

MIGRANTS

THE LIBYAN CONNECTION

While migrants and refugees drown in the Mediterranean, 630,000 more remain stranded in wartorn Libya. How should Europe deal with this tragedy on its shores?

BY Sorrel Downer

Moonbird, a plane operated by the German Search and Rescue NGO Sea-Watch, is on a reconnaissance mission, flying 15,000 feet over the Mediterranean. Using binoculars, the flight crew spot a small, white inflatable, drifting in the vast blue expanse of international waters north of Libya.

It is 1.18pm on 28 October. As the plane flies closer, the crew count 15 people onboard including children and babies. The adults wave for help. *Moonbird* contacts their Air Liaison Officer (ALO) back at base who sends a distress call to coastguards and all boats in the area. An offshore tug, *VOS Aphrodite*,

Fifteen men, women and children are spotted by the *Moonbird* search-and-rescue plane in the sea north of Libya.

is just a few miles away. It is called repeatedly, but the ship sails on. The ALO contacts the Libyan Coast Guard, asking if they are responding to the distress call. The voice at the other end is crackly, but the message is clear: “Not today... bad weather. Our coastguard ships are fibre. Not OK in bad weather.”

“You’re saying the coastguard is not going out because of bad weather?” the ALO asks in disbelief. There is a pause, and then a reply: “Yes.”

TWO HOURS PASS. *Moonbird* checks on the boat every 20 minutes, but the plane is running low on fuel, and is forced to return to base. All is not lost, however. Another rescue organisation

has picked up the distress call. A boat crewed by the Spanish NGO Proactiva Open Arms has just delivered 45 people it has rescued from another boat. But the *Open Arms* rescue vessel and its 17-strong team are in Malta, some 18 hours away.

Undeterred, they decide to help. *Open Arms* sails through the night in worsening weather. Captain Ricardo Sandoval and his team are desperately concerned for the safety of those in the inflatable. But at 10 the next morning, they get an update from *Moonbird*, which is back in the air. After more than two hours of searching, it has spotted the inflatable. It is still afloat.

Many hours later, *Open Arms* locates the craft. It is half-deflated and close to sinking, but the rescuers are in time to save the eight adults and seven children onboard. There are two babies—a girl called Menissa and a boy, Wasim, who will celebrate his first birthday the next day.

At 3.15pm *Open Arms* sends a message back to base: “All saved.” The rescued migrants and refugees—from Libya, Morocco and Tunisia—are transferred to a Maltese coastguard boat and taken to dry land on Malta.

IN THE AFTERMATH, both Sea-Watch and Proactiva Open Arms criticise the lack of

support from authorities and governments. Sea-Watch condemns “merchant ships who refuse any communication with our reconnaissance aircraft *Moonbird* and official maritime rescue coordination centres who value formal responsibilities more than human lives.”

And Oscar Camps, the Proactiva

fewer people attempted the crossing but one in 14 died, and the rate, in the first four months of last year, reached one in three.

For all those rescued at sea, the ordeal is by no means over. European countries around the Mediterranean remain reluctant to let them land, disagreeing on how to share the

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Open Arms founder who was Reader’s Digest’s European of the Year in 2019, condemns the inaction of the Libyan Coast Guard. “Libya is not a safe place, and if its coastguards don’t go out to rescue lives in danger if there is bad weather, they should no longer be called coastguards,” he says.

MORE PEOPLE IN the world are on the move than ever before, driven by armed conflict, lack of opportunity, poverty and climate change. UNICEF estimates there are currently 636,000 migrants and refugees in Libya, of whom 44,500 are children—around a quarter unaccompanied by adults. In recent years hundreds of thousands, exploited by traffickers, have risked their lives to make the perilous journey across the Mediterranean in overcrowded, unsuitable vessels.

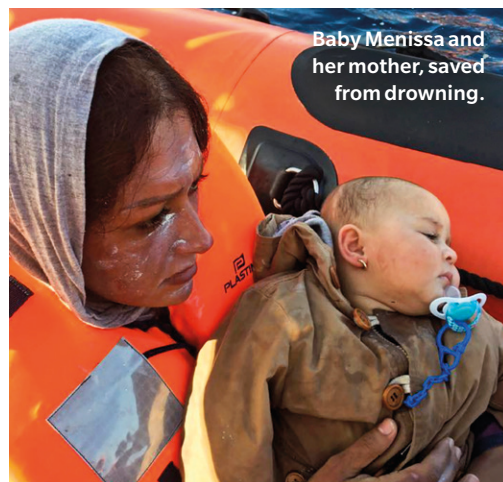
In 2017, one in 38 of those trying to reach Europe from Libya died; in 2018

burden of resettlement. They persist in obstructing humanitarian organisations that save those at sea from drowning and bring them ashore.

Oscar Camps was blocked from entering ports in four European nations last year—Spain, Malta, Greece and Italy. On one occasion, he was stranded at sea for three weeks with 98 migrants and refugees onboard from three separate boats from Libya. “It was a very difficult year. We wasted seven months,” he says.

Other Search and Rescue NGOs have been prosecuted or had boats seized or deflagged. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) with its partner SOS Méditerranée had to stop Search and Rescue missions when their boat, *Aquarius*, was stripped of its registration in late 2018; it was eight months before they could set sail with a new boat.

Facing political pressure from Europe’s southern Mediterranean



Baby Menissa and her mother, saved from drowning.

1,249 PEOPLE LEAVING NORTH AFRICA FOR EUROPE DIED AT SEA IN 2019.

OPENING SPREAD: JULIE BOURDIN/SEA-WATCH.ORG; THIS PAGE: PROACTIVAOPENARMS.ORG

countries, even the EU's own Operation Sophia stopped boat patrols and rescuing migrants and refugees last year. They were routinely refused entry into European ports, and Italy's far-right deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini went further, threatening €1m fines for NGOs attempting to land rescued migrants on Italian soil.

ON 29 JUNE, Carola Rackete, the German captain of *Sea-Watch 3*, having waited at sea for 17 days with 43 desperate people onboard rescued off Libya, declared a state of necessity and took the risk of entering the port at Lampedusa, colliding with an Italian patrol boat while docking. She was arrested and threatened with up to 10 years in jail.

Days later she was released by order of an Italian judge who said the NGO's captain was doing her duty to protect lives. Rackete called the judge's deci-

"Their plan is to reduce migration by leaving people to die."

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, rejects such criticism and offers a different solution. "In the last five years, more than 17,000 people have drowned in the Mediterranean," she told the European Parliament last November. "At sea, there is a duty to save lives... But saving alone is not enough. We must reduce irregular migration, we must fight smugglers and traffickers—it is organised crime."

To that end, she backed a drive to create Europe's first uniformed stand-alone border security force of 10,000 officers. But in the same week as it was launched, a resolution calling on the EU to step up Search and Rescue operations to prevent migrant deaths was defeated in the European Parliament.

Instead of supporting NGOs, the EU continues to encourage Libya to act as

"THE EUROPEAN UNION'S PLAN IS TO REDUCE MIGRATION BY LEAVING PEOPLE TO DIE."

sion "a big win for solidarity with all people on the move including refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, and against the criminalisation of helpers". She was later awarded the Catalan Parliament Medal of Honour alongside Oscar Camps.

"The European Union is responsible for so much cruelty," Camps says.

Europe's border police. Libya's zone of responsibility is now larger than it has ever been, creating an NGO no-go area extending 94 nautical miles off the coast. The armed Libyan Coast Guard, trained by the EU and on boats provided by Italy, intercepts migrants at sea and takes them back to the country they are trying to escape from.



Libyan Coast Guard commander Nasser al Gamudi.

After widely reported human rights abuses, including torture, rape and human trafficking in Libya, and despite an open letter from Oxfam, Amnesty International and Save The Children among others asking the Italian government to reconsider its provision of boats, but the arrangement was renewed last November.

SOME OF THE Libyan Coast Guard are not happy with the arrangement either. The Tripoli Naval Base commander, Anwar Sherif, protests: "We are not responsible for solving the problems of the Italian government—nor any other."

Nasser al Gamudi, commander of

one of six boats provided by Italy for intercepting migrants and refugees, told the Spanish newspaper *El País* last year: "We put our lives in danger. And nobody gives a damn in Europe."

While the Libyan Coast Guard intercepted boats carrying 8,965 people last year, many boats evaded them.

"Since the NGOs started disappearing from the Mediterranean, we frequently receive a rescue alert and arrive too late," says al Gamudi. "We find boats sinking and people dying... At times we have 500 people in front of us, and we can pick up only 300." And, he adds, none of those rescued want to be rescued. "It's the end of their dreams." He argues that the

CARLOS SPOTTORNO PHOTOGRAPHY/SPOTTORNO.COM

Conditions for migrants in Libyan detention centres are grim.



OF 630,000 MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN LIBYA, 44,000 ARE CHILDREN.

NGOs should help: “We are not capable of doing the work alone. We’re sick of the deal with the Italians.”

Charlie Yaxley of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) confirms that NGOs that could have helped were obstructed last year, so that “whereas in previous years we’d see at least six NGO rescue boats, sometimes more than 10 on the Med, that was often reduced to zero.”

A common criticism of Search and Rescue operations, says Yaxley, is that they act as a “pull factor”, encouraging people to risk these journeys. “But an analysis of boat departures proves that to be false,” he says. “The average number of people departing Libyan

shores per day was actually higher on days when NGO boats were not operating.”

The European University Institute, which monitored migratory flows from Libya to Italy between 2014 and October 2019, concludes there is “no relationship between the presence of NGOs at sea and the number of migrants leaving Libyan shores.” The institute says its analysis suggests that departures from Libya have mainly been shaped by weather conditions and policies of ‘onshore containment’.

“The first priority has to be saving lives at sea,” says Yaxley. “If the state coastguard is the nearest boat and able to

perform that, it goes without saying it’s preferable to letting people drown. The issue is what happens afterwards. We need people to be taken anywhere other than Libya.”

MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard are put in detention centres back in Libya where they are held, without access to lawyers, court hearings or the possibility of appeal.

Since June 2016 Médecins Sans Frontières has had a presence on the ground in Libya; medical teams are allowed to make weekly visits to eight centres, three of them in Tripoli at the epicentre of the civil conflict.

“Imagine being locked up and hearing shelling in an area engulfed by fighting,” says Sonal Marwah, an MSF advocacy manager. “Our teams have seen the acute mental distress from existing in a state of limbo, not knowing what’s going to happen. We’ve all heard the horror stories of migrants being taken out to the front lines to

taken that contravened human rights and international maritime law,” says Camps. “But humanitarian boats have the right to be in the Mediterranean and aren’t committing some kind of crime. So things can only get better.”

EU discussions led by France, Germany, Italy and Malta have resulted in some member states sign-

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fight, and we’ve seen a number of other people disappear.

“Europe has been calling for the closure of detention centres, yet it continues to support the Libyan Coast Guard, which intercepts refugees and migrants, who are then returned to them. You don’t have to be smart to see the contradiction.”

As an emergency measure, the UNHCR is trying to evacuate some of the thousands of refugees in Libya’s detention centres to safe third countries outside Europe, including Rwanda and Niger.

IN THE MEANTIME, Open Arms is back at sea, and Camps is back to juggling action and advocacy, troubled by a surge of migration across the Aegean and a new route that has opened up to Cyprus.

“This period will be viewed in history with shame because of actions

ing up to a solidarity mechanism for hosting migrants and refugees across the bloc. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia are among the countries that have refused to support it. “We’ll see what happens,” says Camps.

Proactiva Open Arms is involved in establishing an alliance of local governments across Europe prepared to welcome migrants and integrate them into society. “We are already working with cities in Spain, Italy, France, Greece and Germany, so that’s a positive note.”

And there’s solidarity, too, between the Search and Rescue NGOs. “We meet regularly, bit by bit trying to arrive at recommendations and agreements,” says Camps. He adds wryly: “In our case, we also have our own government trying to prosecute us, fine us and block us. There’s nothing easy about what we do.”