



Scirocco
borderline-europe, Sicily - Part 2
Palermo, 12.04.2021



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Scirocco [ʃiˈrɔkko-Sherocco] is a south-easterly, hot strong wind that carries dust and sand across the Mediterranean to Sicily and Italy's north for often only a few hours. These news in brief in the age of the pandemic will be published from March 2021 in an approx. bi-weekly rhythm. Scirocco replaces the Corona Update Italy.

Political and Social Situation

The first foreign visit of the Italian Prime Minister **Mario Draghi** at the beginning of April 2021 was to **Libya**, which leaves no doubt: cooperation with Libya will be further expanded, even if the human rights situation remains catastrophic. [InfoMigrants](#) has collected testimonies from refugees who report what happens in Libyan ports after their return. Oil and gas are more important than human rights. [Draghi praised](#) the work of the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. [Seven million euros](#) have again been channelled to Libya, mainly for their equipment. Meanwhile, [two former Italian ships](#) that were handed over to Libya are being refitted in Catania in a secret mission. The person in charge of the work was chosen on the basis of "effectiveness and discretion demonstrated in previous similar work, in order to disclose activities of high institutional sensitivity to the outside world", according to the order from the command centre of the Catania financial police. The fact that the so-called Libyan Coast Guard is not functioning became clear again in March. The Alarm Phone reported on a case where nine (!) different telephone numbers of the maritime rescue coordination centre in Libya could not be reached. When someone finally answered, he spoke only Arabic. But maritime rescue coordination centres must be reachable internationally and must be able to speak English. Often, Italian naval personnel seems to help out: "It is known that the Italian ship Caprera, which is based

in Tripoli, plays a coordinating role in every 'rescue operation'," says Giulia Crescini, lawyer of the lawyers' association on migration, Asgi. So it is still not possible to speak of a Libyan Coast Guard (on the sea rescue cases in March, see also [borderline-europe's Central Med Info](#)).

In the **context of the criminalisation of solidarity**, it has become known that several journalists and other people involved in migration work have been [wiretapped](#), following the proceedings and investigations opened against various civil sea rescue associations [and](#) groups. This happened in the context of investigations against [Iuventa](#) (Jugend Rettet), which [was seized](#) on August 2, 2017.



The Iuventa, Photo: [Iuventa10](#)

The journalists were wiretapped while talking to their lawyers and sources. But none of the intercepted persons are under investigation in these proceedings – so what is the basis? Moreover, it is not legal to wiretap and record conversations between clients and lawyers. Wiretapping and recording the sources with whom the journalists talk on the phone violates the freedom of the press. In particular, the journalist Nancy Porsia was wiretapped, including a conversation with the Palermo lawyer [Michele Calantropo](#). The latter called her in 2017 to get information about the situation in Libya. Calantropo is the lawyer of an Eritrean who was wrongly convicted as a human trafficker and served three years in prison in Palermo. Outrageous: the telephone conversation, in which the defence strategy was also a topic, was recorded by the police unit

that provides the witnesses for the other side in the prosecution and could thus find out which line the defence is taking.



The Open Arms on the open sea; photo Chris Grodotzki via Sea Watch

The criminalisation story originated in 2016, when the Paolo Gentiloni government took office on December 12, with the new Democrat Minister of the Interior, Marco Minniti. Internal guidelines were sent to the Trapani SCO, the police's crime-fighting unit. These guidelines had two objectives, one political: to thwart the SAR NGOs. It was to be implemented by means of the code of conduct for NGO vessels drawn up by Minniti. And a legal one: it was intended to launch the lawsuit against the crew of the *Luventa*, against MSF (Doctors Without Borders) and Save the Children. This was signed with his name by Vittorio Pisani, at the time head of the Immigration Department of the Ministry of Public Security. Two years later, he was head of the AISI, the Internal Security Service (secret service). So refugees are above all a security risk. Politicians of the [right and ultra-right wing](#) see in the wiretaps that the end justifies the means. The rights of some people were violated, but: "Enough with the Casarinis (activist of *Mediterranea Saving Humans*, editor's note) who move from the social centres to the NGOs' boats and enjoy mysterious economic payments (it's about the [Mediterranea case](#), editor's note). These took place while they were smuggling illegal immigrants on board their boats. The NGOs' story is a disturbing one that deserves exemplary trials and immediate sen-

tencing. Forget humanitarian aid. This history must be rewritten" says Maurizio Gasparri, member of Forza Italia (Silvio Berlusconi's party), former Minister of Communications under Berlusconi 2001-2005) and previously also a member of the ultra-right *Alleanza Nazionale*.

About Rescue at Sea

With the improved weather at the end of March, the dangerous departures from Libya towards Europe began again. But many of the people did not arrive there.

Between March 28 and April 1 alone, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) counted [1,663 people](#) who were intercepted and returned back to Libya. One of the boats was already in the [Maltese Search and Rescue \(SAR\)](#) zone and should have been rescued from Malta. The crew of the *Open Arms* witnessed that this interception had been coordinated by the Maltese authorities, although this violates the principle of non-refoulement of the Geneva Refugee Convention.

Fortunately, the [Open Arms](#) was able to rescue 219 people, including a [10-year-old boy](#) who was travelling alone. Five days after the first rescue, the people were allowed to land at the port of Pozzallo on April 1. 10 people had already been evacuated earlier. The *Open Arms* received [more distress calls](#) but when it arrived at the GPS coordinates, no boats could be found – they had probably been intercepted by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. The sea rescue ship accompanied another boat until [15 nautical miles off Lampedusa](#), as it could no longer take the 95 people on board. After the *Open Arms* landed, there was no longer a civil sea rescue ship on the Mediterranean but people continued to make their way.

On Easter Saturday, three boats with a total of 270 people on board called for help via the [Alarm Phone](#). All of them were in the Maltese SAR-zone but both Malta and Italy refused to coordinate the rescue, even though two merchant ships were nearby.

For [three days](#), the people drifted on the Mediterranean Sea, most of the time without food or water, before they were finally brought to [Italy](#).

On April 1, another ship with people rescued from distress at sea landed in Italy, but in Salerno, south of Naples. A [cargo ship](#) had rescued 32 people in [Greek waters](#) and had continued the planned route with them on board.

Situation of the refugees

Even before the latest arrivals, 776 people were accommodated in the [Lampedusa hotspot](#), which is designed for [250 people](#). The adults and families were therefore transferred to ferries used as quarantine vessels, where conditions are [far from good](#). [Unaccompanied minors](#), who sometimes made up half of the people on the boats, were taken to other accommodations.

Already at the beginning of March, temporary accommodations in ruined buildings in Cassibile, south of the Sicilian city of Syracuse, where seasonal workers had lived, were [evacuated by](#) the police.



Walled-up window of the evacuated accommodation; photo Borderline Sicilia

Soon, however, the [potato harvest](#) has to be done, with 300-400 people coming each year in need of shelter. Those who find accommodation in the village centre cannot

make it to the field in time early in the morning. Others find shelter with their "bosses", but they don't know how much is deducted from their wages. Still others are currently sleeping in caves outside the village. It is always said that these people are essential workers, because without them we would have no vegetables and no fruit to eat. But once again it becomes clear how they are seen as cheap labour and the question arises whether the public authorities and social actors would be so conspicuous by their absence if the workers had the Italian citizenship. A few [containers](#) have been put up recently, but there is still no one to manage them. They are certainly not a solution to the inhumane conditions of the harvest hands.

For more information on the situation in Italy, see our [Steiflicht Italy](#) and our previous [Corona updates on our homepage](#).

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