

One year after Lampedusa: Call for a "Watch The Med Alarm Phone" for Boatpeople

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11th of October 2013: Refugees from a sinking boat called again and again Italian coastguards via satellite phone in order to be rescued, but their SOS signals were not taken seriously. The boat carried more than 400 people and was shot at in the night before by a Libyan vessel. Despite the Italian and soon later the Maltese authorities having been warned of the imminent distress of the passengers, rescue efforts were delayed for several hours and patrol vessels arrived one hour after the boat had sunk. More than 200 people died, only 212 people were saved.

What would have happened if the boatpeople could have directed a second call to an independent phone-hotline through which a team of civil society members could raise alarm and put immediate pressure on authorities to rescue?

One year after the tragedy from Lampedusa on the 3rd of October and after the left-to-die-case mentioned above, the situation is no less dramatic. Although the Italian military operation "mare nostrum" led to the rescue of about 100.000 refugees and migrants within the last 11 months, only in the central Mediterranean area more than 1300 boatpeople became new victims of the border-regime. In the beginning of 2014 we witnessed more death at the external borders of EU: on the 20th of January 12 refugees died when their vessel sunk while being towed at high speed by a vessel of the Greek Coast Guard aiming to push it back towards the Turkish coast.

And on the 6th of February the Spanish border guards shot with plastic-bullets at swimming migrants who tried to enter the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. More than 14 people died as a result. These cases are not isolated, but rather the most obvious amongst many similarly deadly violations perpetrated against migrants at sea throughout the Mediterranean. Would these deaths have occurred had civil society been informed and had exercised its pressure and influence before rather than after the incidents?

We can no longer bear to remain helpless as tragedies repeat themselves. We want to do more than condemning these violations after the incidents. We believe that an alternative alarm network established by the civil society on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea could make a difference.

We do not possess any rescue-team, nor can we offer direct protection. We are aware of our limited capabilities and of the provisional and precarious character of our initiative. But we want to immediately raise alarm when refugees and migrants get into situations of distress at sea and are not rescued promptly. We want to document in real-time and scandalize immediately when boatpeople become victims of push-back operations or are sent back to countries such as Libya, where migrant rights are repeatedly violated. We want to intervene with political pressure and public mobilisation against the daily injustices at the external borders of the EU.

We know that such pressure can be effective because it has been exercised already for several years by a few individuals who, through family and solidarity ties, have received phone calls from migrants at sea, alerted authorities and made sure that rescue operations had been carried out. We want to broaden and strengthen this network and reinforce its political role in support of migrant rights and the freedom of movement.

Thus we aim to establish – in close cooperation with the monitoring project Watch The Med – an

alternative alarm-phone running 24/7 as of the 10th of October 2014. It will be managed by human rights activists from both sides of the Mediterranean and offer a multilingual team. We will advise all persons in distress at sea to first alert the officially responsible rescue teams. But we will also call the coast guards ourselves, and follow up on their responses, making known to them that we are informed and “watching” them. If they fail to respond, we will gather all imaginable political and public pressure to force them to do so. We will alarm captains of commercial boats close by as well as international journalists, requesting the support of politically active religious leaders of all confessions as well as support of famous supporters. We will use the critical net-community for just-in-time-campaigns and call everybody to contribute with the creation of further forms of intervention.

The left-to-die cases at sea, the human right violations of the EU border agency Frontex and coast guards in all areas of the Mediterranean Sea have to be stopped immediately. We need a civil society network on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea which can enforce political pressure for the lives and the rights of boatpeople, and we want to be part of it. Such an alternative alarm network would be a first but an urgently required step on the path toward a Euro-Mediterranean area that is not characterised by a deathly border regime but by solidarity and the right for protection and the freedom of movement.