



**LEFT TO DROWN IN THE
SOUTHERN EUROPEAN BORDER:**

**ONE YEAR OF *GEO
BARENTS* AT SEA**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May 2021, Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) relaunched search and rescue activities in the Central Mediterranean, chartering our own ship, the *Geo Barents*, to save lives, provide emergency medical care to rescued people, as well as make survivors' voices heard from the world's deadliest sea border. Our vessel is fully equipped for rescue operations, and our activities are carried out by our specifically trained staff including a search and rescue team, a medical team (including mental health), and a humanitarian affairs officer and cultural mediators who ensure identification of protection needs.

Between June 2021 and May 2022, the *Geo Barents* sailed out 11 times and conducted 47 rescue operations to assist people in overcrowded, and unseaworthy boats, some of which were already taking on water. No instructions or assistance were provided by European coastal states during these rescues. MSF rescued a total of 3,138 people and conducted 6,536 medical consultations for primary healthcare, sexual and reproductive healthcare and mental health support on board. The vast majority of rescued people had fled Libya. Many of them reported having survived violence, torture and/or ill treatment.

MSF teams were also made aware of, and/or witnessed, several interceptions and forced returns to Libya: evidence of the systematic abstention of the Italian and Maltese authorities from conducting and coordinating rescues of boats in distress resulting in forcible returns of people to Libya via proxies, in contravention of search and rescue obligations under international law.

During the reporting period, 94 per cent of the boats in distress from which people were rescued were spotted directly from the bridge of the *Geo Barents* or following distress alerts relayed by civil society rescue initiatives. Only six per cent of the alerts were relayed by a rescue coordination centre (RCC), private vessel or another aerial asset. Survivors reported being stranded at sea without rescue for up to 72 hours, often under extremely challenging weather conditions. MSF medical teams on board also treated morbidities directly related to the dangerous journey itself, and recovered the bodies of 10 people who had died during their journey on a wooden boat, most likely due to intoxication by fuel fumes on the wooden boat's lower deck.

Since MSF's return to the Central Mediterranean in June 2021, our teams have continued to bear witness to the normalisation of stand-offs at sea and the consequent exacerbation of human suffering. Throughout the 11 rescue missions conducted in the reporting time, our team submitted multiple requests to the Italian and Maltese authorities to designate a place of safety for survivors to disembark. Requests to the Maltese authorities were systematically ignored or denied; while those to the Italian authorities were met with increasing delay. Stand-offs at sea obstruct survivors' timely access to full assessment of their medical and protection needs, and prolong the suffering of those identified as requiring urgent further care and protection.



MSF ASKS THAT:



European Union (EU) institutions and member states' governments, and the Italian and Maltese authorities, **put an end to this appalling cycle of death and human suffering**



The EU and its member states **reinstate and implement a dedicated search and rescue operation**, with the clear mandate to save lives in the Central Mediterranean, including ensuring adequate rescue operations, deploying vessels to international waters (inclusive of the area currently designated as the Libyan search and rescue region), and guaranteeing accountability for violations of international law



EU member states—in particular Malta and Italy—and Libya **ensure timely disembarkation of survivors in a place of safety** for appropriate access to care, a fair asylum process and safe accommodation for all persons rescued at sea. As repeatedly acknowledged by international bodies, including the United Nations and the EU Commission, **Libya is currently not a safe place for the purpose of disembarkation of people rescued at sea**



The EU and its member states **put an end to policies of deterrence** and immediately cease cooperation, training and any support by EU-funded agencies and assets to the Libyan coastguard or other proxies that **result in forced returns, violence, death, or violations of human rights and international law**



EU member states and, in particular, Italy **stop the criminalisation and administrative harassment** of civilian search and rescue operations and **facilitate the work of search and rescue non-governmental organisations (NGOs)**



EU and its member states **invest in safe passage** for every person seeking safety in Europe, and ensure **safe and legal pathways** for migration, protection, family reunification, resettlement, humanitarian visas and pathways for work and study



European civil societies challenge the deafening silence around the normalisation of the policy of non-assistance in the Central Mediterranean, and join MSF's calls for accountability, investment in rescue at sea and respect for human rights



Libya immediately **releases all arbitrarily detained migrants, refugees and asylum seekers** rescued at sea and forcibly returned to Libya



■ The policemen, the coastguard, the army never care about us. They just kept us in that place... So some men tried to break the door and run away. They started shooting. Because of the shooting, two men were shot dead. Others were beaten severely. Guns break their heads... They beat me a lot, they all beat you. Until you faint. Until you collapse... So many severe punishments in that country... Why is the European Union supporting these people? I said, 'God, please help me'... If Nigeria was safe, I wouldn't be in this land... So when I was preparing for this third time, I said, 'God, I'd rather die in the sea than be returned back to Libyan detention centres'. I cried, I cried. So, for this third time, I boarded another boat. ■■

- A man (25 years) from Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2022, MSF is running search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean for the seventh consecutive year¹, chartering the *Geo Barents*, to save lives, provide emergency medical care to people rescued, as well as make survivors' voices heard from the world's deadliest sea border.

As states abdicate their responsibility to enact a proactive search and rescue mechanism in the Central Mediterranean, MSF and other humanitarian ships, are left to fill a crucial gap. Our presence in the Central Mediterranean is a direct result of a shameful and increasing disengagement of European states from proactive search and rescue naval capacity from the Mediterranean Sea.

Coastal states Italy and Malta, systematically disregard their obligation to provide assistance to boats in

distress, by not implementing a dedicated search and rescue operation inclusive of a clear mandate to save lives in the Central Mediterranean. Instead, European states have co-opted the Libyan coastguard to patrol large areas of the Central Mediterranean. Propping up the capacity of the Libyan coastguard became the focus of Europe's response to the crisis in the Mediterranean Sea, effectively supporting forced returns to Libya where detention and abuse are the norm. "Search and rescue" operations conducted by the Libyan coastguard de facto result in forced returns to Libya, when Libya is not a place of safety and where people are at risk of cruel, degrading and inhuman treatment.

Despite deaths and forced returns to Libya rising in 2021, the Council of the European Union has insisted that 'EU support for the Libyan coastguard is paying

Key Figures (2017-2021):



¹ <https://searchandrescue.msf.org/> [all links in the report were accessed on: 17/5/2022].

off², while the EU Commission's 'Renewed EU action plan against migrant smuggling 2021-2025' invests further in securitisation, policing and solidifying collaboration with unsafe third countries³.

Adults and children have been left to drift or drown as EU Frontex border patrol aircraft circle above, sharing their coordinates with the Libyan coastguard so that they can be returned to Libya, while failing to systematically provide this information to nearby vessels able to provide assistance, including NGO search and rescue ships. MSF is outraged by the normalisation of this policy of non-assistance and condemns the systematic denial of European coastal states to fulfil their maritime duties and human rights obligations at sea.

Since June 2021 when MSF re-launched search and rescue operations with the *Geo Barents*, our teams have continued to witness first-hand the dangerous situation faced by people crossing the Central Mediterranean and the critical, urgent need for search and rescue.

Throughout the course of our operations, MSF teams have documented several occasions on which coastal states have implicitly or explicitly refused to assist boats in distress, including in their own search and rescue region (SRR). During the rescue operations conducted between June 2021 and May 2022, the MSF team on board the *Geo Barents* assisted 47 overcrowded and unseaworthy boats, some of which were already taking on water, when no instructions nor assistance from European coastal states was provided.

Geo Barents Stats (June 2021-May 2022):



183 operational days



25 days of administrative detention



45 days of quarantine imposed



45 days of stand-off in the Italian search and rescue region



11 rescue missions



47 rescue operations



3,138 people rescued from boats in distress



1,078 children rescued of whom **929** were unaccompanied



265 survivors of violence, torture and ill treatment



6,536 medical consultations



192 mental health consultations

Following this last year of operations at sea, MSF highlights the detrimental medical and humanitarian impact of dismantling search and rescue capacity in the Central Mediterranean. European investment in the forced return of people to Libya has resulted in the erosion of lifesaving assistance at sea, the coordination of rescues and the assignment, as soon as reasonably practicable, of a place of safety for survivors. This policy has been accompanied by the criminalisation and deliberate obstruction of civil society search and rescue initiatives.

Between June 2021 and May 2022, MSF's ship was blocked from conducting lifesaving operations by the Italian authorities for a total of 115 days (25 days of administrative detention, 45 days of imposed discriminatory quarantine on the ship and 45 days of stand-offs at sea). In this report, we aim to highlight the continuous harm caused by European policies of deterrence enacted in the Central Mediterranean.

² <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/info/graphics/eu-action-migration-libya/>.

³ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/renewed-eu-action-plan-against-migrant-smuggling-2021-2025-com-2021-591_en

1.1 METHODOLOGY

The analysis contained in this report relies on the data and testimonies of rescued people, as told to MSF teams on board the *Geo Barents* between June 2021 and May 2022. Data related to people's nationality, age, gender and specific vulnerabilities was regularly collected by the humanitarian affairs team on board. Data on medical morbidities and medical referrals is drawn from MSF's routine medical data collection system, adapted to capture variables related to this context and operation. Our data likely represents an underestimation of the true scale of medical conditions and vulnerabilities, considering the environment in which it was collected (factors such as the large number of people on board, consecutive search and rescue operations, rough weather conditions and the stressor of being on board a ship, which affected the survivors' ability or likelihood to disclose information and/or sometimes our staff's ability to collect it). All data in this report, and the processes used to collect it, comply with MSF's data collection policy and respect medical confidentiality.

The analysis in this report is further based on details recorded in daily logbooks during search and rescue operations, and official communications with the national maritime authorities, other NGOs operating in the Central Mediterranean and/or private vessels.

Sixty-seven testimonies of people rescued by MSF were collected by MSF humanitarian affairs staff on board throughout the same period. Interviews were conducted following the provision of informed verbal consent and were carried out in English, French or the spoken language of the interviewees (with the translation of a cultural mediator where necessary). Names and other personal identifiers of the survivors have been changed to protect their identities and privacy.



What amazes me the most is hearing, from men women and children who have just survived the most lethal sea crossing on earth, the countless accounts of dreadful human rights violations in Libya. And yet, they still find the strength to show their humanity and solidarity with us on board... This is a true lesson that I wish all European decision-makers should learn, when they purposefully leave them to die at sea or return them to where crimes against humanity are believed to unfold.

- Julie Melichar, MSF humanitarian affairs officer on board the *Geo Barents*.



2. MSF ACTIVITIES ON BOARD OF THE *GEO BARENTS*

From June 2021 until May 2022, MSF rescued 3,138 people who were at immediate risk of drowning in the Central Mediterranean.

MSF medical teams on board conducted 6,536 medical consultations for primary healthcare, sexual and reproductive healthcare and mental health support.

The vast majority of survivors rescued had fled Libya, but originated from countries facing protracted conflict, war or extreme poverty, such as Eritrea, Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, Bangladesh and Egypt. Overall, survivors came from 33 different countries. Compounding vulnerabilities and significantly high levels of trauma were identified by our medical and humanitarian teams on board.

Of the survivors rescued, 34 per cent were children. Of those, 89 per cent were unaccompanied and/or separated from their families. A total of 265 people

reported having suffered some form of violence, torture or ill treatment, although the true number is estimated to be much higher. Among these people, 63 reported having experienced sexual and other forms of gender-based violence (SGBV). Between June 2021 and May 2022, our medical and humanitarian teams recorded 620 incidents of violence perpetrated against or witnessed by survivors, including physical assault, torture, forced disappearance, kidnapping, arbitrary arrest and detention. Most of these incidents (84 per cent) had occurred in Libya, but had also occurred during Libyan coastguard interceptions and forced returns.

Our teams have also witnessed the structural violence embedded in the dismantling of the search and rescue mechanism in the Central Mediterranean. Survivors were compelled to remain on board our ship for several days following rescue, deprived of access to adequate care and protection.



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■ ■ At daybreak, maybe 7am, the Frontex drone passed by. We were going, all three boats together... The Frontex agent came and circled the three boats. And then some time later, the Libyans arrived... Every time we were intercepted on the water it was this drone... We arrived in Tripoli at 3pm. There they split us up... At Ain Zara, we arrived... They made us sit in the yard. They searched us, those who had money or phones were taken away. Everything important they took away. We went in. That night there was no light and no water. Some time later they came to give food. Small bowl, small plate... You eat five people inside. There was no water, we couldn't wash our hands. We just dipped our hands in the plate and ate... In Ain Zara I did one month. I left there with an infection on my lip. I still have the scar on the inside... I couldn't sleep because my lip was so swollen... I couldn't see a doctor, no matter how much I screamed. They told me to go to the toilet, not to look at myself. It was really bad. ■ ■

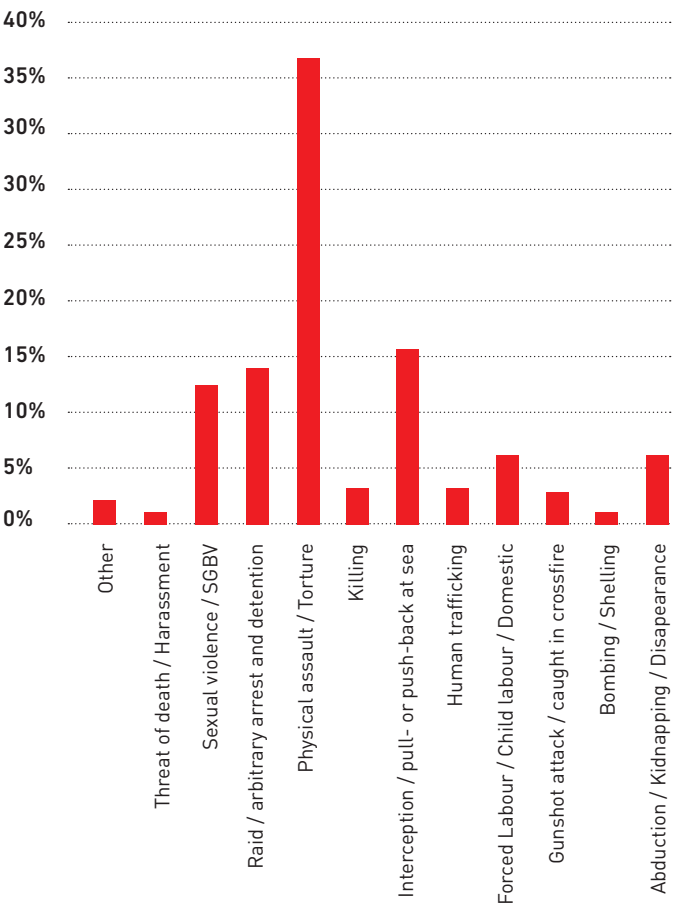
- A man (17 years) from Cameroon

3. LOOKING FOR SAFETY, RETURNED TO LIBYA: THE HUMAN COST OF RETURN TO LIBYA

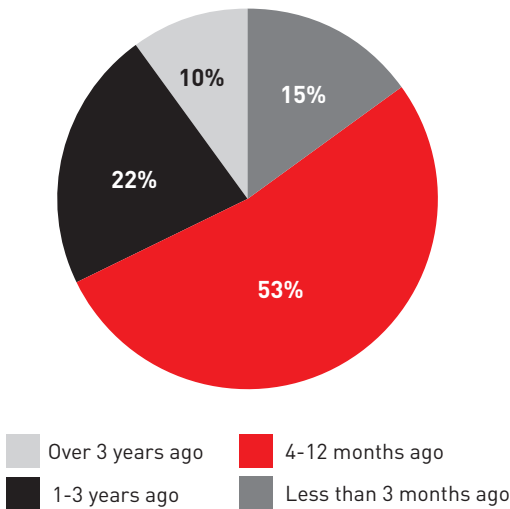
MSF teams have documented the brutal impact and the harrowing accounts of violence inflicted upon thousands of adults and children trapped between the sea and being forcibly returned to Libya. 265 survivors rescued during our operations found the courage to tell us about no less than 620 violent events they were forcefully involved in. Many others could provide similar stories. 84 per cent of the events were perpetrated in Libya. Of the violent incidents reported to have occurred in Libya or during interceptions and returns, 34 per cent were perpetrated by guards in detention centres, 15 per cent by the coastguard, 11 per cent by non-state or military police and 10 per cent by smugglers/traffickers. Our teams documented significant levels of violence against women and children: 29 per cent of those who reported violence were minors, the youngest eight years old; 18 per cent were women. A total of 68 per cent of the violent events reportedly occurred within the last year before rescue. The most prevalent (a total of 50 per cent) of health consequences of the recorded violent events were linked to blunt trauma, burns, fractures, head injuries, injuries related to sexual violence and mental health disorders. Others included long-term physical disability, unwanted pregnancies, malnutrition and chronic pain. A number of these events occurred after people were intercepted by the Libyan coastguard and subsequently locked up in Libyan detention centres.

Survivors also reported having suffered violence during their forced return to Libya by the Libyan coastguard. Between June 2021 and May 2022, our medical and humanitarian teams recorded 95 violent incidents during these returns and relating to the conduct of the Libyan coastguard. The most common methods of violence reported were beatings with belts, wooden sticks or ropes, threats at gunpoint or shooting. Survivors reported having been forcibly returned to Libya between one and seven times prior to their rescue by the *Geo Barents*. Most survivors reported that they were taken to official or unofficial detention centres after being returned to Libya.

Type of violence (June 2021-May 2022):



Reported time of incident:





■ ■ We were launched at 11pm, the second time. We were 45 people. On a black boat, I think. At 9am, [they] came... Among those who were on the Libyan boat, there was a man who had launched us at night... He was a muscular person. He was dressed in beige fatigues. He had a gun on him. He was among four other people on the boat, all dressed in these fatigues. They were speaking in Arabic. This guy, I saw him on the beach at night and then on the Libyan boat... They shot in the air. They said, "You stop now". We stopped. They gave us a rope to tie up our boat. And they made us get on the boat one by one. They searched us in the boat. They took our phones. Around 7pm we arrived in Zawiya... After three days, they put us in a prison in a basement. There was no food or drink. This was Osama's prison. Roshofana. ■ ■

- A man (20 years) from Côte D'Ivoire

Most capsizing happens because of the Libyan coastguard. They chase people and push the boats. It's very dangerous. They kidnap people back to Libya and are locking them up in prisons. No one is keeping trace of the number of people that die there. I should tell you about 120 people in a zodiac, a rubber boat. Only nine survived! It was somewhere between January – March 2021. The Libyan coastguard came to take people back to Libya. They use ropes to attach to the boats and then pull you back to Libya. They dragged the boat, but only nine people survived by hanging onto the boat. The others all drowned. They didn't stop to help them, they left the people to drown. The day we crossed, I had already decided I would fight the Libyan coastguard in the sea, if they had come. ■■

- A man (31 years) from Nigeria





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The forced return of people to Libya has been systematically documented by other civil society groups conducting or supporting search and rescue activities in the Central Mediterranean⁴. MSF teams in Libya provide medical assistance at two disembarkation points in Tripoli, where they have assisted some of the more than 8,000 people forcibly returned to Libya since the 2021 summer, in which time the Libyan coastguard has carried out over 70 operations. Between June 2021 and January 2022, MSF teams on board the *Geo Barents* were made aware of and/or witnessed at least 19 interceptions and forced returns to Libya. The forced return of one group of people who had survived a shipwreck was conducted by a private vessel 'Alegria 1', which had previously performed the rescue with the involvement of the EU Naval Force - Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED). The *Geo Barents*, being present in the area, offered medical support and informed the captain of the obligation to deliver the four survivors to a place of safety. Despite this offer, and contrary to international obligations, the survivors (who had reportedly witnessed the death of around 90 other people during the shipwreck) were forcibly returned to Libya⁵.

■ ■ *I was held for one year in Al Khofra, in Libya, and then was taken to Bani Walid where I was held for three months. I was held captive against my will by Libyan smugglers. They did not wear uniforms. Their faces were covered, only their eyes were visible. Many other Somalis were captives. Only Somalis. They put us in a windowless room, cramped, with no food or water and a bucket for a toilet. They had cameras in the walls. Men were standing on the roof with guns. Men with guns everywhere. They beat us, all the time. Throwing us, women, on the ground, ripping our clothes, kicking us, pulling out hair, using electricity and metal wires. I was forced to work as a domestic worker at the houses of the Libyans. I was a hostage. Once money ran out, I was tortured. Libyan men locked me in the house...Except for torture, we have no choice but to rely on God. Nothing happened to us except torture.* ■ ■

- A woman (19 years) from Somalia

⁴ Indicatively see: <https://alarmphone.org/en/2022/03/02/migrant-resistance-against-yet-another-new-level-of-brutality/>. See also: <https://sea-watch.org/airborne-monthly-factsheet-december-2021-january-2022/>.

⁵ <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/latest/europe-continues-turn-its-back-refugees-and-migrants-fleeing-libya>. For more on privatized forced returns, see: Heller C., Pezzani, L., "The Other Boats: State and Nonstate Vessels at the EU's Maritime Frontier", in Walters, W., Heller, C., Pezzani, L. (eds), *Viapolitics: Borders, Migration, and the Power of Locomotion*, New York, USA, Duke University Press, 2021, pp 211- 234.

Throughout recent years, the EU-trained Libyan coastguard has resorted to attacks against NGOs conducting lifesaving activities in the Central Mediterranean and has engaged in systematic dangerous misconduct at sea⁶. During our operations, MSF teams have witnessed the dangerous maneuvering of the Libyan coastguard around our ship and boats in distress. Our teams have also been instructed by the Libyan coastguard, while in international waters, to leave the area.

- On one occasion in August 2021, two Libyan coastguard speedboats circled the *Geo Barents*, maneuvering dangerously. Given the very short distance between the *Geo Barents* and the coastguard, our team had a clear view of a large group of people on the Libyan coastguard deck, who are believed to have been intercepted.
- In October 2021, the team witnessed the Libyan coastguard chasing a severely overcrowded and unstable boat of people, engaging in zig-zag manoeuvres around the boat and cutting in front of it at full speed. The coastguard came close to the *Geo Barents* and ceased its chase, and the *Geo Barents* completed the rescue of the 95 people in the boat. The survivors confirmed that during the manoeuvres, the Libyan coastguard vessel had pierced the bow of their boat, and that coastguard staff had thrown plastic cans and ropes toward them instead of lifejackets and threatened them with weapons.
- During a *Geo Barents* rescue operation in December 2021, a Libyan coastguard patrol boat approached the scene without lights and at high speed without communicating with the *Geo Barents* prior, endangering both our teams and the people in distress. As MSF fast rescue boats were carrying out the rescue, the coastguard launched its own speedboat and took the engine from the rubber boat.

⁶ In 2016, MSF denounced the attack against our vessel by a group of armed men on board a vessel 24 nautical miles North of the Libyan coast. See at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/central-mediterranean-msf-condemns-attack-rescue-vessel>. Five years later, the Libyan coastguard continues to threaten NGOs conducting rescues at high seas (<https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/36662/libyan-coast-guard-threatens-seawatch-4-in-international-waters>), while they continue to put the lives of migrants at risk (https://sea-watch.org/en/libyan_coast_guard_shots_)

“First, they asked to stop the engine, and then they turned around the boat to raise waves... They gave us a rope, and then they started pulling towards their boat... In [a] case when we have women and babies they proceed as I said now. In [a] case when [there are] only men and youth on boat, they crush the boat hardly from the stern to break the engine, to push us to stop. Our first journey was proceeding by raising waves, but in the second journey they crushed us with their boat because we did not want to stop.”

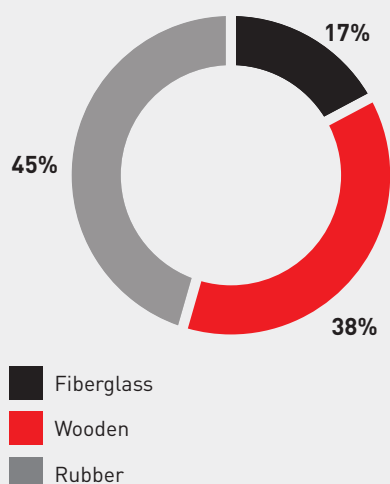
- A man (26 years) from Sudan



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4. POLICY OF NON-ASSISTANCE: THE HUMAN COST OF DISMANTLING SEARCH AND RESCUE IN THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN

Type of boats (June 2021-May 2022):



MSF has repeatedly denounced the systematic abstention of the Italian and Maltese authorities to conduct and coordinate rescues, as well as the system of forcibly returning people to Libya via proxies (i.e. the Libyan coastguard)⁷. These practices fail to meet the humanitarian imperative of saving lives at sea, and the obligations relating to search and rescue under international law⁸. The practice of non-assistance has been normalised in the Central Mediterranean. European authorities not only choose to turn a blind eye to the immense human suffering and people's search for safety, but also seek to further institutionalise these harmful policies⁹. Our teams have documented the deliberate denial of rescue throughout the last year of our operations.

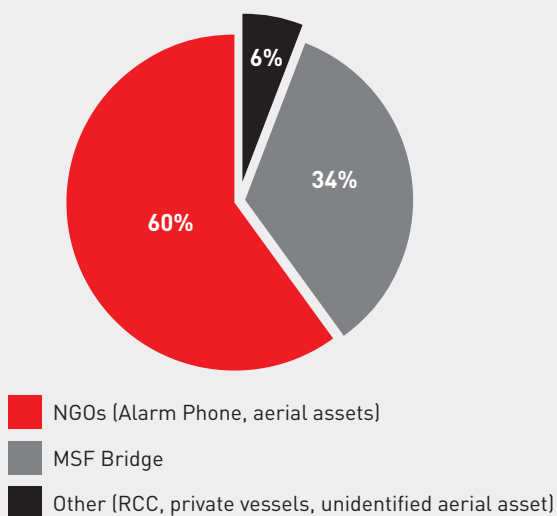
Between June 2021 and May 2022, 96 per cent of rescues by MSF were conducted in the Libyan and Maltese SRRs. Despite the heavily surveilled area, during 1104 hours of navigating the high seas, 94 per cent of the boats in distress rescued were spotted directly from the bridge of the *Geo Barents* or were located via distress alerts relayed by civil society rescue initiatives. Only 6 per cent of the alerts were relayed by a RCC, private vessel or another aerial asset.

⁷ <https://www.msf.org/migration-how-stop-rising-tide-death-mediterranean>.

⁸ International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (Chapter VI), the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Article 98), the International Convention on maritime search and rescue (Annex (as amended by International Maritime Organization (IMO) Resolution MSC.155(78))), and the IMO Resolution MSC.167 (78), 'Guidelines on the treatment of persons rescued at sea', Annex 34, 2004.

⁹ As mentioned above and despite deaths and forced returns to Libya being on the rise in 2021, the Council of the European Union insists that 'EU support for the Libyan Coastguard is paying off', while the EU Commission's 'Renewed EU action plan against migrant smuggling 2021-2025' invests further in securitization, policing and solidifying collaboration with unsafe third countries (https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/renewed-eu-action-plan-against-migrant-smuggling-2021-2025-com-2021-591_en). Similarly the proposed Migration Pact seeks to normalize this devastating policy (https://www.academia.edu/72896823/Towards_a_Thousand_Little_Morias_The_EU_Non_Rescue_Scheme_Criminalising_Solidarity_Structuralising_Defection_in_Thym_Odysseus_Network_edo_Reforming_the_Common_European_Asylum_System_Nomos_2022).

Operational Alerts (June 2021-May 2022):



All rescues carried out by the *Geo Barents* were of adults and children crammed on unstable wooden, rubber or fiberglass boats. Lifesaving equipment such as lifejackets were either absent or unfit for purpose. Instead, makeshift equipment such as tires and empty plastic bottles (which people had wrapped around their bodies) were retrieved during the rescues. Our teams distributed a lifejacket for every person rescued in these operations. The vast majority of these boats were severely overcrowded, far exceeding their actual capacity. Of the boats rescued, 68 per cent held 50 or more people. The largest number of people on any one boat was 188. All boats were in an extremely unseaworthy condition, some highly unstable and at risk of capsizing. They often had deflated or ruptured sponsons, inoperable engines, water entering the decks and toxic fuel spilled inside.



“We were the only ones with lifejackets because we bought our own, we don’t know how to swim – not in this water! The others didn’t have anything at all. No lifejackets were provided by the smugglers. The smugglers don’t even always wait for the sea to be calm. They say ‘just go’, like this time for us. If you resist, they bring out their gun. Libya, it’s a place of no return. The sea was very bad when we crossed, but we felt it was better even to capsize than to go back to Libya. They had given someone the engine and said, ‘you drive’. That person had no choice, they don’t even know how to drive a boat! But when you’re running from your life, you’ll do anything to survive. The waves were so bad, too much, too high. We tried to return but the police would already be waiting for us on land. The engine worked for three days. When MSF came, we couldn’t use the engine as the waves were so bad. We had thrown all the petrol overboard to lighten the boat to regain balance. Water was already entering the boat. For 10 hours we were like that! Up and down up and down on the waves. People were panicking, [in fear] for their lives; the waves kept coming in.”

- A man (28 years) from Nigeria





© Anna Pantelia/MSF

“All people on the boat were hungry, no one had energy. So, when you stand you have a headache or everything is turning, you know... We had maybe 105-106 people, so the boat was overloaded. There was no free space on the boat – all free space was taken by people. In the middle of the night around 12 or 1am, I saw my friend sitting on the edge of the boat, sleeping. After he slept for around 40 minutes he woke up, stood up, and then fell overboard. We tried to find him. We turned back to search for him four times. We called, ‘Kamil, Kamil, Kamil’, but we didn’t hear anything. We had to let him go.”

- A man (21 years) from Sudan

Some survivors reported being stranded at sea without rescue for up to 72 hours, often under extremely challenging weather conditions, and many shared harrowing accounts of their life-threatening experience with the MSF teams. Multiple unanswered distress alerts were received by our teams, who duly informed the maritime rescue coordination centres (MRCCs).

MSF medical teams on the *Geo Barents* treated morbidities directly related to survivors’ dangerous journeys across the sea. Throughout the course of our operations, we conducted 6,536 medical consultations on board. More than 50 per cent of the total consultations were for hypothermia, fuel burns, dehydration and motion sickness. Some of these conditions, if left untreated, can be life-threatening for people.

Non-assistance at sea has proven to have fatal consequences to the lives of people attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean¹⁰. In November 2021, our team recovered the bodies of 10 people, including five minors, from the lower deck of a wooden boat carrying 109 people. The suspected cause of death was intoxication following fuel inhalation. The level of fuel fumes in the lower deck of the boat was such that our team had to wear breathing devices to enter and retrieve the bodies of the people. There have been other incidents involving the death of people on boats in distress, not witnessed by MSF. For example, in January 2022, the Italian coastguard retrieved the bodies of seven people who had died from hypothermia during their journey¹¹. Other NGOs conducting search and rescue activities have also discovered the bodies of people who have died on unseaworthy boats in the Central Mediterranean¹².

¹⁰ Indicatively see: Heller, C. and Pezzani, L., “Ebbing and Flowing: The EU’s Shifting Practice of (Non-) Assistance and Bordering in a Time of Crisis”, 2016, available at: http://nearfuturesonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Heller_Pezzani_Ebbing_2016.pdf. See also: <https://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-reach-16724-2020-deaths-reach-256>

¹¹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/7-dead-among-migrants-landing-in-italy-s-lampedusa/2484919>

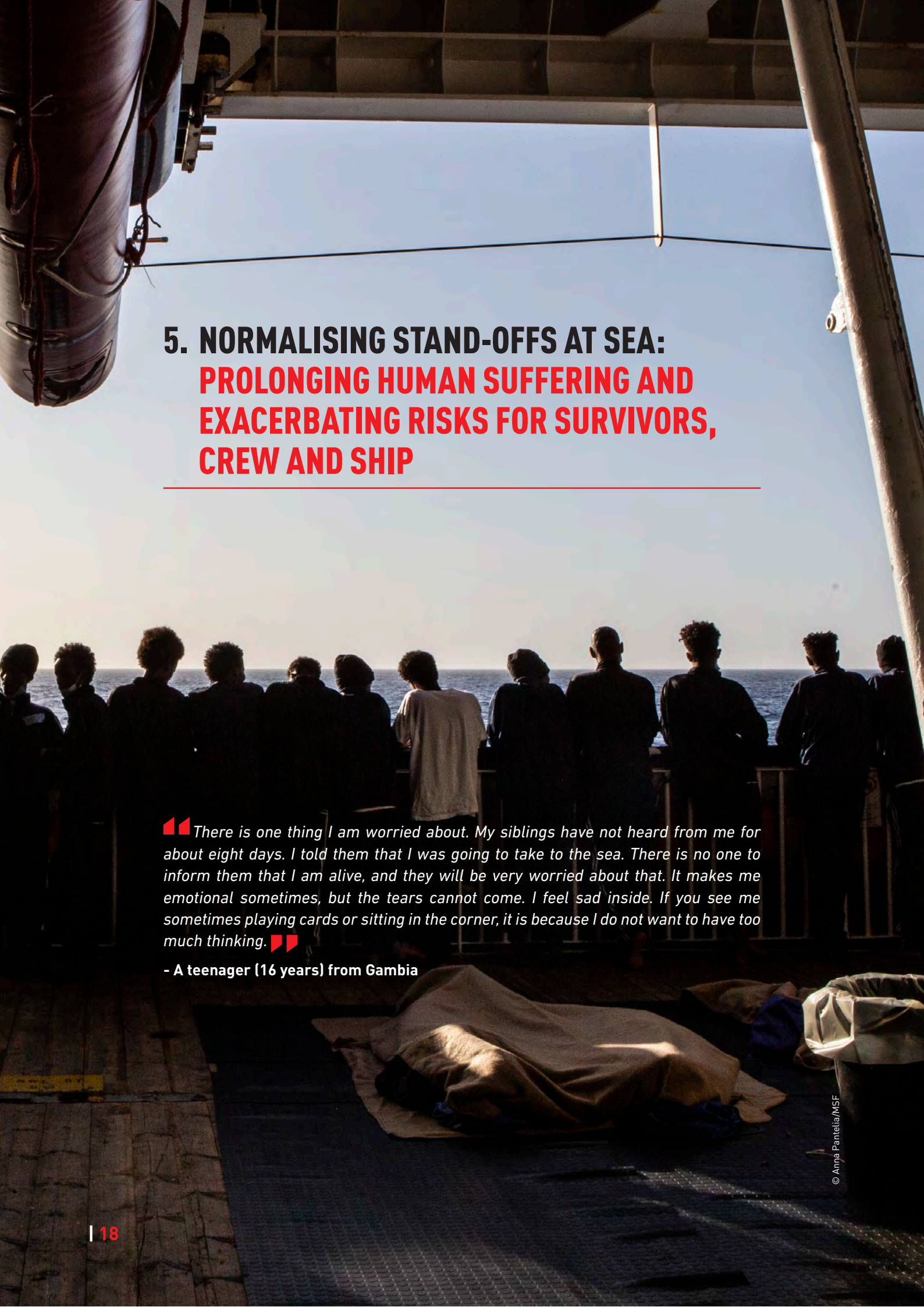
¹² <https://pledgetimes.com/ocean-viking-fetches-migrants-from-rubber-boat-two-people-found-dead/>



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© Pilotes volontaires

A group of people, mostly men, are standing on the deck of a ship, looking out at the sea. They are silhouetted against the bright sky and water. The ship's structure, including a large cylindrical object (possibly a lifeboat) and various pipes and railings, is visible in the foreground and background. The scene is captured in a high-contrast, low-key style, emphasizing the silhouettes and the vastness of the sea.

5. NORMALISING STAND-OFFS AT SEA: PROLONGING HUMAN SUFFERING AND EXACERBATING RISKS FOR SURVIVORS, CREW AND SHIP

“There is one thing I am worried about. My siblings have not heard from me for about eight days. I told them that I was going to take to the sea. There is no one to inform them that I am alive, and they will be very worried about that. It makes me emotional sometimes, but the tears cannot come. I feel sad inside. If you see me sometimes playing cards or sitting in the corner, it is because I do not want to have too much thinking.”

- A teenager (16 years) from Gambia

Stand-offs at sea¹³ date back as early as 2018 and can be linked with the 'closed port' policy implemented by the Italian authorities¹⁴. The human suffering of people rescued by NGOs was used as a bargaining chip for so-called 'burden sharing' and redistribution arrangements between EU member states. Since then, the practice has continued unabated and has contributed to the tremendous loss of life at sea, by blocking NGOs and others, including private vessels, from conducting rescues in the Central Mediterranean.

This practice has endangered the safety of the ship and crews conducting rescues, denied urgent access to care and protection for those rescued at sea, and deliberately prolonged survivors' suffering.

From the beginning of 2022 to date, the average wait time in the Italian SSR imposed on the *Geo Barents* prior to disembarkation is 5.4 days; an increase from three days in 2021. The unacceptable practice of delaying the disembarkation of rescued people in a place of safety remains unaddressed and has intensified. The Italian authorities have demonstrated that when they do decide to coordinate rescues, they can actively facilitate speedy disembarkation arrangements for the survivors¹⁵. Differential treatment of private vessels and NGO ships performing rescues unequivocally aims to obstruct lifesaving activities at sea. This is a key element of the dismantling of search and rescue capacity in the Central Mediterranean.

¹³ Under paras 6.8-6.11 of the IMO Resolution MSC.167 (78), 'Guidelines on the treatment of persons rescued at sea', Annex 34, 2004, the Governments and the responsible RCC should make every effort to minimize the time survivors remain aboard the assisting ship. Also, the relevant RCC should seek to obtain certain information from the master of the assisting ship; in particular, "potential health and safety concerns aboard a ship that has recovered persons in distress include insufficient lifesaving equipment, water, provisions, medical care, and accommodations for the number of persons on board, and the safety of the crew and passengers if persons on board might become aggressive or violent." Hence, stand-offs at sea refer to the assignment of a place of safety for disembarkation of the rescued individuals after several days, which may be considered excessive in light of the prevailing circumstances on board.

¹⁴ On the 'closed port' policy, see for example: <https://www.politico.eu/article/matteo-salvini-italian-ports-closed-to-migrants/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/italy-declares-own-ports-unsafe-to-stop-migrants-disembarking#:~:text=%E2%80%9CItaly%20can't%20just%20do,a%20threat%20to%20national%20security.>

¹⁵ <https://www.guardiacostiera.gov.it/stampa/Pages/comunicato-stampa-22-febbraio-2022.aspx>

Stats on requests for place of safety (June 2021-May 2022)

- 16** replies by the Italian MRCC **denying coordination** as rescues occurred outside of their SRR
- 20** replies from Malta RCC **refusing the assignment of a port of safety**. In one reply Malta RCC instructed us to contact other states able or willing to provide a place of safety.
- 32** requests for a **place of safety forwarded** from the Italian MRCC to other Italian 'competent' authorities
- 10** **ports of destination** instead of **places of safety** assigned by Italian authorities
- 1** **place of safety** assigned by the Italian authorities

MSF teams on the *Geo Barents* continue to bear witness to the normalisation of stand-offs at sea and the human suffering exacerbated by this practice. Throughout the eleven rescue missions conducted between June 2021 and May 2022, our team made multiple requests to Italian and Maltese authorities for a place of safety for survivors to disembark. Requests to the Maltese authorities were systematically ignored or denied; those to the Italian authorities were met with increasing delays. In ten out of the eleven positive replies received, Italian authorities designated a 'port of destination' instead of a 'place of safety'¹⁶, indicating their refusal to coordinate rescue activities.

¹⁶ The term "port of destination" denotes the port of arrival; for example, in commercial contexts, it refers to the port and the location at the port where goods are to be delivered by the supplier for collection by the customer. The term "place of safety", however, is specifically linked to search and rescue at sea, and, according to para. 6.12 of the IMO Resolution MSC.167 (78), 'Guidelines on the treatment of persons rescued at sea', Annex 34, 2004, means a location: (i) where rescue operations are considered to terminate; (ii) where the survivors' safety of life is no longer threatened and where their basic human needs (such as food, shelter and medical needs) can be met; and (iii) from which transportation arrangements can be made for the survivors' next or final destination.



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“We do not know if we will arrive or not, and when... On the boat I was saying my prayers as if I was about to die. Here I feel safe, but the hope is very small. We are just waiting and waiting, and nothing is clear. We are waiting for something unknown. We are always wondering whether the authorities will take us in or not. As Syrians, after all we went through, we cannot trust anyone. I don't know what will happen next. It is so difficult.”

- A man (44 years) from Syria

There were only two rescue missions for which a port for disembarkation was granted within 48 hours of our request. These were in October 2021, when the safety of the ship was at risk due to deteriorating weather conditions, and in November 2021, when the bodies of 10 people were retrieved from the lower deck of a boat in distress.

Due to the normalisation of the stand-offs practice, the *Geo Barents* has been immobilised for a total of 45 days, during which our efforts to save lives in the Central Mediterranean were blocked. States' systematic denial of responsibility for the coordination of rescue, and for the timely facilitation of disembarkation at the closest place of safety, has contributed to the confinement of survivors on board our ship for 9.5 days on average, during which time they have been deprived of access to appropriate care and to full, individualised assessment of their medical and protection needs.

Despite de facto limitations to conducting a proper and full assessment of people's medical and protection needs on board, of the 3,138 adults and children rescued by the *Geo Barents*, almost half were identified as having heightened protection and/or rehabilitation needs.

A total of 40 per cent reported having experienced SGBV, trafficking, torture and/or ill treatment, or self-identified as unaccompanied or separated children.

Stand-offs at sea not only impede prompt access to a full assessment of medical and protection needs but also prolong the suffering of survivors who our teams have identified as requiring urgent further care and protection. During the period covered by this report, MSF medical teams provided 338 medical referrals for people requiring further treatment not possible on board a ship. Most referrals were for painful conditions requiring ambulatory treatment due to complications related to severely infected scabies, fuel burns, mental health conditions, bone fractures, dental care and SGBV.

MSF teams conducted psychological first aid sessions for survivors on board the *Geo Barents* to address acute distress symptoms related to the traumatic event of the sea journey itself. Complex mental health conditions require individualised assessment and counselling, which cannot be provided on board a ship since it requires multiple consultations in a stable environment where all other stressors have been sufficiently addressed. Until disembarkation, the stressor of the journey itself

and associated fears of present and future dangers cannot be fully removed. Survivors are forced to remain on board the deck of the ship for a prolonged period of time, subjected to sea sickness, the loud noise of the ship and often crowded decks. Following stand-offs at sea, on several occasions our mental health team had to provide de-escalation sessions for survivors who had reached breaking point.

Survivors also often mention the inability to communicate with family members and loved ones to inform them that they are still alive as an additional stressor that exacerbates anxiety and other psychological symptoms. Prolonged stays on board a ship not only impede a proper assessment of severe mental health distress, including an accurate assessment of suicidal ideation, but also worsen the suffering of survivors who, until disembarkation in a place of safety, are exposed to 'continuous traumatic stress'¹⁷. Despite MSF promptly communicating these factors and needs to the authorities following repeated denial of our requests for disembarkation, they are ignored and do not seem to have any effect in speeding up the assignment of a place of safety.

Following seven consecutive rescues between **9 and 11 May 2022**, **471 adults and children** were forced to remain on board the *Geo Barents* for **11 days**, including **7 days** inside the Italian SRR until a port was assigned by the Italian authorities for disembarkation. On **19 May**, the Italian authorities allowed disembarkation of the unaccompanied and separated children, families and single women on board, and then ordered the *Geo Barents* to leave the quayside of the port and move back to anchorage. Late that evening, the team was informed that the disembarkation of the remaining 233 people (including several people in need of medical care, including for fractured limbs and chronic conditions) would not continue the next day but would be delayed until the following one, **21 May**. This unjustifiable and inexplicable wait contributed to six survivors reaching the point of desperation and jumping overboard.^{18]}

¹⁷ Stevens, G., Eagle, G., Kaminer, D., & Higson-Smith, C., "Continuous traumatic stress: Conceptual conversations in contexts of global conflict, violence and trauma", *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 19(2), 2013, pp 75–84, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032484>.

■ ■ *Being in a stand-off in the Italian SRR is one of the most stressful times on the ship. People rescued have never been closer to safety, yet uncertainty takes over everything... The fear of being returned to Libya is present in everyone's mind. During this period, tensions arise on the deck and the anxiety of the survivors increases, particularly as they are unable to contact their families. Each day that passes waiting for a place of safety is a day when some of the most vulnerable people on board are denied access to care and protection.* ■ ■

- **Margot Bernard**, MSF humanitarian affairs officer on board the *Geo Barents*.



¹⁸ See more on this example here: https://twitter.com/MSF_Sea/status/1527587314402316289. Other examples: https://twitter.com/MSF_Sea/status/1520120220349829125; https://twitter.com/MSF_Sea/status/1442835632385150976.



6. CONCLUSIONS

MSF is outraged at the policy-made humanitarian catastrophe in the Central Mediterranean.

Despite years of undeniable evidence of the harms of European policies of deterrence, and calls for change in every possible platform, Europe's political leaders and institutions continue to systematise this deadly policy. This report is a further attempt to shed light on the normalisation of these policies as witnessed by our teams and by survivors who have experienced its impacts. It is clear that dismantling search and rescue capacity in favor of forced returns continues to come at a cost of horrific human suffering and pain.

Each of the premises of these policies have been proven false.

People continue to flee across the Central Mediterranean as they face violence, persecution and destitution; dismantling search and rescue capacity and supporting the Libyan coastguard has not stopped people from dying on this route. Instead, it has perpetuated human suffering. It is appalling that EU institutions, Italy and Malta continue to pursue these failed policies and to deny accountability for the immense harm their decisions have caused for people seeking safety.

Change is not only absolutely necessary, but it is also possible.

Europe has shown that it can implement a humane approach to forced migration in the context of the Ukrainian crisis. Every life should be protected, regardless of race, gender, country of origin, or political or religious beliefs, and those seeking safety at Europe's door should be treated with equal respect to their rights and human dignity.



MSF activities in the Central Mediterranean

MSF has been running search and rescue activities in the Central Mediterranean since 2015, working on eight different search and rescue vessels (alone or in partnership with other NGOs). Since 2015 our teams have provided lifesaving assistance to more than 80,000 people in distress at sea. The decision to continue our search and rescue operations was dictated by the lack of dedicated, state-led search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean. MSF relaunched search and rescue activities in the Central Mediterranean in May 2021, chartering our own ship, the *Geo Barents*, to save lives, provide emergency medical care to rescued people, as well as make survivors' voices heard from the world's deadliest sea border.

