Central Med Info
July 12 – July 26 2019

About our Central Med Info: borderline-europe started in March 2019 to put together information about the situation in the Central Mediterranean Sea for internal research reasons. In 2020 we decided to publish these info-letters. You will also find sources of right-wing newspapers and twitter quotations of “friends” of the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. This does not reflect our opinion, but some information is only available here.

LIBYA- INFO

24.07.2019
Libya: Renewed commitment to Mediterranean rescues encouraging, but ‘overriding priority’ must be ‘lasting peace’, say UN officials

The heads of the two key UN agencies championing refugees and migrants have called for an end to their “arbitrary detention” across Libya, following an agreement on Tuesday by European Union countries to offer those fleeing across the Mediterranean a safe berth through a new distribution mechanism.

“The violence in Tripoli in recent weeks has made the situation more desperate than ever, and the need for action critical”, stressed António Vitorino, Director General of the International Organization of Migration (IOM), and Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Disagreements on how to distribute people rescued at sea, led the European Union (EU) to end official Mediterranean Sea patrols earlier this year, as Italy rejected having to take the bulk of those rescued.

While the specifics have not yet been outlined, news agencies reported that 14 EU countries have reached a tentative agreement to allocate migrants and refugees more evenly across the bloc.

The UN officials advocated for a more orderly release process for those in detention, within urban areas or open centres, “that allow reasonable freedom of movement, shelter, assistance and protection from harm, plus independent monitoring and regular unhindered access for humanitarian agencies”.

Considering the risks of abuse, maltreatment or death, “no one should be returned to detention centres in Libya after being intercepted or rescued at sea”, they stressed.

They said the renewed commitment from EU States for those making the dangerous Mediterranean crossing was encouraging: “The status quo, where search and rescue operations are often left to NGO [non-governmental organizations] or commercial vessels, cannot continue”, underscored the high-ranking officials, calling for a renewed commitment to an EU State search and rescue operation, “similar to programmes we have seen in recent years”.

The “crucial role” of NGOs “must be acknowledged”, they continued and not criminalized or stigmatized for saving lives at sea.

“Commercial vessels, who are increasingly being relied upon to conduct rescue operations, must not be requested to transfer rescued people to the Libyan Coast Guard, nor directed to disembark them in Libya, which is not a port of safety”, they spelled out.

They said the discussions on establishing a temporary, predictable arrangement for disembarking people after they have been rescued at sea, and sharing responsibility amongst States for hosting them afterwards, were promising, noting that “a joined-up approach to this situation is in everyone’s interests”.


ITALY and the new Decree – changes wanted by Salvini

24.07.2019
Italy’s government wins confidence vote on decree targeting migrant rescue ships

The Italian government won a parliamentary confidence vote on Wednesday on a security and immigration decree, in a victory for Interior
Minister Matteo Salvini, who heads the far-right League party. The government, which has been riven by internal strife in recent weeks, won the vote by 325 to 248. It would have had to stand down had it lost the motion. The decree was drawn up by Salvini, who also serves as deputy prime minister in the government, and toughens the sanctions on charity ships that seek to bring migrants rescued in the Mediterranean to Italy. The bill now moves to the upper house Senate for final approval which is expected to come before mid-August.


**Rescue Operations Central Mediterranean**

24.07.2019

AP-CASE: Interception by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard - Libya: Europe-bound migrants sent to bombed detention centre

Thousands of migrants are being held in poorly equipped detention centres near the front lines of the fighting between rival Libyan factions Libya's coastguard has intercepted a Europe-bound boat off its Mediterranean coast and taken all migrants on board to a detention centre that was bombed earlier this month. Spokesperson Ayoub Gassim told the Associated Press news agency that a rubber boat carrying 38 people, most of them Egyptians, was stopped on Tuesday 65km northeast of the capital Tripoli.

He added that the migrants were transferred to the Tajoura detention centre. Two air attacks on the facility earlier in July had killed at least 60 people and caused an international outcry with rights groups demanding the centres be closed. The attack followed repeated warnings about the ill-treatment of the mainly African migrants who transit through the turbulent North African country as well as the vulnerability of migrants in such guardhouses. The United Nations condemned the attack - widely blamed on the air force of renegade military commander Khalifa Haftar - on the compound at the time, saying it had provided the location's exact coordinates to the two parties fighting in the country. Libya has had two rival governments over the last few years. The UN-recognised administration, led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, is based in Tripoli, and is supported by Turkey as well as most Western nations. That includes Italy, which is worried that more fighting near Tripoli will lead to an increase in the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean. In the east, there is the Tobruk-based government, the centre of power for Haftar, who is backed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Haftar and his backers say they are trying to free Tripoli from armed groups they accuse of destabilising Libya since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in a NATO-backed uprising in 2011.


26.07.2019

Salvini wants Europe to take migrants from Italy coastguard

Far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini on Friday ordered 135 migrants and refugees rescued in the Mediterranean to remain aboard an Italian coastguard vessel until other European countries agree to take them in. Salvini, also deputy prime minister, has been trying to take a hardline against migrants rescued at sea being brought to Italy, which he says bears an unfair share of their numbers. The migrants were spotted aboard two makeshift boats, one by Tunisian fishermen and the other by Italians, on Wednesday, the day before at least 115 other migrants are believed to have drowned in a shipwreck off Libya. The Italian coastguard sent a small boat to rescue those spotted by the Tunisians and took them to a larger coastguard vessel. The Italian fishing boat stayed with the other vessel carrying around 50 migrants for 24 hours, 50 nautical miles from Malta and in its search and rescue area.

"We gave them water and crackers... we stayed in permanent contact with the (Italian) coastguard, but Malta never answered," the fishing boat's captain, Carlo Giarratano, told journalists after arriving in western Sicily's Sciacca. An Italian coastguard vessel eventually arrived to transport the migrants to the coastguard supply vessel, the Gregoretti. "The government has officially asked the European Commission to coordinate operations to distribute the migrants who are currently on
board," interior ministry sources said. "There are 135 people. Pending an official reply, no disembarkation port has been designated," they said in a statement.

Nevertheless, on Wednesday police and the coast guard rescued 77 people, mostly women and children, three days after they left Libya and brought them all to Italy's Lampedusa. Other migrant boats continue to arrive in Italy, including two from Tunisia with a total of 34 people on board that arrived in Lampedusa on Wednesday night.

Charity rescue boats, the main target of Salvini's ire, were not operating in the area at the time, with many of them detained pending prosecution of their crews. German aid group Sea Eye's vessel Alan Kurdi left Spain on Thursday headed for the waters off Libya. French President Emmanuel Macron on Monday said 14 states had approved a plan to redistribute refugees rescued in the Mediterranean, and eight said they would actively take part.

A furious Salvini said at the time that the agreement underscored a demand that Italy "continue to be the refugee camp of Europe". The issue of what to do with the thousands of refugees still attempting to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea has sparked a sharp response in some countries, with Italy saying it is bearing the brunt of the problem while its EU partners do little to help.

After snubbing Macron's meeting, Salvini said Italy "does not take orders and is not a partner: if Macron wants to discuss migrants, come to Rome". Last month, Italian authorities arrested the German captain of the Sea-Watch 3 charity boat, Carola Rackete, after she hit an Italian speedboat while docking without permission in Lampedusa. Interior Minister Matteo Salvini has been trying to adopt a hardline against migrants rescued at sea being brought to Italy.

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After snubbing Macron's meeting, Salvini said Italy "does not take orders and is not a partner: if Macron wants to discuss migrants, come to Rome". Last month, Italian authorities arrested
people entering Europe by sea and a further 8,007 by land so far in 2019. The UNHCR said the number of confirmed deaths on the Libya to Europe route is 164 since the start of the year, fewer than in previous years. But the UN said the journey is becoming more dangerous, with one in four migrants dying at sea before reaching Europe.

A huge exodus of people from the shores of northern Africa to Europe began after the 2011 uprisings that toppled Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

European leaders have made efforts to stem the flow of boats across the Mediterranean, including partnering with the Libyan coastguard and other Libyan forces. Rights groups said those policies have left migrants at the mercy of brutal armed groups or confined in squalid detention centres that lack adequate food and water.

UNHCR spokesman Charlie Yaxley, said: “This horrific event highlights once again the dire need for a shift in approach to the Mediterranean situation. Urgent action is needed to save lives at sea and prevent people from getting on these boats in the first place by offering safe, legal alternatives.”

Judith Sunderland, associate Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said: “What’s always so horrifying about these relentless tragedies is that they should be preventable.

“Instead of conducting European search and rescue in the Mediterranean, the EU has pulled its forces out. Instead of supporting nongovernmental rescue operations, EU countries have thrown every obstacle in their way. Instead of taking responsibility themselves, EU countries have been propping up the Libyan coastguard without the resources or dedication to save lives at sea.”

This week, the Libyan coastguard intercepted about three dozen people off the coast and took them to a detention centre near Tripoli. More than 200 detainees are still being held at the Tajoura detention centre near the frontlines of fighting between rival Libyan factions, and where earlier this month an airstrike killed more than 50 people. The UN has expressed concern for their safety.

At least 2,500 migrants are detained in centres in and around Tripoli, where forces loyal to Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar are battling militias loosely aligned with a UN-recognised government since April. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jul/25/up-to-150-people-may-have-died-in-shipwreck-off-libya-says-unhcr

New Rescue Vessel CM – OCEAN VIKING

21.07.2019

SOS MEDITERRANEE is going back at sea with the Ocean Viking and launches a call for donations from citizens across Europe

As of July 18th, 2019, SOS MEDITERRANEE and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) are back at sea with a new vessel, the Ocean Viking, to conduct search and rescue activities in the central Mediterranean. SOS MEDITERRANEE calls for donations to the European citizens to support their “#BackAtSea” search and rescue mission. [...] https://sosmediterrane.com/press/sos-mediterranee-is-going-back-at-sea-with-the-ocean-viking-and-launches-a-call-for-donations-from-citizens-across-europe/

22.07.2019

Norwegian Flag and owners step up to support new humanitarian rescue vessel in Mediterranean

Press Release - London, UK. The Norwegian Flag and Norwegian owners have stepped up to provide a new civil society humanitarian rescue vessel the Viking Ocean to be operated in the central Mediterranean reflecting a renewed joint partnership between SOS MEDITERRANEE and Doctors Without Borders (MSF) for the rescue of persons in distress at sea under the established international law requirements of the UN Convention Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982. In effect, Norway has taken the latest international lead in supporting and upholding lawful rescue at sea which falls under the larger umbrella of protecting human rights at sea for all persons living, working, transiting, or engaged in any other type of activity at sea in territorial and international waters around the globe [...] https://www.humanrightsatsea.org/2019/07/22/norwegian-flag-and-owners-step-up-to-support-new-humanitarian-rescue-vessel-in-mediterranean/
Glossary

AP: Alarm Phone
IOM: International Organisation of Migration
Migrant Rescue Watch: Account of R. Gowans, a person that seems to know a lot about the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. We do not share his opinion about the so-called LCG and the SAR NGOs.

So-called LCG: so-called Libyan Coast Guard. These coastguard units since long time are the subject of criticism because of the human rights violations they have committed, their frequent unavailability and the impossibility of attributing them to a government or to militias, for this we call them "so-called" coastguards.

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