



MAY 2026

CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN INFO

Arrivals

According to figures from *borderline-europe*, **2,557** people on the move/asylum seekers reached Italy by sea in May 2026. This represents a significant increase of **16%** compared to April, which may be attributed to the start of summer, the resulting rise in temperatures and calmer seas. In May 2025, **62%** more people arrived in Italy compared to May this year.

The majority of people (**1,783** individuals, or **71%**¹) arrived in Sicily – primarily Lampedusa. This represents a decrease compared to May 2025; however, overall, a wider distribution of arrivals across the country can be observed. Thus, **40** people arrived in Sardinia, **369** in Calabria, **136** in Liguria and **130** people in Emilia-Romagna, in northern Italy.

According to our figures, **1,173** people (**47%**) were rescued by Italian authorities. A total of **746** people (**28%**) were rescued by civilian sea rescue services.

According to data from *borderline-europe*, Frontex was involved in the rescue of **217** people (**9%**) in May. 143 people (**5%**) reached Italian territorial waters (12 nautical miles off the coast) independently, without having been intercepted or rescued beforehand. For **278** people (**10%**), no information was available regarding the manner of arrival or rescue.

According to official figures from the Italian Ministry of the Interior, **2,895** people arrived in Italy in May. We were able to verify slightly lower arrival figures for this month, but we would like to note that there is no access to the background information or sources of the figures published by the Ministry of the Interior.

Overview of the data collected by <i>borderline europe</i>	
Arrivals of people on the move in Italy by sea	2,557
Arrivals of people on the move in Sicily	1,783
Rescues by Italian authorities and Frontex	1,390
Rescues by NGOs	746
Independent arrivals of people in the move	143
Arrivals with no information on arrival/rescue	278

The data is subject to change, as the number of unreported cases could be significantly higher.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all percentages quoted refer to the total number of people who arrived in Italy by sea that month.

On May 12th, the Sea-Eye 5 rescued a wooden boat that had set sail from Libya with 72 people on board. According to the NGO, a [Libyan vessel](#) reached the scene during the operation, but the rescue was completed despite initial concerns. Among those rescued were a newborn baby and a woman in the late stages of pregnancy. Immediately after the rescue, the woman was flown by [helicopter to a hospital](#) in Malta.

Routes to Europe

The transit countries of Libya, Tunisia and Algeria serve as the primary points of departure for the crossing to Italy. In May, at least **2,150 (78%)** of those arriving in Italy set off from Libya, **112 people (4%)** from Tunisia and **49 people (2%)** from Algeria. The point of departure is unknown for **437 people (16%)**. In contrast to recent months, the point of departure remains unknown for significantly fewer people in May (in March it was 29% and in April 20%).

The human rights situation in the North African transit countries remains dire for people on the move, particularly those from Sub-Saharan Africa.

This month, for the first time, the systematic human rights violations faced by people on the move in Libya were [brought before an international court](#). From May 19th to 21st May, Khaled Mohamed Ali El Hishri became the first person to stand trial for his role in the structural violence in Libya. El Hishri is a high-ranking officer in the *Rada militia* and was in charge of the section of Mitiga prison in Tripoli where migrant children and women are detained. He faces 17 charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes, including murder, rape, sexual violence, arbitrary detention and torture. The *International Criminal Court (ICC)* will decide [by July](#) 20th whether to confirm the charges and open a trial.

The trial against El-Hishri is of great significance, as it marks the first time that survivors of systematic violence against people on the move have testified in an international court and their accounts of torture and violence have been heard and taken into account. [David Yambio](#), co-founder of *Refugees in Libya* and himself a survivor of violence in Libya, comments on the trial, saying: "One thing was certain: even if the system is not brought to an end immediately, those who commit crimes must still be held individually accountable for their actions." Nevertheless, accountability must not end with El-Hishri. He is just one of many perpetrators.

We had already reported on the case of Osama Njeem Almasri in our [CMI of January 2025](#). On January 18th 2025, the *ICC* issued an arrest warrant for the leader of the *Rada militia* and former head of Mitiga Prison and other detention camps for people on the move, charging him with war crimes and crimes against humanity. Almasri was arrested in Italy the following day. However, instead of extraditing him to the *ICC*, Italy shirked its responsibility and, a few days later, returned Almasri to Libya on a state aircraft. The *ICC* subsequently referred Italy to the Assembly of States Parties for [breaching its duty to cooperate](#).

In May, two people on the move who had been detained, tortured and enslaved in a Libyan prison controlled by Almasri lodged a complaint against Italy with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). They view Almasri's release as a violation of their rights enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights: the right to life (Art. 2), the prohibition of torture (Art. 3), the prohibition of slavery and forced labour (Art. 4) and the right to a fair trial (Art. 6). Italy must respond to the allegations by September 18th. The ECtHR will then rule on the admissibility of the complaint. This opens up the possibility for the victims of the Libyan regime's apparatus of violence to experience at least some measure of justice.

As important as it is to hold individual perpetrators to account and prosecute them, this is by no means sufficient. The entire system of violence must be brought to an end, starting with the European support for it. For more than a decade, the EU has been supporting the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard* in western Libya, thereby contributing to the maintenance of a system that traps those seeking protection in a vicious circle between pushbacks in the Mediterranean and abuse in detention camps in Libya.

However, instead of taking civil society's demands seriously and ending cooperation with Libya, [it became public in May](#) that the EU plans to extend its support to the Haftar government in eastern Libya as well. A technical agreement leaked to the organisation *Statewatch* reveals that the EU will in future also train and support 'coastal authorities' in north-eastern Libya. In addition, there are plans to build a regional migration coordination centre in Benghazi. Eastern Libya is controlled by General Haftar and, much like the west of the country, is known for systematic violence and human rights abuses against people on the move. Through these plans, the EU is effectively supporting the unlawful interception of people seeking protection at sea and their transfer to detention centres similar to Mitiga prison. So, rather than exposing and preventing human rights violations, the EU is stepping up its support for a system based on the systematic mistreatment, detention and exploitation of people fleeing their homes.

Push- & Pullbacks

This month, we recorded **2,088** interceptions² (interceptions and pushbacks along the refugee route) in the Central Mediterranean, where boats carrying refugees were often forcibly pushed back to the North African coast. This represents only a slight increase compared to April 2026, when we recorded **2,017** interceptions, but a **154%** rise compared to the same month last year (May 2025). All of the intercepted individuals were towed back to Libya. However, it is reasonable to assume that the actual number of cases is significantly higher, as many interceptions are not documented and the fates of those involved remain unknown.

² Interceptions are violent forced returns at sea to a third country. For example, the so-called Libyan Coast Guard, which is largely funded and equipped by Italy and other EU member states, carries out interceptions by intercepting boats on their way to Europe and forcibly returning them to Libya.

Deaths and Missing Persons

In the Central Mediterranean, the number of deaths and missing persons fell in May compared to April. According to data from *borderline-europe*, **26** people died whilst fleeing across the Central Mediterranean in May; no one is reported missing this month. The fate of a further **100** people remains unknown; we assume that the number of unreported cases is much higher. The figures represent a decrease compared to the previous month.

Between May 11th and 13th, the ship *Ocean Viking*, operated by the NGO *SOS Méditerranée*, rescued [a total of 130 people in three consecutive operations](#). Initially, 75 people were taken aboard the vessel; the following day, another boat carrying 56 people was rescued. [On the small fishing boat, the team found one person unconscious](#). Despite immediate resuscitation efforts, the young man could not be saved and died at the scene. According to the NGO, the deceased had lost consciousness several hours earlier and is believed to have been subjected to severe physical violence in Libya. Shortly afterwards, the ship received another distress call. After hours of searching through the night, the reported boat [with around 100 people on board](#) could [not be found](#). Their fate remains unknown to this day.

On May 16th, following a rescue operation by the Italian *Guardia di Finanza*, [a newborn girl](#) was pronounced [dead](#). The one-month-old baby had set off from Sfax in Tunisia bound for Italy, together with her mother, her older sister and 52 other people. Upon arrival in Lampedusa, she was taken to the local polyclinic [in critical condition](#) with [signs of hypothermia](#), but did not survive the journey there.

This death represents a worrying pattern that has persisted throughout the year. In the middle of the month, *Frontex* published data on arrivals in Italy during the first few months of the year. This showed a [46% decrease in](#) arrivals via the Central Mediterranean route [compared with the same month last year](#). However, these figures cannot be properly understood without context. Whilst the number of actual arrivals in Italy is falling, the number of people dying on the crossing is rising. By May of this year, *borderline-europe* had recorded 450 deaths on the crossing to Europe; last year, this figure stood at 259. This represents a significant increase of approximately 74% in the number of deaths actually recorded in the Central Mediterranean compared to last year, and the number of unreported deaths is likely to be significantly higher here too.

Fewer arrivals therefore do not mean less danger for people on the move. Two factors could be particularly relevant here. By May, *borderline-europe* had recorded around 1,000 more interceptions than in the same period last year, the majority of which were carried out by the so-called Libyan coastguard. These operations expose people on board to considerable risks and violence, both during and after the incident. At the same time, the ongoing criminalisation of civilian sea rescue is further reducing the chances of rescue for people in distress at sea. The crossing is not becoming less frequent, but even more deadly.

Civil Resistance

In May, five ships from the civilian fleet were operating in the central Mediterranean and rescued a total of **746** people in distress (**29%** of those who arrived), representing a **55%** increase compared to the previous month.

This again included several multiple rescues by the *Ocean Viking* of *SOS Méditerranée*, the *Sea-Watch 5* and the *Sea-Eye 5*, operated by the organisations of the same names.

Between May 12th and 13th, the *Ocean Viking* operated by *SOS Méditerranée* rescued a total of **131** people in distress in two consecutive operations. *SOS Méditerranée* reports two particularly difficult rescue operations: the first involved a completely overcrowded boat carrying 75 people, which had set sail from Benghazi, Libya, and had been adrift on the open sea for five days and four nights. The shipwrecked people – including two unaccompanied minors – were suffering from severe exhaustion and dehydration. After the *Ocean Viking* was able to locate the boat in distress following an alarm phone alert and with the help of the *Sea Bird*, it immediately set course for it. Until the rescue vessel arrived, the [MV Kilburn](#), an LPG/chemical tanker flying the Singaporean flag, remained with the boat in distress throughout the night and protected the shipwrecked people – contrary to the express instructions of the Maltese authorities.

While the *Ocean Viking* had already set course for another boat in distress with an estimated **100** people on board the day after the rescue, it carried out an [additional rescue operation](#), taking **56** more people on board. Several people were in critical condition and, after spending days at sea, were suffering from fuel burns, hypothermia, dehydration and severe physical and psychological trauma. One [person was found unconscious](#) and not breathing. Despite immediate life-saving measures, the man from Bangladesh could not be saved. According to statements from the other people on board, he had suffered physical violence in Libya before setting sail from the Libyan coast.

The boat carrying the **100** people could not be found despite extensive search operations that continued well into the night. The fate of those involved remains unclear. However, *SOS Méditerranée* considers intervention by the so-called Libyan coastguard to be likely.

Despite the serious health condition of a large number of those rescued, as well as the fact that there was a deceased person on board the rescue vessel, the [Italian authorities](#) did not refrain from their restrictive and criminalising practices. Instead of providing the people on board with urgently needed protection as quickly as possible, they directed the *Ocean Viking* to the port of Ravenna in the Emilia-Romagna region, **1,350 km** from the rescue site, which meant a further three-day journey.

Criminalisation of sea rescue

However, the designation of distant ports is just one of the ways in which the Italian authorities can directly obstruct civilian sea rescue operations and thus actively contribute to deaths in the Mediterranean. According to the latest figures from the [Justice Fleet](#) – an international alliance of **13** civilian search and rescue organisations – a total of **41** civilian sea rescue vessels have been detained for a combined total of **1,075** days since the *Piantadosi* decree came into force in January 2023. During the same period, which spans almost three years, **6,490** people drowned in the central Mediterranean, according to the alliance. The [devastating consequences](#) of this policy of letting people die were also unmistakably evident in the first few months of this year: Despite a general decline in the number of arrivals by sea, the IOM has already recorded [825 deaths](#) in the Central Mediterranean for the first quarter of 2026, making 2026 the deadliest start to a year since the IOM began recording data in 2014.

In view of the imminent implementation of the new *Common European Asylum System* (CEAS), the political criminalisation of sea rescue appears to be intensifying once again. As part of its new draft migration law, the [Italian government](#) is already working on a provision designed to prohibit NGO vessels from entering Italian waters if they are classified as a “*serious threat to public order or national security*”. The [Justice Fleet](#) warns that such emergency regulations have already been exploited in the past and could be used to unlawfully prevent rescue ship crews from carrying out their work.

Attacks by Libyan militias

However, attacks on civilian sea rescue operations are by no means limited to the expansion of restrictive legal and administrative measures. Operations at sea themselves remain dangerous for the crews of rescue vessels. In May, for instance, there were again several attacks by the so-called Libyan coastguard.

During the [second rescue operation](#) as part of its multiple rescues on May 10th, the *Sea-Eye 5* was harassed by armed Libyan militias, which severely hampered the rescue efforts. Despite the panic this caused among the people on the boat, all individuals were eventually brought to safety.

Just a few days later, a [violent attack](#) took place on the *Sea-Watch 5* in the same operational area. The rescue vessel, which at that time had **90** rescued people and **30** crew members on board, was repeatedly fired upon without warning by the so-called *Libyan Coast Guard*, threatened via radio and pursued whilst carrying out its rescue operation. [According to Sea-Watch](#), the two boats involved in the attack had been handed over by Italy to Libya in **2017** and **2023** and had already attracted attention on several occasions in the [past](#) for acts of extreme violence against rescue organisations.

The responses from Italy, the German government and the *European Union* fell far short of addressing the gravity of the events.

No [assistance](#) whatsoever was provided to the *Sea-Watch 5* despite distress calls being made – a fact that weighs particularly heavily in Germany's case. As the flag state, the German government is not only fundamentally responsible for the ship's safety, but had also raised the [threat level for Libyan waters](#) just at the beginning of this month due to repeated attacks by Libyan militias. However, instead of being adequately prepared for and responding to such incidents, no concrete support was provided for the rescue vessel. Furthermore, the German government has still not made any public statement on the incidents to date.

Whilst Berlin remains silent, a spokesperson for the *European Commission* stated at a [press conference that](#) they had taken note of the incident and described it as “regrettable”. Against the backdrop of the recent expansion of financial support for Libyan “border management” by a further **30 million** euros, however, this reaction appears nothing short of cynical. “It is a ‘*moral bankruptcy*’ on the part of the *European Commission* that these militias are even being financed with *EU taxpayers’ money* for their attacks on innocent people,” as [Green MEP Erik Marquardt](#) aptly put it.

The Italian authorities, too, continued their [crackdown](#) on civilian sea rescue operations regardless of the incidents. Not only did they direct the *Sea-Watch 5* to the port of Brindisi, nearly four days’ journey away, but they also launched a criminal investigation against the ship’s captain immediately upon its arrival. The charge: “aiding and abetting unauthorised entry”. The potential penalty: up to 20 years’ imprisonment.

The incidents of the past month once again clearly demonstrate how the criminalisation of sea rescue by Italy and across Europe continues to escalate. The imminent implementation of the *CEAS* reforms and the unrelenting expansion of European Libyan cooperation paint a grim picture. Civil resistance therefore remains all the more important. We demand an end to all cooperation with the so-called Libyan coastguard, an end to the policy of letting people die, and the creation of safe escape routes!

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