

Despite menaces from an unidentifiable masked man, 28 people were rescued by Greek authorities off Samos.

### **Civil Fleet, 19 December**

Aurora (Sea-Watch) rescued 47 people aboard a boat in distress thanks to the Seabird (Sea-Watch) aircraft's alert and landed them in Pozzallo.

### **Rhodes, 20 December**

In a shipwreck off Rhodes caused by a collision between the vessel in distress and a patrol boat, 8 people died, while 18 were rescued by the Greek Coast Guard.

### **Symi, 21 December**

15 people who arrived independently on the island of Symi were rescued by Greek police.

### **Vatos, 22 December**

44 people who arrived independently on the island of Vatos were rescued by Greek authorities and transferred to the larger island of Chios.

### **Pserimos, 27 December**

32 people who arrived independently on Pserimos were rescued by Greek authorities and transferred to the nearby island of Kalymnos.

### **Lampedusa, 30 December**

A boat sank off the coast of Lampedusa: 20 people are missing, while 7 were rescued by the Italian Coast Guard.

### **Lampedusa, 30 December**

336 people aboard five boats in distress were rescued by Italian authorities off Lampedusa and landed on the island.

### **Pasas, 31 December**

34 people who arrived independently on the island of Pasas were rescued by Greek authorities and transferred to nearby Chios.

### **Tunisia, 31 December**

2 people died in a shipwreck off Tunisia, while 17 survived.

### **Pasas, 31 December**

37 people were intercepted off Pasas and pushed back to Turkey. On board the Greek Coast Guard patrol boat, videos show a masked man beating the people before they are pushed back.

## **Rome, 4 December**

Several civilian sea rescue organizations complain that the so-called Decreto Flussi, approved in the Senate, contains a punitive approach toward people on the move, tightening penalties for those who rescue and document daily human rights violations in the central Mediterranean.

## **Vibo Valentia, 6 December**

The Court of Vibo Valentia definitively declared the administrative detention, imposed pursuant to the so-called Piantedosi Decree, against Sea-Eye unlawful after Sea-Eye 4 suffered an armed attack by the so-called Libyan coast guard in October 2023, in which 4 migrants died.

## **Rome, 13 December**

Doctors Without Borders was forced to end operations of the Geo Barents ship because of Italian government measures criminalizing civilian rescue at sea.

## **Strasbourg, 13 December**

A report by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, prepared after visiting centers in Milan, Gradisca, Potenza, and Rome, denounced that CPRs violate the human rights of imprisoned persons.

## **Rome, 18 December**

7 Italian organizations have filed a lawsuit against the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for funding the International Organization for Migration, which is guilty of carrying out “assisted voluntary repatriations,” which are actually real deportations.

## **Palermo, 20 December**

Former Interior Minister Matteo Salvini was absolved in first instance at the Court of Palermo of charges of sequestering and refusal to perform official acts for failing to authorize the landing of 147 people rescued by the ship Open Arms.

## **Rome, 20 December**

The Cassation Court, responding to the preliminary reference requested in July by the Court of Rome, ruled that judges cannot reject the government’s list of safe countries in all cases, but only with respect to specific individuals.

## **Rome, 23 December**

Italian Prime Minister Meloni said that, thanks to the Italy-Albania agreements, deportations of migrants to Albanian centers will restart.

## **Rome, 25 December**

Thanks to the investigative work of the Josi & Loni Project and ASGI attorneys, Harry, one of the people deported to Libya from the ship Asso 29 in 2018, arrived in Italy on a regular visa on a regular flight to Fiumicino.

# REPORT BORDERLINE EUROPE

NEWS FROM  
CENTRAL  
MEDITERRANEAN





# ARRIVALS

According to counts by borderline-europe, 2,821 people reached Italy by sea in December 2024. The majority of people on the move (48%) arrived in Sicily - especially in Lampedusa. Furthermore, some arrivals in Calabria via the Ionian route were recorded again (3%), most of which departed from Türkiye. It can also be noted that departures from Libya are still increasing (around 72%), compared to 10% of departures from Tunisia this month. According to our counts, Italian authorities rescued around 46% of people arriving, while rescues by NGO ships accounted for around 23%. According to data from borderline-europe, Frontex was involved in around 5% of rescues in December. 6% of refugee people independently reached Italian coastal waters (12 nautical miles from the coast) without being intercepted or rescued. For 20% of arrivals, no rescue information was available.

According to official data from the Italian Ministry of the Interior, 2,780 people arrived in Italy in December. The discrepancy - albeit minimal - in the numbers highlights the lack of data transparency on the part of the Italian authorities, as it is not possible to access the background of the published figures.

# ROUTES TO EUROPE

## **Resumption of travel to Albania after the rescue?**

After two failed attempts to bring migrants rescued at sea to the center built by Italy in Albania for an accelerated asylum procedure, the journeys will resume from mid-January 2025. With a decree, the Italian government simply ignored the competent court in Rome, which had carried out the review of the detention and rejected the detention in Albania in all cases. Appeal courts must now decide whether the detainees should remain in Albania. The decree comes into force on January 11th. Meanwhile, on December 19, the Court of Cassation also issued a ruling to determine the list of safe countries of origin. The basis of this ruling are the decisions of the courts of Rome and other cities not to admit migrants to accelerated procedures, even if they come from so-called safe countries of origin.

The Supreme Court's ruling recognizes that the government can create this list of so-called safe countries of origin and thus also carry out expedited asylum procedures, and a judge cannot make a blanket determination about which country is safe and which is not. However, judges can assess whether the categorization is legitimate and possibly unofficially revoke the safe countries decree. This means that judges can still intervene in individual cases and cannot confirm detention in border detention centres. The government considered this fact as a victory and therefore announced the resumption of travel to Albania.

However, this is an incorrect interpretation by the government and we still have to wait for the decision of the European Court of Justice, which will have to rule on the definition of the list of so-called safe countries of origin. The ruling is expected at the end of February. Until then, then, will people once again have to endure this inhumane approach from the Italian government, determined to play a pioneering role in the externalization of migration policy, after a traumatic escape?

### **Spain-Africa relations**

Due to the strengthening of controls in the central Mediterranean, the migratory route is shifting from West Africa towards the Spanish archipelago of the Canary Islands. Due to a new record of migrant arrivals in the Canary Islands, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez held talks with the heads of state of Gambia, Mauritania and Senegal - the main starting points for the crossing to the Canary Islands - during a trip to West Africa in summer. At the beginning of December he presented the new three-year plan for Spanish-African cooperation. Contrary to the European tendency to criminalize migration, it wants to pave the way for legal migration. Particularly in the economic and diplomatic sectors, the goal is to cooperate better in the future. The plan includes more than 100 measures, including, for example, increased academic cooperation, financial resources for Spanish lessons in Africa, scholarship programs for educational mobility in Spain and the opening of several Spanish consulates and embassies in Africa.

### **EU policy: criminalization of smugglers**

In mid-December, EU member states agreed on a new draft law to criminalize smugglers and other so-called traffickers. The proposal still needs to be discussed by the Council and the EU Parliament and is therefore not final. The law intends to harmonize and standardize national legislation. It should be considered a criminal offense to knowingly allow a third country national to enter, transit and remain in the EU. A humanitarian clause establishes that assistance to family members and first aid for basic human needs do not constitute a crime. The proposed law threatens prison sentences of three to ten years, with the possibility for nation states to establish higher sentences. The organizations or companies involved can be fined a percentage of their total worldwide income or a fixed amount of up to 40 million euros.

# DEAD AND MISSING

The number of dead and missing people in the central Mediterranean increases month by month. According to data from [borderline-europe](#), in December 141 people lost their lives during the escape, while 206 are still missing. Numerous fatal shipwrecks occurred in December.

Two weeks before Christmas, an eleven-year-old girl from Sierra Leone made headlines. She had left from Sfax, on the Tunisian coast, with her brother and 43 other people on board. Twelve miles off the coast of Lampedusa, she ended up adrift for several hours clinging to part of the vessel after it sank. After some time, she lost sight of her brother, who had remained afloat with her for a few hours. It was a coincidence that the *Trotamar III* - a rescue ship from Compass Collective's civilian fleet - found and saved her in the middle of the night thanks to her cries for help. All other passengers are now presumed dead. In the same days, a boat capsized off the Tunisian coast. The National Coast Guard rescued 27 people, 15 are still missing.

A week later, several vessels were again in difficulty at sea. On December 18, a vessel with more than 100 people was reported in Tunisian waters, but neither nearby cargo ships nor the Tunisian coast guard intervened in time. According to [Sea-Watch](#), at least 15 people drowned, while 82 were rescued by Libyan authorities and towed back to Libya. [Sea-Watch's](#) *Seabird* monitoring aircraft also observed a vessel with refugees that was in a troublesome position.

It is therefore assumed that in total more than 35 people died. The Tunisian National Guard also reported that at least 20 people drowned off the coast of Sfax. Five people were rescued in the shipwreck, but were returned directly to Tunisia.

At the end of the year, another shipwreck occurred off the coast of Tunisia in which two people died, including a five-year-old child. Seventeen survivors were towed away by the Tunisian coast guard and four were directly arrested as so-called "smugglers". In a second incident, which occurred on New Year's Eve, another 20 people, including five women and three children, died in an accident 20 miles off the Libyan coast after sailing from the Libyan city of Zuwara. Only seven people from the sunken vessel were rescued by the Italian coast guard and taken to Lampedusa. However, there is much controversy surrounding the account of this accident, as the vessel, which was apparently barely navigable, must have traveled a great distance in a short amount of time.

These high numbers of deaths unfortunately demonstrate once again that a state-organized rescue at sea is indispensable, at best, and a clearly shared responsibility! Everyone deserves protection, a life with prospects and at peace. This is only possible with safe migration routes!



# PUSHBACKS

This month we recorded 522 pushbacks in the central Mediterranean, where boats carrying refugee people were pushed back onto the North African coast. 276 people were returned to Libya and 246 to Tunisia. These figures are not certain, as the number of unreported cases is probably much higher. After these pushbacks, migrant people are often detained in camps in precarious conditions. Human rights violations are regularly documented in these camps. Here too violence is often resorted to.

This month Alarm Phone documented a series of interceptions in the central Mediterranean. In many cases, the relevant authorities only intervened when it was too late, despite emergency calls made by Alarm Phone. This led to the death of many people. The survivors were dragged towards the North African coast, where they will most likely end up in one of Libya's detention centers or be exposed to the xenophobic climate of Tunisia and from there dragged into the desert.

On December 11, a boat carrying 130 people sank off the coast of Sfax. The Tunis Maritime Rescue Coordination Center later confirmed that 27 people had been rescued and nine bodies had been recovered from the water. The other people are considered missing. The 27 survivors were returned to Tunisia and their fate is uncertain.

Just a week later, another boat with 97 people on board sank. The so-called Libyan coast guard arrived only several hours after the call for help launched by the telephone alarm. 15 people are presumed dead, while 82 migrants were rescued and possibly towed to Libya.

On December 27, a boat carrying around 60 people sank. 53 survivors were towed back to their starting point, Sfax. Seven people died in the accident.

On New Year's Eve, two boats capsized near the Tunisian island of Kerkennah. The Tunisian coast guard intervened late: of a boat with 48 people, only 20 were saved and brought back to the coast. Of the second boat, with a total of 71 people on board, only 24 were saved and brought back to Tunisia. Tunisian authorities also found 21 bodies and another 26 people are missing. Italian broadcaster RAI also reported a shipwreck with 17 survivors who were brought home by the Tunisian coast guard. However, two people died, including a five-year-old child.

# CIVIL RESISTANCE

In December 2024, 23% of all rescues were carried out by NGOs. The “civilian fleet”, the civil sea rescue service, managed to save a total of 635 people. The rescue of an eleven-year-old girl off the coast of Lampedusa by the Trotamar III (Compass Collective) caused a sensation, see above. In total, there were two multiple rescues by Ocean Viking (SOS Méditerranée) and the NGO Solidaire of the same name.

The Ocean Viking double rescue rescued 34 and 129 people and was sent to the port of Ravenna with a total of 163 people saved, including a one-month-old baby. The Solidaire twice saved 51 and 63 people and was taken to Ortona with 114 people. Life Support (Emergency) was also assigned to a distant port, Ancona, after rescuing 34 migrants. Geo Barents (MSF) rescued 45 people in what was probably its last mission for the time being. Humanity 1 (SOS Humanity) saved 83 people, Louis Michel (MV Louis Michel) 35 and ResQ (People Saving People) 33 and 63 people respectively in different missions. The Aurora (Sea-Watch) rescued 47 people once and 17 once and assisted the Italian Coast Guard twice in rescuing 91 and 56 people respectively.

## **The judiciary bends: Acquittal in the Open Arms trial against Salvini**

After a three-year trial, former Interior Minister and current Italian Transport Minister Matteo Salvini was acquitted of all charges on 20 December. In 2019, after the rescue of 163 people by the Open Arms, it prevented the 147 people remaining on board from entering a safe port. After medical emergencies were evacuated and 13 desperate people jumped into the sea, the Agrigento Prosecutor’s Office temporarily seized the ship, allowing it to enter an Italian port. The NGO Open Arms denounced Salvini for deprivation of liberty and abuse of authority. The Prosecutor’s Office had requested six years in prison for Salvini and he later had to face smear campaigns and death threats. Other (sea rescue) organizations were also present at the ruling to support Open Arms and to see Salvini in court, whose stated goal is to massively limit rescue at sea.

## **Execution against Italian and Libyan authorities**

On December 4, the Vibo Valentia court declared the 20-day detention and the 3,000 euro fine imposed on the rescue vessel Sea-Eye 4 unlawful. The court declared that the measures, based on instructions from the Libyan coast guard, were incompatible with the law and condemned the Italian authorities to pay legal costs of over 10,000 euros. The case centered on a rescue operation on October 27, 2023, in which the so-called Libyan Coast Guard spread panic among 50 shipwrecked survivors with dangerous maneuvers. Women and children jumped into the water, four people died and a pregnant woman lost her baby. Despite the rescue of 48 survivors, Sea-Eye 4 was detained by Italian authorities on October 30 for failing to follow instructions from the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. The court made clear that the so-called Libyan Coast Guard did not act in accordance with international law. This decision strengthens respect for humanitarian and international laws.

After the crew of the *Iuventa* was finally acquitted in April 2024, the *Iuventa - Jugend Rettet* is now fighting to ensure that the rusting ship can be made seaworthy again. On December 12, the Palermo court asked experts to assess the significant damage suffered by the salvage vessel during its long seizure by Italian authorities from August 2017 to June 2024. Their conclusions, expected in spring 2025, will be decisive in deciding whether compensation will be awarded or whether further legal disputes will arise.

## **“Absurd and senseless Italian laws and guidelines”**

In December, Medici senza frontiere (MSF) announced the suspension of civil rescue operations at sea with the *Geo Barents* until further notice due to “absurd and senseless” laws. In the last two years, the *Geo Barents* has been sanctioned four times by the Italian authorities and detained in port for a total of 160 days. The sanctions are based on the Piantedosi Decree, introduced in early 2023 and tightened in December 2024 by the Flows Decree (Decreto Flussi) to facilitate and accelerate the seizure of humanitarian rescue ships at sea and impose fines. The practice of taking rescued people to distant ports has forced *Geo Barents* to spend half the year making round trips instead of doing rescue work. However, MSF promises to return to the Mediterranean.

The new decree of December 2024 is also directed against NGO aircraft, such as the *Seabird*, with which the *Sea-Watch* crew unsuccessfully tried to warn merchant ships of a sinking vessel with around 100 people on December 18th. In the end, the 82 people who had not yet drowned were pushed back by the so-called Libyan coast guard.





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