



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MIGRATION AND HOME AFFAIRS

Directorate B: Borders, Interoperability and Innovation
The Director

Brussels
HOME.B1

Özlem Demirel
Member of Parliament
Bât. ALTIERO SPINELLI
02G351
Wiertzstraat 60
B-1047 Brussels

Subject: EU aerial reconnaissance for the Libyan coast guard

Dear Honourable Member of the European Parliament,

As follow up to the Commission's holding reply on question E-1649/2020, please find below the details of the reply obtained from the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex):

Questions and replies:

- 1. How often have Frontex airspace surveillance services flown sorties in the Libyan SAR in 2019 and 2020, and which aircraft with which identifiers are chartered for this purpose?**

Frontex has been maintaining aerial surveillance capabilities in the Central Mediterranean on a regular basis (small gaps due to weather limitations, maintenance or other technical issues). The patrol patterns of Frontex aerial surveillance services cover a part of the Libyan SAR region to prevent loss of lives at sea, almost on a daily basis.

Not all the aircrafts used by Frontex for pre-frontier patrolling activities in cooperation with the host Member States are permanently based in the Central Mediterranean. In fact, the assets deployed rotate between different operational areas depending on the operational needs.

It is a general practice that law enforcement assets are not made visible. Making them visible might, especially if combined with other information, disclose sensitive operational information, such as the patrolling schedule and the surveillance area and thus undermine the operational objectives. We thus regret that we are not in the position to provide the call-signs of the aircraft.

2. In which - and in how many - cases have planes or drones deployed by Frontex or the EUNAVFOR MED Operation SOPHIA in 2019 and 2020 transmitted information about events in the Libyan Search and Rescue (SAR) Zone to the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre responsible there or the coast guard and in which cases did this relate to vessels in distress?

The information transmitted to the responsible Rescue Coordination Centre in the Libyan SAR Region were all related to distress or potential distress situations.

As a standard procedure and based on the provisions of the SAR Convention, all distress detections made by Frontex assets are transmitted to the competent MRCCs and SAR authorities. In addition, in order to prevent loss of lives at sea, the same information is transmitted to the neighbouring (M)RCCs.

On the basis of that mentioned operational procedure, from the beginning of 2019 until the beginning of May 2020 96 cases, of which 88 were initially assessed as falling under the categories specified in the SAR legal framework, were reported to the MRCC in order to prevent the loss of lives at sea.

The 8 cases not initially assessed as possible SAR events were considered as law enforcement events. However, in line with the provisions of the SAR Convention where an event can potentially become a distress situation, despite the initial assessment that some events were law enforcement ones, in all cases (96), the communication related with these incidents had always the responsible (M)RCC as a recipient for their awareness and monitoring/intervention. In addition, in order to prevent loss of lives at sea, the same information is transmitted to the neighbouring (M)RCCs.

3. Have Frontex or the EUNAVFOR MED Operation SOPHIA observed, as part of their aerial reconnaissance of waters for which Libya is responsible under the SOLAS Convention, how the Libyan rather than the Maltese authorities have been asked to retrieve vessels that have entered the Maltese Search and Rescue (SAR) Zone? This practice has been documented for 18 October 2019 and 14 March 2020 by the Watch The Med Alarm Phone Project, for example?

As a standard procedure, all distress detections made by Frontex assets are transmitted to the competent MRCC and SAR authorities. In addition, in order to prevent loss of lives at sea the same information is transmitted to the neighbouring (M)RCCs. The MRCC assuming the lead role in the coordination of an incident coordinates and tasks all rescue efforts.

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) is an independent body of the Commission, funded in Regulation (EU) 2019/1896¹. Hence, the enclosed reply, transmitted by the Commission, is under the sole responsibility of Frontex.

Yours faithfully,

(e-signed)

Matthias OEL

¹ Regulation (EU) 2019/1896 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 November 2019 on the European Border and Coast Guard and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1052/2013 and (EU) 2016/1624, OJ L 295, 13.11.2019, p.1.

