

## **New Year begins with more than 60 Deaths in the Aegean Sea and in Ceuta/Spain**

Alarm Phone Bi-Weekly Report, 28 December 2015 - 10 January 2016

We are only a few days into the New Year and already at least 58 persons have died while attempting to cross the Aegean Sea.<sup>1</sup> Last year, more than one million arrivals in Europe by sea were counted. These travellers had no other opportunity to reach Europe than by crossing the Mediterranean Sea, and more than 3750 drowned on their perilous journeys.<sup>2</sup> On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January 2016, we had to witness the first death in the Aegean Sea in 2016: a two-year old boy fell off a boat, that we had been in contact with during their crossing, when the boat hit the rocks off the Greek island of Agathonisi, according to media accounts.<sup>3</sup> This death reminds us of Aylan Kurdi and all the other children, who lost their lives in 2015, as well as those whose lives are still being risked every day. On Tuesday, the 5<sup>th</sup> of January the Alarm Phone had to witness again the loss of at least 34 lives, including many children off the Turkish coast. At least two boats had capsized on early Tuesday morning, because of extremely high waves. The Turkish Coastguard came too late to rescue all passengers.

But not only in the Aegean Sea, also in the Western Mediterranean the last weeks saw repeated attempts to cross the militarized border fences at the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Again hundreds of travellers tried to enter Europe by climbing over the fences or by circumventing them by swimming. While doing so, at least three men drowned in the night of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January and many others were violently blocked by Moroccan forces. Other travellers were pushed-back by the Spanish Guardia Civil after having successfully overcome the barriers<sup>4</sup>

Against this violent background, it is astonishing how many travellers still successfully reach European shores, even in the winter months. Despite the desperate attempts of the European Union to re-stabilize its crumbled border regime, it seems to us that only bad weather conditions can prevent people on the move from crossing the sea border to the Greek islands – and not national border guards or Frontex' forces. However, these journeys remain life threatening for everyone trying, and thus the Alarm Phone, also in 2016, will not stop fighting against the deadliness of European borders. No child and no adult would need to risk their life on unseaworthy vessels, if safe ways to Europe were opened.

### **Summary of cases**

In the past two weeks, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 58 emergency situations, 57 of which occurred in the Aegean Sea and 1 in the Western Mediterranean Sea. Summaries and links to the individual reports can be found below.

### **Western Mediterranean Sea**

On Wednesday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January 2016 at 9.15am a contact person called the Alarm Phone from a Moroccan phone number, informing us about a boat, which had left Tangier/Morocco at 2am with 11 people on board, including 2 women. Although we could not reach the travellers directly, we informed the Spanish rescue organization Salvamento Maritimo (S.M.) at 9.50am and forwarded the travellers' phone number. Only 90 minutes later, at 11.20am, the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

<sup>2</sup> <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/03/toddler-becomes-europes-first-refugee-casualty-of-2016>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.publico.es/sociedad/mueren-ahogados-tres-subsaharianos-intentaban.html>

contact person informed us that the travellers had been rescued by S.M. and had safely arrived in Spain (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/400>).

### **Aegean Sea**

On Monday the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 2015 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 3 groups of at least 230 travellers stuck on the Greek island of Farmakonisi and to another group of about 70 travellers who had stranded on the Greek island of Pasas. While the travellers on Pasas were picked up and brought to Chios by the Chios Refugee Support Group in due time, the groups on Farmakonisi were forced to wait up to 24 hours until they were transferred to Leros. Furthermore, we were alerted to a boat in distress on its way to the Greek island of Lesvos. After informing the Turkish coastguard we lost contact to this boat, but learned that the travellers had refused to be rescued by the Turkish coastguard and had continued their passage to Greece. Only more than 12 hours after their initial distress call we received a confirmation that they had safely arrived on Lesvos independently (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/395>).

On Tuesday the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2015 the Alarm Phone was informed about 4 groups of travellers who had stranded on the Greek islands of Pasas and Kalimnos. Furthermore, we were alerted to 2 boats in distress near the Greek island of Lesvos. The Alarm Phone can confirm the rescue of one of these boats, while the other one could not be reached after we alerted the Greek coastguard (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/396>).

On Wednesday the 30<sup>th</sup> of December the Alarm Phone dealt with 3 boats in distress on their way to the Greek islands of Agathonisi, Lesvos and Pasas. While the Turkish Coastguard intercepted one of these boats, another was rescued by the Greek coastguard and the travellers on the third boat were picked up after they had arrived on the island of Pasas independently. Furthermore, on this day we were alerted to a group of travellers, who had stranded on the Greek island of Farmakonisi and were stuck there for more than four days. (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/397>).

On Friday the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 2 boats in distress on their way to the Greek island of Lesvos. While one boat reached the island independently, the other boat was rescued by the Turkish coast guard and transferred back to Turkey (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/398>).

On Saturday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 4 boats in distress on their way to the Greek island of Lesvos and Agathonisi and to two groups of travellers stranded on the Greek islands of Pasas and Samos. All of them were rescued, but during one rescue operation a two years old boy went overboard and drowned. He was the first victim of the European border regime in 2016 (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/399>).

On Sunday the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to 10 groups in distress on their way to the Greek island of Farmakonisi, Samos, Lesvos, Kos and Pasas. One group had lost orientation at the Turkish coast, while three groups had stranded on the Greek islands of Farmakonisi, Samos and Pasas and were rescued and transferred to larger islands later on. Furthermore, the Alarm Phone had been in contact with 6 boats in distress. 4 boats reached the Greek islands of Lesvos and Samos independently or were rescued by the Greek

coastguard, while 2 groups of travellers were intercepted by the Turkish coastguard (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/401>).

In the night from Monday to Tuesday the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, around midnight, the Alarm Phone was alerted to one or two boats in distress in the Aegean Sea. The boats were on the way to Lesbos, but still in Turkish waters, where they faced a rough sea with extremely high waves. We cooperated with several other solidarity groups and individuals in this case and informed the Turkish Coastguard, who started a search operation. At 2am we received the news from two of the contact persons that the Turkish coastguard had rescued the travellers. However, we later had to learn that some passengers had been rescued, but that about 17 or 18 others had drowned (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/405>).

On Wednesday the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2016 the Alarm Phone was alerted to a boat heading towards Agathonisi. At 6:11am, we were told about a boat, carrying about 100 persons, in Turkish waters, heading towards Agathonisi. They were in no immediate situation of distress. At 7:24, when the boat was just about to enter the Greek search and rescue zone, they were intercepted by a boat of the Turkish coastguard and brought back to Turkey (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/404>).

In the night from Friday to Saturday and during the day of Saturday the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 15 cases of distress in the Aegean Sea with about 500-600 travellers involved. In five cases, travellers had stranded on Greek islands, namely on Pasa, Farmakonisi and Kastellorizo. In all cases the stranded travellers were picked up, even though some had to wait until Sunday. The other ten cases concerned boats in distress near the islands of Samos, Chios, Lesbos, Agathonisi and Nera. In all but two cases the safe arrival of the travellers in Greece could be confirmed, some boats even made it to Greece without any assistance. In two cases, we could not obtain a final confirmation whether the boats had really arrived safely (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/403>).

On Sunday the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 7 cases in the Aegean Sea: 5 cases of distress at sea near Lesbos and Samos and 2 cases of travellers stranded on the Greek islands Farmakonisi and Samos. In all but one case, we could ensure that the travellers arrived safely. In one case, the travellers were rescued by the Turkish Coastguard and brought back to Turkey, in all other cases the travellers reached Greece. In the case of travellers stranded on Samos, we could not obtain a final confirmation of their rescue, but learned that the Greek authorities were carrying out rescue operations on Samos (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/402>).