Albatross

One year of bearing witness from the sky

November 2025 → November 2026

One year ago, SOS MEDITERRANEE and Humanitarian Pilots Initiative launched the Albatross aerial monitoring mission in the Central Mediterranean. Since then, the aircraft, stationed in Lampedusa, has been deployed in a series of missions to monitor boats in distress and document events at sea, including violations of international maritime and human rights law. **Between November 2025 and November 2026, the aircraft conducted 78 monitoring flights.**

This first year has demonstrated the importance of independent civilian monitoring in the Central Mediterranean. Albatross monitors situations at sea, including incidents already reported by other actors, recording their positions, movements, and surrounding circumstances.

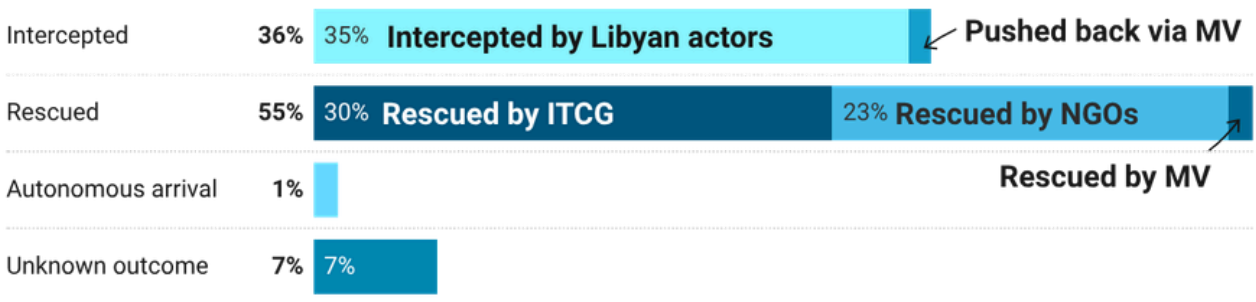
The mission also documents interceptions, failures to assist and other incidents at sea, gathering first-hand evidence of events that might otherwise go unrecorded. Through this work, Albatross contributes to an independent record of what happens at sea, strengthening SOS MEDITERRANEE's ability to bear witness, identify recurring patterns and advocate for the protection of human life and respect for international maritime and human rights law.

A year in the sky: Key figures

Between November 2025 and November 2026, the Albatross crew sighted **69 boats in distress**, carrying an estimated 2,755 people on board, as well as **74 empty boats** and the **bodies of 18 people** who died during the crossing.

Of the 69 documented distress cases,[1] 38 resulted in the rescue and disembarkation in a place of safety of an estimated 1,500 people: 21 were carried out by the Italian Coastguard (ITCG), 16 by NGO vessels, and one by a merchant vessel, which subsequently transferred the people on board to an ITCG vessel.

Figure 1. Distress cases by outcome.



Source: SOS MEDITERRANEE, 2026 • Created with Datawrapper

A further **25 boats were intercepted by Libyan actors** and survivors returned to Libya. This includes a case in which merchant vessel DOENICKE TIDE handed people rescued from a boat in distress to the Libyan Coastguard (LCG).

Of **28 boats in distress that were sighted in the Maltese Search and Rescue Region** (SRR), not a single one was rescued by Maltese authorities – 17 were rescued by the ITCG, 5 by search and rescue (SAR) NGOs, and 2 were intercepted and returned to Libya.[2]

Albatross directly sighted 20 (29%) of the 69 distress cases documented, without any prior alert. The remaining 49 had initially been reported by other sources, including Alarm Phone (30%), Frontex (28%), or mayday relays from unknown sources (13%). Where an alert had already been issued, the aircraft's observations helped locate boats more precisely and monitor their movements.

Over the course of the year, **the crew also spotted 74 empty boats**. In six cases, physical evidence observed from the aircraft, including missing markings, removed engines, boats set on fire, and LCG activity in the vicinity, points to an interception having taken place. In a further 5 cases, follow-up by the team established that the boat had been left behind following a rescue by the ITCG, while 5 others were linked to rescues by NGO ships. For the vast majority (58 boats, 78%), it was not possible to establish what had happened to the people who had previously been on board. Their fate therefore remains unknown.



6 July 2026: Albatross UNO documents the interception of a fibreglass boat by the Libyan Coast Guard.
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Main trends and selected cases

1. Interceptions are a defining pattern of the crossing

Interceptions accounted for 35% of all boats in distress documented by Albatross between November 2025 and November 2026. This reflects a broader pattern across the Central Mediterranean: of the estimated 58,806 people who attempted the crossing during the same period, **40% (23,253) were intercepted by the LCG and returned to Libya**,[3] a place where UN investigations have found that human rights violations against migrants and refugees may amount to crimes against humanity.

Albatross documented 25 interceptions, involving an estimated 1,015 people. In 20 cases, a distress alert had already been issued for the boat before Albatross arrived on scene; Albatross directly witnessed 14 of these interceptions in progress. In the remaining 5 cases, no prior distress alert had been issued: Albatross directly observed three interceptions from the air, and in the other two, the vessel was seen burning during a subsequent monitoring flight.

These interceptions are taking place against a backdrop of expanding Libyan maritime capacity. Over the course of the year, the Albatross crew observed an **increasing number of unmarked speedboats operated by unidentified Libyan actors**, alongside newly delivered LCG vessels, including RHIBs capable of speeds up to 45 knots. In July 2026, IRPI Media reported that the LCG and militia forces now operate a combined fleet of 97 vessels, active across an area extending up to 60 nautical miles from the Libyan coast.

This expanded operational reach helps explain both the volume of interceptions documented here and the shrinking window in which rescue assets can reach people in distress first. In several of the interceptions witnessed by Albatross, **Libyan actors used dangerous manoeuvres and practices**, including repeatedly attempting to drive into boats in distress and towing unseaworthy boats with people still on board, putting those aboard in danger.

21 April 2026, case ADC045: Unidentified Libyan actor tows unseaworthy boat back to Libya with people still on board

Frontex aircraft Osprey1 transmitted a mayday relay for a rubber boat in distress in the Libyan SRR, carrying approximately 100 people. NGO rescue ship Life Support responded to the alert. Approximately 30 minutes later, Albatross UNO located the boat and observed an unidentified RHIB (belonging to an unidentified Libyan actor, possibly affiliated with a militia group) approaching.

Despite repeated attempts by Albatross UNO[4] to inform the RHIB via VHF that Life Support was already proceeding to the scene, its crew removed some survivors, boarded the rubber boat itself, and began towing it southward toward Libya with dozens of people still on board. The manoeuvre placed those remaining on the unseaworthy boat in grave danger.

12 August 2026, case ADC084: Libyan Coast Guard violently pursuits a boat in distress, using dangerous manouvres

A black rubber boat carrying approximately 30 people, including children and babies, was intercepted by LCG patrol vessel WS-LCG-301, donated to Libyan authorities by Italy in February 2023 through SIBMMIL, the EU's main border and migration-management programme in Libya. Over nearly 40 minutes and a distance of roughly 2.2 nautical miles, the patrol vessel repeatedly attempted to drive into the rubber boat at speed in an apparent effort to stop it, creating a serious risk of collision. It made several approaches before finally boarding it by launching ropes alongside. The nearby rescue vessel Humanity 1, in a position to assist, had reportedly been ordered by the LCG to leave the area and proceed north.

This was the second interception witnessed by Albatross UNO that day. Less than an hour earlier, another boat carrying approximately 50 people had been intercepted by two unidentified RHIBs in the Libyan SRR. One RHIB took people on board while the other towed the now-empty boat.



12 August 2026: A Libyan Coast Guard vessel violently pursuits a boat in distress for 40 minutes. ©Camille Martin Juan/SOS MEDITERRANEE

European aerial surveillance: from detection to interception

Detecting and reporting a boat in distress should be the first step towards ensuring that people receive assistance and are brought to a place of safety. Yet **detection by European aerial surveillance is no guarantee of rescue**: between 2019 and 10 August 2026, Frontex aircraft sighted 4,654 boats; **1,214 of them (26.1%) were intercepted and returned to Libya – more than one in four**.[5] In 2026 alone, this proportion rose to 47.1% (106 of 225 boats sighted between 1 January and 10 August).

This pattern must be considered alongside **Frontex's systematic sharing of aerial surveillance information with the Libyan Joint Rescue Coordination Centre**: 3,703 sighting reports, including updates, between 2021 and 2026. By contrast, Frontex did not share sighting reports directly with civilian SAR NGO vessels operating near distress cases. Information about these cases reached them through mayday alerts, which Frontex issued for only 18.4% of the boats its aircraft sighted during this period.

Meanwhile, issuing a mayday does not guarantee that rescue actors receive the information they need, either. Between August and October 2026 alone, the Albatross crew documented three cases in which Frontex Falcon drones issued maydays with wrong coordinates, making boats in distress harder to locate.

Even when an alert reaches civilian rescue actors and a vessel responds, interception can still follow. In 59% of the cases documented by Albatross following a Frontex mayday, people were intercepted by Libyan actors – including one boat that was in the Maltese SRR. Most strikingly, in five of these cases, an NGO rescue ship had indicated its intention to engage with the case – yet the people were intercepted before they could be rescued. In two of these incidents, in October 2026, Frontex aircraft remain on scene as the interceptions unfolded.

30 October 2026, case ADC162: Albatross DUE witnesses an interception in the Maltese Search and Rescue Region following a Frontex mayday

At 07:00 UTC, Frontex aircraft Eagle 1 issued a mayday for a boat in distress carrying approximately 20-25 people in the Maltese SRR. Albatross DUE located the boat less than an hour later and alerted the Maltese Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC).

However, at 08:38 UTC, the aircraft observed LCG vessel PB101 approaching the boat. The Albatross crew attempted to contact the patrol vessel by radio, reminding its crew that it was operating in the Maltese SRR, but received no response. PB101 proceeded to intercept the people on board, removed the boat's engine, and left the rubber boat slashed before departing southwards.

Albatross DUE reported the interception to the Maltese RCC.



30 October 2026: A Libyan Coast Guard vessel intercepts a boat in the Maltese SRR. ©San Trouvé/SOS MEDITERRANEE.

2. A system that makes deaths invisible

Between November 2025 and November 2026, **Albatross sighted 18 bodies floating at sea**. None were recovered. In no case could the identity of the deceased, or the circumstances of their death, be established.

On **21 April, the Albatross UNO crew spotted a body floating in the Libyan SRR** – just days after reports of two mass shipwrecks off Libya. The identity of the person and the circumstances of their death remain unknown. The Albatross UNO team urged the relevant authorities to recover and identify the deceased and establish whether the body was connected to a specific incident at sea. No response was received.

On **14 August, Albatross UNO spotted the bodies of 11 people floating at sea**, all in an advanced state of decomposition. As the aircraft circled lower, the crew could make out further details: some bodies still had clothes on, others were kept afloat by tyre inner tubes. Two Libyan assets, one identifying as LCG, were on scene. Despite Albatross UNO offering to support the recovery of the bodies, the LCG vessel left the area, leaving the bodies behind. Later that day, after SOS MEDITERRANEE shared the coordinates, the rescue vessel Sea-Watch 5 located and documented eight bodies in the same area, also in an advanced state of decomposition, gathering visual evidence that could support future identification efforts.

On **17 August, Albatross UNO spotted six further bodies**, believed to be distinct from those seen three days earlier. IOM's Missing Migrants Project subsequently reviewed the coordinates and visual evidence from both sightings and found that the 11 bodies sighted by Albatross UNO on 14 August were substantially the same as those later documented by Sea-Watch. The six bodies from 17 August were assessed as distinct, with no overlap identified with any other sighting.

These sightings formed part of a wider pattern. **Between 14 and 25 August, 33 bodies were spotted at sea by different organisations operating in the Central Mediterranean**. None of these remains have been recovered, and IOM has not yet been able to determine which shipwreck or shipwrecks they originated from, noting they may represent more than one incident occurring between mid-July and early August along the Zuwarah–Zarzis coastline.

This is not incidental to how the Central Mediterranean is currently governed; it is one of its features. People who are denied rights in life are denied recognition in death: bodies remain unrecovered, unidentified, and unaccounted for. **So far in 2026, 1,038 people have died or gone missing attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean**, even as the number of people attempting the crossing fell by 44%. **Fewer people are crossing, but those who do face a higher risk of dying at sea**. The mortality rate has climbed from 1.26% in 2025 to 2.22% in 2026: it is estimated that one person dies for every 45 who attempt the crossing, compared with one in 79 a year ago.[7]

Without civilian aircraft, the bodies sighted this year would have gone entirely unaccounted for. These sightings offer only a glimpse of a much larger pattern of invisible shipwrecks in the Central Mediterranean – one that may far exceed any official figure. The absence of a body, a record, or an answer is not a gap in an otherwise functioning system; it is one of the system's outcomes.

3. The role of merchant vessels in rescue operations

With **state-led rescue capacity in the central Mediterranean scaled back, merchant vessels have become a structurally important part of the rescue landscape by default.** Under international maritime law, they are required to assist people in distress at sea. In practice, many lack the training, equipment, or capacity to carry out a rescue safely; face commercial pressure not to divert from their routes; and receive instructions from coordinating authorities that can conflict with their legal obligations, including instructions to disembark rescued people in Libya, Tunisia, or other unsafe places. The two cases below, both involving merchant vessels responding to a distress case sighted by Albatross UNO, show starkly different outcomes for the people on board, one ending in return to Libya, the other in safe disembarkation in Italy.

27 April 2026, case ADC056: Merchant vessel DOENICKE TIDE hands survivors over to the Libyan Coastguard

On the evening of 26 April, Alarm Phone circulated a distress alert concerning a rubber boat carrying more than 40 people, sharing the information with all relevant authorities and able-to-assist vessels in the area. Ocean Viking responded to the alert and began a search. In the early hours of 27 April, Albatross UNO observed the Liberian-flagged tanker DOENICKE TIDE near a rubber boat in the Libyan SRR that appeared to match the reported distress case. Albatross UNO attempted, without success, to contact both the merchant vessel and the nearby Bouri platform by VHF. It then witnessed the transshipment of 45 survivors – including, as overheard in radio communications from the merchant vessel, four women, seven children, and one deceased person – to LCG patrol vessel 654. The survivors were subsequently returned to Libya and disembarked in Tripoli. According to IOM's Missing Migrants Project, 11 people traveling on the same boat in distress went missing before reaching DOENICKE TIDE.



27 April 2026: MV DOENICKE TIDE hands over 45 person to LCG vessel 654. ©Tess Barthes/SOS MEDITERRANEE

19 August 2026, Case ADC112/AP0653: A merchant vessel, Italian authorities and civil society cooperate in a successful rescue

On 19 August, Albatross UNO located a grey rubber boat adrift in the Libyan SRR, carrying approximately 50 people, including women and children, with no life-saving equipment visible. The Italian-flagged supply vessel ASSO VENTICINQUE, which was in the vicinity, initially told Albatross UNO it was unable to render assistance. Albatross UNO issued a mayday; shortly after, ASSO VENTICINQUE established visual contact with the boat and informed Albatross UNO that it was coordinating with the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre and would proceed with the rescue. The vessel ultimately rescued 57 people (46 men, 7 women, and 4 children). Later that evening, ITCG vessel CP324 asked Albatross UNO for aerial support to locate ASSO VENTICINQUE. The aircraft shared the vessel's position and relayed a rendezvous point, enabling the 57 survivors to be transferred to CP324 and disembarked in Lampedusa.

4. Structural failures in rescue coordination

The **duty to assist people in distress at sea is a basic principle of international law and applies regardless of a state's migration policy priorities**. This obligation is carried out through the maritime search-and-rescue system, which requires quickly mobilising and coordinating help for people in distress. But this system only works if Rescue Coordination Centres (RCCs) and other authorities are **able and willing to share distress information, coordinate available rescue assets, and enable an effective response**. In practice, non-responsive RCCs, delayed or selective communication of distress alerts, and the failure to mobilise available rescue capacity often undermine the basic premise of maritime rescue: saving lives without delay.

23 February 2026, case ADC019: Albatross UNO identifies a distress case following an Italian military overflight; NGO vessel AURORA completes the rescue as a Libyan Coastguard vessel approaches

Albatross UNO located a boat in distress in the Libyan SRR, at a position where an Italian Air Force aircraft had been observed orbiting. When contacted by Albatross UNO, the Italian Air Force confirmed that it had transmitted the boat's position to the relevant authorities, but stated that it was unaware of any rescue asset having been tasked to assist.

Albatross UNO subsequently issued a distress alert in accordance with its legal obligations, copying the relevant authorities and nearby vessels capable of providing assistance, including Sea-Watch's AURORA. During a second flight later that day, the team observed AURORA approaching the scene to initiate the rescue. An LCG patrol vessel was also observed approaching at high speed. Attempts to establish contact with the Libyan vessel on VHF Channel 16 went unanswered. The LCG's timely presence suggests the coordinates had previously been shared with Libyan authorities but not with other rescue assets, as AURORA only reached the scene once Albatross UNO issued an alert. AURORA ultimately completed the rescue of all 22 people on board, who were subsequently disembarked in Italy.

2 March 2026, case ADC034: Malta instructs a merchant vessel not to proceed to a distress case; rescue later carried out by the Italian Coastguard

Following an Alarm Phone alert, Albatross UNO located a wooden boat with approximately 100 people onboard, drifting without life-saving equipment around 60 nautical miles south-east of Malta. People on board were observed waving for assistance. Albatross UNO subsequently issued a mayday relay on VHF Channel 16. The tanker MV Jal Kailash, which had also received the Alarm Phone alert, established contact and confirmed its intention to assist, reporting an estimated time of arrival of approximately one hour and forty minutes.

Approximately 50 minutes later, MV Jal Kailash reported that the Maltese MRCC had instructed the vessel not to proceed to the distress case, stating there was no confirmation that the distress information was authentic. Throughout the incident, Albatross UNO received no response from the Maltese authorities despite repeated attempts to establish contact by telephone. The tanker, which could have sheltered the unseaworthy boat and stayed on scene until assistance arrived, did not intervene, and the rescue was ultimately carried out several hours later by the ITCG.



2 March 2026: An Albatross crew member observes the tanker MV Jal Kailash from the aircraft. ©Tess Barthes/SOS MEDITERRANEE

Conclusion

The cases documented in this factsheet provide just a small window into the dynamics unfolding in the Central Mediterranean. Yet they confirm trends that humanitarian SAR NGOs have documented for years: interceptions that have become a defining pattern of the crossing, often carried out with violence; European aerial surveillance used to facilitate interceptions rather than rescue; a scale of death and disappearance at sea that remains structurally invisible, denying families answers and closure; a rescue landscape in which merchant vessels are relied upon by default, without the support needed to fulfil that role safely and consistently; and structural failures in rescue coordination that, case after case, translate into delays in assistance to people in distress.

Over its first year, the Albatross mission has demonstrated the importance of maintaining an independent civilian presence over the Central Mediterranean: one that can help locate people in distress and support rescue efforts, while independently documenting interceptions, failures to assist and deaths at sea. As the conditions for rescue at sea continue to be shaped by political decisions, independent monitoring remains essential to ensuring that what happens at sea is witnessed, recorded and brought to public attention.

Albatross will be operational again for its next mission in 2027, continuing this work of documentation and monitoring in the Central Mediterranean.

[1] Methodological note: These figures cover only distress cases directly sighted by Albatross UNO. The number of people on board is estimated from aerial observation. In cases involving NGO rescues, and in some cases involving rescue by the Italian Coastguard, these estimates can be corrected retrospectively using information from the rescuing vessels. Such corrections are generally not possible following interceptions by Libyan actors. Outcomes are established through direct observation by Albatross UNO or, when the aircraft must leave the scene due to fuel constraints or other operational reasons, through corroboration with other sources, including Alarm Phone, coastguard authorities and NGO vessels.

[2] Of the remaining 4 boats sighted in the Maltese SRR, one reached land autonomously; the outcome remains unknown for the other three.

[3] Data on attempted crossings has been compiled from UNHCR (sea arrivals), IOM Libya (interceptions) and IOM's Missing Migrants Project (dead and missing). The figures cover 1 November 2025 to 1 November 2026. Arrivals and deaths and disappearances are recorded up to 1 November 2026. For interceptions by the Libyan Coast Guard, 3 October 2026 is the latest date for which data were available from IOM Libya.

[5] The aircraft used for the mission are chartered and may change between deployments. During the period covered by this factsheet, the aircraft generally operated under the callsign Albatross UNO, while an aircraft operating under the callsign Albatross DUE was used in October 2026. References to Albatross UNO or Albatross DUE in the case descriptions identify the specific aircraft involved.

[6] European Parliament, Data on Frontex multipurpose aerial surveillance in the Mediterranean, Question for written answer E-10-2026-003065, 21 July 2026, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2026-003065_EN.html

[7] This mortality rate is calculated using data on arrivals (UNHCR), deaths and disappearances (IOM's Missing Migrants Project), and interceptions (IOM Libya). The estimate should be interpreted with caution due to data limitations. Interception data remain incomplete, as Tunisian authorities have not published interception figures since June 2024, while IOM data on deaths and disappearances are widely considered to be underestimates. Interception data are based on figures provided to SOS MEDITERRANEE by IOM Libya, with 3 October 2026 being the latest date covered by the data. As a result, the actual mortality rate is likely higher than this estimate suggests.

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