



MEDREPORT
APRIL 2024

INDEX

Missione 16	3
Criminals against humanity	
The underground railroad	6
Stories of borders	8
A new border to defend in the election campaign	
MSH Monthly report on migrations	11
World and Europe	
Borderline Europe Report	16
News from Central Mediterranean	



Missione 16

CRIMINALS AGAINST HUMANITY

The ship MARE JONIO rescues 56 people despite a gun attack by the so-called Libyan coast guard. Disembarkation in Pozzallo of MEDITERRANEA Saving Humans Mission 16 has concluded.

A NEW WAR ZONE

“The policies of the Italian governments and European institutions have turned the central Mediterranean into a war zone. It is extremely serious that the militias of the so-called Libyan coast guard have fired gunshots directly at the shipwrecked people in the water and the rescuers. These are criminals against humanity”.

Denny Castiglione, head of mission of MEDITERRANEA Saving Humans

At 3 p.m. of Friday, 5 April 2024, the MARE JONIO landed in the port of Pozzallo (Ragusa), assigned by the Italian Authorities for the disembarkation of the 56 people rescued in international waters, who were the target, together with the ship’s crew, of the violent intervention of a Libyan patrol boat around 5 p.m. on 4 April.

THE PRECISE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FACTS

The MARE JONIO departed from the port of Siracusa on Wednesday evening, 3 April, for its sixteenth observation and rescue mission in the central Mediterranean, setting course in the early hours of dawn on Thursday 4 towards the SAR zone where the so-called “Libyan authorities” operate. At 13:45 and 15:16 we received by e-mail communications from ALARM PHONE reporting a boat in distress with engine failure and about fifty people on board, adrift in international waters, 90 miles south of the island of Malta and 95 miles north of the Libyan town of Al-Khoms.

At 3:57 p.m. we listened to radio communications on VHF channel 16 from an air asset, later identified by us as aircraft AS1227 BE20 Icao: 4D206A of the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM), which launched may-day-relays of at least three cases, providing updated coordinates of the vessel in distress in position 34°18 N - 014°09 E. Despite repeated attempts to make contact, the aircraft did not respond to our calls.

At 4:26 p.m. the MARE JONIO informed the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (IT MRCC in Rome) that we would be heading to the indicated position to verify the situation of the vessel in distress.

At 4:35 p.m. we spotted the boat in distress through binoculars and approached to check the situation. It was a fibreglass boat, overcrowded with people without any personal safety equipment, adrift with a broken-down engine and at imminent risk of sinking. Our Rescue Team therefore proceeded to distribute life vests to each person on board.

THE APPROACH OF THE LIBYAN PATROL BOAT

During these initial assistance activities, however, a Libyan patrol boat arrived at high speed. It was the 658 ‘Fezzan’, one of the Corrubia class, formerly assets of the Guardia di Finanza, donated by the Italian government to the Libyan militia in Tripoli in 2018. The patrol boat already had several dozen people on deck presumably captured in previous interception operations at sea. The Libyan militiamen radioed the MARE JONIO and threatened us to leave the boat. In the meantime, they began to perform dangerous manoeuvres around the boat in distress. We replied by radio that, in compliance with the 1979 Hamburg SAR Convention, we were at that moment OSC (On-scene Coordinator) and were already proceeding to the rescue.

THE MACHINE-GUN FIRE

At this point the militiamen on deck brandished machine guns and began firing volleys into the air, causing panic among the people on the boat in distress and also among those on the patrol boat itself. The Libyan militiamen beat the people on board with whips and sticks, some threw themselves into the water and others were pushed out. Terrified by the scene, the people on board the fibreglass boat also threw themselves into the water. Within minutes there were dozens of people in the water. The crew of our RHIB Rescue Boat ABBA1 began the rescue of the castaways at sea.

At this point the Libyan militiamen exploded several gunshots and machine-gun fire at our second RHIB Rescue Boat ABBA2, shots which fell in some cases less than a metre from our tubes. The Libyan patrol boat did not respond to any admonition to respect the law of navigation and to the repeated calls from our ship's command to cease its highly dangerous behaviour.

THE RECOVERY OF ALL PEOPLE VISIBLE IN THE WATER

Our crew, keeping calm, managed to complete the recovery of all people visible in the water and their safe transfer aboard the MARE JONIO at 5:25 p.m.. However, we are unable to state whether there are any possible missing persons among those who fell overboard from the Libyan patrol boat.

On board our ship, we gave first aid to the rescued people: all were terrified and in shock at what had happened, many with hypothermia, vomiting, in some cases from salt water ingested at sea, nausea, clear signs of torture suffered during their detention in Libya, abrasions and lacerated wounds from beatings suffered by some on board the Libyan patrol boat.

The people rescued on board the MARE JONIO eventually turned out to be 56 (fifty-six), of which 45 (forty-five) came from the fibreglass boat linked to the case reported by ALARM PHONE (two people remained on board and were subsequently captured by Libyan militiamen) and 11 (eleven) managed to escape from the Libyan patrol boat. From the testimonies collected among the shipwrecked persons, it would appear that the so-called Libyan coast guard carried out, before arriving at the scene of our rescue, two operations of interception and capture, respectively,

of approximately 85 and 15 persons from two other boats in distress that were in the area, all fleeing from Libya, for an estimated total of approximately one hundred persons. All three operations appear to have been guided from above by the aircraft of the Armed Forces of Malta, thus complicit in the deportation of these people.

Among the 56 people rescued on board the ship MARE JONIO are a woman and several minors. The nationalities present are Bangladesh, Syria (Kurds), Egypt and Cameroon. In the evening, the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre IT MRCC in Rome announced the assignment of Pozzallo as a safe port (Place of Safety) for the 56 people rescued. In Pozzallo the disembarkation operations ended at 3 p.m. today, Friday 5 April.

THE LAURA MARMORALE'S SPEECH

“We are shocked by the level of violence meted out by the so-called Libyan coast guard. But at the same time proud to have saved at least 56 people from capture and deportation to the hell of Libya from which they were fleeing. We hold the Italian government and the European institutions directly responsible for what is happening at sea: the deadly collaboration with the Libyan militias must stop immediately. The ships of a European search and rescue mission must return to the sea and all the people trapped in Libya by Italian and European policies must be evacuated to Europe”.

Laura Marmorale, president of Mediterranea Saving Humans.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The Underground Railroad was a network of trails, roads, and secret routes that allowed people to escape slavery in the 19th century United States. It was not only that, it was also a strong network of solidarity that enabled tens of thousands of enslaved people to escape the yoke of slaveholders.

This reference is meant to vindicate the role of solidarity that is criminalized and transcends regulations, borders and countries in the struggle for freedom of movement: referring back to history also draws parallels and exposes those who, instead, view and punish these actions under the guise of aiding and abetting illegal immigration.

As recounted by Leon Blanchaert, board member of Mediterranea, the Underground Railroad is also a novel written by Colson Whitehead that shows us the path to safety outside the United States punctuated by regulations, laws and prohibitions that differed from one another but left one constant in reality, the struggle for movement and for one's freedom.

So we begin this journey with a very important symbolic and political load and it settles in territories and situations where there is already a network of solidarity with which Mediterranea, since last fall, has been collaborating and making its contribution.

This will be the first in a series of interviews and articles that will help us understand more clearly how this network works and how Mediterranea fits in and helps other entities.

Leon, coordinating Mediterranea's project within the Railway will allow for an overall picture of the project. The locations of the railroad are currently three, Trieste, which is one of the most important gateways to Italy, the end of the Balkan route; Milan, which is a focal point; and Oulx which is, instead, the gateway to Western Europe.

The ground crew from Venice and volunteers from Veneto and Friuli collaborate in different ways with the reality of Trieste, which due to regulations and political will does not welcome migrants who are left in total uncertainty. Near the station there is an abandoned and dilapidated Silos where many find makeshift shelter often without even enough tents or blankets. Thanks to solidarity realities there is a day care center in which first assistance, a meal, clothes and the possibility of a shower are provided. Thanks to Piazza Mondo, run in collaboration with Linea d'Ombra and other associations, there is also an overnight first aid that provides clothes, food and medical assistance. This organization makes it possible to provide initial assistance to transients and to those who for a longer period of time have stayed, for example, "settled" in the Silos.

Continuing with the Chat with Leon, instead, he talks to us about Milan and how it is a point where migration routes cross and how there is a need to form paths of solidarity both with transients and those who flee instead from the CPRs. In Milan, Mediterranea acts in support of Rete Milano, which supports people on the move in collaboration with institutions or relying

on solidarity families and guarantees the hospitality of people in a vulnerable condition. While on the one hand it takes care of this on the other hand, together with other associations such as Naga, but also Drago Verde and Rete Milano, they built a garrison of support through medical assistance, cultural mediation, and the provision of food and clothing.

To finish this introductory moment we also talked about Oulx, which is located in the Susa Valley and close to Turin. Here the MedTorino ground crew helps the Fraternità Massi shelter, a place that has been equipped for many years, run by Valdesi, Médecins du Monde, and Home Borders and is a place of refreshment for hundreds of people. Mediterranea helps by collaborating in maintaining the shelter, assisting people on the move, providing clothes suitable for the mountains, and preparing hot meals. The many people and associations that gravitate as volunteers around the shelter allow for a true welcome, complete with legal assistance during the week and on-site medical care.

Finally, I would like to relaunch two key appointments, the first to be held on June 2 in Trieste and the second on June 22 and 23 for which a training is planned in Turin and then in Oulx for all the activists of Mediterranea who want to help out during the summer, when the number of transits increases a lot.

With The Underground Railroad, we'll be in touch in the next MedReport!

STORIES OF BORDERS

A NEW BORDER TO DEFEND IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN



Immigration has become an increasingly hotly debated issue in Northern Ireland, given also the approaching elections for the renewal of the 90 seats in the local unicameral parliament. However, even here the campaigning and the fight for consents is being waged on the skin of asylum seekers and people on the move, who are being moved like parcels across or across a border by governments seeking approval and votes.

A NEW BORDER TO DEFEND

The Irish government said that by the end of May, asylum seekers who have arrived across the border from Northern Ireland will be sent back to the United Kingdom. In fact, a new law, implemented by the end of the month, is expected to allow the deportation of asylum seekers.

The government's choice is intended to try to calm a difficult situation being experienced in the country, where numerous protests have been generated in recent times: at the center of the dissent are government policies and the critical issues in having to manage a number of people on the move and asylum seekers arriving in the country.

In 2020, the United Kingdom and Ireland had signed an agreement for the mutual refoulement of asylum seekers, an agreement that has yet to be implemented, however, first because of pandemic-time restrictions, then because of legal problems in Ireland. Indeed, the Irish High Court recently ruled that people arriving from the United Kingdom seeking asylum cannot be sent back because the government has not stated whether they might be at risk upon their return.

Following disagreements with London, however, the Dublin government is reportedly trying to overcome the High Court ruling through the Cabinet's authorization to the Minister of Justice to draft legislation with this objective. Although Britain has expressed support for this draft, PM Rishi Sunak has stated that he will not accept asylum seekers being returned from the EU through Ireland.

However, the PM's decision to initiate plans for deportations of people moving irregularly to Rwanda without being granted the opportunity to seek asylum in Britain poses a significant problem for Ireland, as the two countries share a land border. Ireland's deputy prime minister said in a phone call with the Northern Ireland secretary that there has been an increase in arrivals in Ireland since the passage of the controversial and much-discussed policy of deporting migrants to the African country. Several days earlier, Justice Minister Helen McEntee said that 80 percent of recent arrivals in the country had come through Northern Ireland.

Immigration has become an increasingly discussed issue in the country, given also an increase in people seeking international protection in the country: the number could exceed 20,000 this year if the trend seen in the first quarter continues, as stated by the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee. From January to March, 5,100 asylum seekers arrived, a figure that represents a 75 percent increase over the 2,900 arrivals in the same period last year. According to Kevin McCarthy, the secretary-general of the Justice Department, more than 2 billion euros were paid to private companies and individuals who provided housing last year; about 1.49 billion euros were used to pay for former hotels, boarding houses and other buildings used to house Ukrainian refugees, while 640 million euros were paid to private operators for international protection applicants.

In recent weeks, Dublin police have been clearing out a makeshift camp that had been set up in front of the International Protection office, moving asylum seekers to alternative camps in more rural areas. People on the move from countries such as

Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nigeria were forced onto buses and about 200 tents were removed.

The informal camp, which had become too large and too visible, was swept away. While it was certainly not an appropriate place for the people who lived there, because of its sanitary conditions, quality of life, and the rights they were not guaranteed, the manner and timing of the eviction, however, suggested more political than humanitarian intentions.

Many activists objected to the violent eviction: Roisin McAleer, a Social Rights Ireland activist who had provided tents and quilts, used the term cleansing to define the authorities' desire to "move people out of sight and out of mind."

However, there were also citizens happy with the decision, Dubliners who welcomed the action stating that they could finally have some peace and thanking the government for finally "doing something." Although the situation was indeed precarious, especially for those who inhabited the encampment, it did not seem a coincidence to many that the eviction took place precisely in the climate of campaigning and general public discontent, considering also the camp had been set up for more than 14 months.

Even in Ireland and the United Kingdom, election campaigning and the fight for consensus is being waged on the skin of asylum seekers and people on the move, who are being moved like parcels across or across a border by governments seeking approval and votes.

MSH MONTHLY REPORT ON MIGRATIONS



WORLD

TUNISIA, April 16th More than a year after President Saïed's hate speech, 36 Tunisian civil society organizations denounced the systematization of violence committed by the authorities against Sub-Saharan people and they condemned the security policies of externalization of borders desired by the European Union for Tunisia.

LIBYA, April 16th In a letter directed to the Secretary of the United Nations, the UN envoy for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily announced his resignation, accusing the current Libyan leaders of using the situation instrumentally in their favor without actually wanting to find a peaceful solution for the ongoing civil war.

TUNISIA, April 16th In the Sfax region, approximately 100 bodies of people who drowned while trying to reach Europe cannot be buried due to the high number of corpses of people who died in the same circumstances present in the city morgue.

TUNISIA, April 25th In just over a week, 43 bodies of people who drowned while trying to reach Europe were found in the coastal strip of the region of Sfax.

SPAIN, April 4th The Spanish Coast Guard rescued 73 people on board a watercraft in danger off the Canary Islands and disembarked them in the port of Arguineguin, in the Island of Gran Canaria.

EUROPEAN UNION, April 10th The European Parliament has voted in favor of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which provides for the outsourcing of border controls and stricter screening procedures for the asylum seeker.

ALBANIA, April 11th A Frontex staff member reported that the collaboration between the European Agency and the Albanian authorities along the border with Greece has resulted in pushbacks, inhuman and degrading behavior and suspicious deaths of some people on the move in temporary reception centers in the south of Albania.

MALTA, April 11th Following a pushback carried out by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard with the support of the Maltese authorities in the SAR area of Malta, 22 Maltese civil society organizations have asked their Government to put an end to this illegal practice.

MALTA, April 13th The three defendants in the El Hiblu 3 case Amara Kromah, Abdalla Bari and Koni Tiemoko, wrongly accused by the Maltese authorities of having committed terrorist actions, were recognized and awarded as human rights defenders in Valletta by a coalition of Maltese and European civil society.

SEA

UNITED KINGDOM, April 23rd The British Parliament has voted in favor of a new security bill, which requires asylum seekers who entered the country illegally to be deported to Rwanda. This happens despite many organizations, including the United Nations, believe that this law violates the human rights of people on the move.

FRANCE, April 23rd 5 people have died while they were trying to reach the United Kingdom from France, crossing the English Channel. There were 57 people on board the watercraft who reached the British coast and 47 were rescued by the French authorities.

SPAIN, April 29th 51 people have died off the coast of El Hierro while trying to reach the Canary Islands after leaving Senegal. Another 9 were rescued by a Spanish authorities helicopter.

EUROPEAN UNION, April 30th The journalistic collective “Lost in Europe” reported that, between 2021 and 2023, at least 51,433 unaccompanied minors with refugee status disappeared within the Member States of the European Union.

CYPRUS, April 2nd Cyprus authorities have rescued around 220 people aboard two watercrafts in danger near the Island.


CIVIL FLEET, April 4th Mare Jonio (Mediterranea Saving Humans) rescued 56 people, the majority of which aboard a watercraft in difficulty fleeing from Libya and others who escaped from a Libyan patrol watercraft after being captured. This occurred despite the Italian watercraft suffering a gunshot attack by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. The rescued people were disembarked in Pozzallo.

CIVIL FLEET, April 5th Life Support (Emergency) rescued 200 people aboard two watercrafts fleeing from Libya and disembarked them in Ravenna, a port assigned by the authorities, despite it being more than 4 days away from the rescue site.

LAMPEDUSA, April 4th A woman died in a shipwreck in the south of Lampedusa. 45 people were rescued from the Coast Guard and disembarked on the island.

LIBYA, April 7th The Seabird (Sea-Watch) aircraft witnessed an illegal pushback by the so-called Libyan coast guard against approximately 35 people on board a watercraft in danger.

CIVIL FLEET, April 7th Ocean Viking (SOS Méditerranée) rescued 55 people aboard a ship in danger. The assigned port of disembarkation is Livorno, 1160 km away from the rescue site.



MALTA, April 8th Approximately 83 people were deported in Libya from the so-called Libyan coast guard despite the fact that the watercraft in danger on which they were traveling on was in the SAR area of Malta.

CHIOS, April 10th 3 people died because the watercraft they were on wrecked into the rocks of Chios Island. 15 survivors were rescued from Greek authorities.

SAMOS, April 10th The Greek Coast Guard intercepted two watercraft with approximately 51 people on board off the coast of Samos and pushed them back to Turkey.

LAMPEDUSA, April 11th The Italian Coast Guard rescued 59 people aboard two watercraft in danger and disembarked them in Lampedusa.

CARTAGENA, April 12th The lifeless bodies of 4 women were found on a watercraft adrift off the coast of Cartagena, in South-Eastern Spain.

CYPRUS, April 13th Approximately 28 people aboard a watercraft in danger in South-Eastern Cyprus were rescued from the authorities of the island.

SYMI, April 14th A group of people aboard a watercraft in danger were intercepted from the Greek Coast Guard North of the island of Symi and pushed back in Turkey.

CYPRUS, April 15th The Cypriot Authorities rescued approximately 90 people aboard two watercraft in danger and disembarked them on the island.

SYMI, April 16th 10 people were rescued by local police after disembarking independently on the island of Symi.

CYPRUS, April 16th-17th 5 watercraft coming from Lebanon were intercepted off the coast of Cyprus. The Cypriot authorities refused to welcome the people on board and the Lebanese authorities did not accept the people's return to the country either. The risk is that the people, all of Syrian origin, will be deported to Syria.

OINOUSSES, April 25th The local police rescued 15 people who disembarked independently on the island of Oinousses.

LESBOS, April 25th 33 people were rescued by the Greek authorities after disembarking independently on the island of Lesbos.

CIVIL FLEET, April 26th

Sea-Watch 5 rescued 47 people aboard a watercraft in danger and disembarked them at the port of Catania, assigned by the authorities.

LESBOS, April 29th 46 people were intercepted North of Lesbos from the Greek Coast Guard and pushed back in Turkey.

LESBOS, April 30th A watercraft in danger with approximately 32 people on board was intercepted and pushed back in Turkey by the Greek Coast Guard.

ITALY

POZZALLO, April 5th Mare Jonio was subjected to a 20-day administrative detention and received a fine of 10,000 Euros for violating the so-called Piantedosi Decree. This happened despite the so-called Libyan coast guard firing shots at people in the water and the Mediterranea rescuer.

ROMA, April 12th Some documents show that, following political pressure, a SAR event was not declared for the watercraft which then sank near Cruto on February 26th, 2023. This would have caused a fatal delay in the arrival of help.

MILAN, April 12th The temporary closure of CPR on Corelli street in Milan has been announced in view of a renovation to expand its capacity.

ROMA, April 13th Interior Minister Piantedosi declared that, on the occasion of the rescue carried out by Mare Jonio and the attack by the so-called Libyan coast guard, the Libyan patrol boat arrived first where the watercraft in danger was located despite numerous evidence proving the opposite.

ROMA, April 17th 6 civil society organizations have appealed to the TAR against the Italian Government's decision to finance for a value of 4.8 million Euros the restoration and transfer of 6 patrol boats to Tunisia, guilty of numerous human rights violations.

TRAPANI, April 19th After more than 7 years of preliminary investigations, the accused of Iuventa Crey, MSF and Save the Children were acquitted of all charges by the judge for the preliminary hearings of the Court of Trapani.

CROTONE, April 19th The Civil Court of Crotona confirmed the illegitimacy of the application of the so-called Piantedosi Decree for Humanity 1, confirming that SOS Humanity acted legitimately, while the so-called Libyan coast guard put people's lives in danger.

RAGUSA, April 24th

The State's Attorney's Office confirmed the version of Mediterranea Saving Humans, according to which Mare Jonio arrived at the rescue site on April 4th before the so-called Libyan coast guard. Despite this, Minister Piantedosi confirmed his versions of events in the Chamber of Deputies.

The Court of Ragusa will decide on the legitimacy of the application of the so-called Piantedosi Decree to the case on July 9th.

REPORT BORDERLINE EUROPE

NEWS FROM
CENTRAL
MEDITERRANEAN



ARRIVALS

According to data from [borderline-europe](#), 4,603 people arrived in Italy in April, a third fewer than in the previous month (7,069 people). For comparison, 12,141 people reached Italy by sea in April 2023. This sharp decline is explained in particular by the bad weather conditions that hit the Mediterranean sea. The vast majority (90%) arrived in Sicily, and particularly in Lampedusa.

About 82% of the people who arrived were rescued by Italian authorities (3,785 people) and a much smaller percentage by civilian sea rescue vessels (360 people, 8 percent). According to our data, the European border management agency Frontex assisted the Italian authorities in three rescues. A minority (191 people, 4%) arrived in Italy independently, that is, they reached Italian coastal waters (12 nautical miles from the coast) without being intercepted/rescued first. For the remaining people, we are not able to provide information on their arrival paths in Italy.

DEADS AND MISSING

According to [borderline-europe](#) data, 114 people died in the Mediterranean in April and 115 migrants are still reported missing. As always, it can be assumed that the number of unreported cases is much higher.

Many bodies are not found until days or even weeks later. In Sfax (Tunisia), currently there are so many that there are almost no places left in the cemeteries, so much so that by mid-month nearly 100 bodies were still waiting to be buried. However, there is also a general lack of logistics options to store the dead bodies waiting for DNA testing and a proper burial. The last home for Muslim migrants is also an important issue in Sicily, which is the reason why an Islamic cemetery will now be built in Porto Empedocle.

The coffins of eleven refugees who drowned in two separate shipwrecks, on April 10 and March 18, were moved from Porto Empedocle to various cemeteries in the region. It is certain that 12 people died in the April 10 shipwreck in the Maltese SAR area and twelve others are still missing. It is also very likely that 45 people drowned in the central Mediterranean shortly before. One person survived this first shipwreck and was rescued from the boat that sank on 10 April. Fortunately, she also survived this second shipwreck and was brought to Lampedusa.

PATHS TO EUROPE

In April, at least 2,549 people (55%) crossed the central Mediterranean sea from

Tunisia. Compared to the last month (about 30%), there was a significant increase

of departures from Tunisia. At the same time, only 743 people (16%) started their

journey across the central Mediterranean from Libya - in March the percentage was 43%. For 1,311 migrants (29%) the country of departure remains undetermined.

In late March, representatives from the African Union, the European Union and the United Nations met in Libya along with several Libyan ministers to form the Libyan Task Force, with the goal of discussing the migrant situation in Libya and looking for ways to improve it.

One of the main points of discussion was the detention conditions for migrants and the search for alternatives to detention, especially for women, children and vulnerable people. It was also requested for U.N. personnel to be granted access to detention centers, and support was given to the Libyan government to combat human trafficking. However, what the Libyan government will actually put in place is yet to be clarified. These multilateral discussions are certainly helpful in drawing attention to the situation of migrants, but the risk is that the main concern remains border security rather than the protection

of human lives. However, to what extent things will actually change and whether the requests will be fulfilled remains to be seen.

In Tunisia, however, the refugee situation is becoming increasingly precarious. After the

EU-Tunisia agreement, Tunisian authorities are increasingly trying to prevent refugees from embarking on the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean. If they stay in land, they have to endure inhumane conditions in camps or, if they leave, they are intercepted by the Tunisian authorities in the Mediterranean and pushed back to Tunisia against their will. For more, see the “Push backs” session.

Shifting the migration routes westward:

As a consequence of this agreement (ed. with Tunisia) and of the increase in the push back rates, there has been a rise in the transits via the Atlantic route from West Africa to Spain. El Hierro, the westernmost of the Canary Islands, in particular has witnessed a sharp increase of arrivals of people fleeing their homes. The main points of departure are the Western Sahara, Mauritania, Morocco, and Senegal, so in some cases people do not only undertake much longer journeys, but also much more dangerous ones. According to the humanitarian organization Caminando Fronteras, last year nearly 7,000 people died on their way to Spain. More and more people are also reaching Europe via the eastern Mediterranean, such as via Cyprus or Greece. While, on the contrary, according to data from Frontex, the number of journeys through the central Mediterranean has decreased significantly compared to the previous year.

Tunisian “Layover”

30 kilometers south of Sfax, thousands of migrants live in makeshift dwellings made of tarpaulins plastic, wooden slats and tents, without adequate sanitation, medical care or sufficient food.

Since October 2023, around 70,000 people have arrived here with the idea to then continue on to Italy. Many arrived in Tunisia through Libya. However, after the EU’s agreement with Tunisia, the journey from here to Italy has become even more difficult and dangerous, causing a high number of unreported deaths. Some refugees used to work as day workers, but now this is forbidden and many remain in the camps for fear of the police, who are increasingly repressing migrant people. Journalists and humanitarian organizations are denied access to the region.

The Tunisian government is trying to deter people from fleeing so that they do not try to reach Europe even through Tunisia. Because of the work ban, many people are having difficulties finding the money to cover the last part of the journey to Italy. Recently, there have been widespread reports that Libyan authorities are destroying makeshift refugee camps, and the Tunisian coast guard is also taking increasingly harsh measures against refugees, with an increasing number of violent and illegal removals. In the mid-April weekend, more than 1,500 people were intercepted shortly after setting sail by the Tunisian National Guard which uses boats donated by the Italian government. In addition to work bans and the destruction of makeshift housing, refugees are repeatedly arrested as “traffickers” as part of

the “fight against illegal migration” but it is unclear what happens to them thereafter. Boats are also being confiscated: in mid-April, Tunisian authorities said they had confiscated 12 boats and “dismantled” 1,151 tents in the Sfax region. And bodies keep being counted on the Tunisian coasts.

Meloni continues her anti-immigration path

In mid-April, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni visited Tunisia for the fourth time in a year. Once again she met with Tunisian President Kais Saied, who has been repeatedly criticized for his autocratic governing style and for his actions against refugees in Tunisia.

Following the agreement between Tunisia and the EU, Meloni wants to donate six more motorboats to the Tunisian coast guard to “limit irregular immigration”. Due to pressure from Europe and Italy to limit immigration, the measures taken by the Tunisian authorities are becoming increasingly violent and are obviously motivated by racism. This cooperation

is very reminiscent of the Italy-Libya pact and has been strongly criticized by groups and associations defending human rights (Asgi, Arci, Actionaid, Mediterranean Saving Humans, Circular Spaces and Le Carbet). According to these associations, human rights violations will increase even more after the increase in the financial support to the Tunisian coast guard, with foreseen violations of the “principle of non-refoulement”, especially since the coast guard is not seen as a rescue unit, but rather as a police unit.

We believe that the decision of the Italian government to hand over the vedettes to Tunisia violates national legislation, in particular the prohibition of financing and transfer of armaments to third countries responsible for serious violations of the international human rights conventions, one activist explained.

A number of Tunisian people protested in front of the Italian embassy in Tunis on April 17 against cooperation between the Italian and Tunisian governments. Meanwhile, dissatisfaction is spreading among the local population as well, while the situation continues to escalate.

CIVILIAN RESISTANCE

In April, six civilian fleet ships were sailing in the central Mediterranean. The Aurora (Sea

Watch - United4Rescue) returned to the SAR area this month after a long hiatus. The Geo Barents (MSF), which was still docked until the middle of the month, also returned to action as of 12.04.24. The Ocean Viking (SOS Méditerranée) rescued 55 people, while Life Support (Emergency) rescued 202 people in distress earlier this month and has since been in the port of Syracuse. Sea Watch 5 (Sea-Watch - United4Rescue) also rescued 47 people at the end of the month. The Mare Jonio (Mediterranea Saving Humans) was docked in the port of Pozzallo on April 5, 2014 after rescuing 58 people and is still there (subject to a 20-day administrative detention due to the Piantedosi Decree). The Sea-Eye 4 (Sea-Eye - United4Rescue) is still stuck in administrative detention due to the Piantedosi Decree since 10/03/24.

“The policies of Italian governments and European institutions have turned the Central Mediterranean into a war zone” - Denny Castiglione, head of the MEDITERRANEA Saving Humans mission. On 04.04.24 the so-called Libyan Coast Guard fired shots during a Mare Jonio rescue operation in international waters. Once again, a motorboat of the so-called Libyan Coast Guard (658 Fezzan, a gift from the Italian government to Libya) thwarted a rescue operation, firing on the water, on the rescue

boat and on people in distress at sea. This is a further increase in inhumanity and violation of human rights of the people fleeing.

Despite violent intervention by the so-called Libyan coast guard, the crew managed to rescue 56 people, but it is unclear how many drowned due to the panic caused by the gunfire and how many are missing. Some were forced onto the boat by the so-called Libyan coast guard and were most likely returned to Libya.

Mediterranea Saving Humans has asked the Italian government to launch an investigation into the case by the so-called Libyan coast guard. Instead, after arriving in Pozzallo, Sicily, the rescue ship was detained for 20 days under the Piantedosi Decree and fined 10,000 euros. The crew was also accused of inciting refugees to flee the Libyan coast guard. Mediterranea immediately filed an appeal against the sanctions and calls for the immediate cessation of its cooperation with the so-called Libyan Coast Guard.

This situation shows how the Italian government is systematically acting against refugees and rescuers at sea by outsourcing the EU external borders. Despite these absolutely inhuman actions of the so-called Libyan coast guard, in April there has been some good news for civilian rescue at sea.

Iuventa - a liberating moment for the sea rescue:

Friday, April 19, 2024, charges against the crew members of the maritime rescue vessel Iuventa and members of Doctors Wi-

thout Borders and Save the Children were finally withdrawn by the Trapani court and the confiscated rescue ship was released. Two rescue missions of the Iuventa (2016 and 2017) had been interpreted as “human trafficking” by Italian prosecutors, for which the defendants were charged with “aiding and abetting illegal immigration” and were facing prison terms of up to 20 years. More information on the background of the charges and a detailed account of the investigation and hearings are available on our web.

The decision in the trial against the Iuventa crew was an important success for the refugees and for civilian sea rescue, as it clarified one thing: the rescue of people

“is not a crime, but a right, even a duty” said lawyer Nicola Canestrini after the last day in court. According to ECCHR, the decision also affects “all civilian rescues at sea” and represents an “important pillar of solidarity for the fleeing people”.

Several releases of civilian rescue ships at sea: legal successes against the Piantedosi Decree

Between late March and early April, several courts ordered the cancellation of the administrative detention of sea rescue vessels; within 24 hours, the detention of Humanity 1 (SOS Humanity) in Crotona and the Ocean Viking (SOS Méditerranée) in Brindisi were lifted.

In addition, the civil court in Crotona clarified that Libya is not

a safe haven, and that the actions of the so-called Libyan coast guard must not be considered rescue operations, but illegal push backs. Shortly thereafter, the court in Ragusa also ordered the cancellation of the Sea-Watch 5 (Sea-Watch) administrative detention. All rescue vessels have been sanctioned under the Piantedosi Decree for allegedly disobeying the instructions

of the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. These decisions, along with the final one on the Trapani Iuventa, are a defeat for the Interior Minister Piantedosi and for the Italian government. Especially because the Crotona court wanted to raise the question of the constitutionality of some passages of the Piantedosi decree. This would be an important step in highlighting the contradictions between the Piantedosi decree and international maritime law. The repatriation of refugees to Libya was also declared illegitimate by the Corte di Cassazione in February, another legal success.

Despite that, the Italian government continues its anti-migration policy and, among other things, wants to extend the memorandum with Libya. Frontex finally puts an end to the narrative of “sea rescue as an attractive factor”. The restrictive measures against civilian sea rescuers are based, among other things, on the idea that the (civilian) sea rescue would encourage people to flee across the Mediterranean and that a greater number of people would set out across the Mediterranean. In late March, Hans Leijtens, executive director of the EU border management agency Frontex, announced in an interview that there is no concrete evidence that civilian rescue at sea acts as a so-called “pull factor” for migration. Although this thesis has already been scientifically proven by multiple evidences, the statement by the executive di-

rector of Frontex nevertheless represents an important and positive change in the debate on migration. Previously, the narrative of “sea rescue as a pull factor” has been repeatedly spread and used populistically by both right-wing parties in Europe and by Frontex (under former executive director Fabrice Leggeri).

However, the border protection agency Frontex continues to be criticized. Sea-Watch International, with the support of “Frag-DenStaat” has filed a complaint against the Border Protection at the European Court of Justice. The basis is the illegal push-back of the 30.06.2021 in the Maltese SAR zone, which according to Human Rights Watch and Border Forensics, was at least facilitated by Frontex; the complaint revealed the existence of a communication channel between Frontex and the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. The court acknowledged that Frontex had mistakenly concealed more than 100 photographs of evidence that could have proven the involvement of the border agency in human rights violations in the Mediterranean.

However, the claim was rejected as such. The two plaintiffs asked Leijtens to finally establish the much-vaunted transparency by making the material accessible, and finally take responsibility for the human rights violations.



MEDREPORT
APRIL 2024