

Alarm Phone Weekly Report, 31st of August to 6th of September 2015

This long summer of migration in 2015 has clearly shown that barbed wire fences, military forces and other measures of deterrence cannot stop human mobility. The recent crossings of ten thousands of people have demonstrated the permeability of borders and have led to the (maybe only momentary) collapse of the Dublin system and other control mechanisms of the border regime of the European Union (see: <http://bordermonitoring.eu/ungarn/2015/09/of-hope-en/>). While some travellers arrived in their desired places of destination and were welcomed and assisted by citizens in solidarity with them, others did not. This past week we learned that, once again, attacks occurred in the Aegean Sea by masked men, presumably units of the Greek coastguard. We received first-hand testimonies of those who had suffered attacks at sea on four different occasions, when masked forces stopped and entered their vessels, and often stole their engines, leaving them behind in actue distress. In the past week this occurred maily in the area around the Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios. We from the Alarm Phone condemn these cynical, aggressive and incredibly dangerous actions and grave human rights violations at sea and call, once again, for an investigation into these allegations (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/page/index/18>).

In the past weeks and months, on their way to Europe, travellers suffocated in trucks or drowned in the sea, like the Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi, whose tragic death attracted worldwide attention. He and thousands of other migrants would still be alive if they could have just taken a plane or a ferry to Europe. It is only through safe and legal ways to Europe that future border deaths can be prevented!

Within the past week, the Alarm Phone was alerted to numerous emergency situations, especially in the Aegan Sea. In total the Alarm Phone teams worked on 66 cases in the Aegean Sea, 4 in the Western Mediterranean Sea and 4 in the Central Mediterranean Sea. Many distress calls reached us via Facebook contacts. Several solidarity groups work hard to assists travellers in their dangerous journeys across the sea and forward information about vessels in distress to the Alarm Phone. While this cooperation is of great help for the Alarm Phone, it also presents a challenge to select all the incoming information, to coordinate the support work and to document all cases. Nevertheless, we always tried to keep an overview of the many cases that occurred at the same time and to assist those in distress as best as we could. A short summary of and links to the individual cases can be found below.

On Monday the 31st of August 2015, the Alarm Phone dealt with 11 emergency cases in the Aegean Sea, with approximately 301 travellers involved. Most vessels we could locate near the island of Lesbos. In one case a vessel was in distress near Kos, Greece and in one case just off the Turkish coast. In 8 out of 11 cases, we received a final confirmation that the travellers had been saved or had made it by themselves ashore. In the other three cases, we could not get their rescue or a safe arrival confirmed, mainly due to the fact that a direct contact to the boats was not given. Most travellers reached their desired destination - either by themselves or assisted by the Greek coastguard. In three cases, the Turkish coastguard saved the vessels in distress and brought them back to Turkey. One case was particular, as not a vessel was concerned, but a person trying to swim to the Greek island of Samos. A contact person called us around 5pm and passed on a phone number and coordinates of the swimmer. We located him at about 150 meters from the Greek coast. We tried several times to reach the swimmer ourselves, but without success. At 5.50pm we informed the Greek coastguards, as also the contact person, his brother, had no news from him. The authorities on Rhodos forwarded us to those on Samos, who told us to call the headquarters of the Greek CG. At 6.55pm, we finally received an answer

via Whatsapp from the swimmer, a refugee from Syria. He had arrived safe and sound in Greece (more on all 11 cases, see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/236>).

Also on Monday, the 31st, the Alarm Phone was alerted to two distress situations in the Western Mediterranean Sea. 15 travellers in two small plastic vessels had left Malabata at night and were lost in the fog, when the alarm reached us. We were alerted to the cases by contact persons, but we could establish direct contact to the travellers and could assist them during the nerve-racking hours until their rescue. In both cases, we informed the Spanish search and rescue organisation Salvamento Maritimo, who saved the boats and brought the travellers to Spain (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/238>).

On Tuesday the 1st of September 2015, the Alarm Phone dealt with 14 emergency cases only in the Aegean Sea, mostly in the area of Lesvos, Greece. Many calls came through contact persons, who got their information via Facebook, so that we could not always receive all relevant information, such as the coordinates, the number of persons on board and the phone number. Only in half of the cases we could get a final confirmation of the rescue of the boats, three of which were carried out by the Turkish coastguard and one by a police boat. In two cases the vessels were probably intercepted by the Turkish coastguard.

The first alarm of the day, which reached us around midnight, concerned a group of women and children, who had stranded on the deserted Greek island of Farmakonisi and was left without food or water. Farmakonisi is an island that is only reserved for military purposes, civilians normally have no access to it. We immediately informed the Greek coastguard. However, they told us that they were not responsible for people in distress on land. At 6:50am we sent a message to the group on the island, since we could not reach them by phone. At 9.10am we reached the UNHCR Greece, informed them about the case and passed on the contact details of the group. We were told that the group would probably be picked up by the military and that that they would probably transfer them to Leros (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/237>).

Also on Tuesday, the Alarm Phone was alerted to one distress situation in the Western Mediterranean Sea. At 11am a contact person called the shift team about a boat carrying 9 persons who had left from Tangier, Morocco and were moving toward Spain. We informed Salvamento Maritimo and they promised to look for the boat. In a second call, the contact person told us that the travellers saw a boat of the SM and a boat of the Moroccan Navy at the same time. At 12pm the contact person called us again to inform us that the travellers had been intercepted by the Moroccan Navy (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/247>).

On Wednesday the 2nd of September 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted by father Mussie Zerai to three boats in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea. At 6.30am he informed us about two vessels in distress on their way to Italy. The vessels carried about 700 persons each. At 7am, we managed to reach the travellers of the 1st vessel who told us that they had left five hours earlier from Libya and that there were pregnant women and children on board. We informed the Italian coastguard, but they since we did not have any coordinates, the person on duty was not very cooperative. At 7.18am we received a call directly from the boat and were given their GPS coordinates. We thus reached out (again) to the Maltese and the Italian coastguards and passed on the coordinates of the vessel. The 2nd vessel could not be reached by phone, thus we could not obtain more information about their situation. We checked the satellite phone accounts of both phones and saw that the travellers of the 2nd vessel had used their phone, as their credit went down. We recharged their phone and passed on their coordinates and contact details to the Italian coastguard as well. The alert about the 3rd distress case came in at 2.30pm.

Father Zerai sent us a text message with a contact number of another vessel off the Libyan coast. Only one hour later after about 20 attempts, we reached the vessel and received their coordinates, which we passed on immediately to the Italian coastguard. At 6.50pm, the Italian coastguard confirmed in a phone call that all three boats were rescued and that all travellers were safe (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/239>).

On Wednesday the 2nd of September 2015, parallel to the cases in the Central Mediterranean, the Alarm Phone team worked on 10 distress cases in the Aegean Sea, mostly near Lesvos, Kalymnos and Samos, Greece. In two cases, travellers were not on the sea, but in an emergency situation on land. In one case, a group of 100 travellers, mostly women and children had landed on a deserted island near Samos, Greece and in another case, a group of 8 persons was lost in the mountains without food or water in the East of Samos. In both cases we alarmed local authorities and the UNHCR. In the cases of distress at Sea, in four cases rescue could not be confirmed, because we had no direct contact with the travellers. Moreover, a follow-up of rescue operations proved difficult, because the coastguards were extremely busy with several parallel arrivals and ongoing rescue operations. In two cases, the travellers made it back to Turkey, in one case assisted by the Turkish coastguard. In two cases we could get a rescue by the Greek coastguard confirmed. The cooperation with local activists for example on Lesvos was important not only to receive information about distress cases, but also to check on ongoing rescue operations (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/255>).

On Thursday, the 3rd of September 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 4 distress cases (with 6 vessels involved) in the Aegean Sea, near the islands of Lesvos, Farmakonisi and Agathonisi. Two vessels were rescued by the Turkish coastguard and one by the Greek coastguard. For the other three vessels, we did not get a final confirmation of their rescue. The communication with the coastguards was sometimes difficult, especially in those cases in which we could not provide an exact position and phone number (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/240>).

On Friday, the 4th of September 2015, the Alarm Phone worked on 9 cases in the Aegean Sea, mainly near Lesvos and Samos, but also near Chios, Kalymnos and Agathonisi. Again, we collaborated on most cases with other solidarity networks. In 3 cases the vessels were rescued by the Greek coastguard, in four cases, the Turkish coastguard intervened and brought the travellers back to Turkey. In at least one case, the travellers managed on their own to reach Greece and in one case we could get any information about what happened. Like on four other days this week, travellers reported attacks at sea. At 2.20am on Wednesday the Alarm Phone was contacted by the Macedonian solidarity group about a 2nd distress case of the day. It involved a vessel carrying 2 families, 11 persons in total, in between Turkey and Chios, Greece. The contact person told us that the travellers had been victims of an attack, they had been shot at and the engine and paddles had been stolen. They had tried to move, paddling with their hands in the direction of Greece, which proved difficult, because of the strong currents. We first reached out to the Greek coastguards, but they said that the boat was near a Turkish island and thus in Turkish waters. Two hours later, we called the Greek coastguards again with updated GPS data, but again they insisted that we call the Turkish coastguard. At 4.38am we informed the Turkish coastguards. They rescued the vessel with the 2 families as well as two other vessels in proximity (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/241>).

Also on Friday, the Alarm Phone received a message from father Mussie Zerai who passed on a phone number of travellers in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea. After several attempts, we finally managed to reach the boat at 12pm. The communication with the travellers was difficult but we understood that they were about 300 persons, including women and children

and that they were in an emergency situation. We explained to them how to find out about their GPS position. A couple of minutes later they sent us their position, which showed them in the eastern waters of the Central Med, between Khoms and Misrata. They also told us that their engine had stopped working. We called the Italian coastguard but they said that they had no rescue boat in the area. We tried to call back the travellers, but could not reach them anymore. We observed that their satellite credit went down, so we knew that they were using their phone. At 4pm we called the Italian coastguard in Rome again - they refused to give us any information about the case (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/256>).

On Saturday the 5th, the Alarm Phone was alerted to one distress case in the Western Mediterranean. At 6am the Alarm Phone received a call from 8 persons in a distress situation near Ceuta, Spain. We heard panicky voices, then the call was interrupted. We tried to call them back, but could not reach them anymore. At 6.45am, we received another call from the same boat, but no connection could be established. At 8am we called the Salvamento Maritimo and informed them about the distress situation. They told us to call back half an hour later and ask for an update. When we called them again, at 12.15pm, they told us that they had rescued a rubber vessel carrying 9 persons. We could not reach the group anymore to confirm their rescue, but on Sunday morning our Moroccan contact person confirmed that the group had been saved and brought to Ceuta, the Spanish enclave in Morocco (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/246>).

Also on Saturday, the Alarm Phone received calls about eight cases involving at least 12 vessels near different Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. At least half of them were rescued by the Greek coastguard. According to a report from a contact person from Lesbos, 2 boats that were going into the direction of Lesbos were pulled back by the Turkish coastguard.

Twice, we received alerts about travellers lost on Greek islands. At 7.30am, we received for example an alert concerning 200 travellers, who had reached the island Mikro Chorio, Agathonisi, Greece with 5 boats, but were lost with no place to get registered or shelter. We advised them to move toward the next bigger town, which was only 3km away from their position. At 2.15pm they sent a message that they had made it and that they would all be registered in Samos (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/242>).

On Sunday, the 6th of September 2015, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 6 cases with at least 8 vessels involved in the Aegean Sea, near the Greek islands of Chios, Lesbos, Samos, and Symi. In five cases, the vessels were rescued by the Greek coastguard. In one case, we did not get a final confirmation of a rescue, but hoped that the travellers managed to restart their engine and that they arrived safely in Greece. In the first distress case on Sunday, travellers reported again that their vessel had been attacked and their engine taken away. We could locate the boat between Cesme, Turkey and Chios, Greece and immediately informed the Turkish coastguard about the case. In the following hours we maintained close contact to the Turkish authorities in order to pass on updated positions of the boat and to check on whether they had started a rescue operation. At 2:10am we received a message from a different contact person about two other boats in distress in the same area. They had also been attacked and left at sea without an engine. At 6:45am the contact person confirmed that all travellers on several boats in the area had been rescued (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/243>).