



**MEDREPORT**  
**MARCH 2024**

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## MISSION 15

### 3 DAYS, 172 HUMAN'S LIFE

A recap of the first three days of MEDITERRANEA's Mission 15 talks about 172 rescued people, 59 in cooperation with the Italian Coastguard and 113 disembarked from Mare Jonio in Pozzallo.

### MARE JONIO SET SAIL FROM TRAPANI

The first three days of Mission 15 of the ship MARE JONIO were a rapid succession of events and operations, proving once again how necessary the presence and activity of civilian assets in the central Mediterranean is. Indeed, a window of a couple of days of good weather and calm seas was enough for dozens of departures of women, men and children from the coasts of Libya and Tunisia, fleeing from countries where, for various reasons, the living conditions of people on the move are increasingly intolerable and their very lives at risk.

The MARE JONIO, after intense preparation by the crew and the Rescue Team, set sail on the afternoon of Friday 22nd March from the port of Trapani, where she was stationed after having been hit, between October and November 2023, by the application of the "administrative detention" of the Piantedosi Decree following its refusal to "cooperate" with the so-called "Libyan authorities".

The first rescue in collaboration with the Italian Coastguard heading south, on the morning of Saturday 23rd the MARE JONIO offered her availability for the ongoing search for the 15-month-old baby missing in a shipwreck. Then she received via VHF radio channel 16 a 'may-day relay' with a request for intervention from the EAGLE 1 aircraft of the European agency Frontex, which reported a boat in distress 43 nautical miles south of the island of Lampedusa, in a SAR (search and rescue) zone theoretically under the jurisdiction of Malta. Arriving on the scene, together with the German civilian ship Mare\*Go, she found an iron boat only seven metres long, overcrowded to the extreme, adrift with its engine broken down and its freeboard now dangerously reduced to a few centimetres.

She began coordinating with the Lampedusa operations room and with the Italian Coast Guard's patrol boat CP319, also acting as a radio link between the various units present. To avoid the looming risk of the precarious boat capsizing and consequent shipwreck, our Rescue Team distributed life jackets to all the people and cooperated with the Coast Guard by starting to lighten the boat and transferring the first survivors to the patrol boat. Once the operation was completed with the rescue of 59 people, including 7 women, two of whom were pregnant, who had been disembarked in Lampedusa by the Coast Guard, the MARE JONIO resumed her southbound course towards the SAR zone off the coast of Libya.

### **THE SECOND RESCUE**

At 3.38 pm on Saturday 23rd, MARE JONIO received a report of a new vessel in distress from SEABIRD 2, Sea-Watch's civil observation aircraft. Having communicated her readiness to





intervene to all the Authorities in the area, the MARE JONIO immediately headed for the last known position of the boat. Once in the vicinity, she received a VHF radio call on channel 16 from an unspecified 'Tunisian military vessel', which gave the coordinates of the vessel's new position and asked us to come to its aid.

After two hours of searching, when it was already dark, the MARE JONIO spotted the boat in distress, overcrowded with extremely tired and panicked people, and, having ascertained the situation at risk of imminent sinking, began the rescue operation. By 9.45 pm, all the shipwrecked people were safely on board our ship: 55 people rescued, including several unaccompanied minors. We immediately started to provide the first medical care, since they were all very tired after more than three days of travel from the Libyan coasts. There were numerous cases of hypothermia, one boy had an amputated leg and many bore fresh scars on their bodies, signs of the violence they had suffered while in Libya.

Shortly afterwards, the Italian authorities announced the assignment of the Sicilian port of Pozzallo for the disembarkation of the shipwrecked people, and the MARE JONIO began her approximately 20-hour voyage from the rescue site to reach it.

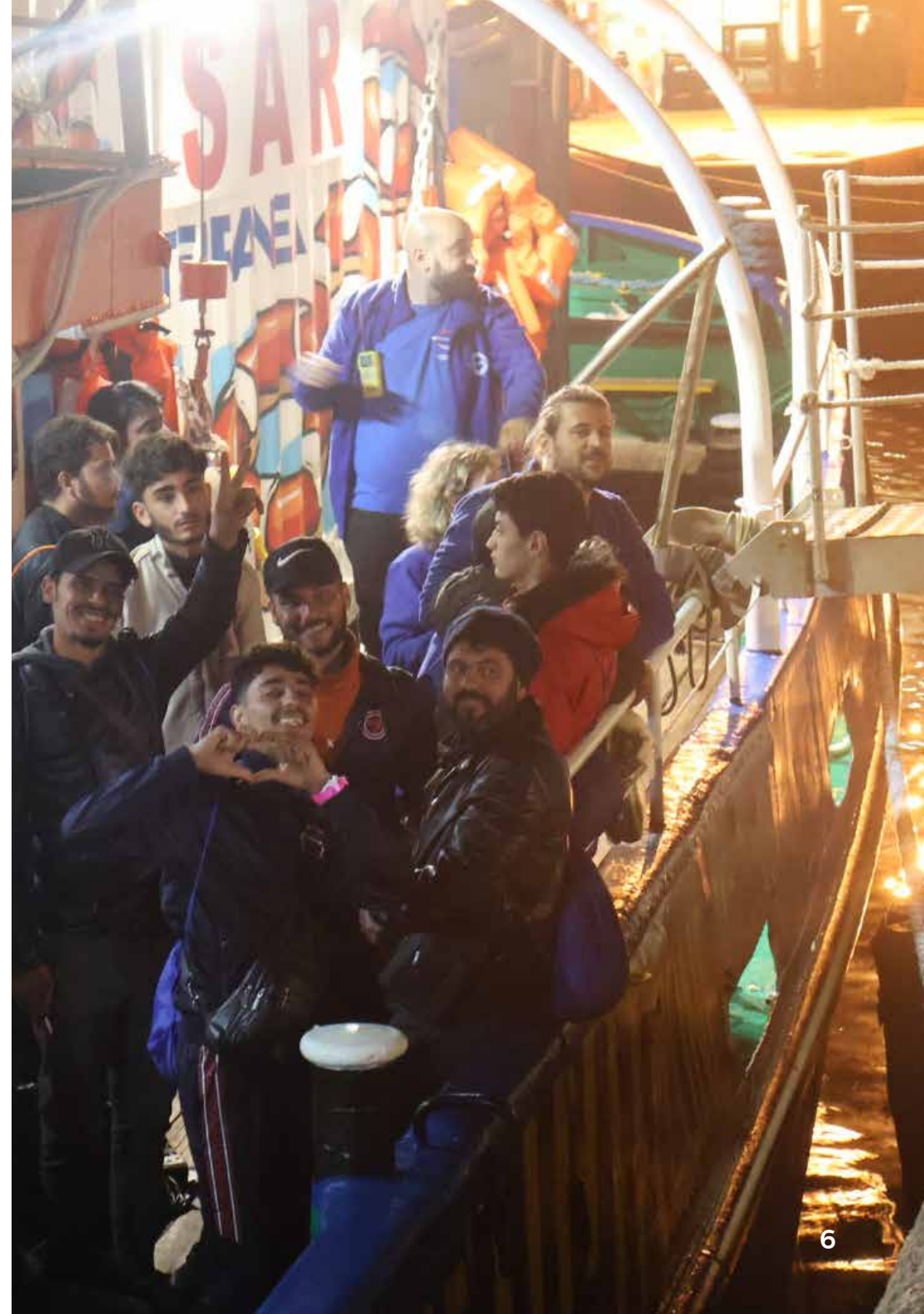
### **THE THIRD RESCUE DURING THE NIGHT**

However, after 00.30 on Sunday, a new SOS was launched from Alarm Phone to all the authorities: more than fifty people had contacted the hotline from a boat in distress, with women and children on board, adrift without water or food.

After contacting the National Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (IT MRCC in Rome), the MARE JONIO diverted her course to the last communicated position of the boat reported by Alarm Phone. After an intense four-hour search, the vessel was finally located: an iron boat overloaded with people from Libya, exhausted from three days at sea and at risk of capsizing at any moment. 58 people were rescued, including four women and 12 minors: among them were three children under the age of 12, including a boy aged 2 and two girls aged 3 years and 20 days respectively, the youngest ever shipwrecked person rescued by the MARE JONIO.

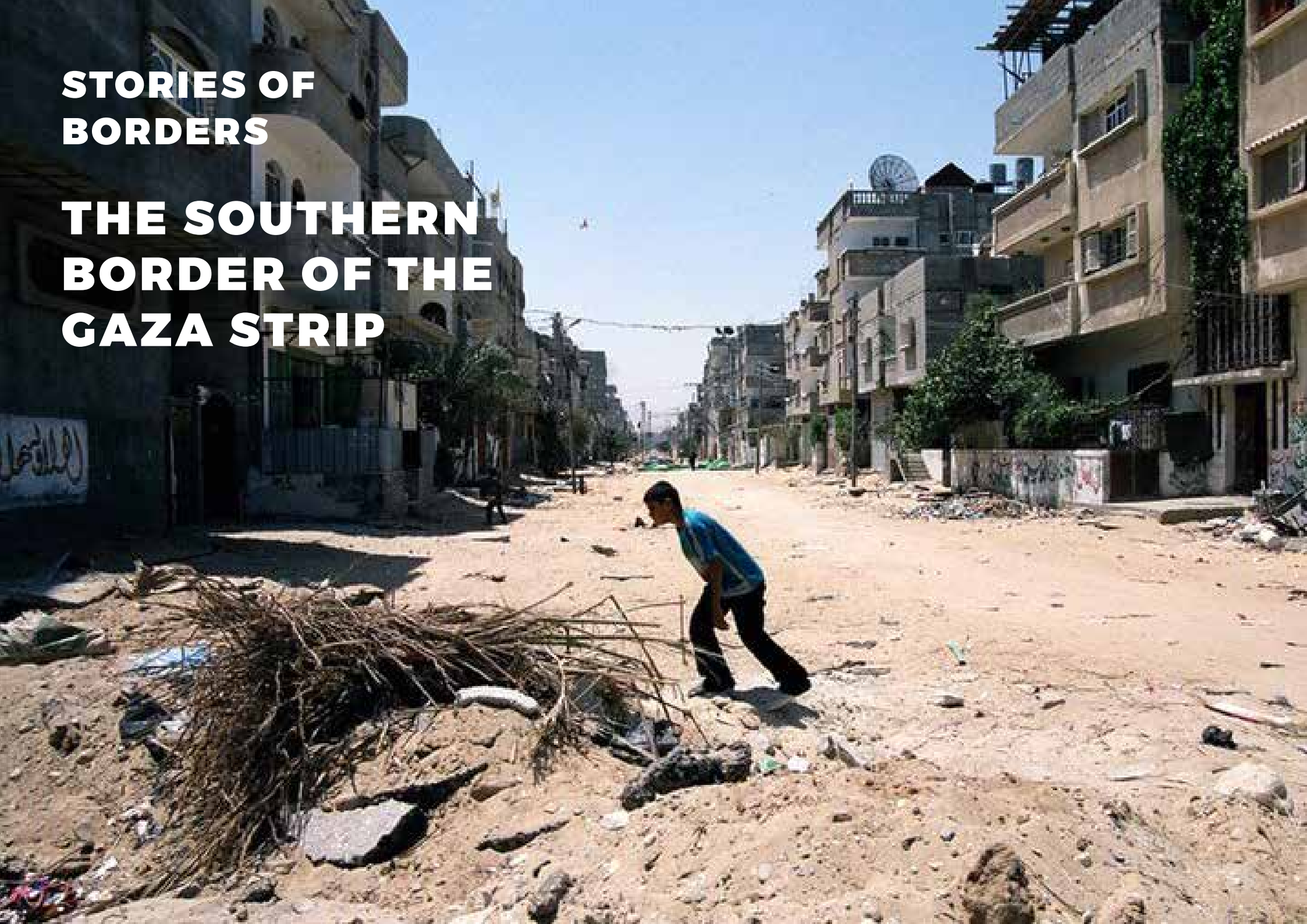
The overwhelming majority of the people in this latest operation are of Syrian origin: individuals and entire families who have fled the war that has been battering that country for more than ten years and ended up in the Libyan hell, from which they again found themselves fleeing. A total of 113 people were cared for and fed on board. Many of them were debilitated and dehydrated from the days of travel. In addition, several survivors were seasick, causing episodes of vomiting on board the endangered vessel, which continued on the MARE JONIO, making it difficult for them to hydrate and feed themselves adequately. This situation required intravenous therapy and hydration in several cases. In addition, the recent injuries caused by the iron boat on which they had been forced to travel were being treated by the doctor on board. Meanwhile, our ship continued on her way to the Sicilian port of Pozzallo, where she was finally able to land at 10pm on Sunday evening.

The disembarkation operations of the 113 rescued people were finally completed on the Pozzallo pier at 00.45 am on Monday 25 March.



**STORIES OF  
BORDERS**

**THE SOUTHERN  
BORDER OF THE  
GAZA STRIP**



It is not easy to tell the story of the Gaza Strip's borders, especially the southern one, which on the Egyptian side has been forcibly closed both in and out, and on the Mediterranean Sea side presents great obstacles and problems. But we are going to do it anyway.

#### IF NOT IN RAFAH, WHERE

It is not easy to tell the story of the borders of Palestine and more specifically the Gaza Strip, which is facing indiscriminate attacks that have so far left more than 33,000 dead, 75,000 wounded and nearly 2 million displaced.

The situation on the Strip's southern border appears to be particularly problematic: on the one hand, the border with Egypt has been forcibly closed almost completely both inbound and outbound, and on the other hand, the Mediterranean Sea represents a new border that is evolving but with major obstacles and problems.

More than one million Palestinians have been forced to seek refuge in Rafah, a city located in the south of the Gaza Strip right on the border with Egypt, thus bringing nearly half the population to share a city that until the outbreak of the war was home to just over 150,000 people, with easily imaginable consequences due to overcrowding - in fact, it is estimated that there are more than 12,000 people per square kilometer.

Egypt has been reinforcing its border since an Israeli offensive at Rafah seemed possible since early November, a fortification that had been seen as a precautionary measure to defend the country from the possible passage of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian inhabitants, with additional troops and machinery deployed in South Sinai.



Very few people are able to get out of the Gaza Strip by crossing into Egypt. At the beginning of the conflict, only a very few seriously injured people and those who held foreign passports, i.e., Palestinians with dual citizenship or citizens of other states, such as about 400 U.S. and a hundred French, were able to cross the border.

Then there are the travel agencies that work between Gaza and Cairo to arrange the crossing; while before the conflict began the fees were around a few hundred dollars, now they have soared, reaching record prices of \$5,000 per person-\$2,500 for those under 16-when years ago the fees were also around \$350. That's the price to pay to hope to get on the list of the very few people allowed to leave the strip in a multimillion-dollar business built by the Egyptian agency Hala, which offers bureaucratic assistance with procedures, faster times and privileged channels with Egyptian and Israeli authorities. According to Mohammed Noseer, head of Egyptian Red Crescent operations in al-Arish, no more than 30-35 people leave the Strip each day. A border therefore blocked on the way out, a border where getting through is almost impossible despite the devastating warfare taking place behind it - odds that diminish even more when it comes to men under forty years of age.

But the Gaza Strip's southern border is also a blocked entry border. Images of thousands upon thousands of trucks full of humanitarian aid lined up at the border waiting to get the go-ahead from Israel to enter the Strip have gone around the world.

The declaration of famine in the area is now imminent, as warned by UN agencies; more than 70 percent of the population is facing a "catastrophic food situation" and the situation continues to worsen day by day.

In the face of this, tons of humanitarian aid from all over the world are waiting to pass inspection, with no clear rules or lists of permitted products. Among the products blocked by Israel officially for "security reasons" are oxygen, incubators, refrigerators, tents, solar panels. U.N. officials recently accused Israel of "systematically" blocking humanitarian supplies to Gaza, and the European Union's foreign policy chief accused the country of using hunger as a "weapon of war," as Israeli bureaucracy is slowing the flow of humanitarian aid by effectively making the border almost impossible to cross.

In the face of this border closure, states and aid organizations are looking for other ways to deliver aid to the Strip.

An early attempt had been to drop parachutes containing food and medicine from international aircraft.

However, the attempts by Jordan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, followed later by the United States, do not seem to be a possible solution to the problem: the cost of air operations is ten times higher than ground operations, and the relief brought has in fact been limited both in time and in the quantities of aid delivered, which are totally insufficient to meet the needs of two million people living in severely difficult hygienic and food

conditions. In addition, it has been reported that there have been several Palestinian victims who have either been struck by the unopened parachutes or drowned in the sea in front of the Strip while trying to reach aid off Beit Lahia beach or still crushed in the crush of thousands of people crowding around the parachutes.

A second route would always be by sea, but via ships carrying humanitarian aid.

On March 12, the first ship bringing humanitarian aid to the Strip departed. Departing from Cyprus, the Open Arms ship carried 300,000 meals prepared by the NGO World Central Kitchen. The establishment of this route would be a goal of the European Union, which would like to regularize the connection between Cyprus, the closest EU country, and the Middle East coast. The departure of the Open Arms ship was called by the chairwoman of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, “a sign of hope.” A border that could be opened by circumventing the obstacles posed by Israel.

However, a hope that is-hopefully only temporarily-suspended due to the brutal attack suffered by a convoy in which seven aid workers from different nations around the world were killed by Israel’s armed forces.

It was an attack that sparked worldwide outrage but more importantly led to the halting of NGO operations in the Strip. What thus seemed like a possible new breach in the border has been eliminated, while on the other side of the border two million people face every day a merciless war that shows no sign of ending.

# **MSH MONTHLY REPORT ON MIGRATIONS**

**What happened in March on the migration routes of Europe, the Mediterranean, the world? What measures did governments take? Who provided relief? Who, on the other hand, sanctioned, detained, or turned away? Let's take stock.**

# WORLD

**TUNISIA, March 5** The Tunisian government and the Italian embassy in Tunis signed a protocol that, within the framework of the agreement concluded in October 2023, will guarantee non-seasonal work permits in Italy for the next 3 years to 12,000 Tunisian nationals

**LIBYA, March 11** At the conclusion of a visit to Tripoli, which was also attended by representatives from Germany, France, Malta and the United Nations, the British government announced that it will allocate £1 million to Libya to prevent arrivals via the central Mediterranean route and facilitate returns to countries of origin.

**LIBYA, March 12** Italian Foreign Minister Piantedosi traveled to Benghazi, where he met with General Khalifa Haftar and published praise for Saddam, the latter's son, an avowed human trafficker and accused of many human rights violations against people on the move in Libya.

**LIBYA, March 23** The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports the discovery of at least 65 bodies of people on the move in a mass grave in southwestern Libya.

**TUNISIA, March 25** In a week marked by bad weather over the central Mediterranean, Tunisian authorities found 11 bodies of people shipwrecked while trying to reach Europe.

**EGYPT, March 27.** Various human rights organizations accuse the Egyptian government of being responsible for arbitrary detentions and illegal deportations of Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers fleeing their country where a civil war is ongoing.

**EUROPEAN UNION, March 5** Frontex Executive Director Leijtens said it is Frontex's duty to inform the so-called Libyan coast guard of the presence of boats in distress in response to the words of European Parliament ombudswoman O'Reilly, who called on the agency to end its collaborations with countries that do not meet their search and rescue obligations and violate human rights.

**UK, March 6** In just over 24 hours, more than 400 people arrived in the UK from France, crossing the English Channel in makeshift boats.

**SPAIN, March 6** Four people died off El Hierro in the Canary Islands while attempting to reach Europe from Mauritania. 64 survivors were rescued by Spanish authorities and two of them transported in critical condition to a hospital in Tenerife.

**EUROPEAN UNION, March 13** Thanks to Massimiliano Smeriglio's proposal, the European Commission will investigate the man who runs the @rgowans account on X, namely the informal spokesman for the Libyan Mafia, who threatened Mediterranean's Mattia Ferrari and "Avvenire" journalist Nello Scavo. The JLProject collective discovered that this is a person who works for Frontex.

**SPAIN, March 13** The bodies of two people were found off the Canary Islands while attempting an Atlantic crossing. Thirty-eight survivors, including four in critical condition at Gran Canaria Hospital, were rescued by Spanish authorities and told that five other people died aboard the boat, but their bodies were thrown into the ocean.

**FRANCE-UNITED KINGDOM, March 20** 514 people who left France crossed the English Channel in a single day to reach the UK. There were no serious injuries.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 2.** Humanity 1 (SOS Humanity) rescued 77 people in three operations, despite the fact that the so-called Libyan coast guard threatened the crew by shooting at them. In the confusion at least one person drowned and others were deported to Libya.


**ALBORÁN, March 3.** 192 people were rescued by Spanish authorities on the island of Alborán. They came from the Atlantic route and were trying to reach Europe.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 3.** Sea-Watch 5 rescued 50 people aboard two boats in distress. Despite the medical team's insistent request for 5 medical evacuations, Italian authorities responded guiltily late and one boy died on board. 49 survivors and the body were disembarked in Pozzallo.

**CHIOS, March 6.** 23 people aboard an endangered boat were intercepted and turned back to Turkey by the Greek Coast Guard.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 7.** Geo Barents (MSF) rescued 162 people in its operations. Italian authorities assigned two ports of disembarkation: Civitavecchia, where the first 132 people were taken, and Genoa for the others.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 7.** Sea-Eye 4 rescued 144 people aboard 3 boats in distress and assisted the Italian Coast Guard during another operation. One person was evacuated because of his medical condition. Italian authorities assigned Reggio Calabria as the port of disembarkation.



**GAVDOS, March 11.** 88 people aboard 2 boats from Turkey were rescued by the Greek Coast Guard off the island of Gavdos.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 11.** Life Support (Emergency) rescued 52 people aboard a boat in distress from Libya and disembarked them in the port of Catania.

**LESBO, March 11.** The Greek Coast Guard rescued 31 people on a boat in distress off Lesvos and disembarked them on the island.

**LAMPEDUSA, March 12.** Italian authorities rescued about 30-40 people in distress from Libya and landed them on Lampedusa.

**CAPE GRECO, March 12.** 458 people aboard 6 boats from Lebanon were rescued by Cypriot authorities and transferred to a reception center near Nicosia.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 14** Trotamar III (Compass Collective) assisted 56 people on a boat in distress until the Italian Coast Guard arrived.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 14.** Ocean Viking (SOS Méditerranée) rescued 224 people in 3 operations. In the first boat, which had been at sea for more than a week, 16 survivors report that many people died during the crossing. The third boat was assisted by Trotamar III and on report from SeaBird 2 (Sea-Watch). The assigned port of disembarkation was Ancona, nearly 1,500 km away from the central Mediterranean.

**FARMAKONISI, March 15.** 20 people aboard a boat in distress off Farmakonisi were rescued by the Greek Coast Guard and transferred to Leros.


**IMBROS, March 15.** 8 people died in a shipwreck off the Turkish coast as the Turkish Coast Guard rescued survivors and transferred them to Imbros.

**LIBYA, March 16.** Although Maltese authorities and Frontex were informed of the location of a boat in distress, more than 100 people were intercepted by the so-called Libyan coast guard and deported to Libya.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 16-17.** Geo Barents rescued 249 people in 3 operations despite threats from the so-called Libyan coast guard on the scene during a rescue and landed them in Marina di Carrara.

**PANTELLERIA, March 16-17.** In a few days, several boats carrying a total of more than 220 people were rescued by the Coast Guard and Guardia di Finanza off Pantelleria and then landed on the island.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 17.** Life Support rescued 71 people aboard a boat in distress and disembarked them in Ravenna, a port four days away.



**ORAN, March 17.** 25 people were intercepted and deported to Oran by Algerian authorities. After disembarkation, they were arrested.

**LAMPEDUSA, March 18.** The sinking of a boat from Sfax left 2 people dead. 49 people were rescued by the Italian Coast Guard and then landed in Lampedusa.

**RODI, March 18.** The Greek Coast Guard intercepted off Rhodes and turned back to Turkey a boat in distress with 46 people on board.

**LAMPEDUSA, March 22-23.** 1028 people were rescued by the Guardia di Finanza, Coast Guard and Frontex through 24 operations in just over 2 days and landed on Lampedusa.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 23.** Mare\*Go rescued 44 people from Tunisia who had been at sea for 3 days. One child is reported missing.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 23-24.** Mare Jonio (Mediterranea Saving Humans) assisted 59 people, who were then rescued by the Italian Coast Guard and disembarked in Lampedusa. Also, in 2 other operations, 113 people were rescued, then disembarked in Pozzallo.

**LAMPEDUSA, March 24.** Fifty-one people were rescued by the Italian Coast Guard after the boat they were traveling on capsized off Lampedusa. One boy died, while 10 survivors were disembarked on the island.

**LAMPEDUSA, March 24.** Thanks to a report from Seabird, the merchant ship Vault rescued 158 people who were then landed on Lampedusa. During the operation 3 people fell into the water and drowned.

**PORT SAID, March 24.** The merchant ship Gamma Star rescued and returned 160 people to Egypt after Greek authorities refused to allow them to land on their territory.

**CHIOS, March 27.** A boat with about 20 people on board was intercepted off the island of Chios and turned back to Turkey by the Greek Coast Guard.

**CIVIL FLEET, March 28.** A shipwreck occurred off Lampedusa in which 31 people were rescued by Trotamar III (Compass Collective), 11 by the Italian Coast Guard, but 3 drowned.

# ITALY

**TRAPANI, March 2.** Legal arguments closing the preliminary phase of the investigation into four Luventa Crew activists charged with “aiding and abetting illegal immigration” have concluded. Following the prosecution’s request for a non-suit, the preliminary investigation judge will rule on April 19.

**CROTONE, March 5-18.** Humanity 1 was placed under a 20-day administrative detention, pursuant to the Piantedosi Decree, for failing to coordinate with the so-called Libyan coast guard during a rescue hampered by Libyan patrol boats themselves. However, the Court of Crotona upheld SOS Humanity’s appeal, declaring the measure unlawful.

**ROME, March 6.** Thanks to humanitarian corridors organized by UNHCR, the Italian government, the Community of Sant’Egidio and the Federation of Evangelical Churches, 97 people were evacuated from Libya and arrived in Rome by humanitarian flight.

**SYRACUSE, March 6-29.** Sea-Watch 5 suffered the consequences of the Piantedosi Decree, being subjected to 20 days of administrative detention. The Public Prosecutor’s Office in Ragusa, however, ruled that the detention was suspended because Sea-Watch committed no wrongdoing by refusing to coordinate with the so-called Libyan coast guard.

**TARANTO, March 11.** Sea-Eye 4 was subjected to a 60-day administrative detention in the port of Taranto after rescuing 144 people. The Piantedosi Decree violation charged is for failing to coordinate with Libyan authorities.

**RAGUSA, March 13.** The second preliminary hearing in the investigation against 7 activists of Mediterranea Saving Humans accused of “aggravated aiding and abetting illegal immigration” was held at the Court of Ragusa. The next hearing will be held on May 8.

**ROME, March 17.** The Italian Ministry of the Interior reported that the practice of assigning distant ports to Civil Fleet ships to disembark people rescued in the Mediterranean is due to unspecified “NATO operations,” which are covered by state secrecy.

**CARRARA MARINA, March 21.** Geo Barents was subjected to a 20-day administrative detention under the Piantedosi Decree for failing to coordinate with Libyan authorities. The MSF crew had been threatened by the same so-called Libyan coast guard during one of the rescue operations that led to the landing of 249 people in Marina di Carrara.

**CATANIA, March 22.** Catania prosecutors sought acquittal for activist Nawal Soufi, who was charged with “procuring clandestine entry” for buying train tickets to some people on the move.

**TURIN, March 13.** The National Association of Italian Municipalities-Piedmont, in collaboration with the City of Turin, presented 39 SAI (System of Reception and Integration) projects that will soon be activated.



# REPORT BORDERLINE EUROPE

NEWS FROM  
CENTRAL  
MEDITERRANEAN



# ARRIVALS

According to [borderline-europe](#) data, 7,069 people arrived in Italy in March, almost three times as many as in the previous month (2,320 people). For comparison, 10,805 people arrived in Italy by sea in March 2023. Again this month, the vast majority (85 percent) arrived in Sicily, specifically Lampedusa.

More than half of the people who arrived were rescued by Italian authorities (41 people, 59 percent) and a much smaller percentage by civilian sea rescue vessels (1,179 people, 17 percent). The European border protection agency Frontex carried out some rescues for a total of 132 people (1.8%). A minority (507 people 7%) arrived in Italy independently, i.e., reached Italian coastal waters (12 nautical miles from the coast) without being intercepted/successful first. For the remaining people, we cannot provide any information on how they arrived in Italy.

# PATHS TO EUROPE

In March at least 2,139 people (30 percent) crossed the central Mediterranean from Tunisia. Unlike last month (about 12%) there was a significant increase in departures from Tunisia. At the same time, 3,052 people (43%) began their journey across the central Mediterranean from Libya. For 1,828 migrants (27%), it is not possible to determine from which countries they departed.

The cost of traveling from Tunisia to Italy or Libya to Italy varies widely. Some refugees reported paying 1,000 Tunisian dinars (about 300 euros) for the crossing from Tunisia to Italy. Some were given a GPS device for navigation at an additional cost of 500 Tunisian dinars.

The crossing from Libya to Italy, on the other hand, is significantly more expensive: people have reported paying between \$1,000 and \$5,000. From Libya, more and more people are arriving from Syria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Egypt.

# CHANGE IN MIGRATION ROUTES

Migration routes have changed recently : more and more people, especially from West Africa (mainly Senegal and Mauritania, but also Morocco), are heading across the Atlantic to the Canary Islands. This escape route is even more dangerous than the one through the Mediterranean : on the one hand, because the route is much longer and people are in the open ocean, and on the other hand, because there are currently no civilian or state rescue ships operating in these waters. In addition, the crossing on this route is often made aboard “pirogues” (small wooden fishing boats), which makes the escape across the ocean even more dangerous. It is estimated that at least 200 people have already died between January and March this year while fleeing to the Canary Islands. There are several reasons for this change in migration routes, but one of them is probably the agreement between Italy and Tunisia to combat irregular migration. Tunisia is taking tougher and tougher measures against refugees, and the Tunisian authorities are carrying out more and more rejections, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The number of refugees on the route from Libya to Greece (Gavdos and Crete) has also increased tremendously since late 2023, but especially in the first quarter of 2024.

On the one hand, this could be due to an agreement between Athens and Ankara, which led to increased patrols on the Greek-Turkish maritime border. On the other, it is even more likely that this change in migration routes is due to the Italy-Haftar agreement. Khalifa Haftar is the commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) that commands Tobruk, which controls eastern Libya and the port, the most important departure point for refugees heading to the southern Aegean, and since the agreement he has focused on stopping refugees on the central Mediterranean route (to Italy) and bringing them back to Libya. Italian Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi also praised Commander Haftar’s work during a visit to Benghazi: Haftar makes an important contribution to the fight against “illegal immigration.”

This “fight against illegal immigration” is also evident this month in the tugs and pulls enacted mainly by Tunisian and Libyan authorities.

# PUSHBACKS

According to [borderline-europe](#) data, 7,147 people bound for Europe were intercepted in March. Of these, 4,252 people (60 percent) were returned to Tunisia, 2,750 (38 percent) to Libya, and 145 (2 percent) to Egypt. This figure confirms the upward trend of so-called interceptions to Tunisia in recent months.

Just earlier this month, the crew of *Humanity 1* (SOS Humanity) witnessed a violent pushback by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard.

“Stand back! Stand back or we shoot!” shout the men on the patrol boat of the so-called Libyan coast guard. There are people in the water. But our crew has no choice but to watch as about 50 people are forced onto the patrol boat. They are being illegally returned to Libya, to the country they tried to flee from. This is contrary to international law.”

(SOS Humanity, March 2024)

The crew reports that they moved away from the scene because of threats and further sightings of migrants in the immediate area. However, this did not lead to a decrease in tension from the so-called Libyan coast guard. They continued to threaten the crew and, during a rescue shortly thereafter, the so-called Libyan coast guard halted the operation and fired into the water, sparking panic.

One person died. More information in the “Civilian Resistance” chapter.

Dangerous encounters are repeated, particularly with the so-called Libyan coast guard, endangering not only migrants but also rescuers at sea. However, Italian authorities continue to cooperate with them.

However, it is not only people who are stopped on the high seas. The Tunisian coast guard also repeatedly prevents crossings on the coast or even on the beach. Tunisian authorities are also resorting to increasingly harsh measures to prevent refugees from reaching Europe. Last month, for example, nearly 500 tents of migrant people waiting on the Sfax coast to cross were destroyed. Several boats and fuel were also confiscated. All this is done under the guise of preventing so-called “illegal” migration.

Politicians, within the framework of bilateral agreements, should instead deal with the fact that people on the move must be treated with dignity and human rights must be respected.

# DEAD AND MISSING

In mid-month, “Ocean Viking” of “SOS Méditerranée” rescued 25 people who had left Libya about a week earlier. After the rescue operation, however, the crew learned that more than 80 people had initially embarked on the perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea. A week without water, food or any help led to the terrible deaths of 60 people. In previous days, Alarm Phone had already reported several times on 75 people whose whereabouts were unclear. It remains uncertain whether this is the same boat. However, it is certain that this tragedy is not an isolated incident.

According to [borderline-europe](#) data, 107 people died in the Mediterranean last month and 25 are still missing. The number of unreported cases is much higher.

The United Nations reported that more people died in 2023 than ever before since data collection began. According to the United Nations, the Mediterranean remains the most dangerous route for migrants. The fact that more than two-thirds of the dead are never found and identified is, for example, particularly distressing for relatives and friends.

In the first week of March, a 17-year-old boy, rescued from a wooden boat by Sea-Watch 5, died two hours after being rescued. The crew had continuously called for help for him. But Italian authorities reacted only when it was too late.

Instead, the rescue ship was initially assigned Ravenna as its port, a journey of four more days for the 51 survivors and crew without the ability to keep the deceased boy’s body in the cold. Fortunately, they were eventually able to dock at the Sicilian port of Pozzallo.

Our data show that people die more often in an interception by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard or the Tunisian Coast Guard than in a rescue operation by NGO vessels, but unfortunately this also happens, because rescues from overcrowded and unreliable boats, especially in heavy seas, are never without danger. This month, a 15-month-old girl fell into the water during an overnight rescue and has since been officially declared missing. Fortunately, the other 44 people on board, including the child’s mother, were rescued.

These terrible events are only a small part of what happens every day in the Mediterranean and is ignored daily by the Italian government. Instead, NGO ships are blamed by Italian politicians for the fact that migrants leave because they feel safer on civilian rescue ships. The fact that people heading to Europe are often desperate and see no other option is completely ignored. Until European countries finally take responsibility for providing safe entry options, there will be no end to the suffering in the Mediterranean.

# CIVIL RESISTANCE

In March, eight civilian fleet ships were deployed in the central Mediterranean.

The Ocean Viking (SOS Méditerranée) carried out several rescues, the Humanity 1 (SOS Humanity), still detained by the Italian government at the beginning of the month, has only been able to return to sea since the middle of the month, while the Life Support (Emergency) is currently sailing again after several rescue operations, the Mare Jonio (Mediterranea Saving Humans) is back in the SAR zone after a long time and has made several rescues, the Trotamar III (Compass Collective) is also back in the SAR zone and has been involved in several rescues, the Sea-Watch 5 (Sea-Watch) made several rescues before being detained for 20 days by the Italian authorities, but is now active in the SAR zone again. Geo Barents (MSF) was active until the middle of the month and has been detained since 03/20/24, Sea Eye 4 (Sea Eye) was actively involved in rescues at the beginning of the month and has been detained for 60 days since 03/10/24 (more information below).

Obstruction of civilian rescue at sea continues to be part of Italy's daily political routine. As in previous months, the Italian government ordered numerous "administrative stoppages" in March. This month, for example, there have been four detentions of sea rescue vessels in Italy for a total of 64 days, with Sea-Eye 4 still stuck in the port of Reggio Calabria.

Normally sea rescue ships are detained for 20 days, but Sea Eye 4 is an exception, having been detained in Reggio Calabria for 60 days. Again, the reason given by the Italian authorities is that the ship's crew did not follow the instructions of the so-called Libyan coast guard. The so-called Libyan coast guard would have been willing to take people in distress on board. However, this would have meant that these people, like many others, would have been turned away and returned to Libya, which is contrary to international law, as the Italian Supreme Court recently confirmed.

However, ship detentions are not the only measure taken by the Italian government to make civilian rescue at sea more difficult. In addition to the detentions, the Italian authorities repeatedly assign NGO ships to distant ports, supposedly to be able to better distribute people, which is obviously just a pretext. In addition to incurring huge costs for NGOs, this measure also means that rescue ships are kept away from SAR areas longer because of the long distances. This is precisely the goal of the government. To cite just a few examples in March: the Ocean Viking (SOS Méditerranée) had to travel all the way to Ancona after several rescues with 336 people on board to bring rescued people ashore. The Geo Barents (MSF) was also assigned to two different and distant ports (Civitavecchia and Genoa) after rescuing 261 people. After three more rescues totaling 249 people, the same rescue ship had to travel a long distance to Marina di Carrara in northern Italy, where it was stranded.

Life Support (Emergency) had to travel to Ravenna with 71 rescued people at the end of March, taking four days. The Sea-Watch 5 was also supposed to reach Ravenna with 51 people rescued on board, but Italian authorities assigned the rescue ship to the port of Pozzallo, Sicily, following political pressure.

In March, the so-called Libyan coast guard spared no shortage of violent actions against refugees in the Mediterranean Sea. On March 2, a rescue mission by Humanity 1 (SOS Humanity) was violently interrupted by the so-called Libyan coast guard, which was financed with European funds. The crew and refugees were threatened and the so-called Libyan coast guard even shot people in the water.

Despite the violent and illegal intervention of the so-called Libyan coast guard, the crew of the rescue boat managed to save 77 people. Some people who were already in the water were forced onto the boat by the so-called Libyan coast guard and taken back to Libya. At least one person, who likely would have survived without the brutal intervention of the so-called Libyan coast guard, died that day in the Mediterranean Sea.

SOS Humanity sums up what happened that day, “This death was not an accident or a tragedy. This death has political reasons.” The so-called Libyan coast guard boat was provided by Italy, funded by EU funds, which therefore shares responsibility for what happened that day.

Instead of punishing the so-called Libyan coast guard for the illegal, violent and dangerous “operation,” the Humanity 1, which arrived in Crotone, is detained for 20 days because, according to the Italian government, it did not cooperate with the so-called Libyan coast guard.

Following the detention of the rescue vessel Humanity 1, the NGO SOS Humanity has taken legal action against this form of criminalization of civilian sea rescue, demanding an independent investigation into the case and the immediate release of Humanity 1. It also continues to demand that the EU end its cooperation with the so-called Libyan coast guard and its financial support.

The good news is that the legal steps paid off and Humanity 1 was able to leave the port of Crotone after 13 days. A small victory for civilian sea rescue, but still not enough. NGOs continue to demand the release of all detained rescue vessels.

Many people are forced to lose their lives as they flee across the Mediterranean because all authorities repeatedly ignore distress calls from boats in distress at sea; this is made evident repeatedly in Twitter reports by Alarm Phone and the various sea rescue organizations.

# HOW ITALIAN POLITICIANS ARE REACTING TO THE EVENTS OF RECENT WEEKS

Italy's right-wing government shamelessly praises itself for its successes in allegedly curbing immigration. To confirm its policy, it continues its campaign against civilian rescue at sea and alleged irregular immigration. First among them is Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi, who sees these (fatal) events at sea as a sign that migration must be restricted even more and more severely. Giorgia Meloni also promotes a "provisional" figure that arrivals are down 67 percent from the previous year.

The immigration issue has always been exploited by right-wing politicians throughout Europe as a "safe" topic to spread old and new populisms. Now it has become easy to "bubble up" the "migration issue" again and again and use it to campaign at any time. Society's fear of losing is played as a card, manipulated, and migration is repeatedly placed in a context of "catastrophe."

Giorgia Meloni and her government also repeatedly talk about the "invasion" of migrants and the "defense of borders." They sell their repressive and inhumane migration policy as a measure to "create security." Unfortunately, this outdated narrative always works, as evidenced by yet another right-wing victory in the regional elections in Abruzzo.

The real catastrophe, however, is the deaths on the run, the violent and illegal push-backs by so-called coast guards, the inhumane conditions of refugees in Europe, the detention centers, and the human rights violations in the Mediterranean, in Libya and Tunisia, and in the closed centers in Italy.

Fortunately, there are also many voices of dissent to the current migration policy in the Italian opposition, which recognizes that the measures taken by the Meloni government have done absolutely nothing to change the death toll in the Mediterranean and repeatedly calls for civilian rescue ships at sea to be assigned closer ports. For example, Nicola Fratoianni, a deputy from Alleanza Verdi Sinistra, calls the Piantedosi decree a "vicious decree" and takes a sharp stance on the political news: "As the so-called Libyan coast guard, supported, armed and reinforced by the Italian government, becomes more and more aggressive and even tries to block the rescue operations of NGO ships in the Mediterranean with acts of piracy and even shooting at shipwrecked people and volunteers, the Piantedosi decree, or rather the "cruelty decree" in Italy, is crumbling little by little in the courts [. ...] Meloni and co. must understand once and for all that, beyond propaganda, there are also international laws and norms to be respected." But what is the weight of the weak opposition in Italy?





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