



Mediterranean Sea June 30th 2021:

Sea Watch reconnaissance aircraft **Seabird**, overheard a **distress call** within the Maltese search and rescue zone indicating that 50 people and many children were at risk.

Seabird flew in the direction of the call and spotted the ship "PB 648 – Ras Jadir" of the so-called Libyan "Coast Guard." The Ras Jadir vessel was one of four boats Italy donated to the Libyan government.

Also located was a blue wooden boat with at least 50 people on board. The relevant authorities in Malta were informed by The Seabird's crew by email and phone about the refugees distress call. The response was that they would not come to the aid of the refugees. When informed that a possible imminent push-back to Libya by the Libyan ship would be illegal the Maltese authorities hung up.

A short time later, there was a brutal attack by the Libyan Coast Guard vessel before **Seabird** had to leave the scene due to low fuel. **Sea Watch** Video footage of the incident clearly shows the Libyan vessel firing Machine gun shots in the direction of the wooden boat. Several times the crew of the Ras Jadir throw objects at the people on board, attempt capture of the boat with a rope and ramming that could have ended with people overboard at sea.

The arrival of the 64 migrants on board who escaped the attack to the Sicilian island of Lampedusa, between Malta and Tunisia, and a complaint from **Sea Watch**, led to an investigation of the episode by Sicilian prosecutors. The investigation of the dynamics of the failed capture of the migrants coordinated by the prosecutor is hampered by the fact that Italy and Libya have no judicial cooperation agreements and it is unlikely that Libya will deliver the names of the officers or the testimonies of those aboard the patrol boat.

Until now, authorities of the North African country have never cooperated in investigations for human rights violations, thus offering shelter to human traffickers and torturers. Last year, an Italian investigation made it possible to identify three torturers from the official prison camp of Zawyah, sentencing each to 20 years in prison. One of the main members of the clan is Commander Abdurahman al Milad, released without trial after a sham detention of six months and promoted to the rank of major in the Navy.

Since 2016, **European Union (EU)** member states, led by Italy, have been collaborating with the Libyan authorities – providing speedboats, training and assistance in the co-ordination of operations at sea – to ensure people attempting to flee the country by boat are intercepted at sea and brought back to Libya. During this period, an estimated 60,000 men, women and children have been captured at sea and disembarked in Libya by the **EU**-supported **Libyan Coast Guard (LCG)**, 8,435 of them between 1 January and 14 September 2020 alone. Driven by a desire to stop arrivals at all costs, **EU** states have offered their support to Libya – in an effort to circumvent international laws prohibiting forced push-backs to disembarkation points – without conditioning it upon strict human rights guarantees. At the end of 2014, **Sea Watch** grew out of an initiative of volunteers who could not stand on the sidelines witnessing people dying in the Mediterranean Sea any longer.

The Libyan Navy claims that it has decided to investigate after examining the images of the patrol boat chasing the migrants "endangering their lives, as well as those of the crew members of the patrol boat itself, as safety measures were not followed and warning shots were also used." Maltese authorities - **Valletta Marina** maintain the operation "appropriate to the circumstances." They explained to the local press that "in these cases, warning shots are allowed." A version of events contradicted by the Libyan authorities that speak

of "lack of fair behavior," seeming to confirm **Sea Watch** concerns over the legality of the the Libyan actions and the safety of migrants. The Libyan vessel was over 110 miles from their home port of Tripoli and patrolled just 45 miles from Lampedusa, a short distance from the Italian search and rescue area. This was the first time that a Tripoli patrol boat went so far north to chase migrants, usually leaving other boats to reach Lampedusa undisturbed.

The news of the investigations came a few days before the Italian legislators voted to refinance missions in Libya, which provides direct support to the Libyan coast guard with the stationing in Tripoli of an Italian Navy support vessel charged with, at the expense of Italy, the maintenance of Libyan patrol boats donated by Italy. Libya has never signed the **Geneva Convention for Human Rights and**, as the **UN** recalled yesterday, the country is not recognized as a "safe landing place" and therefore to bring back migrants, destined for prison camps, constitutes a violation which, however, is not prosecutable in Libya.

More than 800 people have died so far in 2021 while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. The plight of refugees and migrants in Libya is taking place against the backdrop of years of armed conflict, insecurity and lawlessness. And the struggle for governance and territorial control of the **UN**-backed **Government of National Accord (GNA)**. According to an **Amnesty International** report from September 2020- Tens of thousands of refugees and migrants in Libya are trapped in a vicious cycle of cruelty with little to no hope of finding safe and legal pathways out. After enduring unconscionable suffering in Libya, refugees and migrants risk their lives at sea seeking safety in Europe, only to be intercepted, transferred back to Libya and delivered to the same abuses they sought to escape.

Libya, a country torn apart by years of war, has become an even more hostile environment for refugees and migrants seeking a better life. Instead of being protected, they are met with appalling human rights abuses and are now unfairly blamed for the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic on deeply racist and xenophobic grounds. Despite this, even in 2020, the **EU** and its member states continue to implement policies trapping tens of thousands of men, women and children in a vicious cycle of abuse, showing a callous disregard for people's lives and dignity.

The report '**Between life and death': Refugees and migrants trapped in Libya's cycle of abuse** documents the harrowing accounts of refugees and migrants who have suffered or witnessed a litany of abuses in Libya including unlawful killings; enforced disappearances; torture and other ill-treatment; rape and other sexual violence; arbitrary detention; and forced labour and exploitation at the hands of state and non-state actors in a climate of near-total impunity. The report also details more recent developments, including the transfer of people disembarked in Libya to unofficial places of detention – such as Tripoli's notorious Tobacco Factory – and the summary deportation of thousands of refugees and migrants from Libya's eastern regions.

The **EU** is committed to democracy and human rights, but at the same time it is continuing to isolate itself from people fleeing, whether by means of border security installations worth billions on readmission agreements with third party countries such as Turkey, which are questionable and controversial under international law. As a result of this isolation, thousands of people drown every year trying to reach a safe harbor in the **EU**, many of them within sight of its shores and beaches.

Sea Watch tries to fill the gap of an institutionalized, comprehensive sea rescue. The organization considers its work to be a humanitarian duty and calls for an international, institutionalized sea rescue effort, with a

clear mandate and, above all legal and secure entry routes for those seeking safe passage.

Since 2015, **Sea Watch** has so far been involved in the rescue of well over 35,000 people.

Given the Libyan authorities' consistent failure to address long-standing patterns of abuse against refugees and migrants, including by state officials and affiliated militias, the **EU** and its member states must completely reconsider their co-operation with Libyan authorities, making any further support conditional on immediate action to stop horrific abuses against refugees and migrants.

Caught in the crossfire

Militias and armed groups have committed violations of international humanitarian law against refugees and migrants, including unlawful detention, torture and apparently indiscriminate attacks. According to **Amnesty International** researchers refugees and migrants are often exploited by employers and subjected to forced labor by militias and armed groups. Verified videos from Libya show militias and armed groups abusing refugees and migrants. They have also forced migrants to participate in military operations.

One refugee detained in Tripoli told Amnesty International that in May 2020 a militia affiliated with the **GNA** took him along with other refugees and migrants from a detention center, forcing them for hours to transport ammunition between two positions in Tripoli. At a time, that fighting was raging in Tripoli.

Given the horrific conditions and abuses, existing resettlement and evacuation programs are insufficient for providing safe and legal pathways out of Libya for those in need, with only 5,709 vulnerable refugees benefiting from such programs since 2017, as of 11 September 2020. This reflects the small number of resettlement pledges made by countries receiving refugees, including **EU** member states. Travel restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have further exacerbated the situation, with only 297 refugees evacuated from Libya in 2020, before borders closed in March 2020, Squalid conditions without access to clean water and washing facilities, increase their vulnerability to COVID-19 with physical distancing and preventative hygienic measures impossible to follow.

Refugees and migrants face barriers to accessing health care and have been largely excluded from official COVID-19 prevention efforts, they are also a constant target for robbery. Women and girls are at heightened risk of sexual violence. They refrain from approaching police or prosecutors, fearing detention or revenge by alleged perpetrators.

Refugees and migrants also face rampant racism and xenophobia. Government officials, members of armed groups and militias, and media often use racist language to refer to Black people. The pandemic has further fueled racism, with officials and private individuals publicly blaming refugees and migrants for the spread of the virus and calling for their expulsion.

The de facto authorities in eastern Libya, where a police state is in place and elected officials have been forcibly removed from office, abducted or displaced, and replaced by military officers, forcibly expelled over 5,000 refugees and migrants in 2020 without due process or the opportunity to challenge their deportation. The accusation that those arrested were "carriers of contagious diseases" was among the reasons cited for the deportations.

An estimated **1.3 million people** are in need of humanitarian assistance and 217,002 people are internally displaced within Libya in addition to refugees from other north African countries, 90% of people crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Europe depart from Libya.

A Greenfuse Radical Re-Mix with information from:
avenire.it
sea-watch.org
amnesty.org



The complicated history of Libya- colonialism & power plays, liberation & corruption, is a cautionary tale, another domino in the history of once hopeful, failed nation states:

"People of Libya! In response to your own will, fulfilling your most heartfelt wishes, answering your most incessant demands for change and regeneration, and your longing to strive towards these ends: listening to your incitement to rebel, your armed forces have undertaken the overthrow of the corrupt regime, the stench of which has sickened and horrified us all. At a single blow our gallant army has toppled these idols and has destroyed their images. By a single stroke it has lightened the long dark night in which the Turkish domination was followed first by Italian rule, then by this reactionary and decadent regime which was no more than a hotbed of extortion, faction, treachery and treason."

— Muammar Gaddafi's radio speech after seizing power, 1969