

Search and rescue in the time of COVID-19

MSF briefing paper

Contents

Introduction: the arrival of COVID-19 in Europe	1
I. Limited search and rescue capacity in the Mediterranean before the pandemic.....	2
II. The impact of COVID-19 on NGO search and rescue ships.....	3
III. Departures from Libya have been undeterred by COVID-19.....	4
IV. The human cost of non-assistance: shipwrecks, distress calls left unanswered or ignored	5
V. Lack of a safe and predictable disembarkation mechanism for those rescued at sea	7
VI. Malta’s collaboration with the Libyan coastguard and commercial vessels, resulting in pushbacks, interceptions and forced returns to Libya	10
VII. A crisis within a crisis in Libya	12
Conclusion.....	13
APPENDIX: Timeline of key events – February – July 2020.....	14
Steps taken by the EU to avoid saving lives at sea	14
Rescues by NGO search and rescue ships.....	14
Operations by rescue ships impeded.....	15
Autonomous arrivals in Italy	15
Fatalities at sea	15
Cooperation with commercial vessels for the forcible return of people to Libya	16
Use of offshore vessels to hold rescued people in Italy and Malta	17
Life-threatening disembarkations in Libya	17
KEY NUMBERS AND STATISTICS.....	17

Introduction: the arrival of COVID-19 in Europe

On 13 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) [began](#) to consider Europe the active centre of the COVID-19 pandemic, **having** more reported cases and deaths than the rest of the world combined, apart from China. On 19 March, over 75 000 cases were reported in the European region, with four countries – Italy, Spain, France and Germany – accounting for over 77% of all European cases and with case numbers rising rapidly. As a result, on 17 March, EU leaders [confirmed](#) the closure of the EU’s external and Schengen borders for at least 30 days, while many countries within Europe [reintroduced](#) temporary border controls.

In an effort to support EU governments' response in this moment of crisis, MSF [stepped up](#) its activities in a number of European countries, including Italy, Spain, Switzerland, France, Norway, Greece and Belgium¹. In France, for instance, MSF helped screen people for COVID-19 and provided care for some of the most vulnerable population groups in Paris and the surrounding region through mobile consultations. MSF teams in Marseille, in the south of France, used mobile clinics to reach people living in extremely precarious situations, and between mid-April and 31 May conducted nearly 1,000 COVID-19 tests in support of two health centres in the city's most impoverished neighbourhoods. In Italy, the epicentre of the pandemic, MSF started supporting three hospitals with infection prevention and control (IPC) measures in the Lombardy region in March. In Sicily, MSF provided training on IPC measures and health promotion to civil society groups working in the most marginalised areas of Palermo.

I. Limited search and rescue capacity in the Mediterranean before the pandemic

The months leading up to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe saw a number of worrying developments in the Central Mediterranean Sea and in the political dynamics at EU level in the area of search and rescue.

On 17 February, EU foreign affairs ministers took the [decision](#) to stop EUNAVFOR MED (European Union Naval Force Mediterranean) Operation Sophia, with the end of its mandate on 31 March 2020, exactly one year after withdrawing all naval assets from the operation in March 2019 and turning it into "a naval operation without ships". Operation Sophia – called after a baby born following the rescue of her mother by one of the military assets deployed in the Central Mediterranean – was [set up](#) in 2015 to primarily "identify, capture and dispose of vessels and enabling assets used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers", but ended up also engaging in a number of rescue operations which saved 44,916 people between 2015 and 2018. The February 2020 decision appeared to sanction the eagerness of EU states to withdraw from the search and rescue activities and to enable their efforts to avoid rescues at any cost, while at the same time supporting the Libyan coastguard to intercept people at sea and return them to Libya.

When EU foreign ministers decided to put a definitive end to Operation Sophia, they agreed to [launch](#) on 1 April a new mission in the Mediterranean. EUNAVFOR MED Operation Irini is focused on enforcing the UN arms embargo in Libya through the use of aerial, satellite and maritime assets and is able to carry out inspections of vessels on the high seas off the coast of Libya suspected to be carrying arms or related material to and from Libya in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2292 (2016). Operation Irini has no mandate to prevent loss of life at sea; on the contrary, it allows for a withdrawal of maritime assets depending on the "impact on migration flows". Moreover, it has been deployed 100 km off the coast of eastern Libya, where the EU itself has admitted there are fewer opportunities to conduct rescue operations, signalling a deliberate effort to avoid having to save lives at sea.

Not only have European states disengaged from search and rescue activities in the Central Mediterranean Sea, but they have also launched an orchestrated campaign against NGOs conducting search and rescue, relying on vicious tactics to criminalise their lifesaving operations at sea.

¹ "MSF steps up COVID-19 response in Europe", <https://www.msf.org/msf-steps-covid-19-response-europe>

II. The impact of COVID-19 on NGO search and rescue ships

MSF's medical and humanitarian teams on board the search and rescue ship *Ocean Viking*, operated jointly with SOS MEDITERRANEE, were amongst the first people to be directly impacted by some of measures taken by European states to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. After rescuing 276 people in three separate operations on 18 and 19 February 2020, the ship arrived in Pozzallo on 23 February, which coincided with the [announcement](#) of seven deaths and 209 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Italy. After all survivors had been disembarked from *Ocean Viking* and transferred to a quarantine centre in Pozzallo, the ship and crew were also [placed under quarantine](#) off the shore of Sicily until 8 March.

In fact, since spring 2015, after the end of the Mare Nostrum operation in 2014, the de facto void created by the lack of EU-led search and rescue capacity in the Central Mediterranean has been filled by a handful of NGO search and rescue vessels. Since the arrival of COVID-19 in Europe, the challenges faced by NGOs in continuing their lifesaving activities have become even greater. For instance, travel restrictions and lockdowns across Europe have obstructed NGOs' abilities to transport staff and equipment across the continent and complicated the logistical preparations for their return to sea. European states also decided to leverage the COVID-19 crisis to rebrand their migration control policies as public health measures and in April introduced a number of measures aimed at further blocking the search and rescue operations of NGO vessels:

- In a letter dated 6 April, the German government [asked](#) German search and rescue NGOs (e.g. Sea-Watch) not to return to sea and to recall ships already at sea.
- On 8 April, the Italian government issued an inter-ministerial [decree](#) saying Italy could not guarantee the requisites needed to be classified as a place of safety and would not allow the disembarkation of rescued people, due to and for the duration of the COVID-19 health emergency. This decree was preceded by the [closure](#) of Italy's borders, including ports, on 28 March 2020.
- On 11 April, in a [letter](#) addressed to Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the Maltese government announced the closure of Malta's ports in order to channel all resources necessary towards the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In a [press release](#), the government stated that Malta would "no longer accept or offer a safe place to irregular migrants" and it could not guarantee saving lives at sea.

Other less sweeping measures, such as thorough screening and testing, as well as quarantining people rescued at sea, would have allowed public health to be maintained while upholding international law.

Even though MSF and its partner SOS MEDITERRANEE had their medical, humanitarian and rescue teams ready to return to sea with *Ocean Viking*, these barriers to humanitarian action in the Mediterranean left MSF and SOS MEDITERRANEE unable to agree on whether to sail at this time, significantly undermining the viability of their partnership. As a result, the two organisations [ended](#) their partnership on 17 April 2020.

Less than a month after closing their ports, Italian authorities took yet another step to immobilise search and rescue vessels: Sea Eye's *Alan Kurdi* and Salvamento Marítimo Humanitario's *Aita Mara* were [placed](#) under administrative detention in Sicily on 6 and 7 May respectively, due to "technical and normative irregularities". The two ships, which were the first to go back to the search and rescue zone in the context of COVID-19, were impounded after they completed their quarantine, following the [transfer](#) of 180 people rescued in the

Central Mediterranean between [6](#) and [13](#) April to the *Rubattino* ferry off the shore of Palermo.² In a [statement](#), the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights referred to the two NGO vessels being “prevented from supporting migrants in distress at a time when the numbers attempting to make the perilous journey from Libya to Europe have increased sharply” and stated that “it has also been alleged that administrative regulations and measures are being used to impede the work of humanitarian NGOs”.

After a complete absence of NGO rescue ships in the Central Mediterranean in May, *Sea-Watch 3* resumed its lifesaving operations in June and rescued 211 people. On 21 June, the survivors were [transferred](#) to the *Moby Zaza* quarantine ship nearby Porto Empedocle in Sicily and the crew and ship were placed under quarantine. Following that, *Sea-Watch 3* was also put under [administrative detention](#) on 9 July due to “various technical and operational irregularities”.

After a three-month halt, *Ocean Viking*, now operated solely by SOS MEDITERRANEE, rescued [180](#) people in four operations between 25 June and 1 July. After receiving no ‘place of safety’ for approximately 10 days, during which time those on board suffered “enormous psychological discomfort”, as confirmed by an Italian doctor sent to the ship by authorities, *Ocean Viking* was eventually allowed to [disembark](#) the survivors in Porto Empedocle, from where they were transferred to the quarantine ferry *Moby Zaza* on 6 July. After completing a quarantine off the shore of Sicily, the rescue vessel was [impounded](#) by port authorities, in a move described by SOS MEDITERRANEE as “a blatant administrative harassment manoeuvre aimed at impeding the lifesaving work of NGO ships”. In their decision to impound *Ocean Viking*, as well as various minor “technical and operational irregularities”, Italian authorities [cited](#) the fact that the ship had rescued and carried too many people on board, exceeding its maximum capacity and therefore “compromising” their safety.

There are currently no NGO search and rescue ships in the Central Mediterranean Sea.

III. Departures from Libya have been undeterred by COVID-19

Against a backdrop of an escalation in fighting in Libya in March, a first case of COVID-19 in Libya was confirmed by the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on 25 March. As part of a series of measures taken to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, land, air and maritime borders were closed by Libya’s competing governments. Restrictions were also imposed on travel within Libya, while curfews were implemented in both the west and east of the country, with some municipalities even announcing 24/7 lockdowns. While there were few departures from Libya via the Central Mediterranean in March due to unfavourable weather conditions, the travel restrictions imposed by Libyan authorities within the country did little to deter boats with people trying to flee Libya, whose number significantly picked up in April as the weather improved and as a [major escalation of hostilities](#) led to a significant increase in civilian casualties.

In fact, between 1 April and 30 June 2020, UNSMIL [documented](#) at least 358 civilian casualties, which represents an overall increase of 173% compared to the first quarter of 2020, with a 65% increase in deaths and a 276% increase in injuries. Despite the [calls](#) for a humanitarian pause by the United Nations and many UN member states, there were reports in April of multiple instances of indiscriminate attacks in densely populated areas in Tripoli and its surroundings, some of which targeted civilian infrastructure and [damaged](#) functioning health facilities.

In the context of this rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) [announced](#) on 17 March the suspension of all resettlement, evacuation and repatriation

² Sea Eye [reported](#) that *Alan Kurdi* had been allowed to leave the port of Palermo and return to Spain.

flights out of Libya due to COVID-19, while Libya's two competing governments closed their land borders on 16 March and 18 March. With air and land borders closed, the most vulnerable migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers remained stranded in Libya, with no other options to flee but across the sea.

While several boats [arrived](#) autonomously in Italy in March, departures from Libya picked up in number from 6 April onwards, despite the very limited search and rescue capacity in the Mediterranean in this period. Easter weekend (10-12 April) saw a number of boats depart from Libyan shores in an attempt to reach Europe. Citing COVID-19 as justification for not assisting, Malta and Italy [failed](#) to respond to multiple overloaded dinghies in distress in their search and rescue regions. Two boats, carrying [101](#) and [77](#) people respectively, traversed Malta's search and rescue region and landed autonomously in Sicily on 13 April, after receiving no assistance despite sending multiple distress calls. On 13 April, the NGO ship *Aita Mari* intervened to rescue 47 people stranded in the Maltese search and rescue region for more than two days, after the Armed Forces of Malta [failed to undertake](#) a rescue.

The number of arrivals in Italy from Libya and Tunisia continued to increase, with 1,668 people reaching Italian shores in [May](#) 2020 and 1,824 doing so in [June](#) – the highest number of monthly sea arrivals this year so far, according to UNHCR. Between 22 and 24 July, almost 1,000 people [arrived](#) on the island of Lampedusa from Tunisia and Libya, with as many as 14 boats arriving on the night of 24 July. Arrivals continued in the last week of July, significantly straining the capabilities of the authorities on Lampedusa. The new arrivals have been held in a reception centre originally designed to accommodate only around 100 people, leading provincial officials to order the emergency [transfer](#) of 200-250 people to reception centres in Sicily on a daily basis.

IV. The human cost of non-assistance: shipwrecks, distress calls left unanswered or ignored

Shipwrecks

The obstruction of operations by humanitarian vessels and the absence of EU-led search and rescue capacity have resulted in a dangerous void in the Central Mediterranean that has claimed at least 274 lives in 2020, according to IOM's [Missing Migrants Project](#). In June, three shipwrecks were confirmed and a total of 101 people, including six children, lost their lives. On 9 June, a boat with 73 people on board [capsized](#) off the coast of Graten, Tunisia, leaving no survivors. On 13 June, IOM [confirmed](#) that another boat had capsized off the coast of Zawiya in Libya, leaving 12 people missing, including two children. On 20 June, a shipwreck off the coast of Tripoli in Libya claimed the lives of at least five people, while 19 survivors were saved by a fisherman and then taken to an unofficial detention centre in Libya, according to [IOM](#). On 8 July, seven people went [missing](#) when a boat with 25 people on board drifted for at least seven days. The 18 survivors were returned to Libya by the Libyan coastguard, where four survivors in a critical condition were taken to hospital.

In June and July 2020, at least four dead bodies were spotted floating in the Central Mediterranean by Sea-Watch's airborne assets Seabird and Moonbird and by the search and rescue vessel *Mare Jonio* operated by Mediterranean Saving Humans. Even though Italian, Maltese and Libyan authorities were informed of the location of the bodies, no efforts were made to retrieve them. One body, trapped in the remnants of a half-sunk rubber boat, was [discovered](#) on 29 June by Seabird, raising questions regarding the fate of the other people on the dinghy.

On 10 July, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [stated](#) that the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies in Libya and Tunis were alarmed by the increased instances of drownings in the Mediterranean, after recovering 30 bodies in Tunisia and 26 bodies in Libya in June alone.

However, the actual number of people who have lost their lives in the Central Mediterranean remains unclear. On 12 May, IOM issued a [statement](#) saying that “the reduced presence of search and rescue vessels on the increasingly busy Central Mediterranean route are raising serious concerns about the fate of vessels in distress and so-called ‘invisible shipwrecks’”. This is a reminder that the Central Mediterranean route remains the most dangerous maritime migration route on earth and that, in the current context, the risk has increased of invisible shipwrecks occurring far from the view of the international community.

Delayed rescue or instances of non-assistance

The rescue of those in distress at sea is being systematically delayed or denied, leaving people at sea for hours and days without assistance. Such wilful acts of negligence on the part of Maltese, Italian and Libyan authorities have become commonplace in the Central Mediterranean in recent months, with states reportedly failing to provide assistance to boats in distress or offering such assistance with a significant delay, thus further endangering the lives of those in need of rescue.

- Malta

On 14 March, Malta delayed the rescue of 110 people in the Maltese search and rescue region for more than 18 hours, according to Alarm Phone. The organisation reportedly [informed](#) the Armed Forces of Malta by email and by phone and sent them updated GPS positions of the boat eight times before a vessel was eventually sent to conduct the rescue.

In another incident on 8 April, Alarm Phone [reports](#) that a boat with 66 people on board was rescued by the Armed Forces of Malta almost 40 hours after receiving the first distress call, adding that instead of rescuing the people immediately, Maltese authorities merely observed the boat in distress using aerial assets. In its [report](#) “Sabotage, Delays and Non-Assistance: Another day in Malta’s SAR zone”, Alarm Phone details how it tried to contact Malta’s rescue coordination centre 42 times between 8 and 10 April, but heard back from the Maltese authorities just 11 times, “mostly without receiving any information”.

On 12 April, a boat with 101 people on board [arrived](#) autonomously at Pozzallo, Sicily. On 20 May, the *Guardian* [reported](#) that the Armed Forces of Malta had allegedly turned this boat away from their waters at gunpoint on 11 April, after giving them fuel and the GPS coordinates to reach Italy. Video footage shows a presumed Armed Forces of Malta vessel refusing to rescue people from the overcrowded rubber boat, instead providing them with the equipment to continue their journey to Italy. On 29 May, the *Guardian* [reported](#) that the Italian government had confirmed that Malta’s Armed Forces had turned the boat away at gunpoint. Police in Sicily are investigating and the prosecutor’s office may open an investigation into the conduct of the Maltese authorities.

On 28 July, the Armed Forces of Malta [rescued](#) 95 people from an overcrowded and sinking dinghy between Libya and Malta after letting them drift for more than two days, according to [IOM](#).³ In further evidence of “systematic delays” by Maltese authorities in their rescue efforts, Alarm Phone [reported](#) that Malta’s Armed Forces had hung up the phone “repeatedly” as members of its rescue hotline tried to alert them to 52 people in distress at sea earlier in the month.

In May, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [highlighted](#) claims that distress calls to maritime rescue coordination centres (MRCCs) “have gone unanswered or been ignored”. Similarly, the Council of Europe’s Human Rights Commissioner Dunja Mijatović [addressed a letter](#) to the Maltese prime minister saying that the COVID-19 pandemic could not negate clear obligations to save lives at sea and urging the government to “ensure that Malta fully meets its obligations when it is notified of a distress situation or receives requests for assistance, and that all credible allegations of delay or non-response are investigated and addressed”.

³ On 29 July, it was [reported](#) that 65 of the 95 rescued people had tested positive for COVID-19.

- Italy

Aerial pictures taken by Sea-Watch's Moonbird on 13 July [revealed](#) an Italian coastguard vessel and a commercial cargo ship, *Karewood Star*, apparently ignoring a boat in distress only a mile away from their position. The Italian coastguard [confirmed](#) it had arrived at the spot and had not taken part in rescue operations, saying the cargo ship captain had told them he was planning to rescue the boat, which ultimately did not happen. After almost two days, an Italian Guardia di Finanza military ship reached the boat and eventually conducted a rescue.

- Libya

Recent incidents during which Libyan authorities failed to respond or take responsibility for coordinating rescue operations in their own search and rescue region clearly demonstrate the incapacity of the Libyan coastguard to fulfil its maritime obligations to effectively conduct search and rescue activities, despite having received millions of euros' worth of training, assets and materials from Italy and the EU.

On 28 July, a [press release](#) issued by the Italian coastguard referred to a recent incident where a Frontex aircraft spotted a rubber dinghy with dozens of people on board in the Libyan search and rescue region. The boat had no engine and was half-sunk, due to a deflated tube. The Libyan authority responsible for search and rescue activities at sea was informed of the sighting, but did not take over the coordination of the rescue operation due to having no naval vessels available. After receiving no response from the French, Maltese and Gibraltar authorities, the Italian MRCC assumed the coordination of the rescue, sending the naval unit Asso29 to conduct the rescue of 84 people from the boat which, by that time, was almost entirely underwater.

V. Lack of a safe and predictable disembarkation mechanism for those rescued at sea

In a joint declaration signed at a summit between the interior ministers of German, France, Italy and Malta in La Valletta on 23 September 2019, the four states agreed on a more [predictable temporary solidarity mechanism](#) “in order to ensure dignified disembarkation” for people rescued from the Central Mediterranean. This move came after months of stand-offs at sea and of delayed disembarkations of people rescued at sea by NGO and commercial ships. Since then, a limited number of other states have joined this temporary mechanism and relocations following disembarkation have been coordinated by the European Commission. However, the mechanism has failed to gain wide support among EU member states and disembarkations and relocations have remained challenging ad-hoc exercises and appear to have collapsed with the COVID-19 pandemic, in spite of states claiming the contrary.

Use of vessels to accommodate rescued people offshore

While the screening, testing and quarantining of rescued people can be adequate measures to address public health concerns in the face of a pandemic, the recent decision by the governments of Italy and Malta to hold people on ships, sometimes in conditions amounting to detention, is more questionable.

- Italy

In February, people rescued by MSF and SOS MEDITERRANEE were allowed to disembark and were quarantined on shore, but later the Civil Protection Department was tasked with procuring ships to quarantine rescued people. On 17 April, 146 survivors rescued by *Alan Kurdi* were transferred to the privately owned *Rubattino* ferry off the coast of Sicily, where they were joined by 34 rescued people from *Aita Mari* on 19 April. They were supported by the Italian Red Cross which provided health and mental health support,

food, face masks, hygiene kits and COVID-19 testing. The 180 rescued people were allowed to [disembark](#) in Palermo on 4 May. On 8 May it was announced that the vessel *Moby Zaza* would also accommodate rescued people, alongside the *Rubattino*. A total of 193 rescued people were [held](#) on board *Moby Zaza* in preventive isolation for two weeks, and disembarked the ship on 17 and 20 June, when a new group of 211 people rescued by Sea-Watch 3 arrived. It was subsequently [reported](#) that 28 of them had tested positive for COVID-19. On 7 July, 181 people rescued by *Ocean Viking* were transferred to *Moby Zaza* for quarantine; all tested negative for the virus.

On 22 May, a Tunisian man held on board *Moby Zaza* [jumped](#) off the ship in an effort to swim to land and subsequently drowned.

After the concession for *Moby Zaza* expired in mid-July, a new quarantine ship [arrived](#) at Lampedusa to accommodate 678 people held in the island's overcrowded reception centre, many of whom had reached autonomously the island in the preceding weeks.

- Malta

Since 30 April 2020, the Maltese government has [chartered](#) private tourist ferries to accommodate people rescued at sea by the Armed Forces of Malta. A total of 425 people rescued between 30 April and 7 May were transferred to four Captain Morgan Cruises ferries stationed outside territorial waters 13 nautical miles offshore, while a small number of women and children were allowed to disembark on Malta on humanitarian grounds. Some of the rescued people were kept on board the private vessels for [longer](#) than five weeks.

The use of private vessels to keep rescued people offshore was [criticised](#) on 8 May by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights who, while welcoming Malta's rescue operations, called for "all migrants currently being held on board these vessels to be urgently disembarked, as the conditions on merchant vessels are not suitable for longterm accommodation". Human Rights Watch has highlighted that "the government has not provided a legal basis, or legitimate purpose, for keeping people on these ferries, making this arbitrary deprivation of liberty". On 21 May, UNHCR and IOM issued a [joint statement](#) urging Malta and other European states to speed up their efforts to disembark the survivors, saying they were "deeply concerned about reports that states have been ignoring or delaying responses to distress calls, especially amid a sharp decrease in state-led and NGO search and rescue capacity".

On 22 May, Aditus Foundation, Jesuit Refugee Service Malta and Integra foundation [filed](#) three complaints relating to the situation of the people held on the Captain Morgan vessels. One complaint was addressed to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Migrants, the second to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the third complaint, for breaches of EU law, was filed with the European Commission.

On 6 June, the Maltese government [said](#) it would allow the people on board all four vessels to disembark in Malta. In a TV [interview](#) on 7 June, Prime Minister Robert Abela stated that this decision was taken after the situation on all four ships became very difficult after a commotion erupted on *Europa II* and that he did not wish to put the lives of the ships' crews at risk.

Stand-offs with NGO and commercial vessels carrying rescued people

In another case demonstrating the lack of a predictable disembarkation mechanism, a wooden boat with 78 people on board was [rescued](#) by the Antigua and Barbuda-flagged merchant vessel *MV Marina St Johns*, on the order of the Maltese authorities, off the coast of Malta on 3 May. After the rescue, the merchant vessel repeatedly [sought](#) instructions on where to disembark the rescued people and requested permission to carry

on with its scheduled voyage to Malta, but it received no response. On 6 May, after no place of safety had been allocated, the ship's lawyers [reported](#) that a knife fight had taken place and that the situation on board was critical. Finally, on 8 May, after a stand-off between Malta and Italy, the Italian authorities issued a place of safety and instructed the merchant vessel to head for Sicily, where the rescued people were transferred for quarantine onto [Moby Zaza](#) near Porto Empedocle on 9 May.

On 4 July, the Lebanese animal cargo vessel *MV Talia* [rescued](#) 52 people under the coordination of the Maltese MRCC but was then [denied](#) permission to disembark them in Malta, pending an agreement with other EU states on their redistribution. After spending four days on board in unsanitary conditions, including in animal stables below deck, the survivors, many of whom required medical assistance, were allowed to disembark in Malta on 8 July.

After conducting four rescue operations and rescuing 181 people between 25 June and 1 July, *Ocean Viking* was involved in a week-long stand-off with the governments of Italy and Malta, during which time SOS MEDITERRANEE [declared](#), for the first time in its history, a state of emergency on board. After 44 people were identified as being in a state of mental distress, two people jumped overboard and had to be rescued and one man attempted suicide, Italian authorities sent a psychologist and a cultural mediator to the ship to assess the severity of the situation. The doctor concluded that he had “been able to see enormous psychological discomfort on the ship such as to consider the situation almost out of control, for guests and crew,” and the *Ocean Viking* was subsequently instructed to proceed to Porto Empedocle, Sicily, where the survivors were disembarked on 7 July and transferred to *Moby Zaza* to start their quarantine.

In fact, in recent months, a place of safety has only once been assigned within 24 hours, when the Italian-flagged *Mare Jonio* [rescued](#) 67 people on 19 June, who were then allowed to [disembark](#) in Pozzallo on 20 June. The speed with which the place of safety was assigned by Italian authorities on this particular instance was hailed by human rights groups, but the fact remains that NGO ships flying non-Italian flags have been repeatedly forced into painful stand-offs, and this is one of the most concerning consequences of states having closed their ports since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The “shameful” failure of the EU’s handling of the crisis

On 17 March the EU Council validated the European Commission’s proposal to introduce restrictions on non-essential travel to the EU. The text, however, included an exemption for people in need of international protection and for other humanitarian reasons. Instead of applying this exemption and fulfilling their obligations in line with UNHCR [guidance](#), European states have stirred up hostility towards NGO search and rescue operations, with countries shutting their ports and leaving little assurance of a place of safety for those seeking refuge in Europe.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, the European Commission has continued to coordinate relocations of rescued people and emphasised that it considers the relocation mechanism as valid. But it has also [confirmed](#) that participation by a substantial number of member states is lacking and has called on member states to show solidarity.

When Germany took over the rotating presidency on 1 July, during an online meeting between EU interior ministers, German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer [underlined](#) that “each boat requires painstaking efforts to achieve a distribution [of migrants] among member states. And each time, only a small number [of member states] is ready to do so”.

[Plans](#) by the European Commission to work with member states to find a more sustainable solution for disembarkation and to “speed up to secure a complete and sustainable EU legal framework for migration

and asylum” have not yet been translated into reality. The presentation of a ‘New Pact on Migration and Asylum’, initially expected in March, has been repeatedly postponed and is currently planned for September.

VI. Malta’s collaboration with the Libyan coastguard and commercial vessels, resulting in pushbacks, interceptions and forced returns to Libya

Evidence is mounting of coordinated and illegal pushbacks, whereby those rescued from boats in distress in the Maltese search and rescue region have been illegally handed over to the Libyan coastguard.

Reports of coordinated pushbacks of boats in distress, involving the MRCCs of European states and the Libyan coastguard, emerged following the events of Easter weekend in April and continued in May and June. On 15 April, 51 people on board a small boat were [returned](#) to Libya by a private fishing vessel after being picked up in the Maltese search and rescue region. By the time the boat was picked up, after having spent at least four days at sea, five people had [died](#) and seven more had disappeared and are presumed have drowned, according to [IOM](#). The survivors were forcibly returned to Tripoli but could not be disembarked for several hours due to shelling in the port area. After eventually disembarking in Tripoli’s Abusitta naval base, they were taken to Tariq Sikka detention centre.

A *New York Times* investigation [uncovered](#) a new tactic deployed by the Maltese authorities to circumvent their legal obligations: the Maltese government has enlisted a “private, clandestine fleet” of at least three private vessels, based in a European port, to intercept boats in international waters in the Maltese search and rescue region and return the people on board to Libya.

In direct reference to this incident, the Office of the UN Human Rights Commissioner [stated](#) that it was “deeply concerned about recent reports of failure to assist and coordinated pushbacks of migrant boats in the central Mediterranean”. The Council of Europe’s Human Rights Commissioner Dunja Mijatović also called on Malta to refrain from any action that would result in the return to and disembarkation in Libya of people intercepted at sea.

In an [official statement](#), Malta disputed these allegations, saying that the boat was in the Libyan, not the Maltese, search and rescue region for “several days”, adding that when it entered the Maltese search and rescue region, the authorities immediately conducted several flights to pinpoint the position of the boat. They say that the boat was first assisted by a commercial vessel and then the survivors were transferred to a Libyan fishing vessel. During this time, according to Malta’s statements, the Armed Forces of Malta were also coordinating four other similar distress cases. The Maltese NGO Repubblika [triggered](#) a criminal enquiry against Malta’s prime minister, Robert Abela, over the deaths and the forced return of survivors to Libya. However, the magisterial inquiry [\[full text\]](#) [cleared](#) the PM, dismissed homicide accusations made against him and the chief of Malta’s army, and found that Malta had abided by its international obligations.

According to a [report](#) by Alarm Phone, on 2 May an EUNAVFOR MED air asset, overseeing the scene from the air, communicated to the Libyan coastguard the exact position of two rubber boats in the Libyan search and rescue region, which were then intercepted and returned to Libya.

On 25 May, 98 people were rescued by the Portuguese-flagged commercial ship *MS Anne* and handed over to the Libyan coastguard two days later on the orders of Maltese authorities, according to Portuguese Foreign Minister Augusto Santos [Silva](#). IOM [confirmed](#) that the 98 people forcibly returned to Libya were then taken to a detention centre.

In fact, Libya is categorically considered unsafe for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. It is not classified as a safe port for disembarkation for those rescued at sea, according to international and European institutions, including the [UN](#), as well as by senior European Commission [officials](#).

Yet, according to [UNHCR](#), more than 6,000 people have been intercepted and forcibly returned to Libya since the beginning of the year, as part of a bilateral deal financed and facilitated by the EU.

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) [signed](#) by Malta and Libya on 28 May (see below) risks paving the way for further pushbacks and an increased role by the Libyan coastguard in stopping migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from reaching European shores.

Dangerous disembarkations

On multiple occasions in recent months, disembarkations from Libyan coastguard vessels of people intercepted at sea have been delayed due to active shelling in the vicinity of ports. For example, on 9 April, 280 people returned by the Libyan coastguard to Tripoli port had to remain on the overcrowded coastguard vessel after Libyan authorities [refused](#) to let them disembark due to shelling in the area of the port. IOM Libya's chief of mission Federico Soda said: "The situation is tragic. Hundreds of people, drained after a perilous 72-hour journey, will spend the night on an overcrowded boat in tense circumstances".

One month later, on 8 May, 25 people again [could not be disembarked](#) for hours due to shelling around Tripoli port. On 28 July, three Sudanese boys and young men, aged from 15 to 18, were shot and killed by Libyan authorities at a disembarkation site in Al Khums. UNHCR [confirmed](#) that the shooting occurred after more than 70 people were disembarked from a vessel and called for an investigation into the incident. The [shooting](#) clearly exposed the deadly risks faced by those intercepted and forcibly returned to Libya.

Once people are disembarked in Libya, it is very difficult to know what happens to them. In a [statement](#) on 17 April, IOM expressed "grave concerns for the fate of hundreds of migrants returned to Libya by the coastguard this year who are now unaccounted for". The organisation highlighted that the majority end up in unofficial detention centres to which IOM has no access, adding that, despite multiple requests, Libyan authorities have not provided any clear account as to the whereabouts of these people or why they were taken to unofficial detention facilities. IOM stated that "multiple credible reports from migrant communities in contact with IOM allege detainees are being handed over to smugglers and tortured in an effort to extort payments from their families, abuses that have been extensively documented by the media and UN agencies in the past". On 24 July, IOM [confirmed](#) that at least 2,300 people are detained in state-run Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) centres, expressing "grave concern" for their health and safety.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has [called](#) for a moratorium on all interceptions and returns to Libya, in accordance with its recent [guidelines](#) on COVID-19 and migrants. The High Commissioner has also recommended an end to cooperation with the Libyan coastguard and for search and rescue operations to be maintained and swift disembarkation ensured in a port of safety, while ensuring compatibility with public health measures.

EU support for the Libyan coastguard to continue

Malta, however, has completely ignored these recommendations and on 28 May [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding (MoU) [full text [here](#)] with the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya.

The MoU, which entered into force on 1 July, foresees the creation of two coordination centres (one in Valletta, one in Tripoli) financed by the Maltese government to liaise between the two capitals and offer "support relating to combating illegal immigration in Libya and the Mediterranean". The MoU also provides for a proposal to EU member states to "increase the financial support to help GNA in securing Libya's southern border and the provision of necessary technologies for border control and protection", while Malta, in coordination with the EU, "shall propose funding towards additional maritime assets necessary for the interception and follow-up of human trafficking activities in the SAR region" in the Mediterranean. Even

though the MoU states that its implementation “should not contravene with rights and obligations under other international conventions signed by either party”, no reference is made to the principle of non-refoulement.

On 7 July, the Italian parliament also [approved](#) the renewal of its immigration agreement with Libya, a central part of which deals with migration controls and support to the Libyan coastguard. A sum of €58 million has been earmarked, €10 million of which will go to the bilateral mission to assist the Libyan coastguard (€3 million more than last year). Since the MoU was first signed in 2017, €22 million has gone directly to support the Libyan coastguard. The move came as Italian Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese visited Tripoli for high-level talks aimed at boosting collaboration between the two countries in the area of border control.

The EU has also been callous in the face of the multiple reports exposing the deadly risks faced by those returned to Libya by the Libyan coastguard. In fact, on 13 July, at the EU Member States and African Partners conference on countering smuggling, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson made concerning [remarks](#) regarding interceptions by the Libyan coastguard in her opening statement, saying that “the Libyan coastguard has been working actively in the last weeks to disrupt the activities of smugglers” and “we should continue capacity building and training for coastguards and providing equipment”. She also glossed over the chequered human rights track record of the Libyan coastguard and the fact that people intercepted at sea are forcibly returned to Libya where their lives are at risk.

VII. A crisis within a crisis in Libya

Over the past year, since the April 2019 start of the conflict between Libya’s competing two governments, the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Tobruk-based authorities, tens of thousands of Libyan families have been displaced, dozens of civilians and health workers have been killed, health facilities have been damaged or destroyed, and the most vulnerable people of all – migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – have been caught in the crossfire, left with virtually no way out from Libya. The conflict intensified in April and May 2020 in and around Tripoli, but eased in early June after General Khalifa Haftar’s forces withdrew from their positions in and around the capital. Still, thousands more people have been displaced since June from Tripoli and surrounding towns, with at least 16,000 people forced to flee their homes in the town of Tarhuna and in southern Tripoli.

Hundreds of people have been killed as a result of the conflict – among them dozens of civilians, including children. Between January and 30 June, 358 civilian casualties – 106 deaths and 252 injuries – were recorded by the [UN](#) due to indiscriminate attacks on areas populated by civilians in Tripoli and its surroundings. Among the victims were migrants and refugees. Civilian infrastructure has also been deliberately targeted, resulting in water and electricity cuts and leaving people with no access to basic services. Hospitals have been hit by shelling. Of the 20 direct and indirect attacks on health workers, ambulances and health facilities recorded in 2020, 13 took place in April and May alone. Al-Khadra general hospital in Tripoli was [hit](#) on 6, 7 and 9 April, damaging the 400-bed hospital, which had been assigned as a potential COVID-19 health facility.

As of 24 July, 1,634 people in Libya [are](#) actively infected with COVID-19, 489 have recovered and 53 have died from the virus. The World Health Organization (WHO) has [classified](#) Libya as among the high-risk countries in the region. In the wake of the confirmation of the first cases and the announcement of lockdown, many health centres closed due to a lack of training in dealing with COVID-19, a lack of protective personal equipment (PPE) and an absence of clear instructions or guidelines. Around 75% of health facilities in the country are [not functioning](#) to capacity due to shortages of staff, the need for maintenance and repairs, or because they are inaccessible due to the security situation. In the facilities that are open, there are shortages of medicines, equipment and staff to provide critical services. Many health workers, especially in the south, are staying away from work because they have no PPE to protect themselves from possible infection.

This situation has had the hardest impact on the most vulnerable people, including displaced people, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, who are already in an extremely precarious situation and exposed to life-threatening risks, including arbitrary arrest and detention in inhumane conditions, human trafficking, abuse and exploitation. It is not clear whether and how these vulnerable groups will have access to health services in the case of a major outbreak of the virus. Many refugees and migrants are unaware of how and where to seek medical care if they have COVID-19 symptoms, and many fear that seeking care could lead to discrimination, being reported to the authorities and being detained.

The 2,300 people currently [held](#) in detention centres across Libya are detained in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions with poor access to food and water and no actual possibility of physical distancing. Visits by humanitarian organisations to these detention centres have been further reduced due to movement restrictions related to COVID-19 and insecurity. MSF teams operating in Dhar Al-Jebel detention centre [confirm](#) that a 39-year-old man from Eritrea who was reportedly [returned](#) by the Libyan coastguard in 2018 died of a suspected heatstroke while in detention. An attack on Dhar Al-Jebel detention centre on 7 June, which caused the death of one guard, is a reminder of the insecurity and constant threat to detainees of being killed or severely wounded. On 20 July a group of armed men [fired](#) on guards at Zintan detention centre, southwest of Tripoli, in an attempt to kidnap people who had been held inside for some years.

Of the hundreds of thousands of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants estimated to be in Libya, the vast majority live outside detention centres but their living conditions are precarious and they are at constant risk of arbitrary arrest and detention, trafficking, exploitation and intentional violence. On 27 May, 30 people were [killed](#) and 11 were injured in Mizdah, a town in the south of Libya, when the relatives of a human trafficker who had been killed opened fired on people held in a smuggling warehouse. Movement restrictions related to COVID-19 and insecurity due to the conflict have also affected migrants' ability to earn a living and the capacity of UN agencies and NGOs to deliver humanitarian aid.

Conclusion

Over the past six months, the actions of European states in the Central Mediterranean Sea have shown the extent to which they are prepared to go to stop migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from reaching European shores, in blatant disregard for international law, including refugee, maritime and human rights law. Maltese and Italian authorities have exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to justify the closure of their ports to people rescued at sea, have delayed providing assistance to a number of boats in distress and have repeatedly put at risk the lives of people attempting to flee Libya. At the same time, other states have done too little to support frontline states and have reneged on their commitment to support a predictable and sustainable mechanism for the swift disembarkation of people rescued at sea and to participate in their relocation, as agreed in Valetta in 2019.

Recent state measures to discourage or block lifesaving activities in the Central Mediterranean, including through the decision to impound NGO search and rescue vessels, are cloaked in public health rhetoric, but are actually a cynical rebranding of a failed and dangerous migration policy. Recent months have clearly demonstrated that, even when there are no rescue ships at sea, people still risk their lives trying to cross the Central Mediterranean in flimsy rubber dinghies and wooden boats. For many, this deadly crossing is a last resort. The lack of search and rescue capacity only serves to make the risks they endure more extreme.

APPENDIX: Timeline of key events – February – July 2020

Steps taken by the EU to avoid saving lives at sea

17 February: EU foreign ministers [take](#) the decision to end EUNAVFOR MED (European Naval Force Mediterranean) Operation Sophia as of 31 March 2020.

1 April: EUNAVFOR MED Operation Irini [is launched](#) in the Central Mediterranean with the aim of enforcing the UN's arms embargo on Libya.

6 April: The German government [asks](#) German search and rescue NGOs not to return to sea and to recall ships already at sea.

8 April: Italy [closes](#) its ports to NGO vessels carrying rescued people and flying non-Italian flags.

11 April: The Maltese government [announces](#) the closure of Malta's ports.

28 May: Malta and the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya [sign](#) a memorandum of understanding (MoU) focused on "combating illegal immigration in Libya and the Mediterranean".

7 July: The Italian parliament [approves](#) the renewal of its cooperation agreement with Libya to further control migration from Libya.

Rescues by NGO search and rescue ships

18-19 February: *Ocean Viking*, operated by MSF and SOS MEDITERRANEE, [rescues](#) 276 people in three operations. The survivors are [disembarked](#) in Pozzallo, Sicily, on 23 February and begin their quarantine. The ship and its crew are also put in quarantine.

6 April: Sea Eye's *Alan Kurdi* [rescues](#) 150 people. Following an 11-day stand-off with authorities, during which one person [attempts](#) suicide and three people are medevacked, the ship is instructed to [transfer](#) the 147 remaining survivors to the *Rubattino* ferry, off the coast of Palermo, which it does on 17 April.

14 April: Salvamento Marítimo Humanitario's *Aita Mari* [rescues](#) 43 people from a boat in distress 53 nautical miles from Malta after four days in which neither Maltese nor Italian authorities provide assistance. The 43 survivors are [transferred](#) to the *Rubattino* ferry on 19 April.

17, 18, 19 June: *Sea-Watch 3* [rescues](#) 211 people in three separate operations. The survivors are [transferred](#) to the *Moby Zaza* quarantine ship near Porto Empedocle, Sicily, on 21 June. The ship and its crew are put in quarantine.

25 June, 30 June, 1 July: *Ocean Viking*, now operated solely by SOS MEDITERRANEE, [rescues](#) 181 people in three separate operations. After seven requests within a week for a place of safety to the relevant maritime authorities, and following six suicide attempts by survivors within the space of 24 hours, *Ocean Viking* [declares](#) a state of emergency on the vessel on 3 July and is finally allowed to disembark the rescued people, who are [transferred](#) to *Moby Zaza* on 7 July for quarantine.

Operations by rescue ships impeded

17 April: MSF and SOS MEDITERRANEE [announce](#) the end of their partnership on *Ocean Viking*.

6 May: Italian authorities [impound](#) *Alan Kurdi* at the port of Palermo, citing “irregularities of a technical and operational nature”.

7 May: Italian authorities [impound](#) *Aita Mari* at the port of Palermo, citing “technical and operational” irregularities.

9 July: Italian authorities [impound](#) *Sea-Watch 3*, citing “various technical and operational irregularities”.

22 July: Italian authorities [impound](#) *Ocean Viking*, operated by SOS MEDITERRANEE, at the port of Porto Empedocle.

Autonomous arrivals in Italy

12 April: A boat with 101 people on board [arrives](#) autonomously at Pozzallo, Sicily, while a second boat with 77 people on board [reaches](#) Porto Palo, Sicily, after receiving no assistance from maritime authorities.

22-24 July: Almost 1,000 people [arrive](#) on Lampedusa from Tunisia and Libya, with as many as 14 boats arriving on the night of 24 July.

Fatalities at sea

9 February: At least 91 people reportedly [die](#) or go missing when a boat capsizes off the coast of Garabouli in Libya, leaving no survivors.

14 April: 12 people [die](#) or go missing in the Maltese search and rescue region after a boat spends six days adrift without receiving assistance from Maltese authorities. The survivors are eventually picked up by a commercial ship and handed over to Libyan authorities.

23 May: A boat carrying 20 Tunisians [capsizes](#) off Sfax, Tunisia; one person is confirmed dead and six are reported missing.

9 June: A boat with 73 people on board [capsizes](#) off the coast of Graten, Tunisia; there are no survivors.

13 June: A boat [capsizes](#) off the coast of Zawiya, Libya, leaving 12 people missing, including two children.

20 June: A shipwreck off the coast of Tripoli, Libya, claims the lives of at least five people; 19 survivors are rescued by a fisherman and [taken](#) to an unofficial detention centre in Libya.

8 July: Seven people go [missing](#) when a boat with 25 people on board drifts for at least seven days; 18 survivors are returned to Libya by the Libyan coastguard; four are in a critical condition and are taken to hospital.

Delayed rescues

14 March: Malta [reportedly delays](#) the rescue of 110 people in the Maltese search and rescue region for more than 18 hours.

8 April: A boat with 66 people on board is rescued by the Armed Forces of Malta almost 40 hours after its first distress call. According to [Alarm Phone](#), instead of rescuing the people immediately, the Armed Forces of Malta use aerial assets to observe the boat in distress.

10 April: The Libyan coastguard intercepts a boat 12 hours after its first distress call, after the Italian maritime rescue coordination centre reportedly dispatches aerial assets to monitor the wooden boat, but [does not](#) take coordinating responsibility to conduct a rescue.

11 April: The Armed Forces of Malta reportedly [turn away](#) at gunpoint a boat with 101 people on board, before providing them with fuel and the GPS coordinates to reach Italy. The boat [reaches](#) Pozzallo, Sicily, on 12 April.

13 July: Aerial pictures taken by Sea-Watch's Moonbird on 13 July [reveal](#) an Italian coastguard vessel and a commercial cargo ship, *Karewood Star*, apparently ignoring a boat in distress only a mile away from their position. The boat is eventually rescued two days later by an Italian Guardia di Finanza military ship.

23 July: The Armed Forces of Malta rescue 95 people from a sinking dinghy between Libya and Malta after [letting them drift](#) for more than two days. Sixty-five of the survivors [test](#) positive for COVID-19.

26 July: The Armed Forces of Malta [rescue](#) 95 people from an overcrowded rubber dinghy more than 33 hours after its first distress call.

28 July: Libyan authorities [fail to take](#) on the coordination of a rescue operation in their own search and rescue region. The Italian maritime rescue coordination centre sends its naval unit Asso29 to conduct the rescue of 84 people from a dinghy which, by that time, has almost entirely sunk.

Cooperation with commercial vessels for the forcible return of people to Libya

25 May: 98 people are rescued in Libya's search and rescue region by the Portuguese-flagged commercial ship *MS Anne*; two days later they are [handed](#) over to the Libyan coastguard on the order of Maltese authorities.

14 April: 51 people on a boat in distress are [picked](#) up by a private Maltese fishing vessel, *Dar Al Salam 1*; they are returned to Libya and taken to Takiq Al-Sikka detention centre.

30 April: A *New York Times* investigation [reveals](#) that in April Maltese authorities dispatched a small fleet of private merchant vessels, including the *Dar Al Salam 1*, to intercept people at sea and return them by force to Libya. A former high-ranking Maltese official, Neville Gafa', [admits](#) under oath that he coordinated the 14 April pushback of 51 people on the instructions of the Office of the Prime Minister

Use of offshore vessels to hold rescued people in Italy and Malta

17 April: Italian authorities start using the privately chartered *Rubattino* ferry to quarantine people rescued at sea, as a first group of 146 survivors are transferred from *Alan Kurdi* to the ferry.

13 May: Italian authorities start using a second privately chartered vessel, *Moby Zaza*, to quarantine people rescued at sea.

22 May: A Tunisian man held on board *Moby Zaza* [jumps](#) off the ship in an effort to swim to land; he drowns.

30 April – 6 June: Maltese authorities start to hold people rescued at sea between 30 April and 7 May on four privately chartered Captain Morgan Cruises ferries, stationed 13 nautical miles offshore. The 425 people arbitrarily detained on the ships are finally [allowed](#) to disembark in Malta on 6 June; some have spent more than five weeks on the private vessels.

Life-threatening disembarkations in Libya

9 April: 280 people returned by the Libyan coastguard to Tripoli remain on the overcrowded coastguard vessel after Libyan authorities [refuse](#) to let them disembark due to active shelling in the port area.

8 May: 25 people [cannot](#) be disembarked for hours due to shelling around Tripoli port.

24 July: IOM [confirms](#) that at least 2,300 people, many of whom were returned to Libya by the coastguard, are detained in state-run Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) centres in Libya; IOM expresses “grave concern” for their health and safety.

28 July: Three Sudanese boys and young men aged 15 to 18 are [shot](#) by Libyan authorities at a disembarkation site in Al Khums after being returned by the Libyan coastguard.

KEY NUMBERS AND STATISTICS

- So far in 2020, **295** people have lost their lives in the Central Mediterranean. In June alone at least **101** people [died](#) or were reported missing, including **six** children.
- As of 3 August 2020, **14,438** sea arrivals to Italy have been [recorded](#) so far this year (including autonomous arrivals, disembarkations from NGO ships, Italian coastguard and commercial ships), representing a 268% increase on the same period in 2019, when there were 3,920 arrivals.
- According to [UNHCR](#), from 1 January to 30 June 2020, a total of **1,699** people were rescued at sea and disembarked in Malta. This is a 33% increase on sea arrivals in the same period last year (1,276).
- So far in 2020, **2,175** people have been reportedly rescued from the Central Mediterranean by search and rescue NGOs (524 by *Sea-Watch 3*; 864 by *Ocean Viking*; 196 by *Aita Mari*; 228 by *Alan Kurdi*; and 363 by *Open Arms*).
- This year, Italian authorities have impounded **four** ships (*Aita Mari*, *Alan Kurdi*, *Sea-Watch 3*, and *Ocean Viking*) in ports in Sicily, citing “irregularities” of a technical and operational nature.
- As of 30 July 2020, **6,265** people have been [intercepted](#) and forcibly returned to Libya by the Libyan coastguard. The majority were taken to detention centres. As of 24 July, around **2,300** refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are currently [detained](#) in official detention centres.

