



AGAINST THE CURRENT

Three Years of Rescuing People
in the Mediterranean



EMERGENCY
MEDICINE, HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY



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EMERGENCY ONG ETS

is an independent non-governmental organisation founded in Italy in 1994 with two objectives: to provide free, high-quality medical and surgical treatment to victims of war, landmines and poverty, and to promote a culture of peace, solidarity and respect for human rights.

EMERGENCY believes that treatment is a fundamental human right and should be recognised as such for every individual. For treatment to be truly accessible, it must be completely free of charge; for it to be effective, it must be of high quality.

Since 1994, EMERGENCY has worked in 22 countries around the world, providing free care to more than 14 million people.



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INTRODUCTION

1

1.1 SITUATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Mediterranean remains **one of the world's most lethal migration corridors** and the site of an **unrecognised humanitarian crisis**. The people attempting to cross the sea are driven by a convergence of compounding pressures: armed conflict, persecution, human rights violations, climate-related displacement, economic fragility and the desire to seek better living conditions.

While these dynamics are not new, their range and complexity continue to evolve and deepen, shaped by geopolitical developments and wars, hardening policy responses and the accelerating effects of climate change on fragile regions. Despite the scale of human suffering involved, this crisis is **yet to receive formal recognition**, leaving those affected without the fundamental protections or the coordinated response mechanisms that such a designation would trigger. Departure points shift and routes adapt, forcing people on the move into increasingly dangerous circumstances with **fewer legal and safe pathways available, and a growing dependence on smuggling networks, while obstacles to search and rescue only increase**.¹

Declining annual arrivals across the Mediterranean – from 275,200 arrivals in 2023 to 199,400 in 2024 and **155,100** in 2025,² – might suggest that the continent's ongoing border externalisation policies are achieving their intended effect. The situation in the **Central Mediterranean reveals a more complex story**. The corridor connecting North Africa to the Italian coast registered **66,316** arrivals in 2025, representing more than 40% of all sea arrivals into the European Union (EU), a change of just 1% compared to 2024 (66,617 arrivals).³

Among them, the proportion of children travelling alone is significant and deeply concerning; approximately one in every six of those arriving.⁴ **The year on year stability of arrivals reflects the structural rather than circumstantial nature of Central Mediterranean migration.**

The Central Mediterranean route is characterised by long and costly journeys, with Libya and Tunisia serving as the primary departure points – often involving repeated sea crossing attempts. The situation in Libya is crucial to understanding the dynamics in the Central Mediterranean. Despite years of EU-funded cooperation with Libyan authorities to strengthen maritime surveillance, border control and migration management, over **90% of people who crossed the Central Mediterranean in 2025 departed from Libya**.⁵ The conditions facing people on the move in Libya are amounting to crimes against humanity and are well-documented.⁶ Therefore, Libya's persistence as the primary departure country is not simply a migration statistic; it reflects the ongoing exposure of tens of thousands of people to serious human rights risks before they even reach the water.

The **human cost** at sea remains devastating. In 2025, International Organisation for Migration (IOM) recorded **2,185** people dead or missing across the Mediterranean, with **1,330** of these casualties occurring on the Central Mediterranean route alone – making this path the deadliest migration route to Europe.⁷ **These figures, already stark, are widely regarded as an underestimate.** The true toll is almost certainly higher due to the invisible shipwrecks occurring along the Mediterranean routes.

1.2 BORDER EXTERNALISATION, INTERCEPTIONS AND PUSHBACKS

The set of EU measures adopted in recent years further entrench a longstanding **paradigm shift in refugee and migrant protection**, transferring responsibility from EU Member States to non-EU countries. Over the past decade, European coastal states have progressively withdrawn from proactive, state-led Search and Rescue (SAR) operations, in favour of externalising migration management to countries of origin and transit in North Africa and the Middle East, primarily Türkiye, Libya and Tunisia. These measures

were adopted against a backdrop of growing institutional concern. The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights had cautioned against the "*securitisation*" of migration,⁸ while the European Ombudsman had called on the Commission to ensure adequate human rights impact assessments of EU Trust Fund for Africa projects relating to surveillance.⁹ One of the most concerning operational expressions of this policy shift is the dangerous escalation of **pushbacks and interceptions at sea**.





Pushbacks remain endemic across the EU, amounting to 80,865 documented cases in 2025.¹⁰ Meanwhile, since 2018, interceptions by Tunisian and Libyan coast guards have together accounted for nearly half of all recorded maritime operations in the Central Mediterranean.¹¹ In 2025 alone, more than **26,900 people** were intercepted at sea and forcibly returned to Libya.¹² Between January and April 2025, interceptions at sea and pushbacks to Libyan coasts were 41% higher than during the same period in 2024, while interceptions and pushbacks to Algeria increased by 32%.¹³ This rising practice is a stark indicator of **border security** continuing to take precedence over the protection of human life and human rights.

These interceptions carry significant legal weight. Libya and Tunisia are State parties to the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention). The Convention directs coastal states to establish national Search and Rescue Region (SRR) in collaboration with neighbouring states and assume primary responsibility for responding to distress alerts within their region and coordinating operations, which shall terminate in a Place of Safety (POS).

However, documented evidence indicates that interceptions carried out by Libyan actors are frequently characterised by extreme danger, involving threats, verbal abuse, intimidation, hazardous manoeuvres and excessive use of force – including live gunfire directed at or near distressed vessels and NGO ships responding to distress calls.¹⁴ Those intercepted are forcibly returned to various disembarkation points along the Libyan coast, **despite the country's failure to fulfil the conditions under which a state may be recognised as a POS for people on the move and refugees**

pursuant to international law. Rather than finding safety, intercepted individuals are forced back into a cycle of violations, deprivation of liberty and abuse, systematically denied human rights protection at disembarkation points, including due process and the right to seek asylum.¹⁵

The true scale of Tunisia's role in interceptions along the Central Mediterranean route is almost impossible to assess with precision, as Tunisian authorities ceased publishing interception statistics in 2024. Like Libya, **Tunisia cannot be considered a POS.** This is due to the sharp deterioration of fundamental rights conditions in the country, and systematic violations – including violent interceptions at sea and collective expulsions – of the human rights of asylum seekers and people on the move. It is estimated that Tunisian authorities carried out at least **70 collective expulsions involving more than 11,500 refugees** between June 2023 and May 2025, summarily abandoning them in remote desert areas at the borders with Libya and Algeria – without food, water or identification documents, as well testified in international organization report.¹⁶

The EU and its Member States have **direct and material responsibility** in these operations, encompassing aerial surveillance, operational coordination, and financial, material and training support to both Libyan and Tunisian coast guards. This logic of containment is further entrenched by the intensifying deployment of AI, drones and surveillance systems at EU borders.¹⁷ Already in 2023, the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights has explicitly called on states to implement a moratorium on such technologies in border management contexts and to suspend support activities until their human rights implications are fully assessed.¹⁸

1.3 CONSTRAINTS ON SAR OPERATIONS

SAR NGOs have stepped in to fill the rescue gap left by Mediterranean European states failing to meet their assistance obligations under international maritime law. Now in their tenth year of operations, humanitarian vessels navigate in an **ever-shrinking operational space.** Rather than receiving recognition, they have faced increasing obstruction with the criminalisation of humanitarian assistance accelerating at both national and EU levels, systematically constraining the so-called Civil Fleet.

Despite the responsibility on its SRR, Malta has been the subject of sustained and serious criticism from international bodies, NGOs, and legal organisations for **systematic failure to fulfil its SAR obligations.** Non-assistance at sea by the Maltese authorities involves both a failure to conduct SAR operations and the active obstruction of rescue performed by humanitarian vessels, such as **ignoring distress calls and failing to coordinate rescue.** When SAR organisations attempt to contact Malta's Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC), they face deliberate non-engagement, with calls going unanswered or ignored. This failure to act has drawn the attention of the highest levels of international oversight. In March 2025, the UN Human Rights Committee issued an unprecedented legally binding order requiring Malta to coordinate a rescue for 32 people in distress at sea.

Malta did not respond to the Committee at any point, remaining silent and failing once again to comply with its international obligations.¹⁹ The scale of this disengagement is reflected in the disembarkation figures: only **246 people disembarked in Malta** in 2025,²⁰ compared to 66,316 in Italy – a disparity most probably facilitated by the documented practice of coordinating pullbacks from the Maltese SRR to Libya.²¹

In Italy, two compounding practices have further constrained humanitarian action: the threat of administrative detention under the **Piantedosi Decree** and the arbitrary **assignment of distant ports** exclusively to NGO vessels. Issued in January 2023, the Piantedosi Decree has obstructed SAR operations in several ways: initially by limiting NGO vessels from conducting multiple rescues, requiring them to immediately request port assignment and proceed without delay – preventing organisations from maximising their life-saving capacity at a moment of acute need; more recently, for failing to comply with the instructions of the Libyan coast guard or to communicate with them. Violations carry sanctions of up to **€50,000**, administrative detention and the confiscation of the vessel in case of multiple violations. Since the Decree entered into force, **36 administrative detentions** of SAR vessels have been recorded.





While many have been successfully challenged in court – with numerous rulings declaring the decisions of Italian authorities unlawful – the cumulative impact on the Civil Fleet’s operational capacity remains severe.

The distant port assignment practice has significantly compounded these constraints. Since 2023, Italian authorities have systematically assigned ports in Central and Northern Italy exclusively to NGO vessels, forcing them to spend additional days at sea and travel unnecessary

distances to reach distant ports after each rescue. NGO vessels have accumulated **over 760 additional days** of sailing and covered **more than 300,000 kilometres** as a direct result of this practice. Beyond the operational and financial costs – resources that could otherwise be directed to rescue missions – this policy subjects survivors to prolonged and unjustified journeys, delaying their access to essential services guaranteed under international law and increasing the risk of re-traumatisation.

LATEST EU POLICIES ON MIGRATION

The coming year will mark a turning point in Europe’s migration governance. Most prominently, the **EU Pact on Migration and Asylum** becomes fully applicable in June 2026,²² introducing a new architecture for managing asylum and migration across Member States with concerning restrictions on access to the territory and legal guarantees for people on the move and asylum seekers crossing EU borders.

In March 2025, the European Commission proposed the **Return Regulation**,²³ a new legal framework aimed at making return procedures swifter, simpler and more effective across the EU. The Council of the European Union adopted its position in December 2025, with final trilogue negotiations currently ongoing. Key measures include the mutual recognition of return decisions across Member States, extended detention periods, and crucially, the possibility for Member States to **establish return hubs in third countries**. These provisions expose people on the move, including minors, to detention of up to 24 months pending removal and to deportation to **third countries or return hubs, which individuals have no prior connection with**.

These measures raise serious concerns about safeguards, accountability and protection standards, shifting responsibility away from the EU while exposing individuals to uncertainty and violation of non-refoulement principle. Of particular concern are provisions encouraging Member States to identify undocumented individuals for removal purposes, incentivising **racial profiling and the deployment of surveillance technology** against people who may have been residing in Europe for years.

Also, the **Pact for the Mediterranean**,²⁴ formally launched in November 2025, seeks to **deepen cooperation between the EU and 10 non-EU Mediterranean partners** (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia) with a focus on **people, economy, and security**. Migration is primarily addressed under this third pillar, where it is **framed as a security challenge**, and priorities set under this framework include integrated border management, countering migrant smuggling networks, and strengthening cooperation on return and readmission. An **Action Plan** is expected in the first quarter of 2026 to operationalise the initiative, clarify stakeholder roles, and define country-level participation.



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EMERGENCY'S ACTIVITIES

2



2.1 FIGURES FROM LIFE SUPPORT IN 2025

In 2025, *Life Support* conducted **10 missions** in the Central Mediterranean, including two without rescue operations, covering **27,700 km** and sailing for **70 days**. *Life Support* also participated as an observer to the *Global Sumud Flotilla*. Across those 10 missions, the vessel carried out **14 SAR operations**, **successfully bringing 783 people to safety** – among them 516 men, 71 women, 24 accompanied minors and 172 unaccompanied minors – and also recovering two dead bodies. Since beginning operations in December 2022, *Life Support* has rescued **3,234 people** at sea.

All SAR operations were conducted in **international waters**, the vast majority (11) within the Libyan SRR. One rescue took place in the overlapping area between the Libyan and Tunisian SRRs, another in the overlapping area between the Maltese and Tunisian SRRs, and one within the Maltese SRR. **All rescued boats had departed from the Libyan coast**. Reported departure points included Sabratha (4), Zwara (3), Al Zawiya (2), Tripoli (2), and one departure each from Surman, Al Khums, and Benghazi.

More than half of the boats rescued in 2025 – **8 out of 14** – were **spotted from the bridge** of *Life Support*, underscoring the critical role of constant visual vigilance and proactive search efforts by the crew whilst navigating. Three boats were reported by *Watch The Med Alarm Phone* or NGO aircrafts, reflecting the vital coordination between civil society actors operating at sea. In only one instance, a boat in distress was reported by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), a figure that remains strikingly low given the Agency's extensive surveillance capabilities, including aerial assets and satellite monitoring. Two additional distress cases were first reported through anonymous alerts, leading the *Life Support* crew to perform two further rescues.



10*

SAR MISSIONS

*2 WITHOUT RESCUE OPERATIONS



14

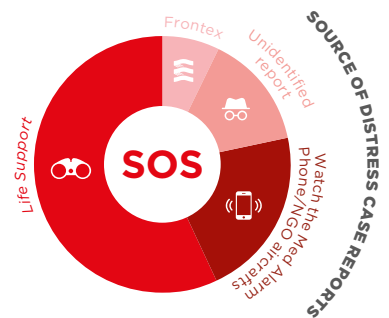
SAR OPERATIONS



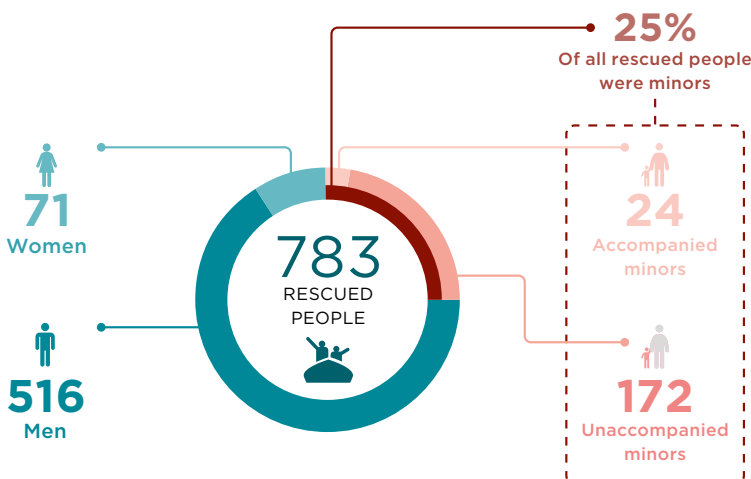
1

OBSERVATION & SUPPORT MISSION

GLOBAL SUMUD FLOTILLA



RESCUED PEOPLE



2 Dead bodies recovered

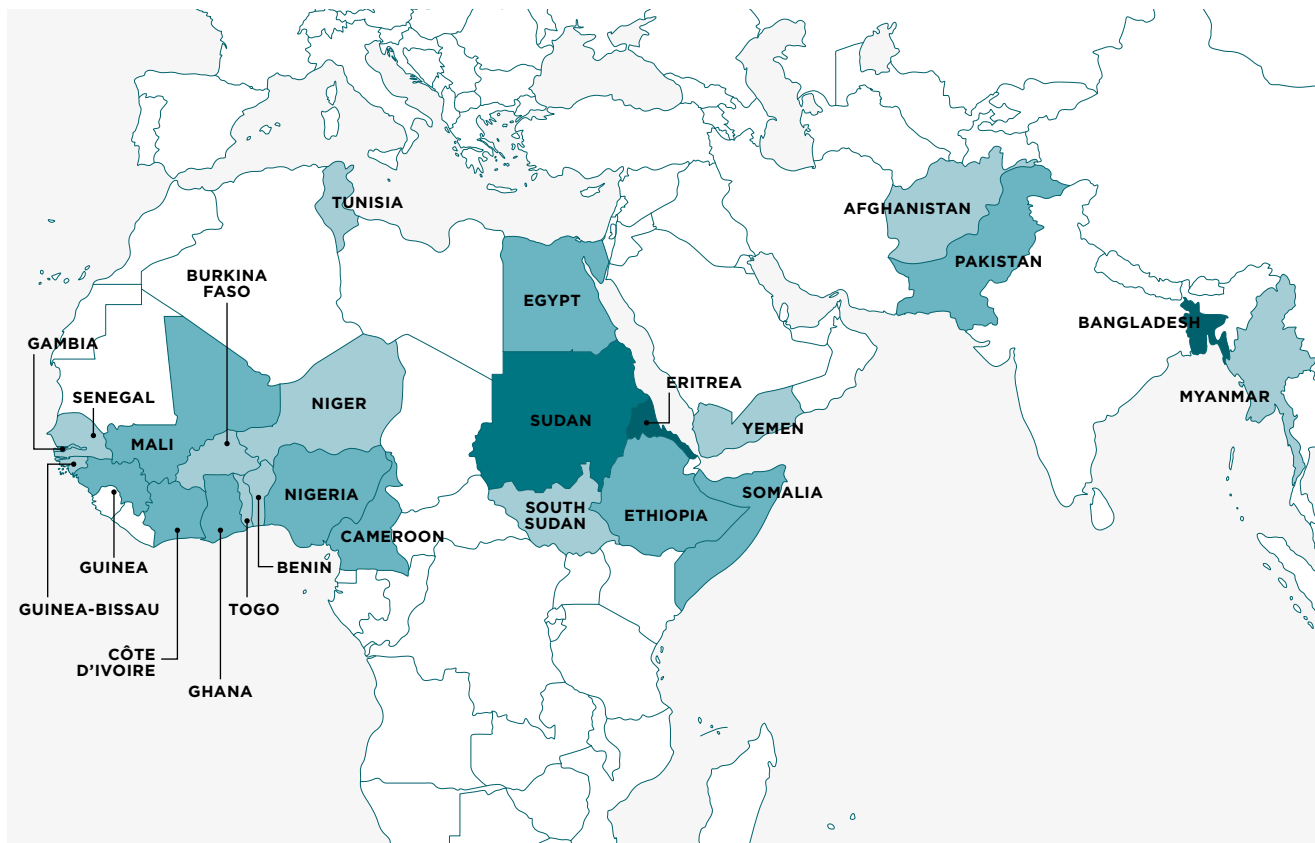
3,234 Rescued people





COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

Number of rescued people: ● 1-10 ● 11-50 ● 51-90 ● 91-140 ● >140



CONTINUED IMPACT OF THE ASSIGNMENT OF DISTANT PORTS

Throughout 2025, the arbitrary assignment of distant ports to NGO vessels operating in the Mediterranean has continued to severely **hinder search and rescue activities**. Beyond the operational toll, with significant losses in time and resources, this practice forces the already vulnerable survivors to endure unnecessarily prolonged journeys at sea before finally reaching shore. In addition, assigning distant ports to SAR NGOs vessels limits their presence in the area of operations, increasing the risk of shipwrecks or interceptions at sea and illegal pushbacks by Libyan authorities.

EXTRA DAYS OF NAVIGATION*



EXTRA KILOMETRES OF NAVIGATION*



ASSIGNED PORTS

● Assigned ports ● Nearby port as reference



*Return trip to and from a distant port rather than a closer one, e.g., Augusta.



2.2 MEDICAL ACTIVITY ON BOARD

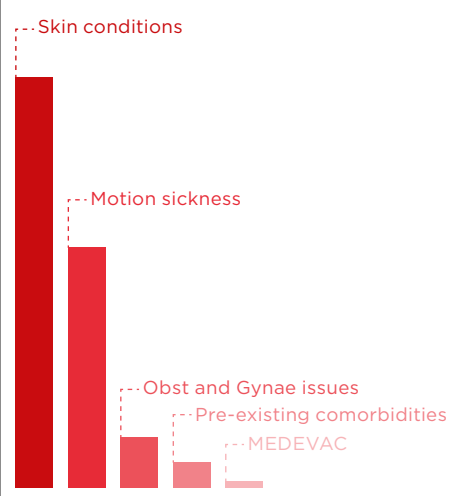
Expanding **access to free, high-quality medical care** is central to EMERGENCY's mission, especially for people in physically and psychologically vulnerable conditions. On board *Life Support*, a doctor and two nurses make up the **dedicated medical team that provide continuous care** from the moment of rescue and throughout the journey until disembarkation.

Upon boarding, all rescued individuals undergo **medical triage** to evaluate their clinical condition before being guided to the shelter area, where the onboard clinic is located. Most outpatient consultations addressed **primary care needs**, with the most common conditions being skin disorders resulting from the hazardous circumstances of the journey, and motion sickness (kinetosis) following prolonged time at sea. In 2025, eight patients presented with **obstetric or gynaecological issues**, while four had pre-existing **comorbidities** requiring additional attention. One patient was rescued in critical condition and required immediate **medical evacuation (MEDEVAC)** to receive higher-level care ashore.

Over the course of 10 missions, the medical team provided **440 clinic visits for 270 patients**, more than a third of the 783 people rescued that year. The patients were 49 women, including 13 who were pregnant, and 219 men, among them 47 were minors (13 accompanied, 34 unaccompanied).

The presence of cultural mediators on board proved essential in building trust with patients and enabling open communication. Through their support, seven individuals were able to report having experienced **violence or torture**, identifying them as particularly vulnerable cases. However, a proper vulnerability screening extends far beyond what is feasible at sea: it requires dedicated professionals, a confidential environment, and the time and space for people to process and share their experiences. All potentially vulnerable cases assessed on board are referred to the competent authorities, who are in charge of ensuring adequate interdisciplinary vulnerability screening procedures of all the shipwrecked, guaranteeing continuity of assessment and appropriate support.

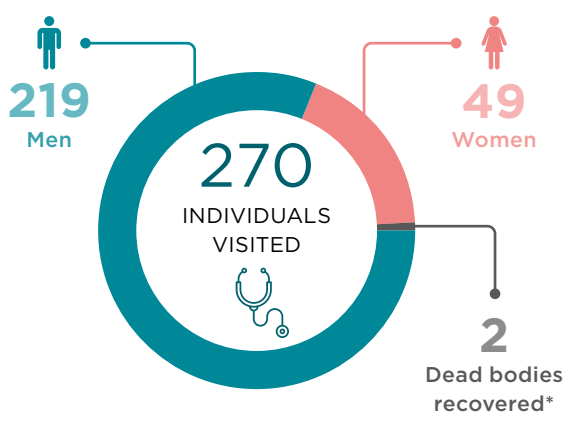
MAIN REASONS FOR CLINIC VISITS



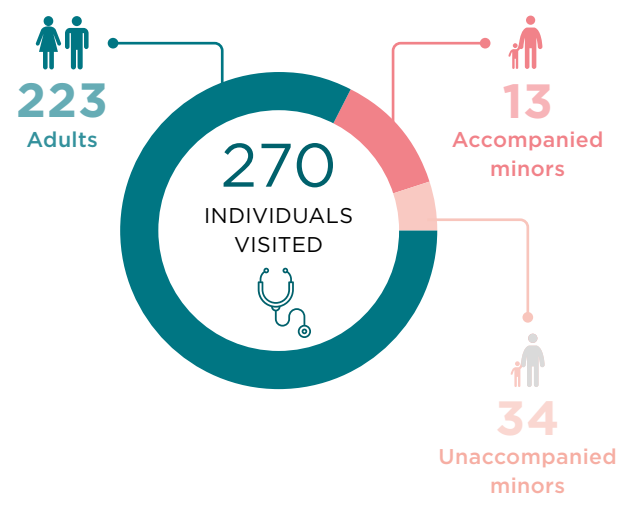
440
MEDICAL VISITS
IN LIFE SUPPORT'S CLINIC

MEDICAL ACTIVITIES IN LIFE SUPPORT'S CLINIC

CLUSTER PER SEX



CLUSTER PER AGE



*During the identification procedure, it was not possible to determine the sex.





CRITICAL MISSIONS OF *LIFE SUPPORT* IN 2025

3

3.1 MISSION NO. 32: RECOVERING OF DEAD BODIES

On 27 June, during its 32nd mission, *Life Support* recovered **two dead bodies** found drifting in international waters within the Libyan SRR.

The initial alert had been issued the previous day by the aircraft *Seabird 1* during reconnaissance flights over the Central Mediterranean. *Seabird 1* had spotted the bodies of five individuals floating off the Libyan coast. Given the absence of known identities or documented distress calls prior to the sighting, it is highly probable that the people were victims of an invisible shipwreck.²⁵

In the early afternoon, the first body was sighted from the bridge of *Life Support* whilst en route to the coordinates shared by the aircraft *Colibri 2*. The recovery was performed immediately. Approximately one hour later, *Colibri 2*, which had remained overhead to assist the ship by circling the last known sighted coordinates, reported the location of a second body, which was then recovered by *Life Support*.²⁶

This was the first time *Life Support*'s crew had to recover deceased people, a harrowing experience for all on board. By recovering their bodies, the staff aimed to facilitate the **identification of the victims** and provide their families with the certainty of their fate. The presence of a morgue on board *Life Support*, combined with the expertise and specialised training of EMERGENCY's staff, ensured that the recovery operation was conducted with the full respect and dignity for the deceased.

Due to the advanced state of decomposition, it was not immediately possible to determine the sex of the two individuals. According to the ship's doctor, the physical condition of the remains suggested that they had been in the water for at least one week. After informing the Italian authorities of the recovery, *Life Support* was assigned **Augusta** as the port of disembarkation for the deceased. On the morning of 29 June, *Life Support* entered the port of Augusta to proceed with the disembarkation of the recovered bodies. Being the first time deceased people had been brought ashore, *Life Support*'s crew expected to receive specific protocols for the procedure; instead, the arrival took place without any prior specific communication from health authorities or other competent agencies, beyond the standard formal requests for a vessel to enter port.

The subsequent **identification, inspection and transport operations** conducted by the health authorities who boarded the ship proved to be **significantly inadequate**. EMERGENCY's staff had to provide personal protective equipment to the medico-legal team, who had arrived completely unequipped. These inappropriate conditions and procedures used for the identification and disembarkation of the deceased were formally documented in a detailed report sent to the relevant authorities.

On 4 July, EMERGENCY, together with other organisations (ASGI, *Sea-Watch*, and Mem.Med), sent a **formal letter** to the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Prefecture of Syracuse, and the Mayor of Augusta. The letter requested the immediate initiation of **proper identification procedures for the two victims**.²⁷

To ensure that these individuals may be identified even after time has passed, it is essential to conduct thorough forensic examinations and maintain accurate records of recovered personal items, physiognomic data and any distinguishing physical marks. Each body must be assigned a unique identification code and buried in a specific, traceable location. Such practices are strictly in line with the **2024 Council of Europe's recommendations on missing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers**.²⁸ Regrettably, by the end of 2025, it appears that these fundamental procedures were not carried out by the competent authorities.





3.2 MISSION NO. 35: CRITICAL RESCUE

On 7 August, during its 35th mission, *Life Support* was navigating to the assigned POS of Savona, having already rescued two boats in distress in the days prior. In the early morning, the bridge sighted a white fibreglass boat sailing towards the ship at high speed with people on board in the overlapping area between the Maltese and Tunisian SRRs.

While both vessels were still sailing, the white boat approached *Life Support*. The boat was operated by **two unidentified individuals wearing balaclavas**, who carried out a series of extremely dangerous manoeuvres that posed an immediate threat to the stability of the boat, the safety of those on board and the safe navigation of *Life Support*.

Despite multiple attempts by *Life Support*'s cultural mediators to establish contact and urge the drivers to cease their hazardous behaviour, the individuals did not respond.

The situation escalated rapidly as the fibreglass boat reached *Life Support*'s rescue area. Due to dangerous manoeuvres, the people on board began jumping and climbing toward the ship in an uncontrolled manner. To prevent the fibreglass boat from capsizing and to protect the lives of those in distress, *Life Support* was forced to decelerate and bring itself to a full stop.

During these hazardous manoeuvres, several people fell into the sea. The *Life Support* Rescue Team acted instantly, deploying lifejackets and a centifloat (buoyancy aid) directly from the rescue deck.

Shortly after falling into the water, approximately 10 individuals were recovered by the fibreglass boat, which also seized the centifloat deployed by the Rescue Team. The fibreglass boat then moved about 500 meters away, where the remaining people jumped overboard. Before fleeing the scene, the two drivers released the centifloat for the people in the water to hold onto. *Life Support* immediately launched **RHIB 1** to rescue the survivors. **11 individuals** were brought to safety, including one person who was unconscious and narrowly escaped drowning. In total, **69 people** were rescued during this critical SAR operation.

As soon as the survivors were brought on board *Life Support*, the Medical Team initiated emergency care, focusing their efforts on stabilising the unconscious patient. Recognising the critical situation, the bridge immediately requested an **urgent MEDEVAC**. Notifications were sent to the **International Radio Medical Centre (CIRM)** and the **Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (ITMRCC)**, with **Circomare Lampedusa** (local Italian Coast Guard district) also informed and placed on high alert.

The evacuation operation moved swiftly. Within minutes, an Italian Coast Guard helicopter arrived to perform the MEDEVAC. Per the instructions of the Italian authorities via VHF Channel 16, *Life Support* was directed to alter its course toward Lampedusa to facilitate MEDEVAC procedure. At the specific request of the authorities, EMERGENCY's doctor boarded the helicopter to ensure continuous medical assistance for the critical patient during transit.

Following the evacuation, *Life Support* team contacted the ITMRCC to formally request a closer port of disembarkation. The justification was rooted in the **severe psychological trauma** suffered by the survivors during the critical rescue. An additional three days of navigation to Savona would further deteriorate the already **fragile mental state** of the shipwrecked and unnecessarily delay access to essential, specialised health services.

The Italian Coast Guard vessel *Charlie Papa 319* approached *Life Support* to return the doctor to the ship. Shortly after, the request for a closer port was formally denied despite the documented vulnerability of the survivors on board and the ITMRCC confirmed **Savona** as the final port of disembarkation, **prioritising administrative and operational procedures over the urgent protection needs of those rescued**.



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3.3 MISSION NO. 39: INTERCEPTION CASES

On 10 December, during its 39th mission, *Life Support* was navigating toward the designated Area of Operations when an abandoned rubber boat was sighted from the bridge. The vessel, coloured red and grey and bearing no identifying marks, was found empty and adrift. Given the absence of prior alerts or information regarding this boat, it was assumed that an interception or a tragic shipwreck had occurred.

The following day, *Life Support* overheard a **Mayday Relay** issued by the Frontex aircraft *Eagle 3* concerning a boat in distress. As the ship altered course toward the reported coordinates, the bridge watch spotted a **dense column of black smoke** rising from the horizon, as a potential visual confirmation of the distress case. Simultaneously, the ship's radar detected a **high-speed asset** rapidly departing the area where the emergency was unfolding.

Upon reaching the last known position of the distress call, *Life Support* discovered a red and white fibreglass boat on fire. Neither floating debris, personal items nor survivors were observed in the immediate vicinity. The absence of any remaining signs suggested that the people on board had likely been **intercepted and transhipped by the unidentified fast asset detected earlier**.

On 12 December, *Life Support* received an urgent Mayday Relay from an unidentified sender via radio VHF Channel 16. The bridge immediately notified the relevant authorities of the new distress case and altered its course to reach the reported coordinates as quickly as possible.

Upon arriving at the last known position, *Life Support* discovered an empty white rubber boat that precisely matched the description provided in the Mayday alert. There were no survivors nor debris remaining in the water. The presence of **two Libyan Patrol Boats** operating in the immediate vicinity strongly suggested that an **interception operation had already taken place**. *Life Support* formally informed the authorities of the sighting, documenting the empty vessel as a likely result of these pushbacks.

The following day, having already rescued **69 survivors** in a previous operation, the ITMRCC assigned Naples as the POS for *Life Support*. However, shortly after receiving a distress alert (**AP1439**) from **Alarm Phone** regarding a boat in the Libyan SRR, the ITMRCC authorised the ship to delay its arrival in Naples to provide immediate assistance to the lives at risk.

In the early afternoon, the aerial asset *Seabird 1* notified authorities and nearby vessels (including *Life Support*) that it was conducting an overflight of the target area. While the specific boat from the AP1439 alert remained elusive, the aircraft spotted a **capsized black and white fibreglass vessel** with two engines still attached. No debris nor identifying markings were visible near the overturned hull, leaving the fate of its occupants unknown.

At late evening, the ITMRCC updated *Life Support*, stating that the last known position of the potential distress case had drifted into the **Maltese SRR**. Consequently, the ship was instructed to coordinate directly with the Maltese SAR authorities.

Life Support's bridge made multiple, persistent attempts to contact the **Maltese RCC** via satellite phone and email, all of which initially went unanswered. After several failed attempts, a Maltese operator finally answered a satellite call, instructing the vessel to await an email response. **That response was never received.**

On 14 December, *Life Support* notified both Italian and Maltese authorities that it had reached the last known coordinates of distress case AP1439 at 11:08 Coordinated Universal Time (UTC). Finding no vessel in sight, *Life Support* immediately initiated a **systematic search pattern** throughout the area.

While conducting the search, the bridge received an anonymous Mayday Relay via radio VHF Channel 16 reporting a potential distress case approximately 45 nautical miles from the ship's current position, a location that suggested a possible match to the ongoing AP1439 case.

In the early afternoon, the aircraft *Seabird 3* sighted a different boat in distress, identified as case **AP1445** (previously reported by Alarm Phone). As the nearest ship with rescue capabilities, *Life Support* altered course to assist the distress case. By evening, the crew successfully completed the rescue operation, **bringing 44 people to safety on board**.

After the successful conclusion of the rescue operation, the fate of the **distress case AP1439 remained a priority**. Shortly after midnight, *Life Support* resumed its search pattern for the still-unlocated and unattended vessel. However, after hours of search efforts with no sightings, *Life Support* formally notified the Italian and Maltese authorities of its decision to suspend the search. The ship then resumed navigation toward its assigned POS in **Naples**.

Throughout the operation, the Maltese RCC failed to provide any information or updates regarding AP1439, despite the case falling within their SRR. A final satellite phone call with the Maltese authorities confirmed a total lack of updates, **leaving the fate of the people on board uncertain**.

The two Libyan patrol boats spotted on 12 December correspond to the Corrubia class, assets typically provided to Libya by Italy under EU programmes. This highlights the **potential involvement of EU-funded** and donated assets in conduct that qualifies as a breach of the principle of non-refoulement, as enshrined by *jus cogens*, international, and European law. Following the failure of an EU Member State to cooperate in saving lives at sea, and the involvement of a Frontex surveillance aircraft in an alert where the outcome remains uncertain, EMERGENCY has entered into correspondence with the European Commission. The aim is to investigate these reported distress cases, ensuring that international law is upheld and that EU funding and assets do not contribute to the unlawful practice of interceptions and pushbacks.



GLOBAL SUMUD FLOTILLA MISSION

4



4.1 OPERATIONAL OVERVIEW

Life Support participated as an observer and support ship to the **Global Sumud Flotilla** (GSF), a non-violent maritime mission bringing together **delegations from 50 countries** in a collective act of international solidarity. The *Flotilla* sought to reach Gaza by sea to **challenge the blockade imposed on the Strip and deliver essential humanitarian aid**, including food, water and medical supplies, to the Palestinian population facing severe and systematic restrictions on humanitarian assistance.

More than 50 vessels carrying activists, journalists, politicians and civil society representatives set sail together, determined to draw **global attention to the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe perpetrated in the Palestinian Occupied Territories** while maintaining an unwavering commitment to peaceful, non-violent action. EMERGENCY considered it essential to support the GSF by joining a grassroots movement born from a profound desire and urgent need for peace.

EMERGENCY has worked inside the Gaza Strip since August 2024, witnessing first-hand the systematic destruction of healthcare infrastructure, the near-total collapse of essential supply chains and the compounding suffering of a civilian population cut off from the outside world and denied access to even the most basic humanitarian assistance.

***Life Support* agreed to accompany the *Flotilla*.**

The decision is consistent with EMERGENCY's most fundamental convictions and mandate: that **access to healthcare and humanitarian aid is not a privilege**, but a right; and that bearing witness, when action is constrained, is itself a form of responsibility. The decision required the immediate cancellation of Mission 36 in the Central Mediterranean. The ship, which was already at sea, turned back to Sicily to undergo the necessary preparations before setting sail as part of the Italian delegation, with a 29-person crew on board composed of doctors, nurses, logisticians, cultural

mediators, rescuers and sailors. Two journalists were on board to witness and document *Life Support's* daily activities during the journey.

Life Support served as an **observer and support vessel**, providing medical, mechanical and logistical assistance to participating boats throughout their navigation. The ship operated within defined parameters after risk assessment, approaching up to 150 nautical miles from Palestinian shores and 40 nautical miles from the Egyptian coast, where it would remain on standby until the *Flotilla* either reached its destination or was intercepted.

Throughout the mission, *Life Support's* role evolved from an observational and operational presence to serving as a **direct witness** to a range of events, including the presence of military assets, aerial surveillance and the broader conditions faced by the GSF at sea. Its observations provided **reliable, independent, firsthand documentation**, contributing crucial evidence of incidents occurring at sea. As the GSF moved further east in the Mediterranean, aerial surveillance intensified. Drone activity increased noticeably, including unlit drones and quadcopters operating in the area. Drones flying at standard altitudes with visible lights were also observed. In addition, a **low-flying military aircraft** was observed directly over the GSF vessels. After careful visual identification, including photographing the plane and verifying markings, it was confirmed as an Israeli military aircraft.

These observations illustrate the **intense and persistent surveillance environment** in which the GSF operated, and helped lend public credibility to the *Flotilla's* reporting of events taking place at sea. *Life Support* provided a total of **18 direct interventions**, as well as multiple instances of remote support, addressing technical and mechanical issues, medical interventions, rescue operations and logistical challenges.



The EMERGENCY team, who work in two health centres in Gaza's Khan Younis governorate, report an incredibly grave situation. Faced with the silence and inaction of governments, the mass participation of regular citizens in public demonstrations in support of this humanitarian coalition is a sign of a desire for peace and justice, which we share and want to support.

Anabel Montes Mier ~ *Life Support* Head of Mission

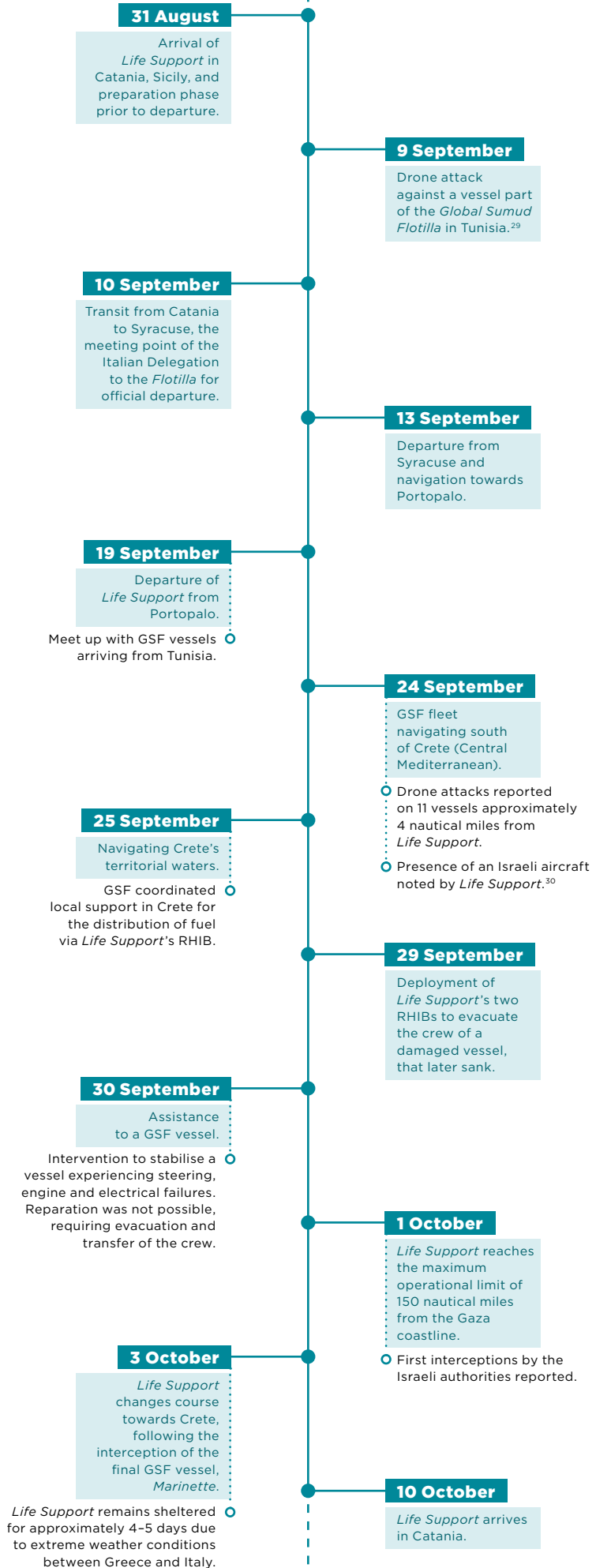






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MISSION TIMELINE





4.2 LIFE SUPPORT'S INTERVENTIONS

MEDICAL INTERVENTIONS

Over the course of the mission, *Life Support's* Medical Team remained continuously engaged, responding to **six medical cases** involving five different vessels in the fleet. **On-site assessments and treatments** were carried out on three vessels, with medical personnel deployed via RHIB to conduct evaluations and initiate appropriate treatment protocols on board each. On another two vessels, medical cases were

effectively managed through **remote medical guidance** and follow-up communications with onboard personnel. All cases were non-urgent in nature and resolved successfully, either through direct intervention by the *Life Support's* Medical Team or through coordinated support with the *Flotilla's* medical coordinators and available healthcare professionals.

TECHNICAL INTERVENTIONS, RESCUE OPERATIONS AND LOGISTIC SUPPORT

Life Support provided a total of **six technical and mechanical interventions** to vessels within the GSF. These interventions addressed a range of issues, including engine malfunctions, cooling system failures, electrical system outages, hull and pipe leakages, and steering system impairments. In five of these six instances, the technical team successfully resolved the problems on site, enabling the affected vessels to resume navigation with the *Flotilla*.

Life Support also performed **two rescue operations**, one of them following the unsuccessful mechanical intervention on a sailing vessel, which suffered combined engine and steering failures. Despite sustained on-site efforts by the technical team to restore functionality, the vessel remained unseaworthy.

In response to the vessel's critical condition and the safety risk to its occupants, the crew was rescued by *Life Support* and subsequently transferred to a Turkish Navy vessel. The second case involved a GSF motorboat experiencing critical hull leakage. *Life Support* deployed its two RHIBs, safely evacuating the crew and transferring them to two other GSF vessels.

In addition, *Life Support* played a key role in **inter-vessel transfers** within the GSF. Following drone attacks carried out in the proximity of Crete, which left several vessels damaged and unable to continue navigation, the team assisted in the transfer of personnel, goods and spare parts between boats. *Life Support* also facilitated the transfer between the GSF vessels of the people who chose to disembark or needed to leave the *Flotilla* ahead of its departure.

ACTIVITIES IN GAZA

EMERGENCY has maintained a **continuous presence in Gaza** since August 2024, with a dedicated team composed of both local and international colleagues working in central Gaza, within what was originally designated as the "Humanitarian Zone."

Since January 2025, EMERGENCY has operated a **Primary Healthcare Clinic** in Al-Qarara (Khan Younis governorate), providing a comprehensive range of services, including first aid, basic medical and surgical care for adults and children, reproductive health outpatient consultations, post-operative nursing follow-up, stabilisation of medical and surgical emergencies, and referrals to hospital facilities. One out of every ten children under five years old seen at the Clinic was found to be malnourished; a malnutrition screening programme was launched in collaboration with UNICEF, to administer therapeutic food to malnourished children as well as pregnant women. From its opening through the end of December 2025, the Clinic recorded more than **52,000 medical visits**, with an average of 170 patients per day; a total of 798 vaccinations were administered.

In parallel, EMERGENCY supports the **Primary Healthcare Clinic established by the local organisation CFTA (Culture & Free Thought Association)** in Al-Mawasi, where it has been operating since November 2024. EMERGENCY staff supervise clinical activities, coordinate and train local staff, and support the supplies of medicines and consumables. This Clinic provides basic medical care, medications, and post-surgical dressings; by the end of 2025, it had delivered **50,241 consultations** and facilitated 463 patient transfers to other facilities.

These activities are carried out in a context of severe and worsening hardship, where the very foundations of humanitarian response have been systematically eroded. The aid blockade has had a direct and severe impact on EMERGENCY's operations, causing grave and prolonged shortages of essential medicines as well as technical and human resources, forcing our teams to deliver care under conditions of critical scarcity, bearing witness to the immense and ongoing suffering of the civilian population of Gaza.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 5



5.1 CONCLUSIONS

Since 2014, the Mediterranean crisis has claimed more than **34,000 lives**, with many others remaining missing in their attempt to reach European coasts. This is a **humanitarian crisis** that has lacked international recognition for over a decade. Despite this staggering human cost, the same dynamics persist along the Central Mediterranean route as direct result of deliberate choices by the EU and its Member States: the border externalisation policies, the legitimisation of authorities that disregard human rights, and, above all, the **criminalisation of both people on the move and SAR NGOs**.

For years, the EU has continued to fund third-country governments with **poor human rights records**, such as Libya and Tunisia, without any mechanisms for monitoring or accountability regarding how border management funds are spent. The true price of these externalisation policies is the **systematic violation of the fundamental rights of people on the move**, who are intercepted at sea and held for years in illegal detention centres, subjected to violence, torture, inhumane treatment and human trafficking.

In three years of operations at sea, in addition to rescuing **3,234 people**, the crew of *Life Support* has witnessed and reported continuous fundamental rights violations and violence perpetrated by Libyan and Tunisian authorities and other vessels operating in the Central Mediterranean. This is coupled with the failure to rescue by Malta and the increasing disengagement from EU Member States. In 2025, EMERGENCY witnessed an **escalation of violence during interceptions and pushbacks** carried out by actors directly funded by the

EU and its Member States. Furthermore, SAR NGOs face severe and deliberate attacks during rescue operations, including gunfire, threats, intimidation, and verbal abuse.

Ultimately, providing humanitarian aid is a relevant part of EMERGENCY's mandate. For this reason, *Life Support* joined the **Global Sumud Flotilla** (GSF) as an **observer and support vessel**. Our goal was not only to deliver humanitarian relief by challenging the illegal naval blockade of Gaza Strip but also to keep the world's attention focused on the situation in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. During the Mediterranean mission toward the Palestinian coast, we provided **extensive logistical and medical assistance** and witnessed several attempts to sabotage and intimidate the GSF. EMERGENCY's commitment to war zones and humanitarian crises remains determined, despite the persistent barriers and increasing obstacles to humanitarian access.

While these events unfold in the Mediterranean – where the duty to rescue at sea as enshrined in international law is frequently disregarded – the Italian government continues to criminalise those saving lives. By imposing repeated administrative detentions under the Piantadosi Decree and assigning distant ports, Italy has for over three years **obstructed those attempting to fill the rescue gap left in the Mediterranean**. This strategy not only reduces the Civil Fleet's rescue capacity but also seeks to reduce inconvenient witnesses to what occurs in a stretch of sea that has become an inhumane border. These measures could be further compounded by the Italian government's announced intention to implement a so-called **naval blockade** in the near future.



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5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

For these reasons, EMERGENCY calls upon Italy, the EU and its Member States, as well as relevant international institutions to implement the following recommendations:

- 1 Place protection of life at sea at the centre** of every decision concerning the Central Mediterranean, **strengthen maritime SAR capacity** and launch a **European SAR mission**;
- 2 Recognise the humanitarian role of NGOs**, abandon all attempts at criminalising them, revoke the Piantedosi Decree (Law 15/2023) and ensure the assignment of nearest available port;
- 3 Revoke Memoranda of Understanding with Libya and Tunisia**, which make EU and its Member States complicit in severe human rights violations, and do not replicate border externalisation policies in third countries;
- 4 Cease any action that supports interceptions at sea and pushbacks to Libya and Tunisia**, which cannot be considered safe places to disembark rescued people;
- 5 Conduct effective investigations** in case of interceptions and pushbacks to Libya and Tunisia, and **ensure accountability for failures to save lives at sea**, which constitute serious breaches of international law;
- 6 Invest in long-term aid programmes** to strengthen communities and services in countries of origin and transit, and **ensure and expand safe, legal channels of access into Europe**.





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EMERGENCY is also present in Belgium, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and the United States, and has a network of volunteers in Berlin, Brussels, Heidelberg, Ticino and Vienna.



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