



The EU must not be complicit in the loss of lives at sea and in rights violations at Europe's borders

Once again, dozens of lives have been lost at Europe's borders due to the EU's failure to allow people seeking protection to reach Europe safely.

Hundreds are missing and presumed dead after the latest tragedy close to the Greek coast, with reports that amongst the dead are many women and children who were held below the deck of this overcrowded fishing vessel. The authorities of several Member States were informed¹ of the vessel in distress multiple hours before it capsized, and a Frontex aircraft was also present at the scene².

These human tragedies are playing out at Europe's land and sea borders on a daily basis. The first quarter of this year marked the deadliest³ in the central Mediterranean in six years.

Human rights watchdogs⁴, civil society organisations, the United Nations⁵ and countless investigative journalists as well as major media outlets⁶ have documented the human rights

¹ See <https://alarmphone.org/en/2023/06/14/europes-shield/>

² <https://www.dw.com/en/greece-says-79-dead-in-migrant-boat-sinking/a-65910893>

³ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1135577>

⁴ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/pushed-beyond-the-limits-urgent-action-needed-to-stop-push-back-at-europe-s-borders>

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-migrants/report-means-address-human-rights-impact-pushbacks-migrants-land-and-sea>; <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-calls-end-pushbacks-and-violence-against-migrants-eu-external-borders>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/19/world/europe/greece-migrants-abandoned.html>

violations, pushbacks⁷ and systematic failures to engage in search and rescue that have now become the EU's de facto migration management policy. Hundreds of reports and evidence submissions have been published, including those based directly on witness and survivor testimonies. Organisations have advocated relentlessly with the European Commission, Member States and European policy makers to adopt measures to end human rights abuses and senseless deaths at EU borders.

Instead, some EU states have drastically reduced search and rescue (SAR) capacity at sea, and restricted⁸ civil society SAR operations⁹, which means that prompt and effective assistance cannot be provided to migrants in distress, in blatant disregard of international SAR obligations.

Further, last week Member States agreed on a reform of the European asylum and migration system, which is built on deterrence and systematic detention at EU borders, that will most probably incentivise more pushbacks, and deaths at sea, while the border monitoring mechanisms established so far are neither independent nor effective¹⁰. This will only push people fleeing war and violence into even more dangerous routes and cause more unnecessary deaths. Meanwhile, EU Member States continue to rely on untransparent deals worth billions with third countries, in an attempt to rid themselves of their asylum responsibilities.

We urge a full investigation into these deaths, specifically into the role of EU Member States as well as the involvement of Frontex. We urge the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, to finally take a clear stand on the open graveyard at Europe's land and sea borders, and to hold Member States accountable. We call for a European asylum system that guarantees people the right to seek protection in full respect of their rights. The EU should abandon the narrative of blaming shipwrecks on smugglers and stop seeing solutions solely in the dismantling of criminal networks. We urge the EU and Member States to set up proactive, state-led search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea.

For too many years, we have heard empty words from the European Commission and EU Member States, being "concerned", "saddened" and "appalled" by the loss of life without taking action. This time must be different. It is time to finally protect the lives and the rights of people seeking safety in Europe.

⁷ <https://pro.drc.ngo/resources/news/protecting-rights-at-borders-vi-what-we-do-in-the-shadows/>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/04/lithuania-legalizing-illegal-pushbacks-gives-green-light-to-torture/> ; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/03/croatia-ongoing-violent-border-pushbacks> ; <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/bimonthly-bulletin-refugees-and-migrants-greece>; <https://www.msf.org/greece-pushbacks-detention-and-violence-towards-migrants-lesbos>; https://www.gcr.gr/media/k2/attachments/GCR_Pushback_Criminalization_Report.pdf

⁸ <https://sea-watch.org/en/statement-by-civil-rescue-organizations-new-italian-government-decree/>

⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/02/italy-proposed-new-sea-rescue-law-puts-more-lives-risk-turk>

¹⁰ <https://euobserver.com/migration/157070>; <https://borderviolence.eu/reports/joint-statement-on-croatias-independent-border-monitoring-mechanism/>

Signatories

Amnesty International

Danish Refugee Council

HIAS Europe

Human Rights Watch

International Rescue Committee

Médecins sans Frontières / Doctors Without Borders

Missing Children Europe

Oxfam

Save the Children

SOS Children's Villages International