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A safer sea: The impact of increased search and rescue operations in the central Mediterranean

Summary

The measures introduced by the European Union in April 2015 to strengthen search and rescue capacity in the central Mediterranean, following the closure of Italy's Operation Mare Nostrum at the end of 2014, have resulted in a significant decrease in the death rate of migrants and refugees taking this perilous route into Europe. While 1 in 16 people attempting the crossing in the first few months of this year lost their lives, the death rate has plummeted to 1 in 427 since the measures agreed at an emergency summit of EU leaders on 23 April started to come into effect.

Amnesty International warns, however, that the current level of naval and aerial assets will need to remain deployed as close as possible to the area where most refugees and migrants need assistance for as long as migration flows by sea continue at current rates. Any withdrawal of resources, or diversion of their use, will jeopardize the current success in saving lives.

Amnesty International also calls on European leaders to address the systemic issues pushing refugees and migrants to undertake dangerous sea crossings, including through the opening of more safe and legal routes to access Europe.

The rising death toll after the closure of Operation Mare Nostrum

Having documented the risks taken by refugees and migrants to cross the central Mediterranean since the beginning of 2014, Amnesty International campaigned against the decision by European leaders to close the Italian humanitarian Operation Mare Nostrum at the end of October 2014 and the dramatic reduction in search and rescue capacity in the central Mediterranean that resulted. Amnesty International warned that Frontex Joint Operation Triton (Triton), set up to patrol the EU's southern maritime borders from 1 November 2014, was an inadequate response to the unfolding humanitarian crisis at sea, because it did not have sufficient naval resources for search and rescue, it deployed its assets too close to European shores to be able to rescue promptly boats in distress near Libyan shores, and the provision of assistance to refugees and migrants was not its primary objective.

Contrary to the expectations of those who wishfully believed that Italy's Operation Mare Nostrum was encouraging refugees and migrants to attempt the dangerous crossing, their numbers continued to grow in the months that followed its termination. In the first six months of 2015, 70,474 refugees and migrants arrived in Italy by sea, the vast majority from Libya; between 1 January and 29 June 2014, the number was 60,431.

Predictably, the number of deaths at sea rose dramatically in the first few months of 2015, with about 470 deaths reported as of the end of March. Two major shipwrecks in the space of one week

between 12 and 19 April 2015, claiming over 1,200 lives, prompted European Union leaders to reconsider their response to the growing tragedy on their doorstep.

23 April 2015 emergency European Council meeting: new resources for search and rescue

As an emergency European Council meeting was convened in Brussels on 23 April 2015, Amnesty International called on European governments urgently to launch a multi-country humanitarian operation mandated to save lives at sea in the Mediterranean, deploying naval and aerial resources to patrol the high seas along the main migration routes on a scale commensurate with foreseeable departure trends.

Belatedly acknowledging the gravity of the situation at sea, EU heads of government agreed to strengthen search and rescue capacity to save lives. In particular, they decided to “rapidly reinforce EU Operations Triton and Poseidon by at least tripling the financial resources for this purpose in 2015 and 2016 and reinforcing the number of assets, thus allowing to increase the search and rescue possibilities within the mandate of FRONTEX.”

Relevant measures were adopted and implemented at different times in the following weeks. Some governments immediately offered extra naval and aerial assets to increase Triton’s capacity to carry out search and rescue. New naval assets included offshore patrol vessels, bigger than those used by Triton until then, which have enhanced Triton’s ability to patrol in rough weather conditions and to rescue sizeable groups of people. On 27 April the French Navy ship Commandant Birot was the first additional asset to join Triton. Others followed soon after. On 4 May, Frontex confirmed that extra assets were being integrated in Triton and more would be added in the following weeks.

In its European Agenda on Migration, issued on 13 May 2015, the European Commission confirmed the determination to take swift action to save lives at sea and stated that “search and rescue efforts will be stepped up to restore the level of intervention provided under the former Italian ‘Mare Nostrum’ operation”. It also confirmed the tripling of the budget of Frontex operations Triton and Poseidon and acknowledged that “In parallel to this increase in EU funding, assets (ships and aircrafts) are being deployed by several Member States.” Importantly, the Commission added: “This welcome solidarity will need to be maintained for as long as the migratory pressure persists”.

On 26 May, Frontex adopted a new operational plan for Operation Triton, with an increased budget, extra resources and an expanded operational area, extending from the original 30 nautical miles (approximately 55km) from Maltese and Italian coasts to 138 nautical miles (approximately 255km) south of Sicily, roughly 70 nautical miles south of Lampedusa. Frontex wrote to Amnesty International in June 2015 that during the peak summer season, from May to September, Triton would deploy six offshore patrol vessels, 12 patrol boats, three airplanes and two helicopters.

At the same time, a number of governments decided to deploy naval and aerial assets outside Operation Triton, in national humanitarian operations to assist refugees and migrants in peril at sea. On 5 May, the British flagship HMS Bulwark reached the central Mediterranean to assist refugees and migrants at sea under the UK operation “Weald”, together with three Merlin helicopters. It was followed on 7 May by the German Navy ships Berlin and Hessen and later in May by the Irish ship Lé Eithne. Within a few days of reaching the central Mediterranean, they all started assisting refugees and migrants. While these ships remain under their national line of command, all search and rescue operations are coordinated by the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre, as required under the law of the sea. The Italian Navy, which also deploys up to five ships outside Triton, ensures local coordination to make the best use of available assets.

In addition, two non-governmental organizations, the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) and

Doctors without Borders (MSF), have also enhanced capacity for rescue operations by deploying four private vessels to assist refugees and migrants at sea.

With these fresh additional assets deployed, search and rescue operations continued relentlessly throughout May and June, in some cases with thousands of people being brought to safety in very short periods of time: over 5,500 between 30 April and 4 May; 2,220 in 11 operations on 14 May; over 5,000 between 29 and 31 May, in 26 operations; 3,480 in 15 operations on 6 June; and about 2,900 in 21 operations on 28 June.

By the end of May, the level of resources which had been available to Operation Mare Nostrum in 2014 had been surpassed. Due to the extension of Triton's operational area, Triton assets have been deployed up to the southern border of the Maltese search and rescue region, as Frontex confirmed in writing to Amnesty International in June 2015. At the same time, the German, Irish, Italian and UK ships, operating independently, are deployed south of the expanded area now covered by Triton and have been able to reach people in distress at sea as close as 30 nautical miles (55km) off Libyan coasts in about two hours. This has been particularly important as in recent months boats and dinghies have departed from a broader stretch of the Libyan coast than before and on some occasions over 25 boats and dinghies have departed at the same time.

The impact of extra naval resources: a plummeting death toll

According to the Italian Ministry of Interior (Mol) data, over 64,000 people arrived by sea through the central Mediterranean between 1 January and 26 June 2015. Of these, according to Italian coastguard data, 14,250 were rescued by Italian Coast Guard vessels; 12,900 by the Italian Navy; 10,380 by other navies operating outside Triton; 5,500 by non-Italian vessels operating under Triton; 4,348 by the Italian custom police (Guardia di Finanza); 4,223 by MOAS and MSF. Reliance on commercial vessels to perform large scale rescues, which had been very significant in the first quarter of 2015, eased with the increased engagement of Triton and navies after 23 April.

Crucially, data published by the Italian Mol and estimates made available to Amnesty International by the International Organization for Migration show how during May and June, while crossings continued at a greater rate than in previous months, the death toll plummeted after the strengthening of search and rescue capacity at sea.

While in the period between 1 January and 26 April 2015, 1,721 people drowned or disappeared at sea of the 27,722 people who attempted the crossing (1 in 16, or 6.2%), the death rate lowered dramatically in the following months.

Between 27 April – the date when the first additional ship was added to Operation Triton - and 29 June 2015, 42,297 people attempted the crossing, of which 99 were believed to have died or disappeared at sea, reducing the death rate to 1 in 427, or 0.23%. This marks a massive improvement on the situation in the months immediately before the emergency European Council meeting of 23 April.

Amnesty International welcomes the set of measures agreed and implemented by European leaders and the determination showed by the European Commission in achieving the changes necessary to save lives at sea.

Mission drift

For so long as departures continue in such significant numbers, Amnesty International calls on European leaders to maintain the current level of deployment of naval and aerial assets as close to Libyan territorial waters as required to assist refugees and migrants in peril at sea promptly. In the

near future, some assets made available by European governments outside of Triton may be called to participate in the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED) operation – a joint military operation launched on 22 June with the mission to identify, capture and dispose of vessels used by people smugglers. The implementation of this operation should not distract assets from the essential task of patrolling the high seas with a view to coming to the rescue of people in distress. Amnesty International calls on European leaders to continue to ensure that those who are rescued are disembarked to a place of safety with access to an effective asylum system to grant international protection to those who need it.

Even if the central Mediterranean route to Europe has become significantly safer, it remains perilous. People will continue to die, and large scale search and rescue operations remain necessary, for so long as high numbers continue to take this dangerous route. In response to an ever-growing global refugee crisis, EU countries need to be opening more safe and legal routes for refugees to enter Europe. They should start by significantly increasing resettlement and humanitarian admissions places for refugees.

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