

## The New Aegean Deportation Regime: Mass detention in hotspots and forced expulsions of Migrants and Refugees

### *Three-Week Alarm Phone Report, March 21<sup>st</sup> 2016 – April 10<sup>th</sup> 2016*

In the past three weeks, we have witnessed transformative changes of the European border regime through the implementation of the new deportation deal between the European Union and Turkey. At least partially due to the reinforced deterrence measures imposed by Turkey, Greece and the EU, sea crossings and arrivals on Greek islands have dropped in the past weeks. While our Alarm Phone shift teams were contacted 11 times by people in distress in the Aegean Sea or by relatives and contact persons, it is clear that the number of calls has markedly decreased over the past three weeks. Estimates of the UNHCR support this trend: daily arrivals in the Aegean of about 750 people per day were recorded in the first week covered by this report, while in the second and third week only 200 and 250 arrivals were noted (<http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1015>). The dying continued nonetheless. On Saturday the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, at least four women and one child drowned when their boat sank between the Turkish coast and Samos. Five refugees were rescued but it is still unclear how many more went missing (<http://www.ekathimerini.com/207765/article/ekathimerini/news/five-migrants-drown-off-samos-after-boat-capsizes>).

Already prior to the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, first changes could be observed in Greece with mass transportations of travellers who had arrived on the islands before the 20<sup>th</sup> of March to the Greek mainland on the one hand, and mass detention of travellers who had arrived after the 20<sup>th</sup> of March in the previously open hotspots on Lesbos and Chios, on the other hand. On the island of Chios, the hotspot Vial was turned into a prison, where travellers were detained and deprived even of their basic human rights. For further information see:

<https://refugeetrail.wordpress.com/>

<http://moving-europe.org/2016/03/22/press-release-on-chios/>

<https://refugeetrail.wordpress.com/2016/03/22/this-is-not-a-camp-its-a-prison/>

<http://infomobile.w2eu.net/2016/03/22/detention-deportation-centre-vial-on-chios-island-hurria-means-freedom/>

<http://bordermonitoring.eu/griechenland/2016/03/eu-tuerkei-deal-und-seine-folgen/>

In light of the catastrophic conditions in these hotspots/detention centres, the UNHCR and Doctors without Borders refused to continue their work there. Both organisations have strongly denounced the violation of international human rights conventions, clear consequences of the EU-Turkey deal (see: <http://www.unhcr.org/56f1odo49.html> and: <http://www.msf.org/article/greece-msf-ends-activities-inside-lesvos-“hotspot”> ).

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, as a major component of the EU-Turkey deal, the first round of deportations of migrants and refugees from the Greek islands was launched: 202 people, mostly from Pakistan but also from Afghanistan, Syria, Algeria, Iraq, India, Congo, Somalia, Bangladesh, the Ivory Coast and Sri Lanka, were deported to Dikili/Turkey from Lesbos (136 people) and Chios (66 people). While authorities suggested that these returns had gone 'smoothly', with one (face-masked) Frontex officer assigned to each deportee, the UNHCR stated that the Greek police had failed to process the asylum claims of 13 persons and had thus deported them 'by mistake', which would constitute a clear breach of international law

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/05/greece-deport-migrants-turkey-united-nations-european-union>).

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, the forcible returning of Europe's unwanted continued: 124 people were deported from Lesbos, Samos and Kos amidst vocal protest and attempts to prevent the deportation vessels from departing (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/08/second-ferry-leaves-lesbos-for-turkey-eu-migrant-deal>). Amongst the deportees were people from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Iraq, Morocco, Egypt and Palestine.

These hundreds of deportees were incarcerated in Turkey and their fate remains unknown. What is clear is that they may not only face dire living conditions in Turkey but also onward refoulement through their forcible return to 'home countries', enforced by Turkey, as reported by Amnesty International (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2016/04/turkey-illegal-mass-returns-of-syrian-refugees-expose-fatal-flaws-in-eu-turkey-deal/>). In fear of being deported, many migrants and refugees on Greek islands have announced that they would commit self-harm if they were to be returned (<http://www.dw.com/en/desperation-in-lesbos/a-19164607>).

Those threatened by deportation, detention and border violence have risen up in self-organised protest. For example, some have gone on hunger-strike in the Moria detention camp on Lesbos and others have escaped the camp in Vial on Chios as well as from a camp on Samos. Travellers in Idomeni have launched another attack on the border fence and were exposed to the violence of Macedonian border guards who threw teargas into the crowd of protestors, leaving many injured. In Athens, groups of mainly Afghan refugees have organised several demonstrations to demand rights and dignity. In many of the open camps on Greek mainland protests took place against the inhuman living conditions and for open borders. We stand united with these struggles and to protest the ways in which the Aegean region is turned into a highly militarised and deadly borderzone. We are not getting tired to raise our voices against those dehumanising practices and will continue to struggle for the opening of borders and the freedom of movement for all.

### **Uptake in migration movements in the Central Med and yet another shipwreck**

Sea crossings from Libya to Italy have become more frequent over the last three weeks. More than 6.400 travellers were rescued in the Central Mediterranean Sea in that period. It is clear that this cannot be understood as a direct consequence of the EU-Turkey deal as, for example, mostly sub-Saharan travellers reached Europe via this route in the past weeks. What is certain, however, is that we can expect to see a rising number of people trying to cross the Central Mediterranean Sea, also due to improving weather conditions there.

Another mass shipwreck occurred on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, when a dinghy carrying 140 people sank in front of the Libyan coast. 89 travellers went missing and the hope of finding them alive is slim to non-existent (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/dozens-of-migrants-feared-dead-after-dinghy-sinking-1459433069>).

### **Summary of cases**

In the past three weeks, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 16 emergency situations, 11 of which occurred in the Aegean Sea, 2 in the Central Mediterranean Sea and 3 in the Western Mediterranean Sea. Summaries and links to the individual reports can be found below.

## **Aegean Sea**

On Monday the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 2 groups of travellers in distress north of the Greek island of Samos. We informed the Turkish and the Greek coastguard respectively and in both cases rescue was confirmed afterwards. The first boat had been rescued by the Turkish coastguard and the second by the Greek coastguard. On Monday the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 2 groups of travellers in distress north of the Greek island of Samos. We informed the Greek coastguard in both cases and rescue was confirmed afterwards (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/488>).

On Tuesday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 2 groups of travellers in distress in the Aegean Sea. The Greek coastguard rescued one group east of the island of Lesbos, while another group was stranded on the island of Kastellorizo and not provided with food, water or shelter for more than one day (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/489>).

On Sunday the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2016 at around midnight, the Alarm Phone was informed about a boat in distress in front of the Turkish town Denizköy, east of the Greek island of Lesbos. We alerted the Turkish coastguard, and were afterwards informed about the rescue of this boat both by the Turkish coastguard and by the person who had initially alerted us to this boat (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/490>).

On Wednesday, the 30th of March 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to two distress cases in the Aegean Sea, near Chios and Samos. At half past midnight, we received alerts by two different contact persons with slightly different positions South of Chios and different contact numbers of the travellers, so that we were not sure, whether we actually dealt with one or two boats. Only in one case we could obtain a final confirmation of rescue. At 6:37am, we received a second alert via Nawal Soufi's activist collective about a rubber boat in distress on the way to Samos. The travellers had run out of fuel and water was entering the boat. We informed the Greek Coastguard about the case and they confirmed to us a few hours later, that all boats near Samos had been rescued. However, we could not find out whether the boat we had been in contact with was among those rescued (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/reports/view/485>).

On Saturday, the 2nd of April 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to a group of travellers stranded on the Greek island of Ro in the Aegean Sea. At 4.40am a contact person sent us a WhatsApp message about a boat with 19 children and 11 adults off the coast of Ro. They did not dare to debark as they had reached a very rocky part of the island. The travellers did not have enough credit on their phone to inform the Coastguard. We tried, but could not reach the travellers, so we called the Greek Coastguard to inform them about the case. At 5.10am the contact person informed us that the travellers had reached the island. One child was in urgent need of medical assistance - it was blue in the face and had difficulties breathing. At 5.18 we forwarded this information and the traveller's new position to the Greek Coastguard. They told us that they had already sent a boat from Kastellorizo. At 6.06am the contact person wrote us that the Coastguard had arrived and had found the group on the island (see: <http://www.watchthemed.net/reports/view/486>).

On Monday, the 4th of April 2016, our Alarm Phone shift team was alerted by a contact person

to a group of about 20 people, 14 adults including one pregnant woman and 6 children, who had stranded on the remote island of Strongyli/Greece and were in need of support. Following our contact person's account, the health condition of the pregnant woman was critical. We ourselves were unable to reach the group directly. At 5.29am we contacted the Greek coastguards and they confirmed that they would send someone to the group. We also reached the port police on Kastellorizo Island and they confirmed that they had already heard about the situation. At 7.41am, another contact person passed on the GPS position of the group which we passed on to the authorities. At 10.35am we receive a confirmation from our contact person that the group had been found and rescued. While we had not been able to reach them directly, we still sent the w2eu info guide to their WhatsApp number: <http://w2eu.info/greece.en/articles/greece-turkey-deal.en.html> (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/493>).

On Wednesday the 6th of April 2016, our Alarm Phone shift team was alerted at 1.45am by an informant to an individual who had landed on Samos Island and needed support. We reached out to the person directly and he reported that he had fallen off a jet-ski and had to swim to the island. At 1.55am we informed the Greek coastguards and shortly afterwards the Samos Port Police, also passing on the GPS position of the man. They confirmed that they would search for him. At 3.30am we contacted the Samos Port Police again and they confirmed that they had found the person and were currently transferring him to the hospital on Samos. On the 7th of April, we were able to contact the individual again and he said that he had been released from the hospital and was now at the hotspot on Samos, waiting to get registered and be interviewed (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/494>).

On Saturday the 9th of April 2016, our Alarm Phone shift team was alerted at 00.57am by our activist allies to a group of Afghan refugees who were on a boat, somewhere between Dikili/Turkey and Lesvos/Greece. Their engine had stopped working and water had entered their boat. Despite not having a concrete location, we reached out to the Greek coastguards to inform them about the case. At 1.10am already, we received the confirmation that the group had been able to move on and reach Lesvos Island independently (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/497>).

### **Central Mediterranean Sea**

On Sunday the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted by Father Mussie Zerai to a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea, with 150 people on board. We were able to talk to the travellers several times and recharged their Thuraya satellite phone's credit. We also forwarded an estimated position of the boat to the Italian coastguard and received confirmation of the boat's rescue in the afternoon of the day (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/492>).

On Wednesday, the 30th of March 2016, the Alarm Phone was alerted to one distress case in the Central Mediterranean Sea. At 8.50am, father Mussie Zerai informed us about a plastic boat with 80 passengers in distress off the Libyan coast. We followed the case for about 8 hours with the help of a translator. The main challenge was to obtain correct and updated GPS coordinates from the travellers. We recharged the travellers' satellite telephone several times and also checked regularly with the Italian Coastguard, who at 5.25pm finally confirmed the rescue of 82 passengers (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/487>).

## **Western Mediterranean Sea**

On Tuesday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2016, the Alarm Phone was directly called from a boat in the Western Mediterranean Sea, which had left from Tanger Med/Morocco, with 16 persons on board. We stayed in contact with the travellers for about one hour, but finally we were informed that the Moroccan Marine Royale had intercepted the boat (see: <http://watchthemed.net/reports/view/491>).

On Monday the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2016, our Alarm Phone shift team was alerted by a contact person to a vessel in distress near Ceuta, carrying 8 people. Following the account of our contact person, they had been at sea already for several hours. We tried to reach the boat at 7.02am but were unable to speak to them. At 7.04am we called the Spanish search and rescue agency Salvamento Maritimo and informed them about the case. At 8.14am, our contact person reported that the boat had been intercepted by the Moroccan Navy and the people were in the process of being returned to Morocco. We then established contact to some of the boat-people. They reported that they had been very close to Ceuta already and had reached out to us as they had problems with their boat. They then said that the Moroccan Navy appeared and returned them to Morocco, then deporting them to Marrakesh. While we cannot verify their account, this seems to have been a forcible pull-back by the Moroccan authorities (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/495>).

On Thursday the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2016, the Alarm Phone shift team was alerted to a group of 10 people who were on their way to Tarifa/Spain. At 9.06am, we received a call from a woman who informed us that she was on a boat moving toward Tarifa. She was part of a group of 10 people, 5 men, 4 women and 1 boy. They had left about an hour earlier but it was not clear where exactly they had departed from. She said that she was able to see buildings and mountains ahead. After the initial phone call, we tried to reconnect several times, without success. Due to that fact that we had no confirmation of their location and only partial information about their situation, our shift team decided against reaching out to the authorities straight away. At 10.26am we came through to the boat-people but the line was interrupted before we could speak to them. A minute later they called back but due to connection problems, we were unable to hear anything. We also reached out to our contact persons in Tangier, to ask whether a group of that size had embarked on a journey. We learned that a group had successfully reached Spain already but the size of that group did not match 'our' group. Several hours later, at 1pm, we then reached out to the Spanish search and rescue agency Salvamento Maritimo to enquire whether they had knowledge of any vessels in distress in the area. They confirmed that they had rescued one vessel, the one which did not match the size of the group in question. They also stated that the Moroccan Navy had rescued a vessel. We then turned to the Moroccan authorities at 1.25pm but the officers informed us that they had in fact not rescued any vessel and the only vessel in distress had been rescued by Salvamento Maritimo. While trying to reach the people on the boat for several hours, as well as on the following day, we were not able to re-establish contact with them. It could be that the initial information about the number of people on the boat was wrong and that it was, in fact, the vessel that had been rescued by Salvamento Maritimo (see: <http://watchthemed.net/index.php/reports/view/496>).