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Please quote when replying.
Your reference: E-1930-2021

Subject: Written question number E-1930-2021: Return of 800 refugees to Libya

Dear Mr Oel,

With reference to your letter dated 07 May 2021, please find below the replies to the questions from the Member of the European Parliament.

MEP Özlem Demirel indicates that on 24 February 2021, Frontex reported on Twitter that it had spotted 'nine migrant vessels in distress with over 800 migrants on board' during the previous few days in the central Mediterranean. MEP Özlem Demirel further states that the European Border and Coast Guard Agency had then informed the relevant national Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres in the areas concerned and provided 'regular updates'.

1. **Question:** *On which date during the aforementioned weekend did Frontex identify each individual maritime emergency and how many people were on board each boat?*

Answer:

As the Twitter message was posted on 24 February 2021 based on cases sighted in the pre-frontier area in the Central Mediterranean on 19-20 February 2021 the answer is provided accordingly.

In addition, the number of persons on board indicated below for each case is only an estimated number due to the capacity of the aerial surveillance. Based on the feedback from the competent Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres, the total number of persons rescued is above 800.

1. Sighting One - On 19/02/2021 - approximately 100 migrants.
2. Sighting Two - On 19/02/2021 - approximately 30 migrants.
3. Sighting Three - On 20/02/2021 - approximately 90 migrants.
4. Sighting Four - On 20/02/2021 - approximately 60 migrants.
5. Sighting Five - On 20/02/2021 - approximately 120 migrants.
6. Sighting Six - On 20/02/2021 - approximately 100 migrants.
7. Sighting Seven - On 20/02/2021 - approximately 60 migrants.
8. Sighting Eight - On 20/02/2021 - approximately 80 migrants.
9. Sighting Nine - On 20/02/2021 - approximately 10 migrants.

2. **Question:** Which Frontex teams were deployed in each case and in what ways were they supported by EUROSUR services, such as Copernicus or the Frontex Aerial Surveillance Services?

Answer:

The nine cases sighted by Frontex Surveillance Aircrafts and listed under question 1 were sighted in the Libyan Search and Rescue Region (SRR). It has to be highlighted that this area is outside the operational area of Joint Operation Themis. More precisely the distance between the southernmost part of the operational area of JO THEMIS and

- the northernmost part of the Libyan SRR is 55 nautical miles,
- the southernmost part of the Libyan SRR is 133 nautical miles.

There were no teams from the standing corps and no maritime assets deployed by Frontex in the area of the referred events since they occurred outside of the Operational areas of the Frontex coordinated joint operations.

Accordingly, the competent, responsible and internationally recognized rescue coordination centres are informed in case a distress situation is detected. In case the detection takes place in the Libyan SRR the responsible rescue coordination centre, which is the Libyan Rescue Coordination Centre, is informed and at the same time the rescue coordination centres active in the Central Mediterranean including Italy and Malta as well as EUNAVFORMED HQ are informed. This procedure is followed by all actors active in the Central Mediterranean including NGOs.

It has to be highlighted that it is the responsibility of the competent rescue coordination centre to coordinate the rescue, Frontex has no such competence. In line with the international regulations governing search and rescue, the rescue coordination centre can instruct any asset in the area to contribute to the rescue.

All events are detected with the use of Eurosur Fusion Service - Multi-Purpose Aerial Surveillance upon the service requests from Malta and Italy.

3. **Question:** In which cases were Libyan control centres also informed, and which of these reports led to boats being escorted back to Libya by the country's coast guard?

Answer:

It has to be noted that migrant boats are not escorted back to Libya but instead passengers of the rubber boats are systematically transferred onto the Libyan Coastguard vessels (or the fishing vessel performing the rescue in one case (see below)). Most migrant boats are not seaworthy to be escorted or towed by the rescue vessels as this would jeopardize the life of the passengers on board.

Considering the above, in all 9 distress cases Frontex informed the internationally recognized and competent Libyan Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) and other relevant MRCC active in the Central Mediterranean, namely Italian, Maltese and Tunisian. In 5 distress cases the rescues were performed by Libyan patrol vessels, in 3 distress events rescues were performed by Italian patrol vessels and in 1 distress event, the rescue was performed by an unidentified and flagless fishing vessel. Frontex has not received information from the competent MRCCs on the exact circumstances of the rescue operations nor on the exact location of disembarkation of the migrants in any of the 9 cases.

Yours sincerely,


Fabrice Leggeri
Executive Director