

Deadly denial of assistance in the Western Med; borders of Greece increasingly sealed off

Alarm Phone Weekly Report 16th November – 22nd November 2015

Between Monday the 16th of November and Sunday the 22nd of November 2015 the Alarm Phone dealt with 44 cases of travellers in distress at the European borders. In one particular case in the Western Mediterranean Sea we witnessed a delayed rescue by the Spanish rescue organization Salvamento Maritimo, which led to the drowning of at least 24 travellers after a boat with 46 people on board had capsized off the coast of the Western Sahara. As the rescue vessel had arrived at the spot prior to the accident, why did it not act immediately but waited for almost an hour until the boat had capsized? Later on Salvamento Maritimo downplayed the number of travellers on board and the many missing travellers, claiming that they had rescued all but one of them – a statement that fundamentally contradicts the testimonies of survivors, family members and Spanish activists (<http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/347>).

In the Aegean Sea last week saw a slight decline of arrivals, with approximately 4500 travellers reaching the Greek islands per day.¹ This decrease reflects the increasing attempts of the EU to include Turkey more thoroughly into its policy of deterrence. However, reports from Lesbos indicate that there are still thousands of travellers in Turkey willing to cross into Greece, the situation of which gets more difficult from week to week.² But not only the Greek sea border is increasingly blocked, also further north, on Wednesday the 18th of November the border crossing point in Eidomeni at the Greek-Macedonian border was closed for all travellers except Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis. This desperate attempt to obstruct the freedom of movement of many led to an unbearable situation of stuckness for thousands of travellers who stranded at the border. However, it also fostered protests for many days.³ Amnesty International has rightly scandalized this racist separation practice⁴ and even the IOM, UNCHR and UNICEF resolutely called for keeping the corridor to Central Europe open.⁵ The Alarm Phone has denounced such practices for months and recalls that only the re-opening of Europe's borders can stop the human suffering, degradation and death that we have again witnessed during the past week.

Summary of cases

The Alarm Phone was alerted to 44 emergency situations at Europe's borders in the past week, 42 of which occurred in the Aegean Sea and 2 in the Western Mediterranean Sea. Summaries of the cases and links to the more detailed reports on <http://watchthemed.net> can be found below.

Western Mediterranean Sea

On Monday the 16th of November 2015 the Alarm Phone was informed about a boat with 11 travellers on board, which had left from Tangier Med/Morocco. As our contact person had lost contact to the boat, we informed the Spanish rescue organization Salvamento Maritimo and tried to reach the travellers several times, but without success. Only at the next day we learned from another contact person that the travellers had safely arrived in Ceuta/Spain in the night from Monday to Tuesday. <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/344>

¹ <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=171>

² <http://balkanroute.bordermonitoring.eu/2015/11/26/the-empty-cage-lesbos-arrivals-turkish-smugglers-and-eu-migration-politics/>

³ <http://bordermonitoring.eu/liveticker/2015/11/live-ticker-eidomeni/>

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/11/refugee-crisis-balkans-border-blocks-leave-thousands-segregated-and-stranded-in-greece/>

⁵ <http://www.iom.int/news/iom-unhcr-unicef-joint-statement-new-border-restrictions-balkans>

On Tuesday the 17th of November 2015 at 11.30pm the Alarm Phone was alerted to a boat in distress with about 46 travellers on board, which had left from Laâyoune in the Western Sahara, heading towards the Canary Islands. We called the Spanish coastguard in Las Palmas, who stated that they were already informed about this boat and were looking for it. At the next morning we learned that the boat had capsized and that only 22 travellers had been rescued, while 24 were missing. In the afternoon, Spanish media started to report about the capsized boat. It is highly questionable, why so many travellers had to die, why the coastguard was not able to rescue all of them and if it has delayed the rescue. <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/347>

Aegean Sea

On Monday the 16th of November 2015 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 9 groups of travellers in distress in the Aegean Sea. Two groups went back to Turkey independently or were rescued and returned by the Turkish coastguard. The Greek coastguard and Greek fishing vessels rescued 6 boats, while one group was rescued after stranding on the Greek island of Kastellorizo. <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/345>

On Tuesday the 17th of November 2015 the Alarm Phone dealt with 7 cases of distress in the Aegean Sea, near the Greek islands of Strongyli, Pasas Nisida, Lesbos and Farmakonisi. Three groups had stranded on Greek island but were rescued and transferred to bigger islands afterwards. One group of travellers finally arrived on Lesbos independently, while two boats were rescued by the Greek coastguard and one by the Turkish coastguard. <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/346>

On Wednesday the 18th of November 2015 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 5 boats in distress near the Greek islands of Strongyli, Chios and Lesbos. In all of the cases the travellers finally reached the Greek islands, either by themselves or with the help of the Greek coastguard. <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/348>

On Thursday the 19th of November 2015 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 8 groups in distress in the Aegean Sea. Three boats in distress near the Greek islands of Lesbos and Kos were rescued either by the Greek or by the Turkish coastguard. 4 groups of travellers who had stranded on the Greek islands of Kastellorizo, Nera and Strongyli were finally picked up from these islands. Beyond that, the Alarm Phone supported a group of travellers who got lost in a forest near the Turkish coast in the middle of the night. <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/349>

On Friday the 20th of November 2015 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 6 boats in distress near the Greek islands of Lesbos, Farmakonisi, Chios and Samos. All groups of travellers were rescued afterwards. 5 groups finally arrived in Greece while the Turkish coastguard rescued one group, who had been beforehand attacked by a group of masked men, most probably belonging to the coastguard, who took away their engine. Beyond that, two groups who had stranded on the Greek island of Nisida Pasas were picked up after the Alarm Phone had alerted the port authorities on the Greek island of Chios. <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/350>

On Saturday the 21st of November 2015 the Alarm Phone was in contact with 4 groups of travellers who had stranded on the Greek islands of Tilos, Strongyli, Ro and Kastellorizo. Due to bad weather conditions all four groups could only be rescued on the following day. Beyond that, the Alarm Phone was alerted to a boat in distress north-east of Samos, which was later rescued by the Turkish coastguard. <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/351>