

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May 2021, Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) relaunched search and rescue activities in the Central Mediterranean, chartering our own ship, the *Geo Barents*, to save lives, provide emergency medical care to rescued people, as well as make survivors' voices heard from the world's deadliest sea border. Our vessel is fully equipped for rescue operations, and our activities are carried out by our specifically trained staff including a search and rescue team, a medical team (including mental health), and a humanitarian affairs officer and cultural mediators who ensure identification of protection needs.

Between June 2021 and May 2022, the *Geo Barents* sailed out 11 times and conducted 47 rescue operations to assist people in overcrowded, and unseaworthy boats, some of which were already taking on water. No instructions or assistance were provided by European coastal states during these rescues. MSF rescued a total of 3,138 people and conducted 6,536 medical consultations for primary healthcare, sexual and reproductive healthcare and mental health support on board. The vast majority of rescued people had fled Libya. Many of them reported having survived violence, torture and/or ill treatment.

MSF teams were also made aware of, and/or witnessed, several interceptions and forced returns to Libya: evidence of the systematic abstention of the Italian and Maltese authorities from conducting and coordinating rescues of boats in distress resulting in forcible returns of people to Libya via proxies, in contravention of search and rescue obligations under international law.

During the reporting period, 94 per cent of the boats in distress from which people were rescued were spotted directly from the bridge of the *Geo Barents* or following distress alerts relayed by civil society rescue initiatives. Only six per cent of the alerts were relayed by a rescue coordination centre (RCC), private vessel or another aerial asset. Survivors reported being stranded at sea without rescue for up to 72 hours, often under extremely challenging weather conditions. MSF medical teams on board also treated morbidities directly related to the dangerous journey itself, and recovered the bodies of 10 people who had died during their journey on a wooden boat, most likely due to intoxication by fuel fumes on the wooden boat's lower deck.

Since MSF's return to the Central Mediterranean in June 2021, our teams have continued to bear witness to the normalisation of stand-offs at sea and the consequent exacerbation of human suffering. Throughout the 11 rescue missions conducted in the reporting time, our team submitted multiple requests to the Italian and Maltese authorities to designate a place of safety for survivors to disembark. Requests to the Maltese authorities were systematically ignored or denied; while those to the Italian authorities were met with increasing delay. Stand-offs at sea obstruct survivors' timely access to full assessment of their medical and protection needs, and prolong the suffering of those identified as requiring urgent further care and protection.



MSF ASKS THAT:



European Union (EU) institutions and member states' governments, and the Italian and Maltese authorities, **put an end to this appalling cycle of death and human suffering**



The EU and its member states **reinstate and implement a dedicated search and rescue operation**, with the clear mandate to save lives in the Central Mediterranean, including ensuring adequate rescue operations, deploying vessels to international waters (inclusive of the area currently designated as the Libyan search and rescue region), and guaranteeing accountability for violations of international law



EU member states—in particular Malta and Italy—and Libya **ensure timely disembarkation of survivors in a place of safety** for appropriate access to care, a fair asylum process and safe accommodation for all persons rescued at sea. As repeatedly acknowledged by international bodies, including the United Nations and the EU Commission, **Libya is currently not a safe place for the purpose of disembarkation of people rescued at sea**



The EU and its member states **put an end to policies of deterrence** and immediately cease cooperation, training and any support by EU-funded agencies and assets to the Libyan coastguard or other proxies that **result in forced returns, violence, death, or violations of human rights and international law**



EU member states and, in particular, Italy **stop the criminalisation and administrative harassment** of civilian search and rescue operations and **facilitate the work of search and rescue non-governmental organisations (NGOs)**



EU and its member states **invest in safe passage** for every person seeking safety in Europe, and ensure **safe and legal pathways** for migration, protection, family reunification, resettlement, humanitarian visas and pathways for work and study



European civil societies challenge the deafening silence around the normalisation of the policy of non-assistance in the Central Mediterranean, and join MSF's calls for accountability, investment in rescue at sea and respect for human rights



Libya immediately **releases all arbitrarily detained migrants, refugees and asylum seekers** rescued at sea and forcibly returned to Libya