After Two Months in Operation: Insights into the Watch The Med Alarm Phone

December 2014

On the 10th of October 2014, the Watch The Med Alarm Phone went live. It is operated by a transnational network of activist and migrant groups, located in various settings on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea. The hotline is run by multilingual shift teams day and night, 24/7. The Alarm Phone initiative has gained the support of various migrant communities, individual members of civil society, as well as human rights activists and organisations. While not able to physically intervene itself, with no available boats that could carry out rescue operations, it offers advice and raises alarm when people in immediate distress are not promptly rescued or even pushed-back by European border authorities.

The Alarm Phone seeks to intervene immediately, in real time, when receiving calls from boatpeople. It is still in its beginning to distribute the hotline number amongst migrant communities in transit. The Alarm Phone seeks to offer an alternative avenue for those on the move to reach out when in need and to protect themselves from human rights violations that occur all too often in Europe's Mediterranean border regions.

In the first two months of operation, the Alarm Phone has received various calls and has actively engaged in 12 cases so far. The cases had different dimensions and have drawn the attention of the shift teams to several locations, varying levels of distress and scales of human rights abuse. So far, distress calls have been received from the Central Mediterranean Sea and the Aegean Sea, as well as from survivors of Greek push-back operations who were back on Turkish territory.

In most cases, the Alarm Phone has been notified by contact persons and groups within migrant communities, residing for example in Sweden, Italy and Switzerland. Amongst them is Father Mussie Zerai who has, for many years now, operated an alarm phone himself, particularly for refugees from Eritrea. He advised the Watch The Med activists and encouraged them to begin the Alarm Phone project. Just like Father Zerai, several individuals and groups in Europe receive phone calls from people in distress. The Alarm Phone does not aim to replace these structures that have, at times, existed for a long time in different communities and regions, offering their important advice. The past two months have demonstrated that the Alarm Phone project may offer some additional support to these structures and function as a catalyst to bring people together who may not have known one another beforehand and who can contribute to a collectivisation of experiences and expertise.

As experienced so far, challenges and cooperation scenarios with authorities have differed according to the distress-situation and the locations of the incidents: It has become clear that in cases of distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea, the Alarm Phone is required to immediately notify the Italian and Maltese coastguards. When the shift teams gained the impression during phone conversations that rescue operations were not immediately initiated, they reached out to the UNHCR and other organisations to increase the pressure on the coastguards to begin rescue operations.

With the end of Mare Nostrum and the beginning of the Frontex led operation Triton, the Alarm Phone began to operate in a time when it was and is open, if "left to die" will become again an often occurring practice in the sea between Libya, Malta and Italy. The concept of the Alarm Phone, the option of real-time documentation and scandalisation, might be an important practice of intervention.

In the Aegean Sea, the Alarm Phone has experienced situations in which Greek coastguards have conducted illegal push-back operations back to Turkish territory. In cases of calls from those who had already reached Greek territory, the shift teams have sought to prevent push-back operations by notifying organisations, by demonstrating their awareness of the situation and by remaining in contact with the individuals/groups in question. In other cases, the Alarm Phone received calls from individuals and groups on Turkish territory, only after the push-back had already occurred. In these situations, the shift teams documented the situation by collecting witness accounts and by remaining in contact with the push-back survivors.

We have gained the impression, in all of these cases, that our ability to offer psychological support to the ones calling our number was very significant and cannot be overstated. It seems very important for those calling in or after situations of life-threatening danger to know that what they experienced does not remain invisible, and that, in fact, they belong to a European civil society that seeks to intervene and visibilise human rights violations at sea.

The Alarm Phone has made three cases accessible to the larger public:

1 “They want to see us drown”: A survivor of a push-back operation notified the Watch The Med Alarm Phone of an illegal push-back operation by the Greek coastguards in late October 2014. Thirty three Syrian refugees were attempting to cross the Aegean Sea when their vessel was intercepted and boarded by Greek coastguards who then disabled the engine and punctured the vessel, leaving the refugees behind at sea. The passengers were able to call the Turkish coastguard which rescued them and brought them back to Turkish territory (case name: 2014_10_25_pushback_CHIOS-GR-CESME-TR).

2) Danger of push-back after arrival on European territory: The Alarm Phone was in contact with a group of up to 75 Syrian refugees who had arrived on the Greek island of Symi in October. They were in a precarious situation, without food, water and orientation and were scared to be pushed-back by Greek authorities. The shift teams were able to engage directly with them, follow their movements and notify organisations and authorities (case name: 2014_19_21-Symi).

3) Refugee Boat in Distress off the Coast of Libya: A vessel carrying up to 200 refugees off the coast of Libya was in danger of capsizing, with no other vessels in vicinity. The Italian coastguard alerted vessels to the situation of the refugees and a vessel directed itself to them. The shift team accompanied the refugees through repeated phone calls and reassured them that help was on its way. The vessel reached the refugee boat and conducted a successful rescue operation. This was the first case in which the shift team was in direct contact with people in distress at sea (case name: 2014_11_14-CM1).

As mentioned in our press release in October, we consider the Alarm Phone not as a solution but as an emergency intervention. The project is another contribution to support the increasing struggles against a repressive European border regime. Within the first weeks of its existence new connections between and amongst migrant and activist communities have been established in the practice of assisting people in distress to remain unharmed or to protest against human rights abuses. And also in future, the project seeks to strengthen the process of transnational networking for the freedom of movement.

We call on all members of civil society to distribute the Watch The Med Alarm Phone number as widely as possible and circulate it in migrant communities in need. Pass it to all friends who have relatives and friends trying to cross the outer borders of Europe. For us, this is the most important task for the weeks and months to come – and in order to achieve this, we need the

broad support. Please contact us if you have further questions or if you need materials (for example: leaflets ‘Safety at Sea Aegean and Morocco’ in several languages, short descriptions of the project in various languages, visitors cards with the number).

Since we depend on an efficiently functioning network including translators, we call for wider active participation in the Alarm Phone project. If you can imagine to support please contact us.

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