

SOS
MEDITERRANEE

A large ship, likely a search and rescue vessel, is shown at sea under a dark, stormy sky. Two bright lightning bolts are visible, one striking the ship's deck and another striking the water nearby. The ship's lights are on, and the overall atmosphere is dramatic and urgent.

into the
STORM

*Ten years of search and rescue
amid neglect, solidarity and struggle
in the Central Mediterranean*



ABOUT SOS MEDITERRANEE

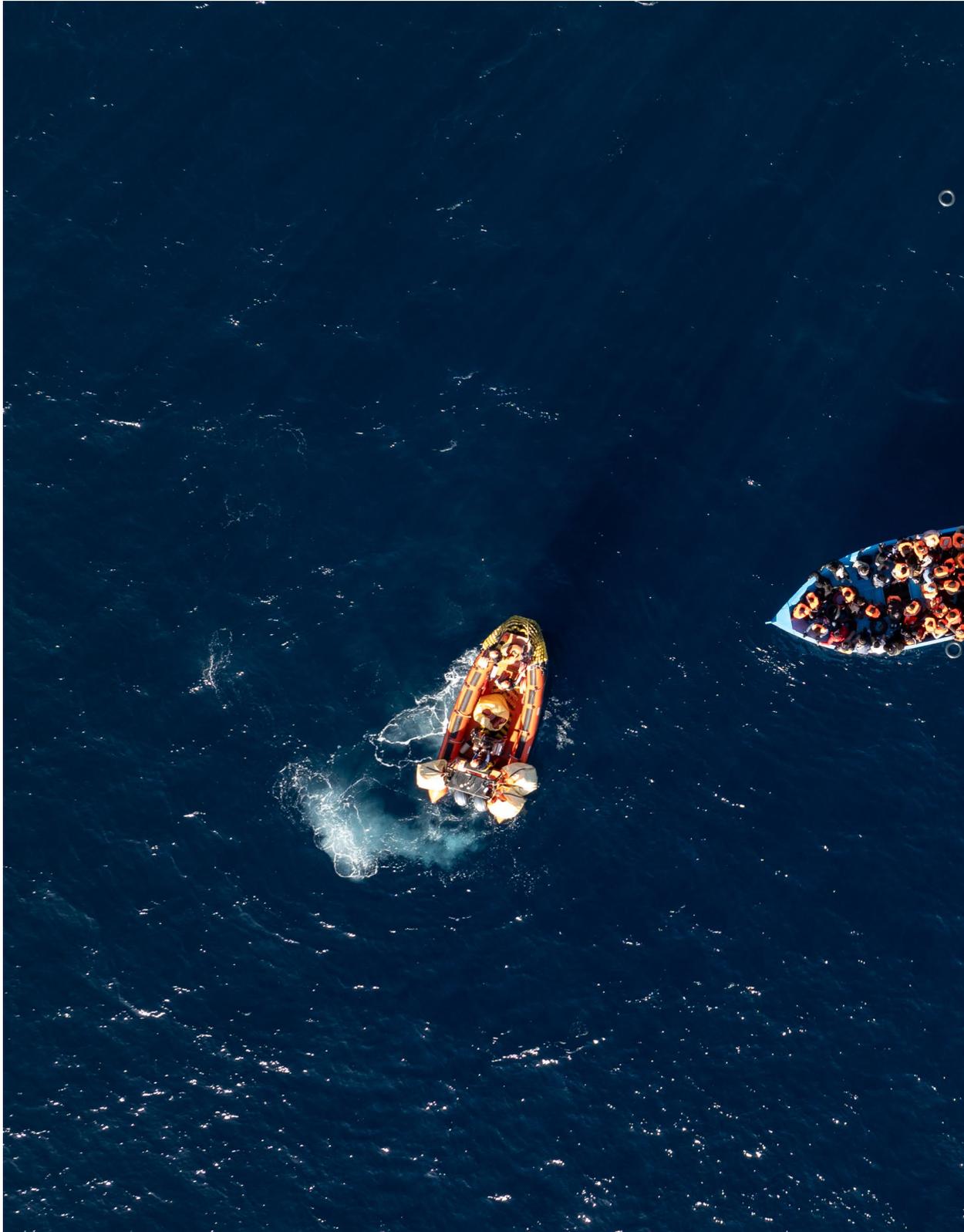
SOS MEDITERRANEE is an international maritime and humanitarian search and rescue organisation dedicated to saving lives at sea. It was founded by citizens in May 2015 in response to the escalating humanitarian crisis in the Central Mediterranean and the failure of authorities to take action to prevent further loss of life.

SOS MEDITERRANEE operates as a European network, with teams in Germany, France, Italy and Switzerland, jointly financing and operating a rescue ship. From February 2016 to December 2018, SOS MEDITERRANEE chartered and operated the rescue ship Aquarius. Since August 2019, SOS MEDITERRANEE charts and operates the Ocean Viking. Medical care onboard the Ocean Viking was provided by Médecins Sans Frontières until April 2020. From September 2021 until December 2025, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) joined SOS MEDITERRANEE's teams on board to provide medical care, protection and assistance to survivors rescued at sea.

FOREWORD

SOS MEDITERRANEE was founded as a citizen-led movement, born out of the intention to mobilise in response to the worsening humanitarian situation in the Central Mediterranean Sea and to uphold a fundamental maritime principle: that no one should be left to die at sea. Over the past ten years, members of the SOS MEDITERRANEE network, together with volunteers and supporters, have worked tirelessly to remain faithful to the organisation's three core principles: to rescue, protect, and testify. None of what SOS MEDITERRANEE has achieved would have been possible without the support of the thousands of individuals who have chosen to stand behind our mission. As we mark our first decade of activity at sea, we would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to each and every one of them. SOS MEDITERRANEE also wishes to express its gratitude to the partner organisations that have worked alongside us on board our rescue vessels, helping to ensure the highest possible standard of care for the survivors we have rescued.





On 10 January 2025, 101 women, men and children were rescued by the Ocean Viking from a double-decker wooden boat in distress in the Libyan Search and Rescue Region.



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INTRODUCTION

In the early hours of 7 March 2016, SOS MEDITERRANEE's first rescue ship, the *Aquarius*, rescued 74 people from an unseaworthy boat in international waters north of the Libyan coast. In the ten years since, SOS MEDITERRANEE has assisted* more than 42,700 people in distress at sea (see Figure 1), operating in a context marked by the progressive dismantling of state-led search and rescue (SAR), the externalisation of border control, and the growing criminalisation of humanitarian action.

Over the same ten-year period, the Central Mediterranean has remained one of the deadliest migration routes in the world. Between January 2016 and December 2025, at least 19,655 people are known to have died or gone missing while attempting to cross this stretch of sea in search of safety. These deaths are often described as tragic or accidental. They are not. Nor did they occur in a legal vacuum.

International maritime law is clear: States have an obligation to render assistance to any person in distress at sea and to ensure their prompt disembarkation in a place of safety.

Rather than upholding this duty, European coastal States have progressively withdrawn from proactive, state-led search and rescue and replaced it with a fragmented and ineffective system at sea. Rescue coordination has become opaque and inconsistent, surveillance has increasingly replaced rescue capacity, and responsibility for assistance has been shifted to third countries, notably Libya and Tunisia, that lack both the capacity and the willingness to comply with international maritime and human rights law. This externalisation of rescue responsibilities has resulted in delayed assistance, dangerous interceptions, and returns to places that cannot be considered safe.

*"Survivors assisted" includes all individuals embarked on SOS MEDITERRANEE's vessels, whether directly rescued by SOS MEDITERRANEE or transferred onboard after rescue by other actors, and disembarked in a place of safety by SOS MEDITERRANEE. This figure does not include deceased persons recovered at sea. Over the past ten years, SOS MEDITERRANEE's teams have recovered 55 bodies. In addition, 261 people have been reported missing by survivors rescued on board. These numbers reflect only cases witnessed or reported during SOS MEDITERRANEE's operations.

At the same time, the operational environment for humanitarian search and rescue has deteriorated sharply. Civil rescue vessels have been subjected to administrative restrictions, prolonged standoffs at sea, distant port assignments, detentions, and public criminalisation, significantly reducing their ability to operate. Rather than restoring adequate rescue capacity, European governments have increasingly chosen to obstruct those who have stepped in to fill a deadly gap and to continue to save lives at sea.

This report documents how this perfect storm of deliberate policy choices has manufactured a humanitarian catastrophe in the Central Mediterranean.¹ Drawing on ten years of search and rescue operations, survivor testimonies, documented incidents at sea, and the medical and humanitarian consequences observed onboard our rescue vessels, it traces how this preventable catastrophe has been allowed to unfold. It focuses on several interconnected failures: gradual disengagement from life-saving assistance by coastal States, outsourcing rescue responsibilities to countries of departure, and the criminalisation of humanitarian search and rescue.

The aim of this report is to bear witness to what has occurred over the past decade and to highlight that the continued loss of life at sea is not an unavoidable feature of migration across the Mediterranean, but the outcome of policies that prioritise deterrence and containment over protection. Reversing this trajectory is a matter of political will, legal obligation, and moral responsibility.





7 March 2016

74 people rescued in the first operation of the *Aquarius*



23 May 2017

Armed men presenting as the "Libyan Coast Guard" attack shipwrecked people during a rescue operation (see page 35)



June–October 2018

After rescuing 630 people in June, the *Aquarius* was denied disembarkation by Italy and Malta and forced to sail to the distant port of Valencia. In October, the *Aquarius* was deflagged following political pressure, effectively ending its search and rescue operations (see pages 40-41)



9 August 2019

85 people are rescued in the first operation of the *Ocean Viking*

22 July 2020

The *Ocean Viking* is detained for five months after an 11-hour Port State Control inspection (see page 39)



11 November 2022

The *Ocean Viking* is forced to sail to Toulon, France, after waiting to disembark survivors for 20 days, the longest standoff in the history of SOS MEDITERRANEE (see page 42)

21 April 2021

The *Ocean Viking* arrives at the scene of a shipwreck that claimed at least 130 lives (see page 27)



10-11 August 2023

623 people are rescued from 14 boats in the largest rescue operation carried out by the *Ocean Viking*



2024

The *Ocean Viking* is forced to sail 29,388 unnecessary extra kilometres to reach distant ports assigned by authorities (see page 44)



24 August 2025



The *Ocean Viking* comes under sustained fire by Libyan Coast Guards (see page 35)

1.

DANGEROUS JOURNEYS: Survivors' accounts and conditions at the point of rescue

“

Detention conditions [in Libya] are even more difficult when you are intercepted at sea and imprisoned. My friend, who was with me on the boat, died. After she died, I also caught tuberculosis again. There was no treatment or anything. She had started getting sick while we were in the hangar. It's very cold at sea, because your clothes get all wet. We spent the whole night out there. She couldn't stay alive for long, because of the cold and the illness. When she was sent back to prison, she died immediately. I wrote a diary when I was in prison. I have it here, but it got wet. I wish my father and I could read it together one day. I want him to know that I survived. There are so many risks when you get on [these boats] to cross the sea. [...] More than death, you're afraid of being arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard."

Mary (Eritrea, 20 years old) was rescued by the Ocean Viking in January 2024.²

© Tess Barthes / SOS MEDITERRANEE

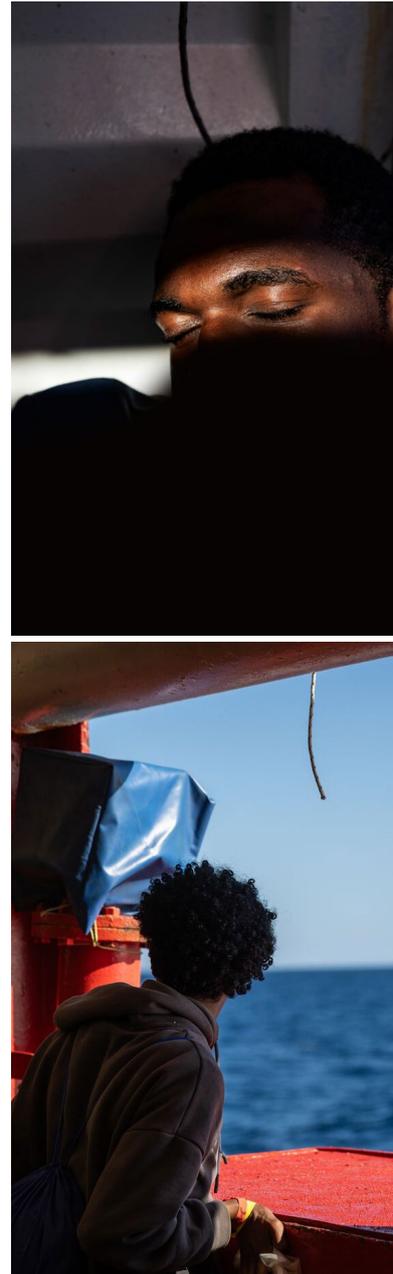
Over the past decade, people attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean have been progressively stripped of their humanity in public and political discourse. They are no longer described as *men, women, and children in danger*, but as *numbers, burdens, or threats*. **This dehumanisation has created the moral distance that allows inaction to become normalised.** By portraying people in distress as less deserving of protection, States have justified delays in rescue, prolonged standoffs at sea, obstruction to timely disembarkation and forced returns to unsafe countries.

Humanitarian crews onboard civil rescue ships have in turn upheld a commitment to human rights for survivors regardless of status or circumstance, as per maritime law, including the right

to access medical care. The medical conditions treated by SOS MEDITERRANEE's teams over the past ten years reflect both the dangers of the crossing and the cumulative impact of a prolonged chain of violence and neglect.

For many people rescued at sea, the crossing is not a choice made lightly, but a last resort after prolonged exposure to violence, deprivation, systematic absence of protection and lack of life prospects in countries of origin and transit. In Libya, migrants are exposed to a continuum of abuse, including arbitrary detention, extortion, forced labour, torture, and sexual violence, often at the hands of traffickers, armed groups, criminal networks, and State officials.³ Access to healthcare is severely limited or non-existent, and serious injuries and illnesses routinely go untreated.⁴ In this context, escape by sea is often perceived as the only remaining option, despite the known risks. The crossing itself becomes a direct confrontation with death, undertaken in unseaworthy boats, without fuel, water, or navigation equipment, where survival depends on timely assistance. Many of the survivors have attempted the crossing several times, after being intercepted and forcibly returned to Libya.

When rescue finally occurs, the conditions of survivors bear the mark of extreme exposure at sea. People rescued by SOS MEDITERRANEE's teams often arrive with fuel burns, hypothermia, dehydration, and severe exhaustion after spending days adrift without food, water, or shelter. The corrosive mixture of fuel and



© Francesca Volpi / SOS MEDITERRANEE | Max Cavallari / SOS MEDITERRANEE

“

I am sick. If I don't leave, I will die anyway. So I decided to leave. [...] I don't want to die in Libya. There is no healthcare there, there are no services. [...] After four hours at sea, the engine just started burning, it caught fire, my leg got burnt. The boat was taking water, it was mixed with fuel. After 10 hours, we could see oil platforms. We were just screaming and waving. And then you (the Ocean Viking) came up behind us. [...] I had to cross the sea because I want to live. I want to see my grandchildren grow up.”⁵

Mouna (Syria, 53 years old) was rescued by the Ocean Viking in July 2021

seawater is particularly devastating, frequently leaving people with deep chemical burns that require urgent medical attention.

Beyond injuries sustained at sea, SOS MEDITERRANEE's medical teams consistently document wounds and conditions resulting from violence endured before the crossing. Many survivors bear visible injuries resulting from torture, beatings, forced labour, and sexual and gender-based violence along their journey. Others suffer from untreated fractures, infected wounds, and chronic illnesses exacerbated by deprivation, poor living conditions, and the systematic lack of medical care during their time in Libya. In addition to physical injuries, survivors frequently exhibit signs of significant psychological distress, including anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, and dissociation.

“

At the end of last year, I was caught by Libyan brigands. [...] I was with a friend. My friend was beaten to death. He left. For him, it's over. I stayed in that camp for two months. Many people died in there. [...] Finally, I managed to get on a boat. The whole inside of my body hurts. The blows from the sticks at the time left huge bruises. The marks are gone now, but inside they remain for a very long time.”

Amir (15 years old) was rescued by the Ocean Viking in March 2021⁶

In this context, many survivors describe their rescue as the first moment in years in which they are treated with dignity and care, often referring to it as a “rebirth”, a brief restoration of dignity and care after prolonged dehumanisation and exposure to mortal danger.

“

My consultation on the Ocean Viking was the first time I saw a doctor after 4 years. I couldn't believe someone finally cared for me. I only wish to be able to get treatment for my heart, so I can meet my youngest child, a baby boy who was born while I was in Libya.”

Menes (Egypt, 40 years old) was rescued by the Ocean Viking in October 2024

The human toll of the deliberate chaos in the Central Mediterranean: Mass casualty incidents and medical response

On board SOS MEDITERRANEE's search and rescue vessels, medical teams are trained and equipped to respond to the urgent and complex needs of survivors rescued at sea. However, the dire conditions on unseaworthy boats during the crossing and the risk inherent to mass offshore rescue operations may lead to situations in which survivors' medical needs exceed the capacity of the medical team – from multiple near-drowning cases to hypothermia, dehydration and injuries. The mass casualty plan is designed to reorganize resources, roles and work areas when medical capacities are overwhelmed to ensure the most effective care for the greatest number of patients. One such incident occurred on 27 January 2018, when SOS MEDITERRANEE and MSF teams onboard the *Aquarius* reached a rubber boat in distress in the Libyan Search and Rescue Region. Only after the fast rescue boats were deployed did the full extent of the emergency become visible: the side of the rubber boat hidden from the mothership was completely deflated, with dozens of people in the water, some already submerged. The Mass Casualty Plan was immediately activated onboard, and all available resources were mobilised to resuscitate people pulled from the water unconscious and not breathing. Seven people – one woman, three babies, and three young children – were successfully resuscitated, while two women could not be revived. In total, 99 survivors were rescued from the collapsing boat. Ten patients and six family members were later evacuated by helicopter, while an unknown number of people went missing during the incident.

Another mass casualty incident occurred on 13 March 2024, when the *Ocean Viking* rescued 25 people from a rubber boat in distress. After a prolonged period at sea without food or water and in severe weather conditions, those rescued were found in life-threatening condition, suffering from acute dehydration and hypothermia. Two people were unconscious and required urgent intensive medical care. Once onboard, survivors recounted that at least 60 people – including women and children – had died during the crossing. Three days after departing from Zawiya, the boat's engine broke down. Calls for help went unanswered, and people began to die one by

one from dehydration and hunger. Even though a European Coast Guard and Border Agency (Frontex) aircraft issued an initial Mayday relay on the evening of 8 March and Alarm Phone alerted authorities on the morning of 9 March, the boat was left adrift in the Libyan SRR for five days without rescue. One of the two survivors rescued unconscious later died in hospital after evacuation from the *Ocean Viking*. Frontex's Fundamental Rights Office opened a Serious Incident Report (SIR) following the events, concluding that "the Libyan authorities failed to act and/or communicate their efforts to rescue the migrant boat, which led to loss of lives". The report also indicates a lack of communication between the stakeholders involved, including Italian authorities, which contributed to delays in assistance and loss of lives.⁷

For many, the hardship does not end with disembarkation in Italy. **Over the past ten years, at least 1,912 migrants have been arrested upon arrival and prosecuted as 'boat drivers' or 'smugglers,' frequently on the basis of minimal or circumstantial evidence,** such as having held the rudder, followed GPS instructions, or performed basic navigational tasks during the crossing.⁸ This enforcement practice reflects the broad application of facilitation-of-irregular-migration offences under Italian law, combined with investigative approaches that rely heavily on immediate identification procedures conducted upon disembarkation. Multiple studies and court decisions have highlighted how these prosecutions disproportionately target migrants who assumed such roles under coercion, debt, or threat, or as a condition for passage or survival at sea, rather than persons embedded in organised smuggling networks.⁹ As a result, anti-smuggling measures intended to combat criminal organisations have often translated into the criminalisation of migrants themselves, raising serious concerns regarding due process, proportionality, and the effective distinction between victims and perpetrators of smuggling-related offences. In June 2025, the Court of Justice of the European Union issued a landmark ruling in the so-called Kinsa case, clarifying that facilitation (or so-called anti-smuggling) laws must not conflict with the fundamental rights enshrined in the EU Charter.¹⁰

Figure 1



10 YEARS
ACTIVITY



453
OPERATIONS



42,741
people assisted at sea

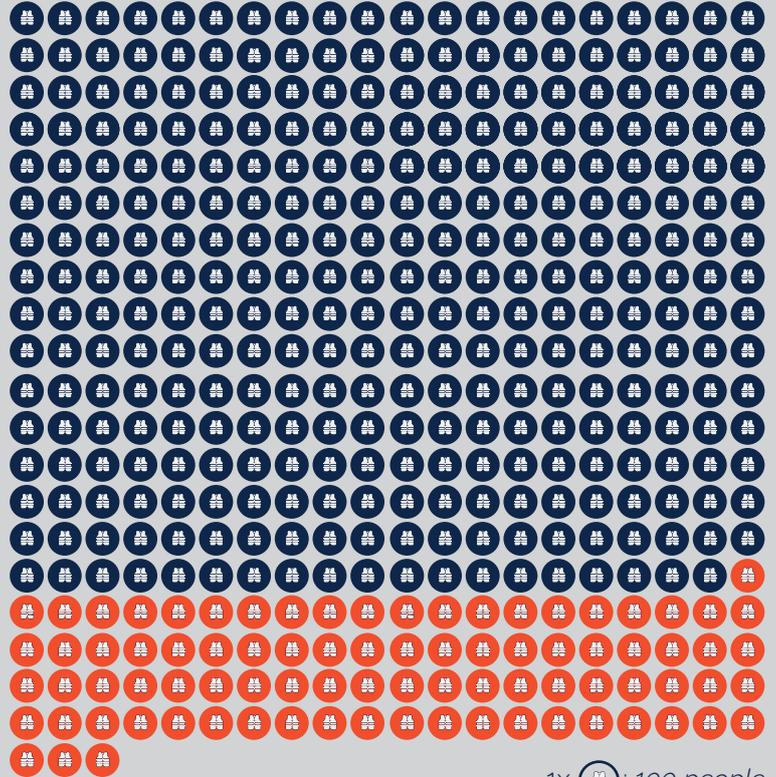
86% men and boys

14% women and girls

7% pregnant women | 6 births on board

10,393 children

80% unaccompanied children

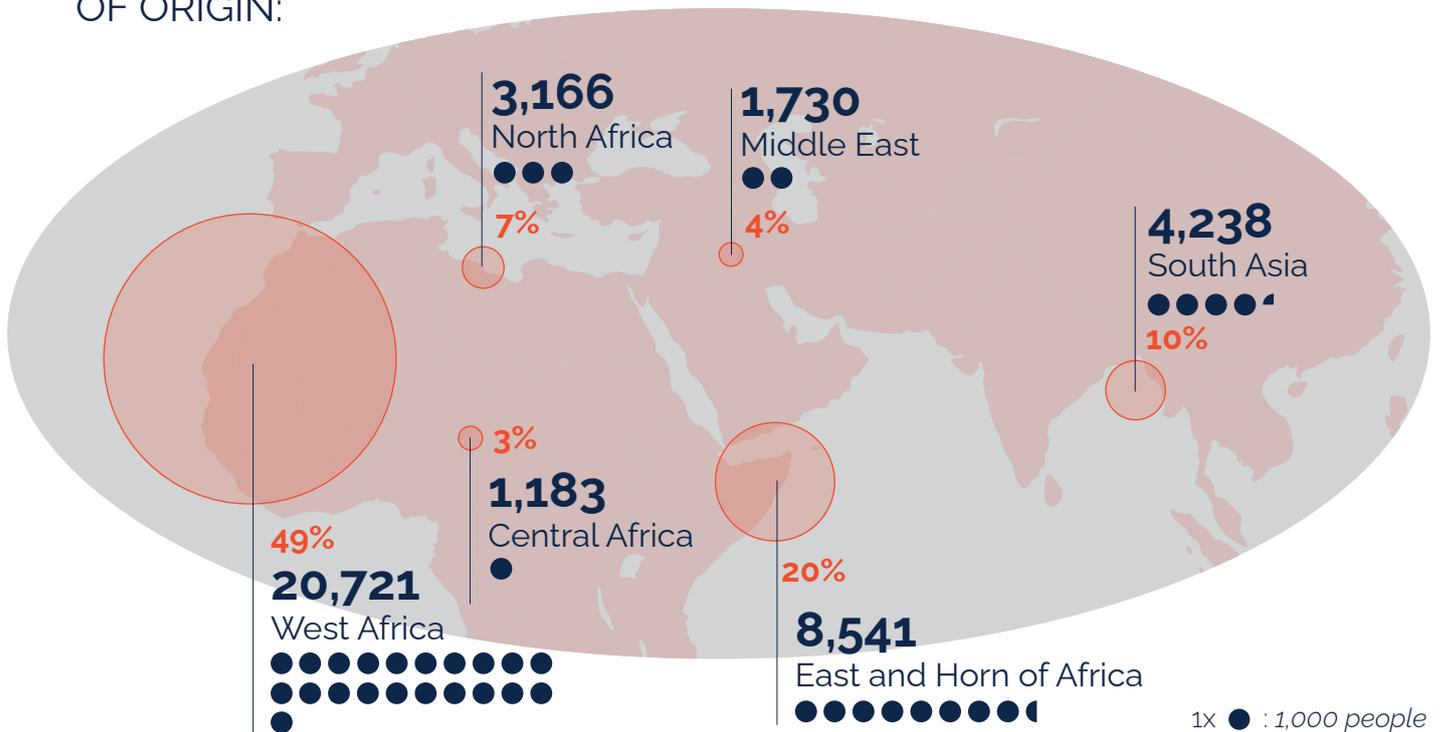


1x : 100 people



NEARLY **1 IN 4** PEOPLE RESCUED WAS A CHILD

SURVIVORS CAME FROM **48 COUNTRIES** OF ORIGIN:



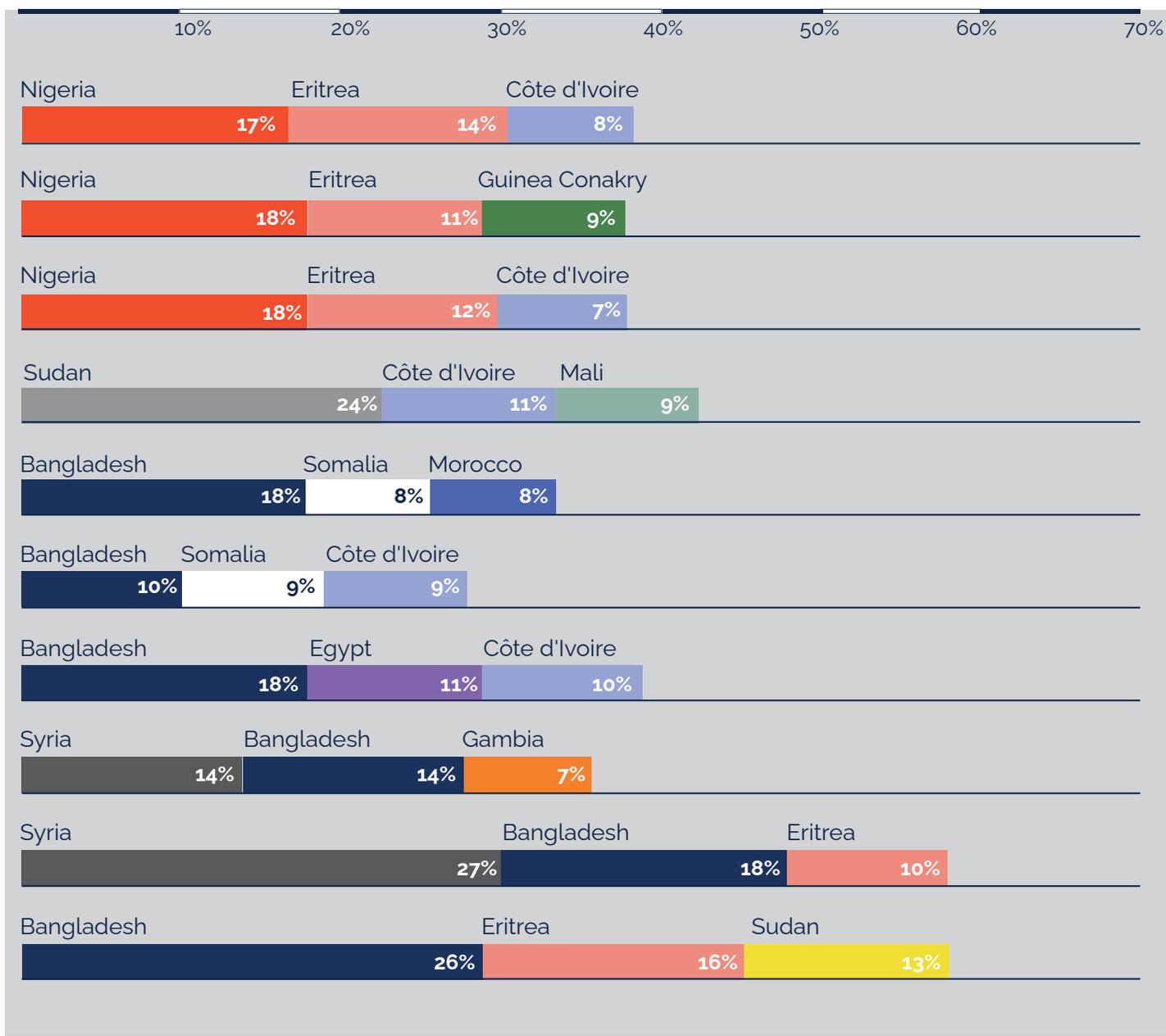
1x : 1,000 people

1. DANGEROUS JOURNEYS: survivors' accounts and conditions at the point of rescue

Figure 2



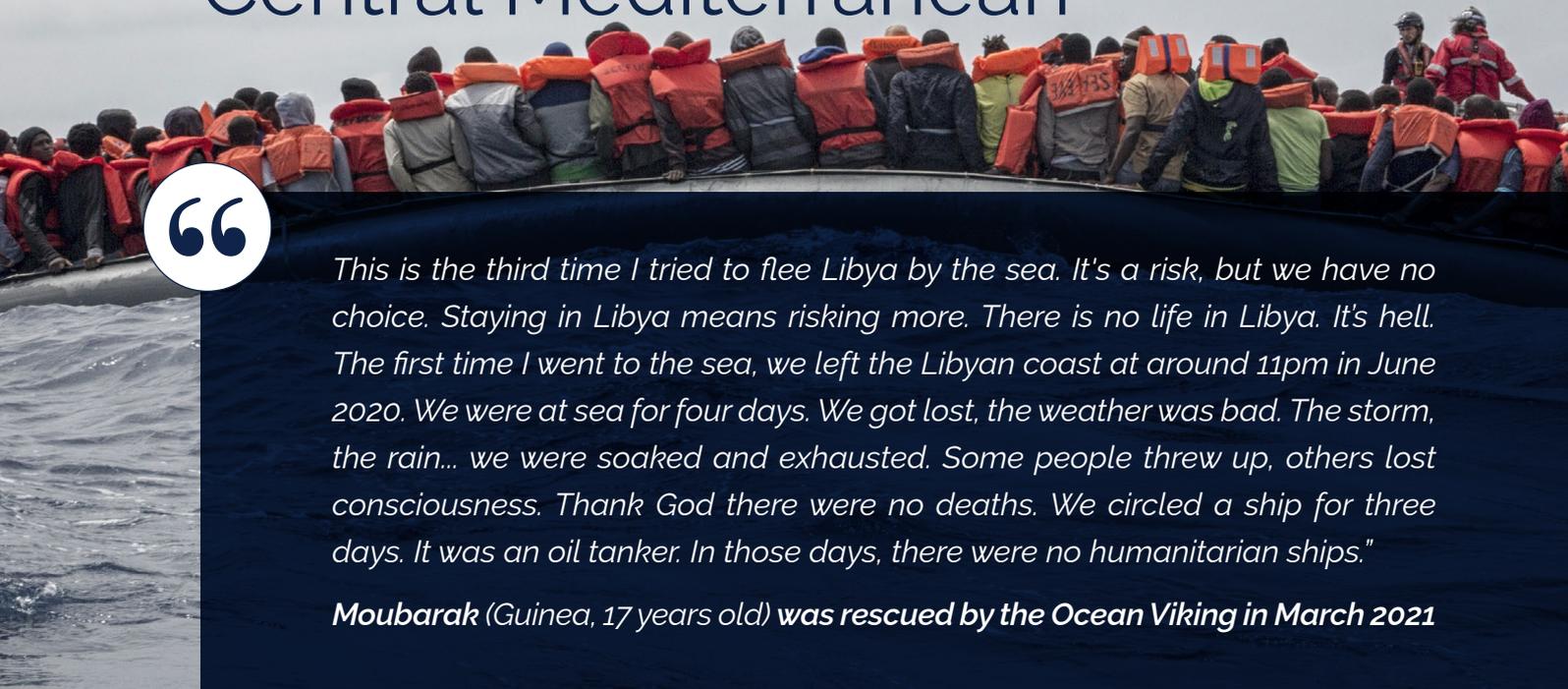
TOP 3 NATIONALITIES OF SURVIVORS RESCUED BY SOS MEDITERRANEE



Source: SOS MEDITERRANEE

2.

DELIBERATE NEGLECT: Coastal States and the widening void in the Central Mediterranean



“

This is the third time I tried to flee Libya by the sea. It's a risk, but we have no choice. Staying in Libya means risking more. There is no life in Libya. It's hell. The first time I went to the sea, we left the Libyan coast at around 11pm in June 2020. We were at sea for four days. We got lost, the weather was bad. The storm, the rain... we were soaked and exhausted. Some people threw up, others lost consciousness. Thank God there were no deaths. We circled a ship for three days. It was an oil tanker. In those days, there were no humanitarian ships."

Moubarak (Guinea, 17 years old) was rescued by the Ocean Viking in March 2021

© Anthony Jean / SOS MEDITERRANEE

Over the past decade, European coastal States have steadily withdrawn from coordinating and carrying out search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean, despite an escalating humanitarian crisis that continues to claim hundreds of lives each year. **Rather than ensuring that this stretch of sea does not become an open-air cemetery, the EU and EU coastal States have increasingly transferred responsibility for coordinating search and rescue in a vast stretch of the Central Mediterranean to the Libyan Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) and Libyan Coast Guards (LCG).***

This outsourcing was formalised in February 2017, when Italy signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Libya on migration management and border control. The agreement committed Italy

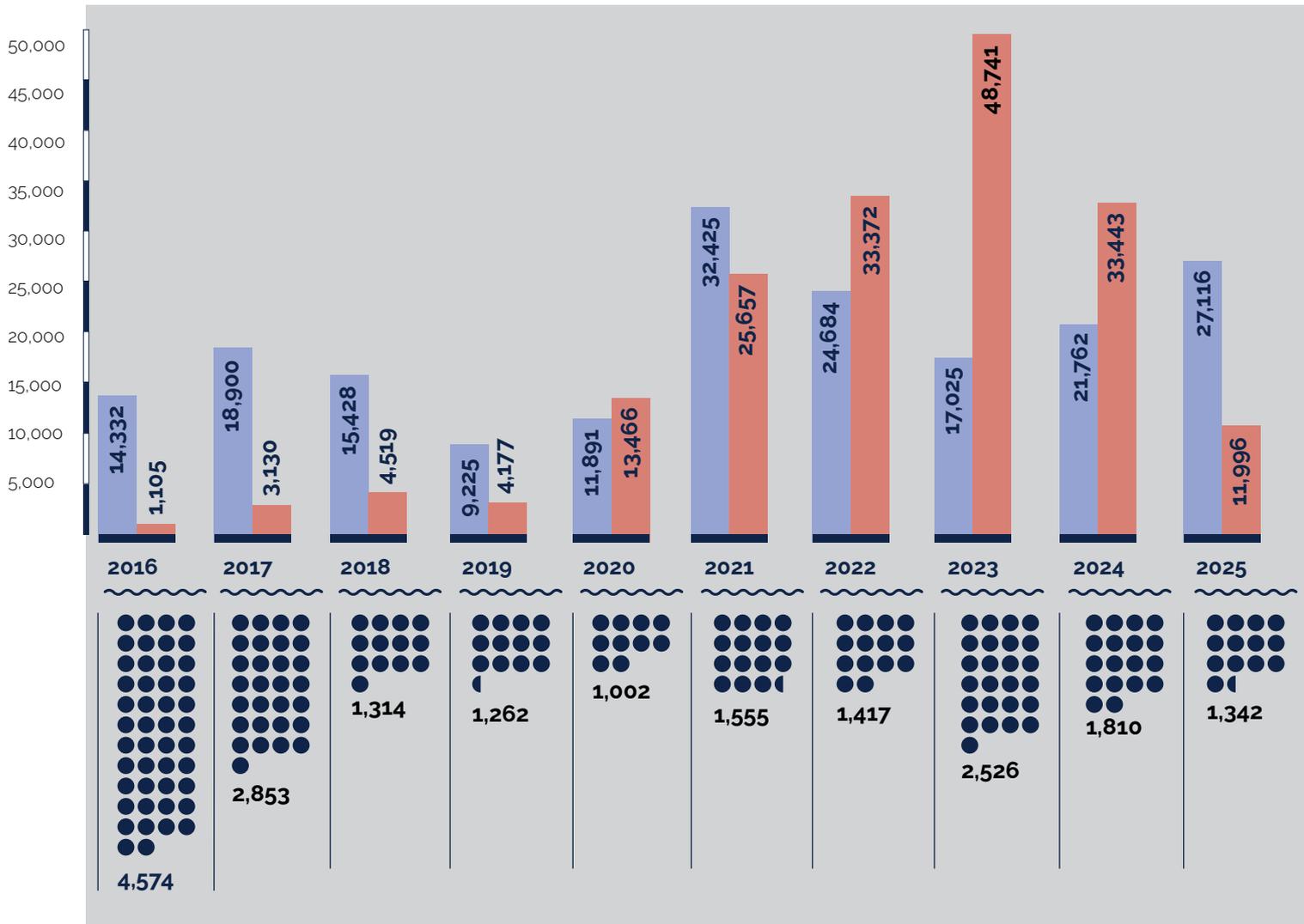
* The report uses the term "Libyan Coast Guards" in the plural to reflect the fact that multiple units and actors operate at sea under this label, often under different command structures, rather than under a single, unified coast guard authority.

to providing funding, technical support, and training to Libyan Coast Guards, with the stated aim of strengthening Libya's capacity to intercept vessels carrying migrants and coordinate search and rescue operations. This cooperation was reinforced through EU funding, notably via the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and its project "Support to Integrated Border and Migration Management in Libya" (SIBMMIL).¹¹

Figure 3



INTERCEPTIONS AND DEATHS IN THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN (2016–2025)



Source: [IOM Libya](#); [Tunisian Forum for Social and Economic Rights \(FTDES\)](#); UNHCR (unpublished data); [IOM's Missing Migrants Project](#)

■ Interceptions by the Libyan Coast Guard
■ Interceptions by the Tunisian Coast Guard
 1x ●: 100 dead and missing people in the Central Mediterranean

Over the years, several institutions have raised concerns around the opacity in decision-making processes and the lack of transparency surrounding EU and Italian funding, hampering the understanding of the EU's fund disbursements and commitments.¹² According to some reports, total EU funding for border management in Libya between 2018 and 2022 amounted to approximately €71 million.¹³ Other sources indicate that between 2015 and 2020, Italy allocated €210 million to projects in Libya, of which 44% went to projects focused on border control.¹⁴

European financial and technical assistance have translated into tangible operational reinforcement: Libyan personnel have received training in navigation, vessel handling, and maritime operations, and have been supplied with patrol boats, engines, and technical equipment. **Rather than ensuring independent rescue and prompt disembarkation in a place of safety, this support has enabled a large-scale system of interception and forced return to Libya.**

Between January 2016 and December 2025, 192,788 people were intercepted at sea and returned to Libya.¹⁵ In 2016, approximately 7% of people attempting the crossing were intercepted and returned. Following the formal recognition of a Libyan Search and Rescue Region (SRR) by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in 2018, despite well-documented concerns regarding Libya's ability to fulfil the responsibilities associated with such a designation, the interception rate rose to 33% (see Figure 3). Although arrivals to Europe have fluctuated in subsequent years, interceptions remain a defining feature of the Central Mediterranean route: in 2025, 25% of people attempting the crossing were intercepted and returned to Libya.¹⁶



Extension of the Libya model in Tunisia

In 2023, the EU intensified efforts to extend similar cooperation agreements with other third countries. Despite widespread reports of violent, racist attacks against Sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia and the collective expulsion of migrants from the country, the EU signed an agreement with Tunisia in July 2023 aimed at curbing departures. The Tunisian SRR was ratified on 19 June 2024, and interceptions by the Tunisian Navy have skyrocketed in recent years. Survivors and civil society organisations have described cases in which people forcibly returned to Tunisia following interceptions at sea were trafficked across the border and handed over to Libyan armed groups. Testimonies collected on board the Ocean Viking point to violence during interceptions by Tunisian authorities and subsequent forced transfers to Libya:

“

Once we were in the water, the coastguard stopped us. [...] They took us to Sfax, made us sit on the floor and started beating us. Then we saw very long buses arriving. They tied our hands with plastic straps [...]. They transported us on these buses where there were no seats; we sat on the floor with our hands tied behind our backs, and they beat us. We spent 10 hours on the buses. We were tortured and told that black people shouldn't come to Tunisia. When we arrived in the desert, we saw the Libyan pick-ups, and the Tunisians sold us to kidnappers.”

Charly (Cameroon) was rescued by the Ocean Viking in January 2025

At the same time, States have increasingly manipulated international maritime law, interpreting their obligations in restrictive or disingenuous ways. Over ten years of continuous operational presence in the Central Mediterranean, SOS MEDITERRANEE has witnessed how proactive, coordinated search and rescue has been replaced by an ineffective system in which Maritime Coordination Centres act without transparency or predictability, and deliberate non-assistance condemns people to drown. This fragmented and dysfunctional

coordination endangers lives and systematically delays rescue operations, in breach of the duty of maritime authorities to coordinate all able-to-assist assets.

Against this backdrop, expressions of sadness by European governments or the European Commission in response to this ongoing and avoidable mass loss of life ring hollow.¹⁷ **The repeated shipwrecks in the Central Mediterranean are not accidents, but the concrete and foreseeable outcome of a series of concrete policy and operational decisions.**

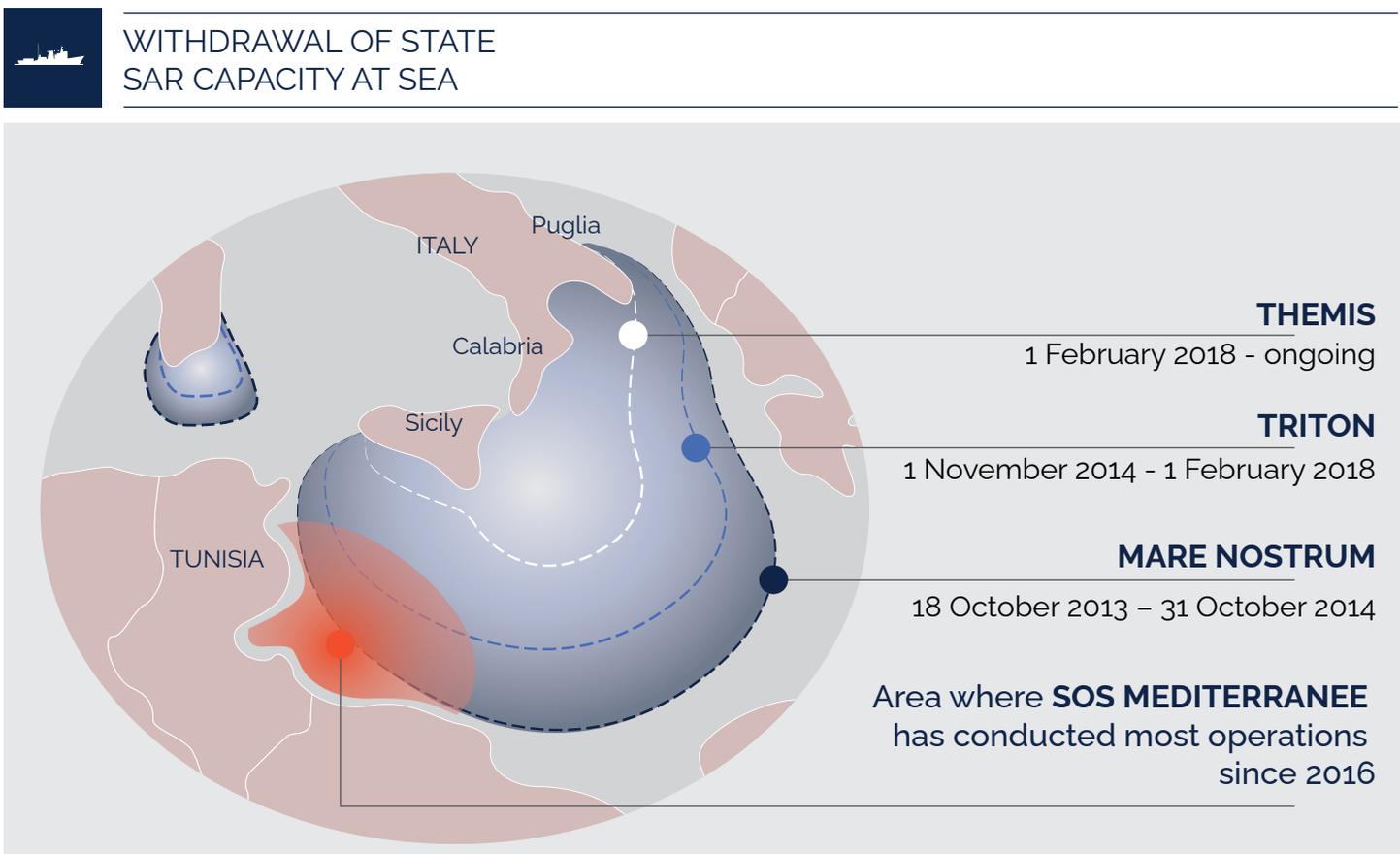
Dismissal of proactive search and rescue and withdrawal of maritime assets

The decision by Italian authorities to end the dedicated search and rescue activities of *Operation Mare Nostrum* in late 2014 marked a turning point in the Central Mediterranean. *Mare Nostrum* had been a large-scale, proactive operation with a clear life-saving mandate, deployed in October 2013 close to the Libyan coast in response to mass fatalities at sea. In the absence of sustained financial contributions from other European States, the lack of agreement on relocation arrangements for rescued people, and mounting domestic opposition, Italy decided to terminate *Operation Mare Nostrum* in October 2014. Over the first four months



of 2014, when *Mare Nostrum* was operational, 51 people lost their lives while attempting the crossing. During the same period one year later, after *Mare Nostrum* was discontinued, the death toll was at least 1,932.¹⁸ Its termination signalled the beginning of a steady disengagement by European States and institutions from search and rescue at sea.

Figure 4



Although subsequent European operations were launched in the Central Mediterranean, none were designed to replace *Mare Nostrum's* rescue capacity (see Figure 4). Instead, operations coordinated by Frontex, such as *Operation Triton* (2014–2018), prioritised border control and anti-smuggling objectives over life-saving activities. Its successor, *Operation Themis*, launched in 2018, nominally included search and rescue within its mandate but in practice focused on preventive surveillance and interception close to North African coasts, resulting in fewer rescues by EU-deployed

assets. Similarly, *EUNAVFOR Med* missions (first *Operation Sophia* and later *Operation Iriini*) maintained predominantly military and enforcement goals. Their operational areas were progressively reduced and concentrated closer to European shores, leaving large stretches of the Central Mediterranean without adequate rescue coverage.¹⁹

This shift away from proactive rescue is also reflected in Frontex's mandate. Since its establishment, and as reiterated in successive regulations (most recently in the 2019 Regulation),²⁰ Frontex does not have a proactive search and rescue mandate. Formally, the Agency's role is to "*support Member States on the ground in their efforts to protect the external borders*".²¹ On numerous occasions, Frontex has stated that search and rescue remain the responsibility of coastal States. As the number of dead and missing in the Mediterranean Sea continues to rise, this limited mandate has become increasingly at odds with the operational reality in the Central Mediterranean.

Ineffective coordination leading to systemic chaos

During the early years of SOS MEDITERRANEE's operational presence in the Central Mediterranean, particularly in 2016 and 2017, civil search and rescue assets were treated as an integral part of the broader rescue system coordinated by Italian authorities, as directly experienced by our crews during operations at sea. This approach

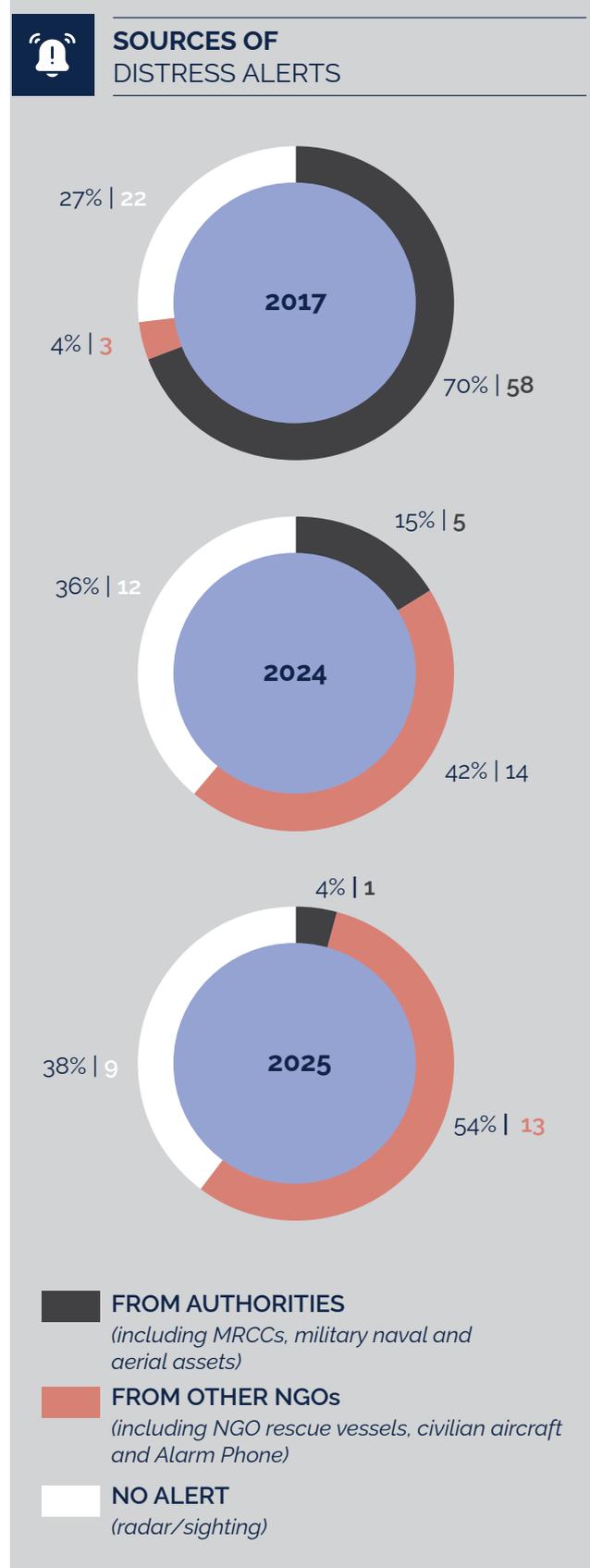


was consistent with the principle of integrity of SAR services, as set out in IMO's *Guidelines on the Treatment of Persons Rescued at Sea*.²² At the time, the Italian Coast Guard frequently referred to civil SAR actors collectively as the 'rescue community', and public perception of SAR NGOs was overwhelmingly positive.

This collaborative approach shifted dramatically in 2017 and 2018, giving way to growing political hostility and operational obstruction (see chapter 4: The erosion of the duty to rescue). SOS MEDITERRANEE's teams observed a sharp shift in coordination practices, with distress information increasingly handled in a confidential and restrictive manner by Italian and Maltese authorities, in ways that facilitated interceptions by EU-supported Libyan Coast Guards.

Operational data from SOS MEDITERRANEE's vessels illustrates the scale of this shift. In 2016 and 2017, more than 50% of the boats assisted by our teams were located following alerts relayed by national authorities, notably the Italian Coast Guard. In contrast, in recent years this role has virtually collapsed: in 2024, only 15% of alerts originated from authorities, dropping to just 4% in 2025, with MRCC-originated alerts almost entirely disappearing. In 2025, SOS MEDITERRANEE did not receive a single distress case from the Italian authorities (see Figure 5). Meanwhile, the role of civil initiatives such as Alarm Phone or civilian monitoring aircraft became increasingly central, accounting for around half of the distress alerts received by our teams in 2025, while consistently notifying all relevant maritime authorities.

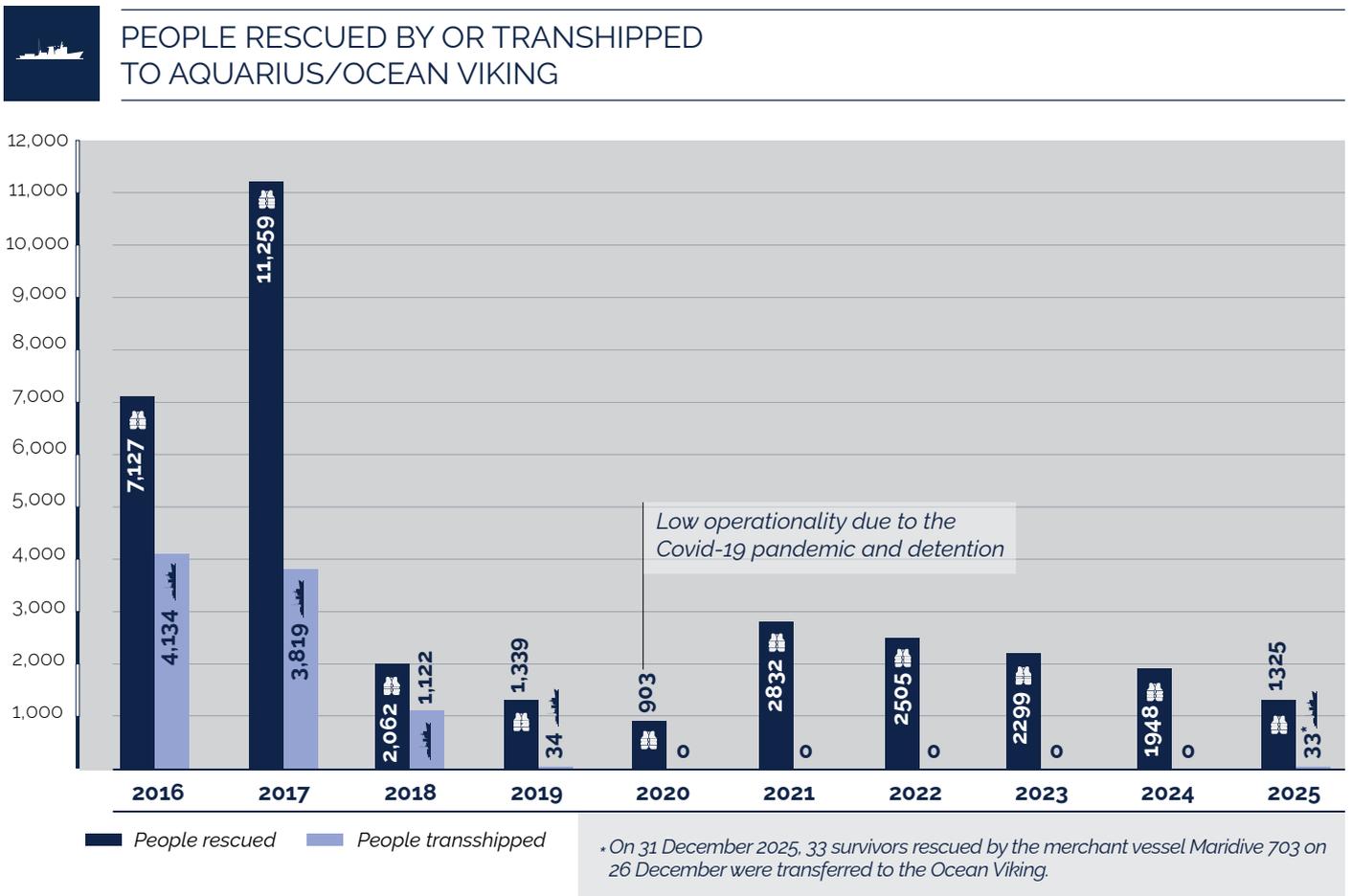
Figure 5



Source: SOS MEDITERRANEE

The deliberate refusal to coordinate with all available assets to prevent deaths at sea is also evident in the effective cessation of transshipments involving NGO rescue vessels. Until mid-2018, Italian authorities routinely coordinated transfers of survivors between vessels in order to maximise rescue capacity and reduce the number of ships required to disembark survivors at a place of safety, allowing other rescue assets to remain operational in the area. Between 2016 and 2018, more than 9,000 survivors were transferred to SOS MEDITERRANEE's vessels after initial rescue by other actors. From 2019 onwards, this practice virtually disappeared, despite thousands of people continuing to be rescued each year. The loss of this pragmatic, life-saving coordination mechanism has significantly undermined the overall effectiveness of rescue efforts in the Central Mediterranean (see Figure 6).

Figure 6



Blatant neglect of international maritime law and legal obligations

International maritime law establishes a clear and longstanding duty to render assistance to any person in distress at sea. This obligation requires coastal States not only to respond to distress alerts, but to ensure effective coordination of all available assets and the prompt disembarkation of rescued persons in a place of safety.²³ In the Central Mediterranean, however, this duty has been repeatedly disregarded.

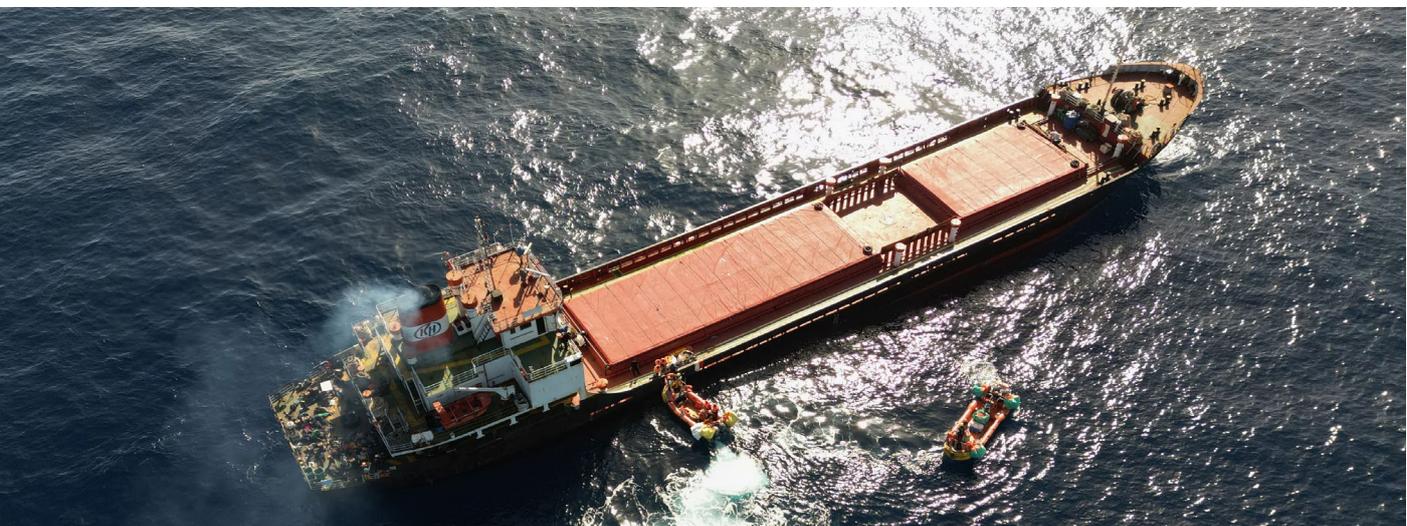
In recent years, Italian, Maltese and Libyan maritime authorities have repeatedly failed to rescue people in distress, as their coast guards have been unwilling or unable to effectively coordinate vessels to carry out SAR operations. **Calls for assistance to people in distress at sea have been ignored, delayed, or denied, leaving shipwrecked persons at sea for hours or even days without assistance.**²⁴

Delays in dispatching rescue assets have contributed to devastating shipwrecks, including the boat that capsized near Cutro, Italy, on 25 February 2023, killing at least 94 people. Authorities had prior information about the vessel, yet rescue assets were not deployed in time. Criminal proceedings have since been opened against officers of the Guardia di Finanza and the Guardia Costiera, who have been indicted on charges including negligent shipwreck and multiple manslaughter in connection with alleged failures and delays in the rescue response.²⁵



Over the years, SOS MEDITERRANEE's teams have witnessed first-hand the lethal consequences of delayed and denied assistance to known distress cases. A particularly deadly example occurred in April 2021, when the *Ocean Viking* sailed overnight through worsening weather to reach a distress case more than ten hours away. Two merchant vessels also mobilized. On the afternoon of 21 April 2021, the crew located a deflated rubber boat amid dozens of bodies. Although authorities had been aware of the boat's position, and another distress case nearby had been rescued the previous day, no assistance ever reached the 130 people who are known to have lost their lives.²⁶

Failures to uphold the duty to rescue have also placed merchant vessels in untenable legal and moral positions. While international law requires shipmasters to assist persons in distress, coastal States have increasingly failed to provide clear instructions or timely assignment of a place of safety following rescue. The case of the tanker *Maersk Etienne* has become a symbol of States' disregard for their obligations towards captains who assist people in distress. After rescuing 27 people at sea on 5 August 2020, the vessel was stuck in limbo for 38 days with survivors onboard, without being assigned a place of safety for disembarkation.²⁷



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17 January 2026 — Drone view of the transshipment of 44 survivors from the merchant vessel MV SIDER to the *Ocean Viking*. The survivors, rescued on 15 January 2026, were transferred by RHIB from the stern of the vessel.

Deadly failure of rescue coordination: the *MV Bobic* case

In the early hours of Saturday, 24 May 2025, the civil network Alarm Phone alerted maritime authorities to two overcrowded wooden boats in distress in the Libyan SRR. Both boats had departed from Sabratha two nights earlier and were each carrying more than 100 people in urgent need of assistance.

Only one of the two distress cases triggered a coordinated response. That boat was eventually rescued by the Italian Coast Guard, and 128 survivors were disembarked in Lampedusa on Sunday, 25 May. For the second boat, however, no search and rescue plan was initiated, despite repeated alerts, worsening weather conditions, and the clear and ongoing presence of distress.

Later that day, the merchant vessel *MV Bobic* encountered this second boat after being alerted by Alarm Phone. The ship was not equipped for mass rescue operations and, despite repeated calls for assistance, received no guidance or coordination from Italian, Maltese, or Libyan maritime authorities. In the absence of any state-led response, the captain attempted a rescue. During the operation, multiple people fell into the sea. One person disappeared, and 35 survivors were taken onboard the *MV Bobic* before contact with the remaining people on the distress boat was lost. For nearly 36 hours, repeated attempts by the captain to obtain instructions or establish coordination with maritime authorities went unanswered. At no point was an effective rescue plan put in place.

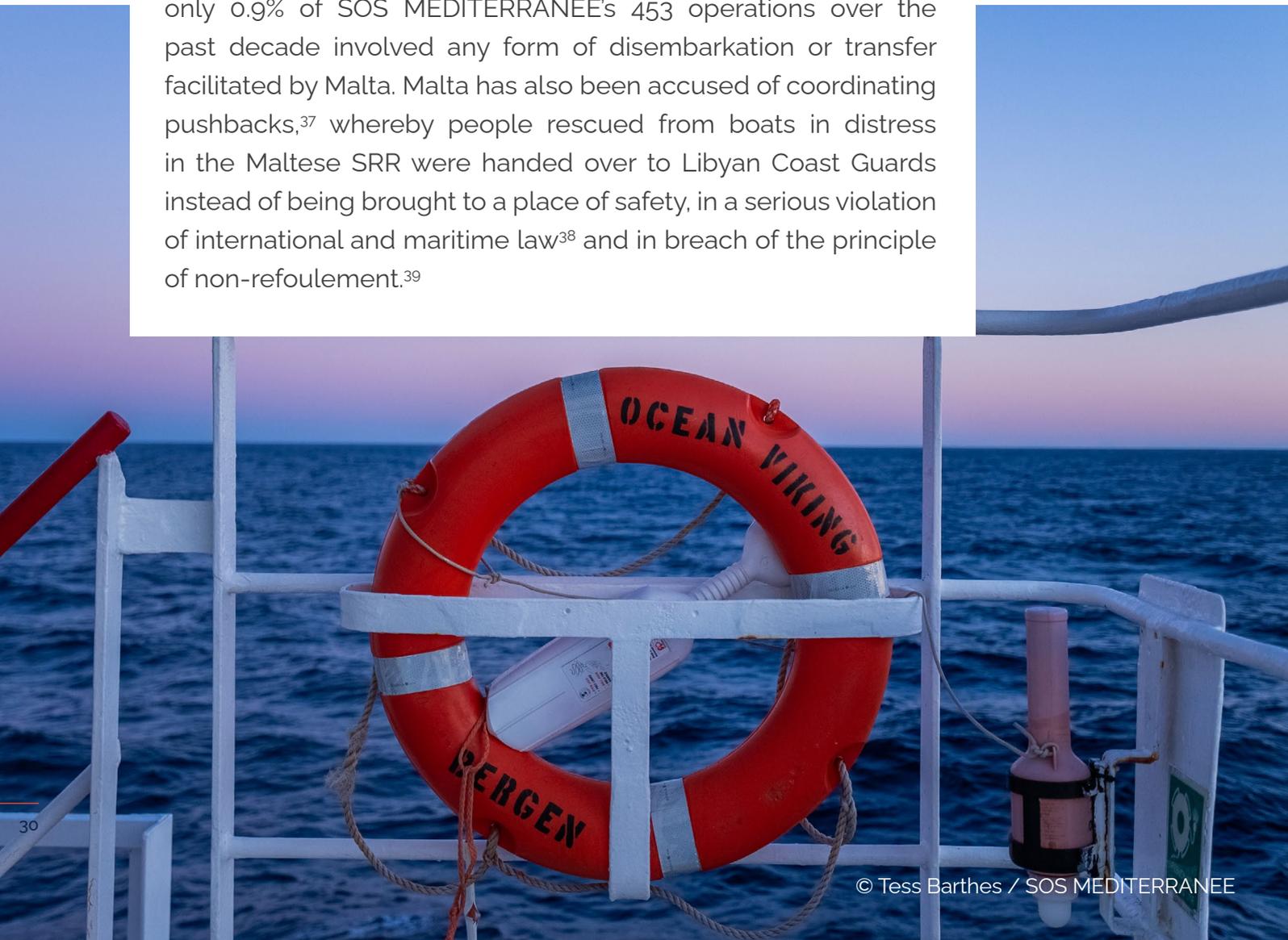
Despite the captain's and flag State's explicit warnings that disembarkation in Libya would violate international law, the 35 survivors were ultimately disembarked and sent to detention in Libya under an unclear chain of command. Throughout the night, Alarm Phone and SOS MEDITERRANEE provided remote support to the *MV Bobic* crew and continued efforts to locate the remaining people in distress. Contact was re-established the following day with 79 survivors. The merchant vessel *MV Eco One* rescued 26 people, while the *Ocean Viking* completed the rescue of the remaining 53 survivors.²⁸

There have also been reports of coastal States issuing instructions to commercial vessels that directly contradict international maritime law. In some instances, merchant vessels in the vicinity of boats in distress have been instructed to stand by rather than initiate rescue.²⁹ In other cases, authorities have ordered vessels to disembark survivors in unsafe ports – including Libya³⁰ – or have given instructions not to provide assistance at all.³¹ This lack of support and clear guidance from coastal States, combined with the precedent of captains left without instructions for the lawful and timely disembarkation of survivors, has effectively turned the duty to rescue into an incalculable risk for merchant vessels. These practices continue despite a clear ruling by the Court of Appeal of Naples – later confirmed by the Supreme Court of Cassation – which found the captain of the Italian-flagged supply vessel *Asso 28* guilty of “*arbitrary disembarkation and abandonment of persons*” for having returned 101 people rescued in international waters to Libya.³²

Substantial documented evidence further shows that, in recent years, men, women, and children have been left adrift in the Central Mediterranean while aerial surveillance by Frontex or affiliated aircraft monitored their position, failed to alert nearby rescue actors, and instead forwarded coordinates to Libyan Coast Guards. These practices have frequently resulted in interception and return to Libya.³³ Since 2018, Frontex’s Multipurpose Aerial Surveillance (MAS) scheme has institutionalised this model. According to the Frontex Consultative Forum’s 2022 Annual Report, confirmed by Frontex itself, “*in about 50% of the cases, sightings by Frontex have triggered search and rescue and/or interceptions by Libyan coastguards of migrants and refugees from international waters, leading to their disembarkation in Libya.*”³⁴ Human rights organizations have repeatedly warned that the replacement of European ships with aerial assets deployed by Frontex appears designed to circumvent European legal obligations toward people in distress at sea.

Malta has also systematically disengaged from its SAR responsibilities. The Maltese Rescue Coordination Centre is notoriously unresponsive and often avoids issuing formal Mayday relays or SAR coordination messages, minimising its formal involvement and accountability in rescue operations. Distress alerts have often been ignored or action delayed, even when boats were clearly in peril. While openly refusing to collaborate with SAR NGOs, Malta has in multiple cases attempted to shift its legal responsibility by referring distress cases to Libyan authorities.³⁵

Despite having carried out more than 70 rescues in the Maltese SRR or in areas in which the Maltese SRR overlaps with the Italian or Tunisian regions, SOS MEDITERRANEE has, over ten years of operations, been allowed to disembark survivors in Malta only once, in August 2018,³⁶ and has transhipped survivors to Maltese Armed Forces vessels on only three occasions. Taken together, only 0.9% of SOS MEDITERRANEE's 453 operations over the past decade involved any form of disembarkation or transfer facilitated by Malta. Malta has also been accused of coordinating pushbacks,³⁷ whereby people rescued from boats in distress in the Maltese SRR were handed over to Libyan Coast Guards instead of being brought to a place of safety, in a serious violation of international and maritime law³⁸ and in breach of the principle of non-refoulement.³⁹



3.

LIBYA: No safe port, no effective coordination

“

Once you are in Libya, there is no other way out than the sea. We suffered a lot in Libya. Dying at sea is better than dying of hunger. The smuggler held us for 34 days. He took our passports, and he never gave them back. We saw death at his place. When we were there, we no longer wanted to cross. We wanted to go back to Syria, but we had no choice. We were forced to get on the death boat.”

Sanad (Syria) was rescued by the Ocean Viking in July 2021

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International maritime law is unequivocal: a rescue is considered concluded only when survivors are disembarked in a place of safety. By design, the outsourcing of rescue responsibilities to Libya results in disembarkation in a country that cannot be considered a place of safety under international maritime, human rights and refugee law. Multiple UN bodies – including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – have repeatedly and unequivocally affirmed that Libya cannot be considered a place of safety.⁴⁰ UNHCR has explicitly stated that, due to ongoing violence, arbitrary detention, and widespread human rights violations, “*Libya does not meet the criteria for being designated as a place of safety for disembarkation following rescue at sea*”.⁴¹ In this context, so-called “search and rescue” operations conducted by Libyan Coast Guards within its declared search and rescue region amount in practice to de facto interceptions and forced returns, in violation of the principle of non-refoulement.⁴²

Additionally, UN investigations have identified the LCG as a perpetrator of abuses against Libyans and migrants and as an actor colluding with human trafficking and smuggling networks.⁴³ People intercepted at sea by the LCG are routinely returned to official and unofficial detention facilities, where they are exposed to arbitrary detention, torture, extortion, and sexual violence. The investigations have revealed credible evidence indicating cooperation between units of the Libyan Coast Guard and militia-linked actors involved in trafficking and exploitation.⁴⁴

“

“I was on a rubber boat with women, men, and children, about 80 people in total. We saw the Ocean Viking coming toward us to rescue us, but the Libyan Coast Guard arrived and started shooting [on March 25, 2023]. The Ocean Viking left. The Libyan Coast Guard took us onto their vessel and beat all of us. I was thrown into a prison in Tripoli called Ain Zara, where I stayed for weeks before I could get out. My family had to pay \$1,200 for my release. While in prison, I was tortured and beaten. There are thousands of us there, Ain Zara has 5 compounds. [...] After five attempts to escape Libya, the Ocean Viking finally rescued me.”

John (Eritrea, 17 years old) was rescued by the Ocean Viking in January 2025⁴⁵

The Libyan Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) has repeatedly failed to demonstrate its “ability to receive distress alerts, e.g., from MCCs, CESs” and to ensure “24-hour availability” required by the International Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue (IAMSAR) Manual⁴⁶ of the IMO by continuously not responding to calls from SAR NGO vessels before, during and after rescue operations at sea. The JRCC has also failed to ensure the presence of “persons with a working knowledge of the English language”, as demonstrated by multiple documented instances where SOS MEDITERRANEE crews were explicitly informed by JRCC personnel that they were unable to communicate in English and spoke only Arabic.

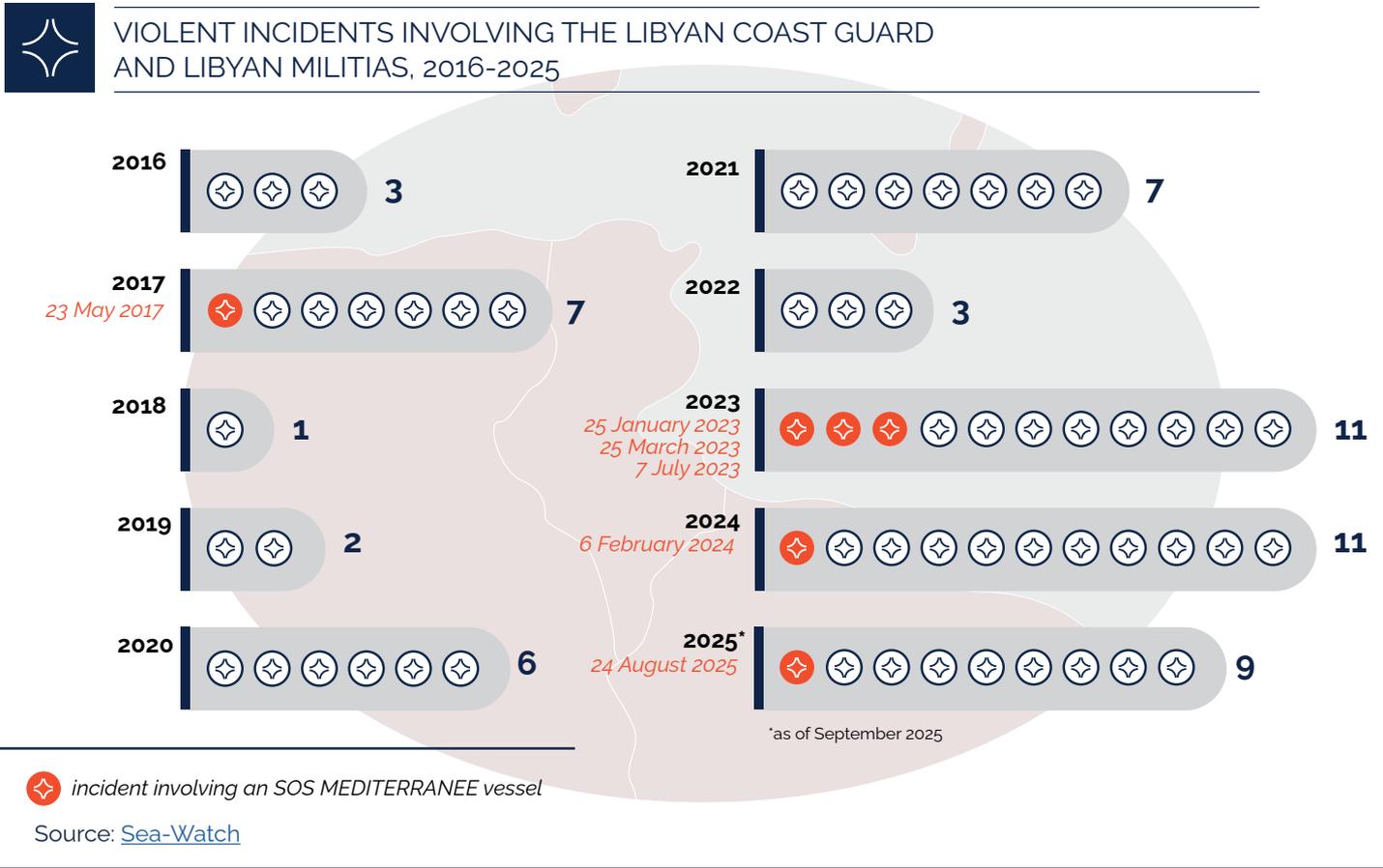
More broadly, the JRCC has demonstrated extremely limited capacity to manage its extensive search and rescue region. It is frequently unresponsive, often fails to initiate or coordinate rescue operations, and rarely issues or disseminates distress alerts as required under international maritime law. Moreover, the JRCC has repeatedly issued instructions to both NGO-operated and commercial vessels that contradict established maritime obligations. In several documented cases, Libyan Coast Guard units have ordered NGO vessels operating in international waters, including SOS MEDITERRANEE's rescue ships, to "proceed north" or to vacate the area, even when actively engaged in search operations responding to distress calls.⁴⁷

Additionally, despite increased logistical support, equipment and technical training provided by the European Union and Italy, as well as human rights and protection training by UNHCR and other agencies, serious concerns persist regarding the conduct of the LCG during search and rescue operations. **SOS MEDITERRANEE and other SAR NGOs have documented multiple serious incidents in which Libyan Coast Guards' conduct during rescue operations has directly endangered lives.** Between January 2016 and September 2025, at least 59 violent incidents involving Libyan authorities have been recorded (see Figure 7), revealing a persistent pattern of behaviour incompatible with the responsibilities of a search and rescue authority under international maritime law.⁴⁸ These incidents have included the use of live ammunition, physical violence, threats and racist abuse, dangerous boarding of overcrowded boats, collisions with vessels in distress, and high-speed manoeuvres that generate destabilising waves. Such actions routinely provoke panic among people already in life-threatening situations, sharply increasing the risk of injury or death.

The LCG has also repeatedly engaged in hostile actions towards humanitarian rescue vessels, including firing weapons near or towards humanitarian ships; instructing SAR NGOs to stay away from boats in distress during interceptions and to refrain from providing assistance; and issuing threats that vessels would be

"targeted" if they did not "come to Tripoli port" or leave the Libyan SRR. Such conduct has also been documented in international waters, including against the *Ocean Viking*. These actions not only endanger lives but also violate core principles of international maritime law, including the freedom of navigation, and illustrate the extent to which violence and intimidation have become embedded in the conduct of Libyan authorities at sea.

Figure 7



Violent incidents involving SOS MEDITERRANEE's rescue vessels and Libyan Coast Guards' assets

Over the past decade, SOS MEDITERRANEE's vessels have repeatedly been exposed to violent and dangerous interference by units of the Libyan Coast Guard during rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean. As early as May 2017, while our rescue vessel *Aquarius* was assisting multiple boats in distress, a Libyan Coast Guard patrol boat approached the scene at high speed and fired shots into the air and the water. Officers boarded one of the boats at gunpoint, confiscated personal belongings from those onboard, and caused panic that led more than 60 people to jump into the sea. Although no fatalities occurred due to the prior distribution of life jackets, several people were forcibly intercepted and returned to Libya.

Similar patterns of interference have continued in subsequent years. In January 2023, a Libyan Coast Guard unit disrupted an ongoing rescue by preventing an *Ocean Viking* RHIB from returning to the vessel, delaying the transfer of people in distress. In March and July 2023, Libyan patrol vessels repeatedly approached the *Ocean Viking* in a threatening manner, ignored radio communications, brandished firearms, and fired shots in close proximity to rescue crews and survivors, forcing us to withdraw from active rescue while people were still in the water; dozens were subsequently intercepted and returned to Libya. In February 2024, the *Ocean Viking* was again compelled to abandon a planned rescue after receiving aggressive orders from a Libyan Coast Guard vessel.

A particularly serious incident occurred on 24 August 2025, when a Libyan patrol boat repeatedly fired live ammunition at the *Ocean Viking* during a search and rescue operation in international waters, damaging the bridge and disabling critical communication and rescue equipment.⁴⁹ At the time of the attack, 87 rescued survivors were on board, alongside our team. The patrol vessel involved had been supplied by Italy in 2023 through an EU-funded border management programme. These repeated incidents illustrate a persistent pattern of intimidation and violence that has directly endangered humanitarian crews and people in distress, severely undermining the ability of SAR NGOs to conduct life-saving operations at sea.

4.

THE EROSION OF THE DUTY TO RESCUE: Criminalization and administrative obstruction of NGO-led search and rescue

With the signing of the Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding in 2017, and the subsequent outsourcing of search and rescue responsibilities to a third country with the explicit objective of preventing people from seeking protection and safety in Europe, the operational environment for search and rescue NGOs in the Central Mediterranean changed radically. **Almost overnight, SAR NGOs were recast in public and political discourse, from being portrayed as “angels” saving lives at sea to being labelled “vice smugglers”,** and falsely accused by political actors, media outlets, and public institutions of colluding with smugglers, endangering lives, and operating outside international legal frameworks.⁵⁰

In the wake of this broader public debate, three parliamentary commissions were established in Italy to examine the role of international NGOs engaged in SAR activities in the Central Mediterranean. As early as March 2017, the Defence Committee of the Italian Senate launched an extensive inquiry and unanimously concluded that there was no evidence of links between NGOs and human traffickers. Nevertheless, the Committee called for increased scrutiny of NGO activities and recommended that the Italian government take steps to regulate their operations.⁵¹

Following the Senate Committee's report, the Italian Ministry of the Interior introduced a Code of Conduct for NGOs. Although the Code had no legal basis, adherence was presented as a prerequisite for being considered part of the "rescue system." In practice, the Code was never effectively applied; however, it served as a powerful narrative tool, fostering the impression that new and specific rules were needed to regulate SAR NGOs, and implicitly suggesting that civil actors were operating outside the scope of existing legal frameworks.⁵²

From mid-2016 onwards, public prosecutors' offices in Sicily initiated a series of criminal investigations against civilian actors involved in maritime search and rescue, accusing them of facilitating irregular migration, in some cases with the aggravating charge of criminal association. The most prominent proceedings were brought by the Trapani prosecutor's office against the German NGO *Jugend Rettet*, operator of the rescue vessel *Iuventa*, which was accused of facilitating irregular migration through its SAR activities. Authorities alleged improper contacts between crew members and smugglers, as well as unlawful transfer practices during rescue operations. These proceedings also implicated *Médecins Sans Frontières*, *Save the Children*, and the charter company *Vroon*.

While several other investigations were dismissed at a very early stage, the Trapani case continued for years and ultimately concluded on 19 April 2024, after nearly seven years of legal proceedings.



The preliminary hearing judge ordered the acquittal of all defendants, finding that the alleged conduct did not constitute a criminal offence and that there was no evidence of collaboration with trafficking networks.⁵³ While all criminal cases against SAR NGOs have so far been closed without any wrongdoing being established, these judicial proceedings played a significant role in sustaining the broader criminalization campaign against SAR NGOs and had a substantial impact on many organizations, both in terms of public perception and financial strain.

Despite the fact that these false narratives were repeatedly and thoroughly debunked by journalists, researchers, and civil society actors, misinformation continued to circulate widely.⁵⁴ This climate created fertile ground for the proliferation of administrative and legislative measures targeting SAR NGOs, contributing to the progressive shrinking of humanitarian space at sea, with the tacit acquiescence of political actors across the political spectrum and, at times, of the broader public.

While on land civil society actors became the targets of defamatory campaigns, at sea the constructive cooperation that had previously characterized relations between SAR NGOs and maritime authorities, particularly the Italian Coast Guard, ended abruptly (see chapter 2: Deliberate neglect). In parallel, SAR NGOs were subjected to a series of ad hoc administrative obstacles not applied to other vessels, including commercial ships that have also conducted rescues at sea. A notable example is the increase in Port State Control (PSC) inspections and the reinterpretation of existing regulatory standards applied exclusively to SAR NGO vessels.



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After an 11-hour Port State Control inspection in Porto Empedocle, the Ocean Viking was detained by Italian authorities for five months in July 2020. The detention was finally lifted on 21 December 2020.

Port State Controls are a well-established maritime safety mechanism, and the frequency of these inspections is determined by a vessel's Ship Risk Profile. However, since spring 2020, SAR NGO vessels have been systematically subjected to unusually frequent PSC inspections in Italian ports, characterised by extreme scrutiny and followed by detentions based on alleged technical and operational 'irregularities'. These detentions have relied on a discriminatory and disproportionate interpretation of safety-of-navigation regulations. While Port State Controls are a legitimate maritime safety regime, they have been instrumentalised to target NGO vessels in a selective manner. Several of the alleged technical deficiencies invoked to justify detentions appear politically motivated, based on distorted interpretations of maritime law, and, in practice, impossible to remedy.

154 days lost: Port State Control detentions of the *Ocean Viking*

Between 2020 and 2023, the *Ocean Viking* was detained three times following Port State Controls, immobilizing the ship for a total of 154 days. In July 2020, the *Ocean Viking* was detained in the port of Porto Empedocle, Sicily, following an 11-hour Port State Control inspection by the Italian Coast Guard. Although previous inspections had found the ship compliant with all applicable safety standards, a punitive reinterpretation of regulations forced SOS MEDITERRANEE to undertake costly modifications. The vessel remained out of operation for five months, until the detention was lifted on 21 December 2020.

In July 2023, the *Ocean Viking* was again detained, this time in the port of Civitavecchia, following another 11-hour inspection. The detention was based on alleged irregularities related to the ship's crewing and certification. SOS MEDITERRANEE, together with the ship's flag State and classification society, demonstrated that the ship was in fact crewed, certified and equipped in compliance with all applicable regulations, and the detention was lifted after ten days without any substantive changes.⁵⁵

In this context, the 2022 judgments of the Court of Justice of the European Union in the *Sea-Watch* cases (C-14/21 and C-15/21) provided an important clarification. The Court held that while Member States may detain vessels under PSC where there is a clear risk to safety, health, or the environment, such measures must be based on objective and specific evidence rather than general or abstract concerns. The rulings reaffirmed that PSC procedures must comply with international and EU law and constitute an important safeguard against arbitrary or politically motivated detentions of civilian SAR vessels.⁵⁶

Political pressure on SAR NGOs has also been exerted through flag State measures. In August 2018, Gibraltar withdrew its flag from SOS MEDITERRANEE's rescue vessel *Aquarius*, which later resumed operations under the Panamanian flag. In September of the same year, however, Panamanian authorities notified the *Aquarius* crew that the vessel would be removed from the national registry, stating that Italian authorities had urged the Panama Maritime Authority (PMA) to take "immediate action" against the *Aquarius*. The PMA message explained that, "*unfortunately, it is necessary that [the Aquarius] be excluded from our registry, because it implies a political problem against the Panamanian government and the Panamanian fleet that arrive to European port*".⁵⁷ As a result, the ship was forced to remain docked in Marseille and was unable to return to the SAR zone.

In parallel, SAR NGOs have faced persistent and evolving obstacles to the timely and safe disembarkation of people rescued at sea. From mid-2018 onwards, Italian authorities adopted a restrictive approach towards the disembarkation of survivors by NGO rescue vessels. Although no formal legislation was initially introduced, this shift had an immediate impact on NGO activities, as disembarkation was no longer authorized promptly after rescue operations. Instead, approval to enter a place of safety was frequently delayed or withheld. The first case of Maltese and Italian port closures leading to what later became known as a "standoff" at sea occurred in June 2018, involving the *Aquarius*.



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On 9 June 2018, our teams on the *Aquarius* rescued 230 survivors from two boats in distress and carried out the transfer of an additional 400 survivors from Italian Coast Guard and Navy vessels, in accordance with instructions from the Italian MRCC. With a total of 630 survivors onboard, the *Aquarius* was initially assigned a place of safety in Sicily, which was subsequently rescinded, leaving the ship without any authorised port for disembarkation. Spain eventually offered the distant port of Valencia, where survivors disembarked after a prolonged voyage and multiple rounds of food and water resupply by Maltese and Italian Navy and Coast Guard vessels.

Between 2018 and 2019, these standoffs became systematic. On average, survivors rescued by SAR NGOs were forced to wait approximately nine days after requesting authorization to disembark before being allowed to dock, with extreme cases reaching more than twenty days.⁵⁸ Although waiting times

decreased from late 2019 onwards, delays remained systematic, as disembarkation continued to be postponed rather than granted immediately. **Taken together, standoffs at sea resulted in the *Ocean Viking* losing a total of 150 operational days awaiting the designation of a place of safety.**⁵⁹ The striking last example of the practice of standoffs, which routinely inflicted undue hardship on shipwreck survivors, was the refusal of the newly elected Italian government to authorize the *Ocean Viking* to disembark rescued persons in October 2022. The ship eventually sailed to Toulon, France, where survivors finally reached land only after spending up to 20 days onboard.

Efforts to restrict humanitarian assistance at sea further intensified in 2023 with the adoption of new legislation and implementing rules explicitly targeting NGO-led SAR operations.⁶⁰ Under this framework, rescue vessels have been required to return immediately to port after a rescue, in some cases obliging them to ignore additional distress alerts. This requirement has significantly reduced the time NGOs can spend actively patrolling international waters. **Since the beginning of 2023, Italian authorities have imposed 36 administrative detentions on NGO rescue vessels under these rules, resulting in more than 800 days during which ships were immobilised and unable to carry out life-saving activities.**

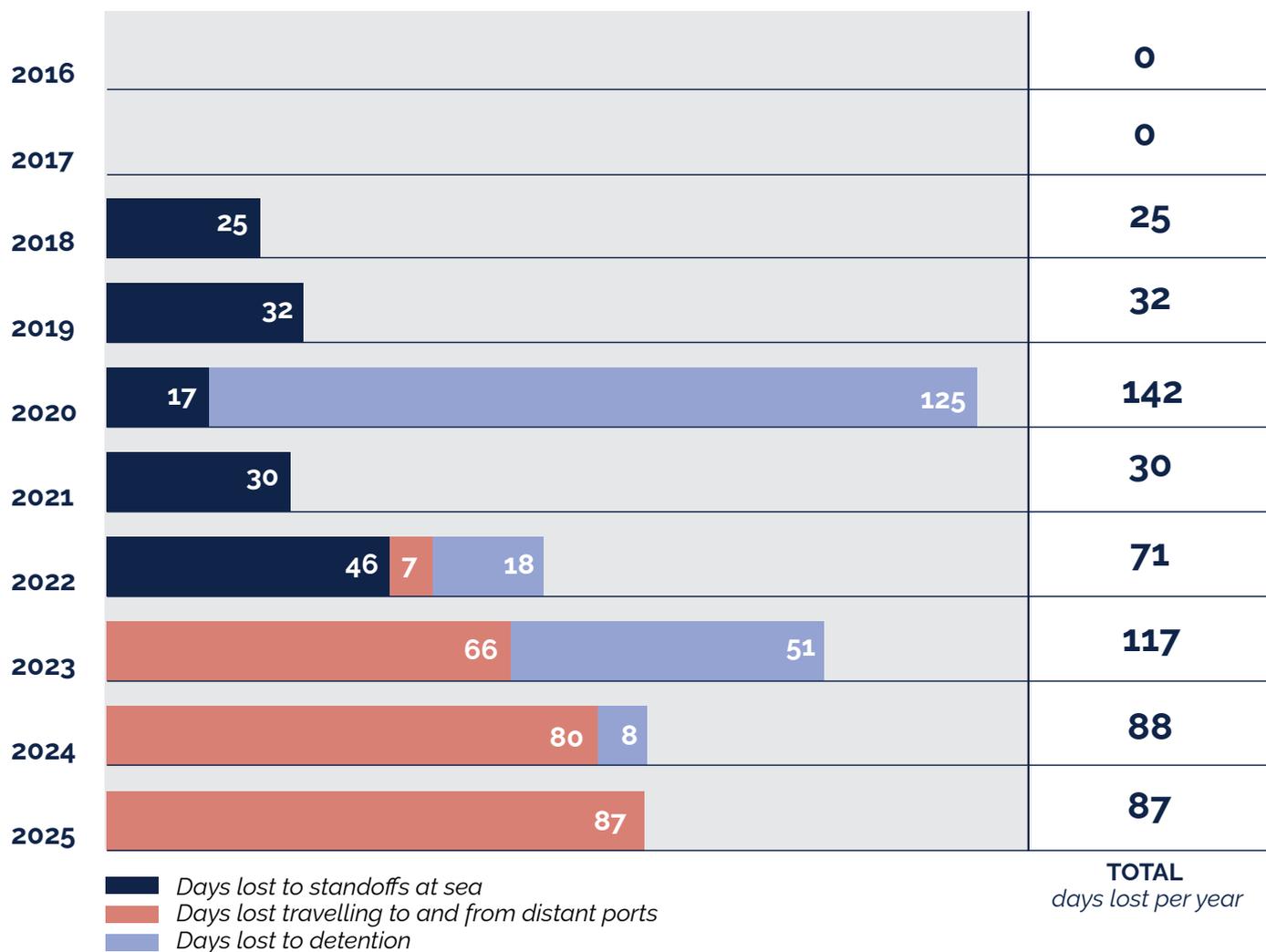
One of the main grounds invoked for the detention of humanitarian rescue vessels has been the alleged failure to comply with instructions issued by Libyan Coast Guards. NGOs have been accused of endangering survivors by not following these instructions; including in two detention orders issued against the *Ocean Viking* in November 2023 and February 2024. These allegations effectively penalise humanitarian actors for not coordinating with an actor whose conduct has actively endangered lives at sea, whose capacity to coordinate rescue operations in their area of responsibility has been repeatedly shown to be inadequate, and whose involvement in serious human rights violations is well-documented (see chapter 3: Libya: No safe port, no effective coordination).

In addition, several detention orders have been issued against NGO vessels that carried out multiple rescues, on the basis that they failed to proceed without delay to the assigned place of safety, as happened to the *Ocean Viking* in December 2023.

Figure 8



OPERATIONAL DAYS LOST BY SOS MEDITERRANEE'S VESSELS DUE TO CRIMINALIZATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE OBSTRUCTION



Source: SOS MEDITERRANEE

Note: "Days lost" refers to days during which SOS MEDITERRANEE's vessels were unable to conduct search and rescue operations due to administrative detention, prolonged standoffs at sea awaiting disembarkation, or extended navigation to and from distant ports assigned by authorities. Standoffs were calculated as the number of days between the first request for a place of safety submitted to the authority best placed to assist and the date on which a place of safety was formally assigned.

Instructing SAR NGOs to proceed immediately to port while other persons remain in distress at sea contradicts the captain's obligation to render assistance to all persons in distress, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. In practice, this rule risks resulting into a de facto ban on conducting multiple rescues.

At the same time, since the end of 2022, authorities have institutionalised the systematic assignment of distant ports of disembarkation to SAR NGO vessels. This practice has forced survivors to endure additional days at sea, delaying access to medical care and humanitarian assistance, while further reducing the operational presence of NGO assets in areas where rescue needs remain acute. Between December 2022 and December 2025, the *Ocean Viking* alone spent a total of 239 days navigating to and from remote ports, time that could otherwise have been dedicated to saving lives at sea. This practice stands in contrast to the obligation under international maritime law for coastal States to minimise the deviation of ships assisting persons in distress and to ensure that disembarkation of survivors takes place "as soon as reasonably possible".⁶¹

Taken together, the range of policies and practices that SOS MEDITERRANEE has documented over the past decade converge toward a common outcome: limiting the presence of independent actors in the Central Mediterranean. Their cumulative effect has further depleted the sea of essential life-saving assets, while simultaneously removing crucial witnesses to the widespread violations of international law occurring in the area. SOS MEDITERRANEE alone has lost 591 operational days as a result of these measures, equivalent to one year and seven months during which its rescue vessels could have been saving lives (see Figure 8). At a time when the rescue system urgently requires reinforcement, Italian governments continue to obstruct humanitarian actors operating on this perilous stretch of sea while the European Union turns a blind eye. The result is a systematic undermining of efforts to save lives and to bear witness to the human cost of deterrence-based migration policies.







CONCLUSIONS AND KEY ASKS

Ten years of search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean leave no room for ambiguity. The ongoing loss of life at sea is not a tragic inevitability but the result of deliberate policy choices that have dismantled state-led search and rescue, replaced assistance with deterrence and containment, and shifted responsibility onto actors unable or unwilling to uphold international obligations.

These choices have produced a maritime space in which distress is detected but not addressed, rescue is possible but not prioritised, and deaths at sea are treated as an acceptable consequence of policy. International maritime law is clear: States have a duty, grounded in the right to life, to render assistance, coordinate rescue, and ensure prompt disembarkation in a place of safety. The means to uphold these obligations exist, and the human cost of failing to do so is well documented. European coastal States and EU institutions must urgently reverse the withdrawal from rescue responsibilities, end cooperation with unsafe third countries, and restore a coordinated, rights-based search and rescue system that places human life and dignity at its core.

SOS MEDITERRANEE calls on EU institutions and Member States to:

1. Re-establish state-led, proactive search and rescue in the Central Mediterranean

European Member States and coastal States, Italy and Malta in particular, must fulfil their duty under international maritime law to assist persons in distress at sea and ensure timely, dignified rescue and disembarkation in a safe place, irrespective of nationality or migration status. A dedicated, state-led and proactive search and rescue mechanism in the Central Mediterranean must urgently be restored, with a clear humanitarian and protection mandate. This mechanism should ensure continuous presence at sea, rapid response to distress alerts, and transparent, accountable coordination by maritime authorities, in full compliance with international maritime and human rights law.

2. End the delegation of rescue responsibilities to unsafe third countries

The EU and its Member States must cease all financial, logistical, and political support to Libyan Coast Guards and the Libyan Joint Rescue Coordination Centre, given their documented record of violence and misconduct. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) and its Member States should urgently review the recognition of the Libyan Search and Rescue Region. European authorities must publicly reaffirm that Libya does not meet the criteria of a place of safety and ensure that no rescue coordination or transfer results in the return of people to Libya or other unsafe countries. Cooperation frameworks and EU-funded border management projects in Libya and Tunisia must be reviewed through independent human rights assessments and discontinued where they result in interceptions at sea, forced returns, or collective expulsions.

3. Protect the humanitarian space at sea and end obstruction of NGO-led search and rescue

The EU and its Member States must end the criminalisation, administrative obstruction, and harassment of civil search and rescue organisations. The Italian government should repeal laws and administrative measures that restrict NGO rescue operations, including mandatory return-to-port orders, arbitrary detentions of vessels, and the systematic assignment of distant ports. States should facilitate coordination between State and NGO rescue assets, recognising civil SAR actors as legitimate humanitarian partners whose activities contribute to fulfilling, rather than undermining, States' legal obligations to save lives at sea.

4. Ensure transparency and accountability for failures to rescue and violations at sea

The EU and its Member States must disclose agreements, operational data, and communications related to SAR coordination, interceptions and returns. An independent monitoring mechanism should be established to oversee SAR operations and assess compliance with international maritime, refugee, and human rights law. All cases of non-assistance, delayed rescue, unlawful interceptions, violence, or obstruction of humanitarian assistance by State or non-State actors must be investigated and prosecuted under international and domestic law.

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This report draws on testimonies and operational data collected by SOS MEDITERRANEE's teams over the past decade. The authors extend their sincere thanks for their dedication and careful documentation that made this publication possible.

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