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At sea

- ***Malta Independent***, January 2nd, 2020, 97 migrants rescued in Maltese search and rescue area, seeking port of safety in Europe - NGO
- ***Newsbook***, January 4th, 2020, Migrants rescued in Malta's SAR will be taken to Sicily - Open Arms

After the rescue operation of 97 people in the Maltese Search and Rescue zone, NGO rescue ship Open Arms and platform Alarm Phone unsuccessfully called RCC Malta several times to receive instructions for a port of disembarkation. According to Alarm Phone, the calls were either not picked up or hung up immediately. All rescued people were finally allowed to disembark at Port Empedocle, Sicily.

- ***Times of Malta***, January 23rd, 2020, Ocean Viking rescuers pick up hundreds of migrants off Libya

Humanitarian ship Ocean Viking rescued more than 350 individuals off the Libyan coast and asked Maltese and Italian RCCs for help. 131 are unaccompanied minors. European authorities have still not designated a safe port of disembarkation.

- *OHCHR*, January 27th, 2021, Italy failed to rescue more than 200 migrants, UN Committee finds
- *Times of Malta*, January 28th, 2021, Lampedusa tragedy: Malta responsible for rescue, Italy failed to protect life

The UN Human Rights Committee found that Italy failed to protect the right to life of more than 200 people who sank in the Maltese SAR zone during the ‘Lampedusa tragedy’, in 2013. After the loss of their family members, four survivors filed a complaint. After fleeing Libya towards Europe, they have been targeted by shots fired from a boat flying a Berber flag in international waters. They called MRCC Rome several times and were told 12 hours later that Italian authorities wouldn’t intervene, since they were in the Maltese SAR zone. According to survivors, MRCC Rome didn’t even liaise with RCC Malta, leaving the phone number to migrants who were drowning. More than four hours after their first distress call to RCC Malta, the AFM intervened and saved 143 people. The boat had already capsized. At their request, Italy sent out its navy ship ITS *Libra*, in the vicinity, to come to rescue 56 other survivors and disembark them in Lampedusa, just a few miles away.

Italy was found guilty by the OHCHR of having delayed distress calls and of failing to organise rescue while one of their ships was nearby. Nonetheless, the Armed Forces of Malta were responsible for this rescue operation. Let’s recall that Malta never ratified the 2004 amendments to the SOLAS and SAR conventions, stating that the State responsible for the rescue and safe disembarkation of persons in distress at sea is the State responsible for the SAR zone in which these persons are located. Even today, Malta still applies the rule of the nearest safe port (being Lampedusa in many cases), leading to irresponsible quarrels between Italian and Maltese MRCCs, which are the root of these tragedies.

In detention

- *Infomigrants*, January 14th, 2020, Malta: Mistreatment claims, ongoing pressure despite a drop in migrant arrival

Despite the drop in arrivals in 2020 (2,281 people rescued and disembarked in Malta by the end of the year), systematic and inhumane detention of exiles remains the rule in the Maltese archipelago. All along 2020, Foreign Affairs Minister Evarist Bartolo called on other EU Member States to agree to relocate disembarked asylum seekers. Less than 300 have been relocated to Finland, Romania, Germany, France, Portugal and Luxembourg. Most of them were detained before their relocation, and some who weren’t ‘picked’ by receiving countries are still locked up in Marsa (women, children, vulnerable people), or in Safi and Lyster Barracks for men and teenagers who haven’t been assessed as minors by the Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS). After several convictions by the ECtHR, Malta committed in 2018 to amend its national legislation on detention of exiles arriving illegally on the territory (Immigration Act, 1970). At the time of these reforms, fewer than 2,000 migrants landed on the island each year, due to a tacit agreement with Italy, leaving responsibility for rescue and disembarkations mainly to Lampedusa and Sicily. Nonetheless, as soon as Malta had to take back its share of responsibility in the Central Mediterranean (summer of 2018), high detention figures resumed. These so-called reforms were a smokescreen to respond to European exhortations.

Malta and the EU

- *Schengen visa info news*, January 16th, 2020, EASO expands operations to all major EU countries of first arrival

The European Asylum Support Office will be expanding its operational support to Cypriot, Greek, Italian, Spanish and Maltese asylum and reception authorities in 2021, spending 50% of its budget. 2,000 personnel members are to be deployed in the five countries (1,000 in Greece). For Malta, figures will increase by 129%, from 65 personnel members in 2020 to 149 in 2021. They will enhance the assistance to national authorities: the International Protection Agency (IPA), the Maltese Dublin Unit and the Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS).

Foreign affairs

- *Times of Malta*, January 12nd, 2020, Migrants returned to their country after asylum applications are rejected

A group of rejected asylum seekers, mainly Bangladeshi nationals, were returned to their country of origin on Tuesday 12th January, 2021. According to non-official sources, 44 people were sent back to Bangladesh after spending more than 18 months in detention. On social media, Prime Minister Robert Abela was pleased that ‘migrants who are not truly in need of protection’ were sent back. Nonetheless, the asylum procedure and detention regime for Bangladeshi nationals in Malta is particularly discriminatory and doesn’t comply with EU standards: systematic fast-track procedures, impossibility to appeal decisions, unlawful grounds for detention. When these procedures are reported and denounced by lawyers to the Maltese authorities, they take a harder line. Hundreds of Bangladeshis are currently detained with removal orders behind bars in Safi and Lyster Barracks. Most of them haven’t been able to appeal and have to wait at least another 18 months before being sent back. No information has been given concerning the framework of this return.

Home affairs

- *Malta Today*, January 18th, 2020, Prison costs soar with 443 jailed over false passports in two years as government considers expansion

Maltese Home Affairs Minister Byron Camilleri informed that Abela’s cabinet is considering expanding the Corradino Correctional Facility (Paola) to address overpopulation, explained by the rise in incarcerated people apprehended leaving Malta on false identification and passports. Most prisoners are Sudanese, Ivorian and Eritrean nationals, usually sentenced to 6 months. In 2019 and 2020, 443 individuals were sentenced and imprisoned in connection with immigration issues. According to Chapter 258 of the Laws of Malta, any person giving false information, producing a false document or forging an identity document is liable to imprisonment from two to five years. Those convicted are trying to escape from Malta to go to other EU countries.