



**SAR**

**MEDITERRANEA**  
IMO 7222669

**MEDITERRANEA**

**MEDREPORT**  
**DECEMBER 2023**

# INDEX

<b>Data and numbers</b>	<b>3</b>
End of the year report	
<b>Chronicle of the facts of the Mediterranean</b>	<b>6</b>
The most important events of the month of December	
<b>Med Care for Ukraine</b>	<b>8</b>
The Second Winter Of War Has Arrived	
<b>No, Libya is not a port of safety</b>	<b>10</b>
An interview with Sheila Melosu	
<b>Border Stories</b>	<b>14</b>
Across the channel	
<b>MSH Monthly report on migrations</b>	<b>16</b>
World and Europe	
<b>Borderline Europe Report</b>	<b>22</b>
News from Central Mediterranean	



# **DATES AND NUMBERS**

## **END OF YEAR REPORT**

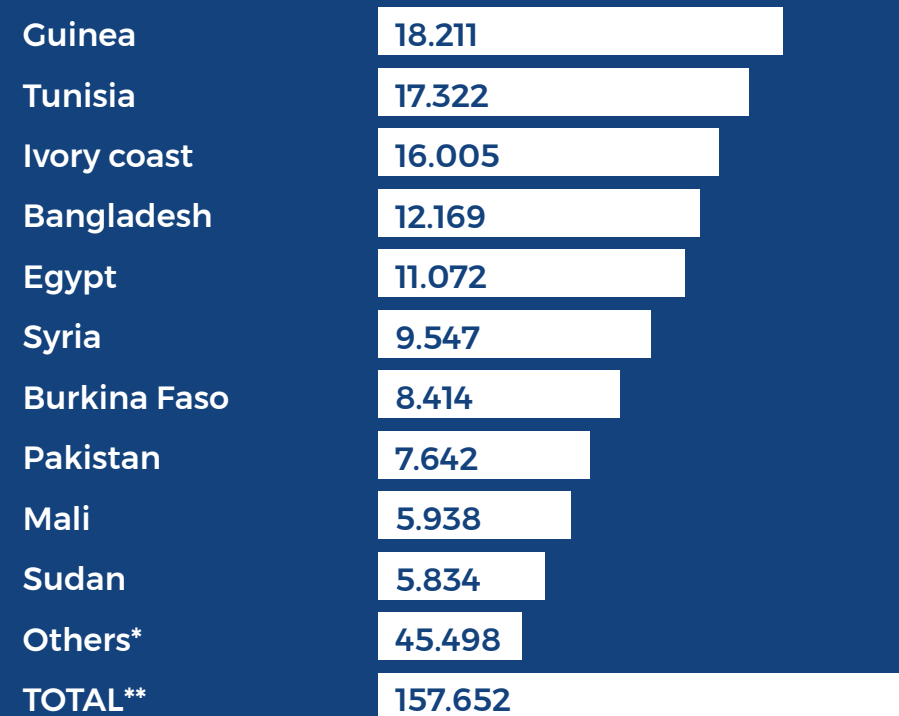
**At the end of the year, the situation regarding migration in the central Mediterranean remained a critical issue requiring a serious commitment from the European Union in order to address the causes of the situation and to ensure a humane and an effective management of migration crises.**

# WHAT DO THE NUMBERS TELL US

In December the number of people forced to flee across the Mediterranean and who managed to arrive in Italy amounted to 5,380; among these were 231 unaccompanied minors.

The situation regarding migration in the central Mediterranean remained a critical issue at the end of the year. Despite what may be considered international efforts, the region continues to be the setting of tragic accounts of displaced people seeking a better life and fleeing Libyan atrocities. Humanitarian organizations reported increased crossings with thousands of people undertaking dangerous journeys aboard unsafe vessels.

## NATIONALITIES DECLARED AT THE TIME OF LANDING (UPDATED TO NOVEMBER 30, 2023)



\* The figure could include immigrants for whom they still are identification activities are in progress.

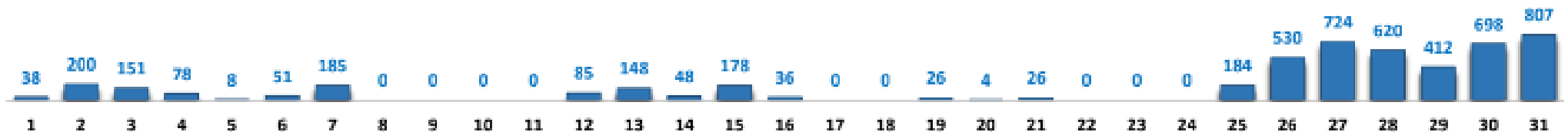
\*\* The data refer to the landing events detected before 8:00 am of the reference day.

Source: Department of Public Security of the Ministry of the Interior of the Italian Republic.


The data are subject to subsequent consolidation

Conditions within reception centers, especially those in Italy, became increasingly concerning: overcrowding, lack of basic necessities, drawn out asylum processing procedures contributed to creating inhuman conditions. Non-governmental organizations condemned the human rights violations and called on the European Union for a more serious commitment in managing humanitarian emergencies.

Under these circumstances the central Mediterranean remained the symbol of global challenges tied to migration that requires a compassionate approach and a just and concerted effort by the international community in order to address the root causes of the issue and to ensure migration crises are managed humanely and effectively.



These data are processed on the basis of information provided by the Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration of the Ministry of the Interior of the Italian Republic. The data refer to the landing events detected by 8.00 on the reference day.



**CHRONICLE  
OF DECEMBER  
OF THE FACTS IN  
MEDITERRANEAN**

## DAY 4

The crew of MSF's civil ship GeoBarents rescues 44 people from two boats in distress. The Port of Taranto is assigned as a port of safety for disembarkation by Italian authorities.

## DAY 7

Alarm Phone operators report the presence of a boat in distress carrying 47 in the central Mediterranean. The boat is damaged and there are no life jackets on board. There are strong winds with rough waves.

## DAY 13

The crew of MSF's civil ship GeoBarents rescues 36 people aboard a boat fleeing Libya. Despite being over 1,200 km from the site of rescue, Italian authorities assign Genova as the port of disembarkation.

Later that day, the civil ship Ocean Viking's crew rescues 26 people, including 2 minors, aboard a boat in distress fleeing Libya.

## DAY 17

Yet another tragedy takes place in the central Mediterranean: 61 people are missing and the 25 remaining survivors are forcibly taken to Libya. Although authorities were previously informed of the location of the vessel in distress, they did not intervene.

## DAY 25

In two separate operations, Sea-Watch 5's crew rescues 118 women, men, and children (of which the youngest is 3 years old) in serious danger in the central Mediterranean. Italian authorities later assign the Port of Marina di Carrara for disembarkation, 1,150 km away.

## DAY 26

The civil ship Sea-Eye 4's crew rescues 106 people from two separate boats in distress.

Italian authorities later designate the Port of Brindisi for disembarkation.

## DAY 27

In the evening, the civil ship Ocean Viking's crew rescues 244 people in three operations in the central Mediterranean. One rescue is coordinated with the MRCC in Rome. Another boat is rescued thanks to Pilotes Volontaires' aircraft Colibri2's alert.

# MED CARE FOR UKRAINE

## THE SECOND WINTER OF WAR HAS ARRIVED: MEDITERRANEA IS WHERE WE NEED TO BE

Accompanying the second winter of war in the country invaded by Russia, snow arrived in Ukraine in November. As temperatures in Lviv fall below zero, the MedCare for Ukraine project's activities face difficulties due to the cold. Fortunately, our medical teams are able to operate indoors inside the city's 12 official and unofficial refugee shelters. However, on the days we are not working in these centers, Mediterranea Saving Humans continues to operate in Striskj Park despite the weather. The organization has been providing basic medical assistance and healthcare to the homeless in Striskj Park for the last several months. Now in winter, on the days Mediterranea is in the park providing care to the city's poorest, activities take place aboard our mobile medical clinic.

Anti-aircraft alerts warning of the arrival of Russian missiles or drone attacks have become less frequent. But when the alarms go off, they can sometimes last up to four hours. Our activists and medical teams are then forced into underground shelters for the duration of these warning alerts.

November's humanitarian aid supply mission arrived at the beginning of the month thanks to the collaboration of the land crews in Barcelona, Taranto, and Turin. We now await the arrival of the next supply mission expected to arrive in January from Bologna thanks to the land crews of Emilia Romagna.





**Missione di rifornimento #13**  
**#MedCare4Ukraine**

On December 1st, the Ukrainian government passed new legislation concerning humanitarian supplies. The process of bringing supplies into the country has become longer and more cumbersome than before and a series of customs operations have been introduced that can potentially penalize international organizations which provide assistance to refugees such as *Mediterranea Saving Humans*. This very real obstacle is complicated by the insufficient state funds allocated by the government for the reception and care of war refugees from the eastern part of the country. The government is now absolutely broke financially and is completely dependent on international assistance to address the refugee crisis in western regions such as Lviv. The impact the new rules will have on *MedCare* for Ukraine's ability to function will become clearer in the upcoming weeks.

For now, *Mediterranea Saving Humans* is where we need to be, alongside the civilian population affected by the war.

# NO, LIBYA IS NOT A PORT OF SAFETY

## AN INTERVIEW WITH SHEILA MELOSU

MEDITERRANEA'S Mission 14 set sail on October 13, 2023. Mare Jonio rescued 116 people within three days from its departure only for the mission to be halted and penalized by the Italian government under the Piantedosi Decree. The reason for the punishment is serious and of crucial importance: the Commander and the Head of Mission chose to not forcibly return 69 people to Libya. They set aside Italian authorities' instructions to submit to the orders of Libyan militias.

We have asked Head of Mission Sheila Melosu to tell us about this incident.

### **"THIS WAY OR NOTHING"**

On Friday, October 13, 2023, MEDITERRANEA Saving Humans' Mission 14 set sail.

After overcoming all the obstacles and countless onboard inspections imposed by Italian authorities, Mission 14 finally sailed from the port of Trapani towards Lampedusa. On the afternoon of the next day, just 40 miles southwest of the island, our Mare Jonio found 47 people aboard a small iron boat, a precarious and dangerous type of boat considered to be a true "floating coffin" which usually is only supposed to carry 30 people, 35 at most. The people aboard this boat had fled from the area near Sfax, Tunisia the previous day. There were no alerts about the boat from authorities nor had there been any reports from Alarm Phone or any of the civil fleet aircrafts. Simply sailing south in the middle of the Mediterranean, Mare Jonio

just happened to spot the boat while the crew was looking at the radar and monitoring the sea with binoculars. The rescue operation was successful and Italian authorities designated Lampedusa as the landing port. The 47 survivors disembarked on the island on the night of October 15th.

On Monday, October 16th, Mare Jonio set off again for the SAR zone. However, this time, an alert was received: Sea Watch's aircraft, Seabird, reported it had spotted two boats in distress. Contacting the Italian MRCC (Maritime Rescue Coordination Center) in Rome, Head of Mission Sheila Melosu described the situation and explained the people on board the boat were in serious danger. The MRCC then informed her the so-called "Libyan authorities" were responsible for coordination efforts in that area and that their commands were to be followed. After consulting with the Commander, together they both responded with a resounding "NO!" Mare Jonio's crew then successfully carried out the rescue operation.

On the morning of Wednesday, the 18th, the survivors disembarked in Trapani. The Commander and the ship's owner were immediately summoned to the harbor office where they learned Mare Jonio had received a 20 day administrative detention and a fine of up to 10,000 euro. That "NO" had led to this punishment.

Because, it's 'this way or nothing.'

### **"I DON'T BELIEVE THIS"**

It's a Friday in November and I'm interviewing Sheila Melosu. Emma and Manuel are with me. They're not really with me physically. It's a virtual meeting online, but it's as if we're all together in the same place.

I ask her my first question: What happened on that October 16th on the bridge of Mare Jonio when Rome's MRCC told you to 'CALL LIBYA!' and you told them 'NO!'?

Sheila brushes away her bangs. She smiles.

She tells me the second rescue operation was much more complicated than the first one. Despite the precarious iron boat that was about to sink, the first rescue took place during the day and the sea was calm. In the middle of the night, that's when the second rescue happened and everything is more difficult in the dark. The darkness would have been enough of a complication, but the sea was also rough that night.

"This is what happened," she says. "We received an email from Seabird on the afternoon of the 16th. Two boats in distress had just been spotted by the aircraft as it flew over the Mediterranean. More or less, this is the procedure: if Seabird spots a boat in distress while it monitors the sea from the air, a number is assigned to each boat and an alert email is sent out with all the information that has been pieced together. This email is then sent to the Italian, Maltese and Libyan Maritime Rescue Coordination Centers. It is also sent to all the ships operating in the area. I mean, we receive these two emails from Seabird. Both emails report people are in danger. We respond to Seabird and to all the coastal authorities and inform them all that we are x miles away from the boat, that we are capable of confirming their situation and able to provide the necessary assistance. And then, we set out for the boat in distress that is nearest to us."

And that's exactly what they do, Sheila tells me. They arrived at the designated location. It took three hours to get there and, then,



it was nighttime. Once the aircraft gives you the location, it takes a long while to arrive. And once you arrive, you don't know what route the boat may have taken, where they could be, or whether something's happened to them. However, we can still locate them, all thanks to the radar. Sheila confesses to me that when inflatable rafts are loaded with people, the radar can still pick them up. Anyway, once the vessel is spotted, the operation begins. Iasonas, the Rescue Coordinator, gets down into the water with the RHIB (rigid-hulled inflatable boat) for an initial assessment of the situation: the gray dinghy is overcrowded, no one is wearing a life jacket, the engine is damaged and intermittently starts and stops. The Commander hears everything and tells Sheila to call the MRCC in Rome:

“And so I call and tell them, ‘The situation here is very serious. People are already in the water and risk drowning at any moment.’ Rome counters telling me, ‘The SAR zone you are in is under Libyan competency. Call Libya!’ And then I tell them, ‘No! There isn't enough time! And I don't believe that. You are our reference. We sail under the same flag, so I refer to you.’ And then I add, ‘We do not recognize Libyan authorities as trustworthy, let alone consider Libya a port of safety.’”

When Sheila tells them, “NO!” she knows what she's doing. She makes her decision based on continuous deliberation with the Commander, the Rescue Coordinator, and with Mediterranea's ground crew. Sheila tells them, “NO!,” because calling them would mean giving them authority; it would mean recognizing someone as being trustworthy when in fact they are responsible for untold violence and countless accidents at sea and because in the best case scenario these people would be captured and taken back to Libya.

“In the midst of all this, what's even more absurd is the fact that just

over a month earlier Naples's Court of Appeals convicted the Commander of the Italian ship Asso Ventotto for following the orders of the so-called Libyan Coast Guard to return over 100 people rescued at sea to Tripoli," she says.

At this point, the actual rescue starts. All 69 people are brought to safety. There was an entire family on that boat with three small children: a 5 year old, a 3 year old, and a 2 month old. They are all fine now. At this point we send an email report about the rescue operation we just concluded to the Italian MRCC. We confirm 69 people were saved, most of them from Sudan, and they are worn from the long voyage. We tell them that Mare Jonio didn't manage to contact Libyan authorities and that, in any case, Libya cannot be considered a port of safety for the survivors. We add that Libyan authorities cannot be considered a legitimate interlocutor from whom to receive instructions for disembarkation of the survivors.

A detailed report from the ship's medical officer Dr. Francesco Nastasio was sent as soon as the ship docked. The report contained statements he compiled from the survivors documenting the abuse and torture most to them experienced during their detention in the Libyan camps from which they fled.

The interview is almost over. I ask Sheila if she wants to add anything. Sheila brushes her bangs away, again. She says 'yes' to me as she has one last thought to share.

### **"ONE LAST THOUGHT"**

Regarding what happened on the night of October 16th, there is little to add. Sheila and the Commander of the Mare Jonio executed their duties to the fullest extent possible, under both Italian and international law, adhering to not only the most solid ethi-

cal and moral principles, but also by complying with the terms of the Hamburg SAR Convention and the Geneva Convention's right to asylum by refusing to follow commands that would have been egregious violations of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, not to mention our own constitutional principles.

The Italian government's charges and its imposition of two penalties under the January 2, 2023 Piantedosi Decree represent yet another attempt to normalize Libya, to pretend that Libya is a safe country, to pretend that Tunisia is a safe country, to make believe that these people are not survivors, but illegal migrants. They're meant to fool us into believing that the right thing to do is to take these people back and that those ports are safe ports where those people will have to return to one day, anyway.

While the Italian Ministry of the Interior at the Viminale through the Port of Trapani wrote in black and white that Mare Jonio refused to coordinate with Libyan authorities and did not request a POS (port of safety), this time something different took place. This time someone said, "NO!" And this "NO!" not only has a symbolic value, it is also productive. This "NO!" has given Mediterranean the opportunity to proceed legally in this case by making use of every possible appeal to the judiciary.

### **Why? Because Libya is not a port of safety.**

"Mediterranea must now assume complete responsibility for keeping this issue in the spotlight. I am sure that we can be effective and that we can make a difference and change how things are done. We are in the right and have a duty to fight for this," she concludes.

# BORDER STORIES

## ACROSS THE CHANNEL

“Stop The Boats” has become the main priority of British politics as the government seeks alternative, and highly controversial, solutions in order to reduce the number of immigrants in the country. In fact, according to a YouGov survey, immigration is one of the three most important issues for the English people. And, it seems the Prime Minister is willing to do anything to please his electorate.

### RISHI SUNAK’S BATTLE AGAINST IMMIGRATION

Almost 30,000 people on the move landed illegally on Britain’s shores in 2023. Although the number is lower compared to the record year of 2022 with 45,774 arrivals, 2023’s numbers are still very high. In fact, the second highest number of arrivals ever recorded (29,437) happened in 2023.

Traveling on small boats under precarious weather conditions, thousands of people on the move have risked their lives crossing the dangerous channel that separates France and the southern coast of England.

Among arrivals, the nation most represented was Afghanistan with 20% of the total number; this was followed by Iran (12%), Turkey (11%), Eritrea and Iraq (both at 9%). In 2023, there was a sharp drop in arrivals from Albania, 90% less compared to 2022 when Albanians were among the most represented with 12,658 people among the arrivals for that year. The agreement preventing irregular migration from Albania to the UK explains the reduction in arrivals from that country.

The fight against irregular immigration has been designated as one of the British government's top five priorities by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak who was himself born in England, but is the son of 'twice migrants' as both his grandparents and parents were immigrants.

Moreover, a YouGov survey (an online polling site that collects public opinion data) has shown immigration to be among the three most important issues for the British people.

Stop The Boats has become the main priority of British politics as the government seeks alternative, and often highly controversial, solutions in order to reduce the number of immigrants in the country. Initially, there was the infamous agreement with Rwanda meant to dissuade migrants from undertaking the Channel crossing. The plan to deport anyone arriving in Britain illegally to Rwanda, over 6,000 km from Britain, was originally conceived in 2022 by PM Boris Johnson's government. The European Court of Human Rights blocked the first flight to Rwanda in June of that year. Later in November 2023, the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom declared the agreement unlawful as Rwanda could not be considered a safe third country. So far, 240 million pounds have already been paid to the African country under the agreement although no deportations have taken place. According to the UK government, the cost of sending one individual asylum seeker to Rwanda would cost an average of £169,000.

However, there may be new developments in the plan as PM Sunak has recently agreed to a new treaty with Rwanda following the passage of emergency legislation which ignores previously existing laws that would prevent its implementation. Many politicians, including several conservative centrists, have criticized

the law, fearing it goes too far. On December 12, 2023, the new bill passed during a second round and was submitted to committee even though concerns among those who consider the country's migration policies "inhumane" persist.

A tweet from Sunak, following the vote, stated, "It is the British people who must decide who can come to our country, not criminal gangs or foreign courts. This is the result of this bill. Now we will work to make it law so that we can start flights to Rwanda and stop the boats." Many commenting on the Prime Minister's tweet, reminded him that it was the UK Supreme Court that blocked the agreement, not just the European one.

Every year it costs the UK government billions of pounds to manage asylum seekers and process their applications. An estimated £3 billion a year is spent on processing asylum applications in Britain while it costs 8 million pounds a day to accommodate people in reception facilities as they wait for their cases to be decided. In 2023, more than 112,000 asylum cases were processed, with a grant rate of 67% (down from 76% from 2022). The government is attempting to work through and eliminate the backlog of asylum applications, saying that it is saving taxpayers millions of pounds by doing so.

The government's future moves on immigration are yet to be seen. Future developments of the Rwanda law are also unknown. However, what is certain is that the British government will do everything it can to discourage arrivals to its shores even if the economic and human costs of its policies are onerous.

# **MSH MONTHLY REPORT ON MIGRATIONS**





# WORLD

**TUNISIA, December 4th:** A group of students hold a rally in front of Tunis' Italian Embassy protesting the Italian government's refusal to grant a sufficient number of student visas to Tunisian citizens.

**LIBYA, December 11th:** According to a Lighthouse Reports investigation, Frontex has been directly communicating the positions of boats carrying people on the move in the central Mediterranean to the Libyan militia group Tareq Bin Zayed. Led by General Khalifa's son, Saddam Hafar, this militia group is known to be one of the organizations most involved in human trafficking and illegal pushbacks in the Mediterranean.

**TUNISIA, December 15th:** InfoMigrants reports that more than 1,500 people have been deported from Tunisia and taken to Libya's detention centers since September. Tunisian authorities deny these allegations.

**LIBYA, December 19th:** For the first time, the UN Secretary-General Guterres' annual report accuses Libyan authorities of being directly complicit in violating the human rights of migrants inside Libya's illegal detention centers. The report has established that often, after being intercepted at sea in the Mediterranean, people are handed over by authorities to the militias that run these clandestine detention centers.

**LIBYA, December 23rd:** Italian Economy and Finance Minister Giorgetti visits the Italian Guardia di Finanza police commander stationed in Tripoli. The Italian Guardia di Finanza police force continues to provide assistance to the so-called Libyan Coast Guard despite its record of numerous human rights violations.

**MEXICO, December 24th:** Headed for the southern border of the United States, a caravan of approximately 7,000 people on the move from various Central American countries departs Tapachula in southern Mexico.

**WESTERN SAHARA, December 28th:** 14 people drown off the coast of Boudour after their boat capsizes in the Atlantic Ocean. Both Alarm Phone and Caminando Fronteras accuse Moroccan and Spanish authorities of delaying rescue efforts that could have prevented the accident at sea from taking place.

**EUROPEAN UNION, December 1st:** The Court of Justice of the European Union rules that EU member state courts do not have the authority to decide whether asylum seekers are to be repatriated to their country of origin in cases where the asylum seekers are sent back to the first country of access in the European Union.

# WORLD

**FRANCE, December 1st:** French police evacuate approximately 1,500 people from makeshift camps in Dunkirk and Calais. Over 1,200 people are being housed in emergency facilities throughout the country. However, those who are undocumented, about 130 people, are being held in detention centers awaiting deportation.

**EUROPEAN UNION, December 6th:** During a Parliamentary Committee hearing for monitoring the implementation of the Schengen Agreement, Frontex Director-General Leijten acknowledges, “There is no evidence that sea rescue NGOs serve as a pull factor for irregular migration.”

**EUROPEAN UNION, December 8th:** Despite the 2021 European Parliament resolution calling for the identification of migration route victims and the creation of a coordinated European database meant to track the migratory phenomena and to collect details of the bodies, the Guardian has revealed it has documented the existence of at least 1,015 unmarked graves of people on the move at European Union borders.

**ALBANIA, December 13th:** Albania’s Constitutional Court suspends the ratification of the pact with Italy intended to manage the migratory flows between the two countries due to procedural errors regarding the need for prior authorization by the President of the Republic in cases involving the renunciation of Albanian sovereignty over some its territory.

**EUROPEAN UNION, December 14th:** Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Mijatović urges Italy to make a greater commitment to defending the rights of people on the move and to abolishing measures that hinder civil society rescue efforts at sea.

**GREECE, December 14th:** Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International accuse the Greek government of failing to provide “sufficient resources” for the investigation into the June 14th Pylos shipwreck which caused over 500 deaths.

**GREAT BRITAIN, December 18th:** Every British commercial airline has refused to provide aircrafts for the UK government’s plan to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda. The government says it is ready to use Ministry of Defence resources if private sector contractors cannot be found.

**FRANCE, December 19th:** French deputies and senators reach an agreement and pass an immigration bill at the Joint Committee meeting thanks to the votes of the extreme right National Rassemblement party. Many human rights organizations have called the legislation “shameless xenophobia.”

# SEA

**LAMPEDUSA, December 1st:** The Italian Coast Guard rescues 32 people aboard a boat in distress south of Lampedusa. The survivors later disembark on the island.

**CIVIL FLEET, December 1st:** Aurora (Sea-Watch) rescues 45 people in distress. The survivors later disembark at Lampedusa.

**CYPRUS, December 4th:** Local authorities rescue 20 people aboard a boat that departed from Lebanon. The survivors later disembark on Cyprus.

**LESBOS, December 6th:** The Greek Coast Guard intercepts a boat carrying 38 people off the island of Lesbos and illegally forces the boat back into Turkish waters.

**CHORA SFAKION, December 7th:** The Greek Coast Guard rescues 27 people who fled Libya. The survivors later disembark in Chora Sfakion, Crete.

**CIVIL FLEET, December 7th:** Trotamar III (Compass Collective) assists a boat carrying 47 people in distress while awaiting the arrival of the Italian Coast Guard. The survivors later disembark at Lampedusa.

**LAMPEDUSA, December 7th:** 103 people aboard two boats fleeing Libya arrive autonomously on Lampedusa.

**LESBOS, December 7th:** The Greek Coast Guard intercepts a boat off Lesbos carrying 22 people and forces the boat back into Turkish waters.

**SANTA MARIA DI LEUCA, December 7th:** 80 people fleeing Libya arrive autonomously at Santa Maria di Leuca.

**CRETE, December 11th:** 41 people arrive autonomously in Kissamos on the northern part of the island of Crete.

**TURKEY, December 12th:** 122 people aboard two boats from the region of Izmir are forcibly pushed back into Turkish waters by the Greek Coast Guard.

**CIVIL FLEET, December 12th:** Geo Barents (Médecins Sans Frontières) rescues 36 people aboard a boat that fled Libya. Genova is assigned as the port of disembarkation, 1,245 km from the rescue location.

**KOS, December 12th:** The Greek Coast Guard intercepts 17 people off the coast of Kos and forces their boat back into Turkish waters. Turkish authorities later discover one of the survivors unconscious.

**CIVIL FLEET, December 13th:** Ocean Viking (SOS Méditerranée) rescues 26 people from a boat that fled Libya. The survivors later disembark in Livorno.

# SEA

**ROCCELLA JONICA, December 15th:** The Italian Coast Guard rescues 100 people aboard two boats from Turkey. The survivors later disembark in Roccella Jonica.

**ZUARA, December 16th:** 61 people drown after their boat sinks off the coast of Libya. The remaining 25 survivors are brought back to Zuara.

**CIVIL FLEET, December 18th:** Sea-Eye 4 (Sea-Eye) rescues 26 people aboard two boats in distress. The survivors later disembark at the port of Civitavecchia.

**CRETE, December 20th:** A merchant ship rescues 85 people south of Crete. The survivors later disembark in Morocco.

**CIVIL FLEET, December 24th:** Sea-Watch 5 (Sea-Watch) rescues 119 people aboard two boats in distress. The survivors disembark in Marina di Carrara after four days of navigation.

**LAMPEDUSA, December 25th-26th:** In 24 hours, the Italian Coast Guard rescues 278 people aboard a total of five boats off the coast of Lampedusa. The survivors later disembark on the island.

**CIVIL FLEET, December 25th:** Sea-Eye 4 rescues 106 people aboard two boats south of Lampedusa. The survivors later disembark in Brindisi.

**NISYROS, December 27th:** The Greek Coast Guard intercepts approximately 67 people off the coast of Nisyros and forces their boat back into Turkish waters. Later, the Turkish Coast Guard intervenes and rescues the passengers on the boat.

**CIVIL FLEET, December 27th:** Thanks to (Pilotes Volontaires) Colibri 2's alert, Ocean Viking is able to rescue 122 people fleeing Libya. The survivors later disembark in Bari.

**LAMPEDUSA, December 27th:** 137 people aboard three boats arrive autonomously on the island of Lampedusa.

**CIVIL FLEET, December 28th:** Open Arms rescues 63 people. The survivors disembark in Genova, over 600 miles from the point of rescue.

**CIVIL FLEET, December 29th:** Geo Barents rescues 336 people aboard three boats. The survivors disembark in Ravenna after four days of navigation.

**LAMPEDUSA, December 30th:** Italian authorities rescue a boat carrying 100 people. The survivors later disembark on Lampedusa.

# ITALY

**MILAN, December 1st:** Following the Guardia di Finanza police's inspection of Milan's CPR (administrative detention facility), Martinella Srl is accused of not providing a proper supply of food, medicine, and healthcare, and of not providing psychological and legal support as called for by the service contract.

**CROTONE, December 4th:** Humanity 1 (SOS Humanity) receives a 20 day administrative detention from Italian authorities for violating the Piantendosi Decree following the rescue of 40 people whom the so-called Libyan Coast Guard had attempted to refoule.

**MILAN, December 7th:** Naga, Cambio Passo, Mediterranea, and Rete Milano condemn the lack of assistance for people transiting through Milan. In just October, approximately 550 people were forced to sleep outdoors.

**GRADISCA D'ISONZO, December 17th:** People detained in the province of Gorizia at the Gradisca d'Isonzo's CPR (administrative detention facility) protest the inhuman conditions they are forced to live in within the facility by burning mattresses and personal items.

**ROME, December 20th:** The Community of Sant'Egidio, the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, Tavola Valdese, the Italian Episcopal Conference, and Caritas sign a 3 year agreement with the Italian Government guaranteeing humanitarian corridors from Libya for 1,500 people in that period.

**BARI, December 31st:** Following a rescue operation in which 122 people fleeing Libya were saved, Ocean Viking receives another 20 day administrative detention from Italian authorities, the second in two months.

**TURIN, December 29th:** The city of Turin will grant five cost-free apartments in Via Brione for the reception of people on the move who arrive in the metropolis. The project will be run with the help of the Red Cross for the entire year of 2024.

# REPORT BORDERLINE EUROPE

NEWS FROM  
CENTRAL  
MEDITERRANEAN



# ARRIVALS

borderline-europe reported 3,866 arrivals in Italy for the month of December, a 50% decrease compared to the previous November. However, Italy's Minister of the Interior reported 5,237 arrivals for the same period. The reason behind such a discrepancy in figures between the two sources can be attributed to citizens' lack of interest in arrivals to the EU leading to a lack of reporting between Christmas and New Year's.

Although not uncommon in the winter months in the Mediterranean, storms and harsh weather made crossing the sea especially perilous even for this area for many days making meteorological conditions a factor contributing to the lower number of arrivals compared to the same period in the previous month. In fact, most of December's arrivals crossed at the end of the month when weather improved, from December 26th onwards, with at least 500 people reaching Italy each day.

Most arrived in Italy by reaching Lampedusa, however others arrived by landing on the shores of Calabria and Sardinia. Often, these refugees arrived independently by reaching Italian territorial waters on their own, while others landed directly on Italian shores.

In December, approximately 4% of arrivals reached Italy independently while 36% were brought ashore by Italian authorities and another 24% reached Italy assisted by the civil fleet. Contributing to the relatively large percentage of civil fleet arrivals were two end of month rescue operations: on December 27th, Ocean Viking's SOS Méditerranée rescued 244 people and two days later, on December 29th, Doctors Without Borders's (MSF) Geo Barents rescued 336 people.

According to Italy's Ministry of the Interior, 11% of arrivals in 2023 fled Guinea and Tunisia while 10% departed from the Ivory Coast.

Many applying for international protections in Italy also originated from Bangladesh (8%), Egypt (7%), Syria (6%), Burkina Faso (5%), and Pakistan (5%).

# DEAD AND MISSING

The cruelty perpetrated by the European border regimes was yet again distinctly evident at the end of the year. According to [borderline-europe](#), 31 people died and at least 121 were considered missing in the central Mediterranean in December. The number of unreported cases is presumed to be much higher.

IOM's Missing Migrants Project estimated that 2,498 people died or were considered missing in 2023. This figure is based on the number of reported cases. However, the IOM had estimated 2023 would see a 60% increase in fatalities in the Mediterranean when compared to the previous year.

The fate of many of these people remains uncertain. Often, no identifiable body is found because authorities do not make the effort to identify bodies that are recovered nor are attempts made to search for missing persons. The Mem.Med (Mediterranean Memorial) Project seeks to fill this void by providing support to the civil society in the search for people's missing relatives in the Mediterranean. We discussed the issue of the so-called "missing" people of the Mediterranean in the latest episode of our podcast.

On December 16th, a boat carrying 86 people capsized off the coast of Libya after departing from the coastal city of Zuwara in northwestern part of the country. According to IOM Libya, at least 61 of the 86 passengers were considered missing as the organization expected worse news to arrive as the situation developed. The survivors of the accident at sea were forcibly

returned to Libya by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard and confined to the Tariq Al Sekka Detention Center near Tripoli.

According to Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), this accident could have been averted if authorities had been notified promptly of the boat in distress. The civil sea rescue ships that had been active in the area were forced to return to Italian ports with few people rescued on board. Moreover, the merchant ship, "Vos Triton," arrived at the site eight hours after the alert was issued and forcibly returned the people it rescued to Libya.

Accidents also took place as boats landed. On December 27th, for instance, the engine of a boat combusted causing one person to be injured and need hospitalization. On the same day, another boat carrying 46 people reached Italy. Two other people with bullet wounds were on board: one was deceased. It is still unclear where the victims were shot before or after departing Libya.



# PUSH-BACKS

borderline-europe reported 1,974 people were forcibly returned to Libya and another 96 people were taken to Tunisia in the last month of the year. While there was a dramatic decrease in the number of forced returns to Tunisia for the month, pushbacks to Libya increased. The broadening of collaboration between European authorities such as Frontex and Malta's Coast Guard with Libyan militias and the so-called Libyan Coast Guard probably contributed to this increase.

An extensive and in-depth investigation by the news organization Al Jazeera revealed that while European authorities refuse to cooperate with civil sea rescue organizations and ignore their requests, European authorities, and more specifically Maltese authorities, shared the GPS coordinates of boats carrying refugees with the so-called Libyan Coast Guard and the Libyan militia group Tareq Bin Zayed which is alleged to have ties with the Russian Wagner Group. Both Tareq Bin Zayed and Wagner Group are known to be involved in human rights abuses. The investigation provided witness statements and recordings of radio communication evidence supporting their findings.

In early December, Tunisia's government reported it had intercepted approximately 70,000 people for the year, over twice as many as those intercepted the previous year: 31,000 interceptions in 2022. Most interceptions in 2023 occurred off the coast of Sfax, the country's largest city. Sfax was considered the main point of departure for those attempting to flee to Europe.

The report also stated that 77.5% of those intercepted in 2023 originated from sub-Saharan countries while another 22.5% were Tunisians. However, arrivals from Asian countries such as Bangladesh or Pakistan, often documented in records, were not mentioned.

Following President Kais Saied's racist remarks in February which caused international uproar, Tunisia saw a wave of violence and discrimination against migrants in the country. Furthermore, the United Nations and several NGOs accused the Tunisian government of illegally and violently expelling migrants to Algeria and Libya where people were often abandoned without water or food along the border in desert areas causing many to die.

On December 28th and 29th, there were another three accidents at sea in which people died while others went missing or were forcibly returned to Libya. So far, 61 people are still missing. Alarm Phone had previously alerted Frontex during three separate monitoring missions of the need for assistance in the same area of the accidents. Neither Frontex nor Italian authorities commented on the incidents.

## WAYS TO EUROPE

Further changes in arrivals' points of embarkation were noted in December. The increase in departures from Libya observed in October continued to the end of the year with 37% (1,461 people) having left from that country. However, the percentage of people leaving from Tunisia decreased 9% compared to the previous month with just 14% (543 people). For 39% of December's arrivals, it was not possible to determine their point of embarkation.

As in the previous month, 392 people arrived from Turkey. However, taking into consideration the decrease in number of total arrivals for the month of December, arrivals from Turkey accounted for a larger percentage (10%). Many sailboats continued to undertake the multi-day journey along the Ionian Sea route from the Turkish Mediterranean coast to the eastern coast of Italy.

## CIVIL RESISTENCE

In December, yet again, most people who were rescued in the Mediterranean were saved thanks to the presence of civil rescue organizations in the area. Approximately 24% of arrivals, 947 people, who reached Italy by traveling across the central Mediterranean were rescued by civil sea rescue vessels. With crucial support from Pilotes Volontaires' and Sea-Watch's aircrafts, seven civil fleet ships remained active at sea despite the harsh weather.

The civil rescue fleet also continued to grow. On December 14th, the Maldusa Project, already active in Palermo and Lampedusa, announced that it had completed the final phase necessary for the deployment of a motorboat to aid sea rescue operations in the Mediterranean and to assist in monitoring of the area. According to the association, which received financial support from the United4Rescue Alliance for this project, trials were in their final stages.

The activist network Alarm Phone manages a self-organized hotline for refugees in distress at sea in the Mediterranean. Alarm Phone's call center gives refugees an additional opportunity to share their requests with appropriate authorities. On December 1st, Alarm Phone reported approximately 30 people were in distress at sea. They were subsequently rescued by the Italian Coast Guard. On the same day, Alarm Phone also reported another 42 people were in distress at sea near Malta. Eventually, these people were rescued by a container ship which took them to Malta.

On December 2nd, SOS Humanity's ship, Humanity 1, was detained at the Port of Crotona after disembarking 200 people. Humanity 1 was charged with hindering the so-called Libyan Coast Guard's vessel's attempt to rescue 46 people on November 30th. Both Humanity 1 and the so-called Libyan Coast Guard were present at the rescue site when some people jumped from their dinghy. The so-called Libyan Coast Guard claimed Humanity 1's captain ignored the so-called Libyan Coast Guard's instructions and that people jumped into the water following Humanity 1's arrival. However, Humanity 1 stated this was not the case and explained that the crew had been informed that there were people in distress at sea about 20 minutes before the rescue operation began and the ship was five kilometers from the site at that time. The crew decided to head for the location because the so-called Libyan Coast Guard had not yet intervened. It seems that the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Center had also given Humanity 1 the go ahead for the rescue. For this rescue operation, Humanity 1 received a 20 day detention and a 3,333 euro fine.

The media's persistent narrative that sea rescue acts as a pull factor was surprisingly dispelled in this period. Maritime rescue organizations had long stressed that their presence in the Mediterranean did not act as an incentive for migrants nor did it encourage them to undertake the dangerous journey across the sea. At the beginning of December, Frontex Chief Hans Leitjens also admitted that the presence of maritime relief organizations in the Mediterranean did not act as a pull factor contradicting claims made by mass media and by the Italian government.

On December 7th, Alarm Phone reported the presence of 47 refugees in distress on an overcrowded metal boat in Malta's SAR area. Turbulent weather with strong winds threatened to capsize the boat. With the help of Compass Collective's Trotamar III, the survivors were rescued by a container ship.

SOS Méditerranée's Ocean Viking rescued 26 people in Libya's SAR area on December 14th. Despite high winds and severe storms at sea, Italian authorities designated Livorno, 1,000 kilometers away, as the port of disembarkation. Rather than allow the survivors to land at Lampedusa, they were allowed to shelter there, aboard the ship, for a limited time while waiting for the weather to improve before heading for Livorno.

After being docked in port for recent maintenance work, (Sea-Watch) Sea-Watch 5 carried out its first rescue mission saving 119 people in Libya's SAR area on December 24th.

On December 27th, SOS Méditerranée's Ocean Viking rescued 244 people from three individual boats. Charged with not going directly to its designated port in Bari after the rescue operation, the ship was detained by Italian authorities upon its arrival on December 30th. However, in this instance, Ocean Viking briefly deviated from its route to Bari only after learning of another boat in distress and once the crew realized that the boat was further away than expected, the ship resumed its original course for Bari. Yet again, it is obvious that this prejudiced legislation is meant to deliberately impede civil rescue at sea, rather than assist people in need as quickly as possible.



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