

NEW: Bounties not Bodies: Smugglers Profit from Sea Rescues Though No Clear Alternative Available

If smugglers take advantage of rescue at sea, so be it. The alternative is letting people drown.

The Financial Times [reported](#) that the European Union accuses MSF and other humanitarian organisations running search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean of working in collusion with smugglers or at least helping them to carry out their deadly trade. These allegations were made based on an internal report from the European border agency, Frontex. MSF requested Frontex to share this report with us, which they declined. Instead, they refute they accuse humanitarian agencies of collusion, but raise a number of concerns with our search and rescue operations.

Their first point is on the increased overcrowding of the boats and their lower quality compared with previous years. They state that the number of passengers in a 10-12 metre boat has increased from 90 to 160 and also note that “it is common for the rescuers to find bodies of the people who died from asphyxiation and fume inhalation [...] on the bottom of the dinghies.” As MSF we can only confirm after having pulled the bodies of numerous people, including pregnant women and unaccompanied minors, from rubber boats so far this year. What Frontex is not answering however is why the boats are of lower quality in 2016? It is possible that the presence of a few boats operated by humanitarian agencies, on top of the massive search and rescue resources deployed by the EU itself, play a role on the quality of the vessels used by the smugglers. However, what has also changed since 2015 is that Operation Sophia, the anti-smuggling EU naval operation has moved to “Phase II” which allows the interception of smugglers, as well as the destruction of their vessels and other assets, in international waters. This provides another possible explanation why smugglers are now using almost exclusively low quality rubber boats. Why spend money on higher quality boats when you know they will be destroyed?

Next, Frontex explains that search and rescue operations have moved closer to Libyan shores and that “there is little doubt that the smugglers are taking advantage of the significant number of rescue boats present in the area.” This is true, as smugglers will take advantage of any situation — be it the political chaos in Libya or the presence of EU naval and private rescue vessels off its coast. For MSF, the question whether or not smugglers take advantage of the presence of search and rescue vessels off the coast, is irrelevant. The proximity to the Libyan coast is a humanitarian imperative as the closer we are, the more lives we save. It is only the legal barrier of 12 nautical miles, at which the Libyan territorial waters start, that prevents us to go closer still. MSF’s rescue operations are neither the cause nor the solution to the problem but simply a reaction to thousands of people dying in their desperation to reach Europe.

Frontex ends its response by acknowledging “the tremendous work of all those present in the area” but reminds us that “it is also important to say that law enforcement approach is central to [Frontex’s] work.” This is done according to Frontex by gathering all physical evidence from the vessels we rescue. However, the internal report quoted by journalists complains about the non-cooperation from the migrants rescued by humanitarian vessels, accusing the agencies that run them to forbid anyone debriefing with the border agency. We neither encourage nor discourage such cooperation. There is no question that a border agency like Frontex is responsible for guarding borders. But just because we find ourselves in the same stretch of sea, it does not mean that the responsibility to protect European borders now extends to us. Doctors are not, nor will we ever be, border control police. The fact that all search and rescue vessels, both private and military alike, operate deliberately close to the Libyan coast and the fact that humanitarian organisations like MSF

refuse to take on the role as border guard, does not mean we are in collusion with smugglers or support their cruel reign.

On a daily basis we are horrified by the brutality of smugglers and witness firsthand the consequences of their disregard for human life. We see marks of ill-treatment on the bodies of the men, women and children we rescue and hear the bone chilling stories of those they raped, tortured, starved and otherwise abused. But history has shown, that whatever MSF or Frontex or anyone else does to stand in their way, smugglers will adapt their tactics and find new ways of plying their trade. As long as no legal alternatives exist for the desperate people fleeing war, persecution and poverty, smugglers will continue to provide their only hope and thousands will die. It's a vicious cycle — one that will only be remedied by the creation of safe and legal routes to Europe.

Smugglers may indeed “profit from our presence,” as they will profit from the EU naval forces that work beside us and profit altogether much more from war and poverty across the world and the desperate people who look for an escape route which the EU still refuses to provide. Search and rescue is not a solution, it's a band aid that will never prevent people from dying at sea. With more than 4,800 people drowned, suffocated, burned to death or missing in 2016 alone, we are effectively patrolling a graveyard in the Mediterranean Sea. The death toll increased this year, partly because of the decision by the smugglers to use severely overcrowded low quality vessels. This could well be an economic reaction to the EU decision to destroy all smuggling vessels encountered at sea.

MSF did not create smugglers, just like MSF did not create the conflicts and deep inequality many of those we rescue flee. Until politicians reverse this absurd situation in which we find ourselves, MSF will continue to try and save the maximum number of lives as possible, both on land and on sea. Because the alternative implied by Frontex's concerns about our rescue operations is to let people drown as a strategy to deter the smugglers.

By [Aurélien Ponthieu](#). Photo by Giorgos Moutafis © SOS MEDITERRANEE 2016.

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