



# Borders of (In)humanity

Testimonies of survivors on board Humanity 1 reveal the true consequences of the EU's externalisation policies



+++ Publication by SOS Humanity +++



***“ They sell people like they would sell bread ”***

Darius\*, survivor



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Photo: Camilla Kranzsch/SOS Humanity

# Abstract

*“Humans don’t take to the water if there’s no danger behind them.”*

Ange\* (R06)

This report assesses testimonies given by **64 survivors** on board the rescue ship Humanity 1 across **13 rescue operations** between **October 2022 and August 2024**. It focuses on three stations of their journeys – Tunisia, Libya and the Central Mediterranean – to bring to light the consequences of the European Union’s externalisation policies.

These testimonies span accounts by men, women and children from **15 different countries**, who departed from both Libya and Tunisia, recorded in **seven languages**: English, French, Arabic, Urdu, Bangla, Tigrinya and Punjabi. They range from brief statements to complex, multi-hour stories.

Over the last decade, the EU has increasingly engaged in policies of **externalisation** which outsource border controls and shift responsibility for international protection to non-EU third countries. These policies include the enabling and building up of new Libyan and Tunisian Search and Rescue (SAR) zones, Libyan and Tunisian Rescue Coordination Centres (RCCs), and the so-called Libyan and Tunisian Coast Guards. These institutions are dysfunctional, dangerous and deadly, often with close links to the very smugglers and militias the EU and its member states are allegedly trying to combat. They also force protection seekers back to the countries they are fleeing, in violation of international law. Such actions make a mockery of labels implying these actors are part of a search and rescue ecosystem; they are better understood in the context of organised criminal networks whose actions directly or indirectly result in deaths and human rights abuses on a daily basis.

The testimonies of the 64 survivors give detailed insights into their treatment in **Libya** and/or **Tunisia**. They testified about racist, sexist and religious discrimination, persecution, denial of fundamental rights, modern-day slavery, torture, and physical

and sexualised violence. In Libya, survivors almost universally reported arbitrary detention in dire conditions including hunger, denial of medical treatment and summary executions. Many were sold as slaves and trafficked for profit, including across the Tunisian border. Often, these violations were not merely enabled but carried out by state actors, military/police personnel or Coast Guards funded by the EU, making European complicity clear.

The situation in the **Central Mediterranean** is similarly dire. Survivors reported violent pull-backs by the so-called Libyan and Tunisian Coast Guards, often experienced numerous times. They testified about violence at sea – including beatings, gunshots, sexualised violence, the intentional sinking of already unseaworthy boats and leaving people to drown, some of whom had jumped into the water for fear of being forced back to Libya or Tunisia. Survivors reported European authorities failing to rescue or coordinate, but instead facilitating their capture by the Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards.

By analysing the themes mentioned in these testimonies in depth, this report aims to create greater awareness of European complicity in human rights violations in the Central Mediterranean and beyond, debunking the myth that externalisation policy is an effective or humane means of ‘migration control’. It also strives to centre the voices and experiences of survivors in political and ethical debates around migration.

Lastly, the report provides further support and evidence for SOS Humanity’s demands to the EU and its member states. We call on the EU and its member states to fulfil their duty to save lives at sea by complying with the international law of the sea. The EU must end all cooperation with Tunisia and Libya that leads to the violation and restriction of refugee rights, and instead establish a European-funded and -coordinated search and rescue programme which would bring some much-needed humanity back to its external border.

**This report is dedicated to the survivors who shared their stories with us – and in memory of the almost 25,000 people who did not survive the Central Mediterranean crossing since 2014, whose stories remain untold.**

*SOS Humanity is a non-governmental search and rescue organisation originally founded in Berlin in 2015 by captain and historian Klaus Vogel as SOS Mediterranee, starting its first mission to the Central Mediterranean in 2016 with the ship Aquarius. In 2022, the organisation became independent of the SOS Mediterranee network, and has since carried out rescues with the ship Humanity 1 under the name SOS Humanity.*





Photo: Ma. Cavallar / SOS Humanity

## Introduction

*“Three young men jumped back into the sea due to the severe beating they endured. The Libyan Coast Guard left them to die before our eyes, cursing them as they drowned, saying to each other, ‘Let them die; it’s easier for us and for them.’”*

Fidaa\* (R13)

### The Central Mediterranean

For centuries, the international waters of the Central Mediterranean Sea, viewed from the north, have been a site of prosperity for Europe in terms of trade, shipping, fishing and tourism, with thousands of vessels crossing daily. Viewed from the south, these same waters represent the last chance of reaching safety for thousands of people fleeing Libya and Tunisia; they are a crime scene where EU-funded human rights violations are committed with

impunity; and they are a mass graveyard where nearly 25,000 protection seekers have lost their lives since 2014.<sup>1</sup>

In both cases, what the Central Mediterranean represents is a geographical, political and moral border.

### Background

Between 2013 and 2014, the Italian government’s Operation Mare Nostrum rescued around 150,000 people on the move from distress at sea and brought them safely to shore in Europe, in line with the legal obligations set forth in international law.<sup>2</sup> Although a military operation, its search and rescue mandate was not only an indication of basic humanity towards those fleeing disintegrating security situations in countries like Syria and Libya; it was also an acknowledgement of Europe’s legal and moral responsibilities beyond the narrow national borders of its member states. Lacking financial and political support from the rest of Europe, Operation Mare Nostrum ended on 31 October 2014 and was replaced by a series of EU-run operations: Triton (2014–18), Themis (2018–), Sophia (2015–2020) and Iriini (2020).<sup>3</sup> Not one of these operations has contained a search and rescue component in the Central Mediterranean, leaving NGOs such as SOS Humanity alone with this mammoth task.

The situation in the Central Mediterranean is complicated by other actors, including patrol boats of the Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards as well as smaller boats operated by Libyan militias – all of which regularly interfere in and endanger NGO rescue operations in international waters. In recent years, even commercial ships such as tankers have been complicit in illegally bringing survivors back to Libya, while state actors like Maltese navy vessels or Coast Guard systematically ignore their legal obligation to rescue boats in distress.

## Externalisation

This abdication of responsibility mirrors a growing trend whereby European state actors effectively push activities which should be carried out at their borders, from search and rescue to asylum processing, as far as possible from EU territory. This policy is described by the umbrella term ‘externalisation’. Thus, in contravention of international law, Italy’s far-right government has struck deals with countries like Albania so that asylum applications of some of those fleeing to Italy are processed on Albanian soil. Even more concerning, some of these deals aim explicitly at reducing the number of people fleeing Libya and Tunisia, under the euphemistic heading ‘migration control’. Through financial, material and informational support of actors like the Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards, European taxpayers fund grave human rights violations both in the Central Mediterranean and in the countries to which refugees and migrants are forced back.

The externalisation of European asylum and migration policy might, on paper, seem like a dry, technical topic for European bureaucracies to debate. In practice, externalisation means the EU aiding and abetting torture, blackmail, rape, modern-day slavery and murder on a systemic scale. **The inhumane consequences of externalisation policies are felt daily on the bodies of the men, women and children who attempt to flee Libya and Tunisia, those who are forced back, and those who cannot leave.**

## The Borders of (In)humanity

This report is an attempt to amplify the stories of these people, who know better than anyone what happens in spaces where Europe knowingly turns a blind eye. Their testimonies provide evidence of a system of human rights violations which would not exist without the funding of the EU. Rather than ‘combating the smugglers’, the stories of survivors reinforce the fact that this system actually creates economic incentives for smugglers, militias and state actors, who in many cases work in collusion – or are, de facto, the same. **Instead of reducing levels of people smuggling or trafficking, or even deterring people from fleeing, externalisation policies lead to more deaths and suffering.** By turning their backs on the reality at Europe’s borders, EU governments abdicate responsibility for these deaths, often in exchange for short-term popularity in a political climate where the far-right is on the march. Even the economic arguments of externalisation do not add up: the amount spent on attempting to prevent people crossing the Mediterranean dwarfs the potential costs of a search

and rescue programme for those who (will and do) cross regardless, especially if shared between EU member states.

These testimonies represent a tiny fraction of the stories of the 4,040 total survivors rescued by the crew of Humanity 1 between August 2022 and April 2025. Rather than being seen as a homogenous mass of victims, these individual voices and varied experiences provide valuable evidence through first-hand witnessing, or ‘témoignage’. This act is particularly powerful since many survivors are witnessing events the EU would prefer were not seen, and speaking out with demands the EU would prefer were not



heard. As SOS Humanity, we want to use these testimonies to answer the questions: what happens to the victims of the EU’s externalisation policy? How can the deaths and human rights violations in the Central Mediterranean and beyond be prevented? And, ultimately: **where do Europe’s moral borders lie?**





Photo: Laurin Schmid/SOS Humanity

# 1. Methodology

## Gathering testimonies

### What?

One of the key pillars of SOS Humanity's work, alongside rescuing and protecting people on the move, is testifying.<sup>4</sup> This means bearing witness to the humanitarian catastrophe in the Central Mediterranean, as well as human rights violations in countries of origin, departure and arrival. It also feeds into the political change we strive to create through our advocacy and communications work. Drawing on the work of other NGOs and humanitarian organisations – such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and OHCHR – we try as far as possible to centre the voices and experiences of survivors.<sup>5</sup>

Testimonies are recorded on board our rescue ship Humanity 1 by one of our Communications Coordinators, who are part of the permanent crew of SOS Humanity and lead the onboard Communications Team.

### When?

After a rescue, the Communications Team gives survivors time and space to access dry clothing, food and medical support, before introducing themselves with a short speech translated live

into the languages relevant to survivors. The Communications Coordinator informs survivors about the possibility of sharing their stories but does not approach individuals directly, to avoid putting pressure on anyone. Rather, survivors can approach the Communications Coordinator or another crew member voluntarily if and when they wish to share their experiences.

The Communications Coordinator will consult with the Protection Representative and Mental Health Representative (part of the Care Team on board) to ensure they have no immediate psychological concerns about the survivor giving a testimony.

### Where?

The Communications Coordinator agrees on a time and place with the survivor, ensuring an environment as safe, private and comfortable as possible. This may be a quiet spot on the boat deck or, outside of operating hours, the onboard clinic.

### Who?

Where appropriate, the Communications Coordinator arranges for the Cultural Mediator to act as translator; or if all parties agree, another survivor can act as a translator. Survivors choose whether to give consent for the usage of their words, audio recording,



video and/or photo. On occasion, the external journalists who join the crew of each rescue mission can conduct or be present for an interview, after a careful briefing and with the supervision of the Communications Coordinator to ensure adherence to protection guidelines.

### How?

The Communications Coordinator explains the procedure of testimony collection to the survivor, emphasising their rights to change their mind about participation, to conceal their identity and to withdraw their consent after the interview. Each interview begins with the question: 'What would you like to share with us?' Testimonies can last from a few minutes for a short statement up to a few hours. Where appropriate, the Communications Coordinator will ask open or clarifying questions, for example about the journey from the survivor's home country to the country of departure; their experiences in Libya and/or Tunisia; the Mediterranean crossing; and their hopes and wishes for the future. However, Communications Coordinators strive to avoid asking leading questions. If either party wishes to do so, interviews can be paused or ended at any moment.

## Safeguarding policy

Testimonies are given in a short time window between often traumatic or near-death experiences in Libya/Tunisia or on the Mediterranean, and a journey into the unknown which continues after arrival in Europe. This brief window also often represents the first time in a long time that many of those rescued have had access to food, water, basic hygiene facilities, medical or psychological care and reliable information. Some may still be in shock or traumatised.

Furthermore, images or testimonies which identify survivors can cause great harm if they are extreme, intrusive, manipulated or are taken without proper informed consent. This can include harm to friends and family in countries of origin – for example, if the survivor is a political refugee or belongs to an oppressed minority in that country.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, the testimony process is grounded in SOS Humanity's safeguarding principles, in close collaboration with the onboard Care Team, including medical and psychological representatives. This safeguarding responsibility is, however, taken on by the entire crew, who are briefed by the Communications Coordinator about the process during training. Crew members are encouraged to offer an open, non-judgemental ear to survivors who might be interested in sharing their story, while also showing sensitivity and awareness of their physical and psychological state.

SOS Humanity's key safeguarding principles governing testimonies are as follows:

→ **Testimonies are voluntary.** Communications Coordinators explain that giving a testimony will have no positive or negative impact on the treatment of survivors on board or during the asylum process. Minors can only be contributors if accompanied by at least one guardian or if the minor in

question appears to be particularly mature, expresses a strong desire to share their story and there are no objections on the grounds of mental health.

→ **Testimonies are anonymous.** Survivors must not be identified by name, but are requested to suggest a pseudonym (in a few cases, they asked for no pseudonym to be used, in which case we have simply anonymised testimonies). We do not publish photos or videos in which their face is identifiable, nor do we publish too many specific details which may make people identifiable.

→ **Only Communications Coordinators collect testimonies.** The only exceptions are external journalists under close supervision, after being briefed. Anyone conducting an interview must show sensitivity to the mental state of survivors and avoid passing judgement.

→ **Do no harm.** As SOS Humanity, we have a duty of care to the people we encounter in an emergency situation. We always strive to avoid causing further harm or creating new risks, for example the risk of re-traumatisation by asking overly direct questions about (sexual) violence.<sup>7</sup>

→ **Put people first.** The people we rescue, and the stories they wish to tell, are at the centre of our work. We recognise and respect their rights to participation, consent and protection. Their welfare and safety take precedence over our communication requirements.<sup>8</sup>

→ **No single story.** We try to show as many different stories and facets of people on the move as possible, without generalising, simplifying or perpetuating stereotypes, including those which victimise or dehumanise.<sup>9</sup>

Should the survivor share stories of violence, abuse, torture, and other forms of exploitation during the interview, this information can be shared, with consent, with the Mental Health Representative and/or Protection Officer (who can write humanitarian referrals which could support asylum claims). After every testimony, survivors are reminded about the possibilities for medical and psychological support on board. They are also given the possibility to withdraw their consent should they change their mind about any aspect before publication.

## Publication

After survivors have disembarked in Europe at the assigned place of safety, testimonies are shared with the Communications Team on land in SOS Humanity's Berlin office, where they can be edited, translated, and published in English and German on our website,<sup>10</sup> newsletters, press releases, social media channels and reports. Sometimes, testimonies are shared with journalists, both on board Humanity 1 and around the globe.

SOS Humanity's testimonies have appeared on *BBC World Service* radio programmes, in Italian newspapers including *la Repubblica*, in reports by the International Organization for Migration (IOM)<sup>11</sup> and as part of exhibitions on migration such as in London's National



Photo: Max Cavallari/SOS Humanity

Maritime Museum. Moreover, each year, SOS Humanity co-organises the theatre performance *Tatort Mittelmeer*, where some of Germany’s best-known actors, renowned for playing TV detectives, read transcripts of testimonies to shed light on the ‘crime scene’ on the Mediterranean.<sup>12</sup> We are open to providing content from testimonies for journalistic purposes or potential artistic or political collaborations. Lastly, testimonies are also used in our advocacy work, both in public debates and lobbying policymakers.

### Methodology of this report

For this report, we have collated all testimonies gathered by the crew of Humanity 1 available at time of publication, covering the period between October 2022 and August 2024. All testimonies are reproduced here with consent, and some have already been published in full on the website of SOS Humanity.<sup>13</sup> These testimonies were transcribed, translated where necessary into English and edited for clarity, comprehension and brevity. In some cases their structure has also been altered slightly, so a few quotations in this report may be taken from different parts of one testimony. They have been labelled with numbers corresponding to the relevant rescue mission (**R02 to R14**)<sup>14</sup>:

On occasion, our crew was made aware informally of stories, often particularly shocking or traumatic, which do not appear in testimonies, either because the survivor in question chose not to give a testimony or because our Care Team deemed it too great a psychological risk. This information therefore appears only sporadically in a generalised and fully anonymised context, covering topics not mentioned explicitly in testimonies.

Direct quotations from survivors were arranged into three categories: **Libya**, **Tunisia** and the **Central Mediterranean**. Based on their experiences at these ‘stations’ of their journey, subcategories (such as ‘discrimination & persecution’) were created. We have also collated survivors’ **hopes, dreams and demands**, placing them alongside SOS Humanity’s own political demands to the EU and its member states. Lastly, while the quantity and scope of the 64 testimonies made a complete analysis of each individual text impractical, a basic frequency analysis was carried out to determine which words appeared most often across all testimonies, the results of which can be seen in the word cloud in the subsequent chapter. These testimonies contain a wealth of evidence of human rights violations in North Africa, the Mediterranean and beyond, some of which have never been reported in the media and/or were witnessed only by survivors themselves.

Rescue mission	R02	R03	R04	R05	R06	R07	R08	R09	R10	R11	R12	R13	R14
Dates	Oct – Nov 2022	Nov – Dec 2022	April 2023	May – June 2023	June – July 2023	Aug 2023	Oct – Nov 2023	Nov – Dec 2023	Jan – Feb 2024	Feb – Mar 2024	May 2024	June – July 2024	July – Aug 2024



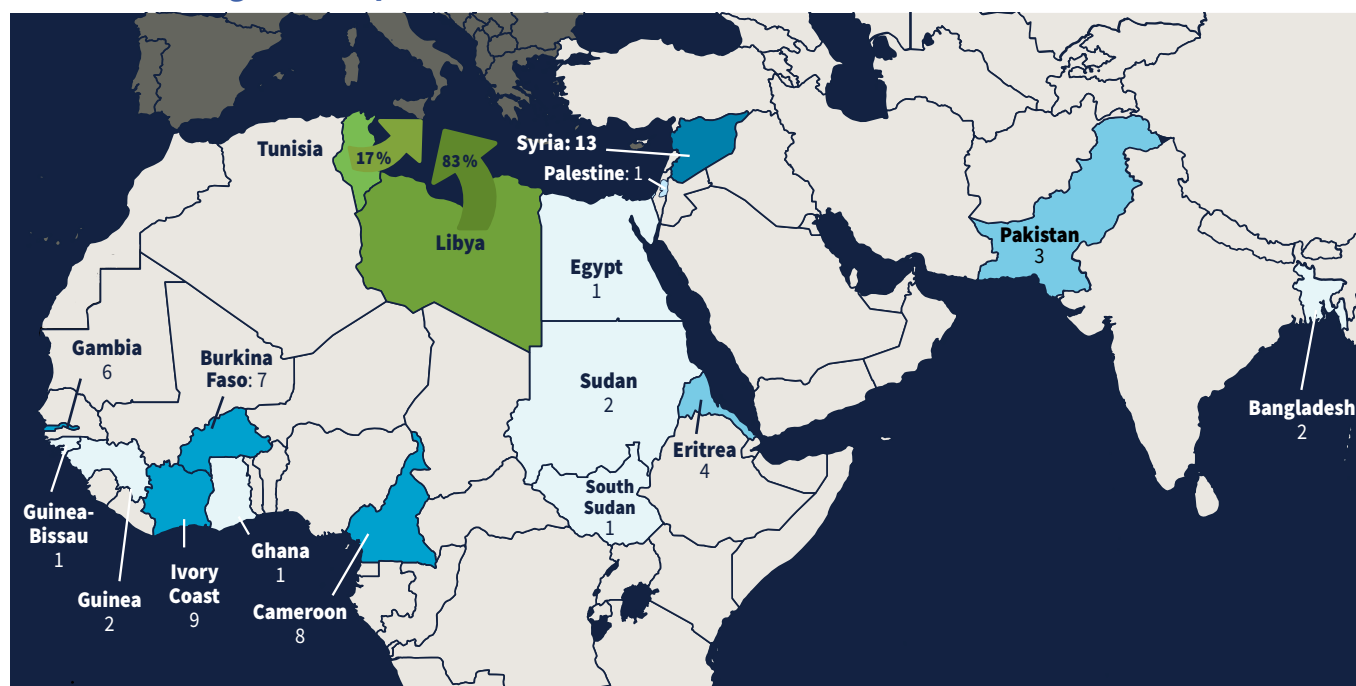
## 2. Quantitative Analysis

The 64 survivors who gave testimonies came from a total of **15 countries**, spanning West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. These correspond broadly to the overall nationalities of those rescued by the crew of Humanity 1, outlined in our previous report ‘Humanity Overboard’.<sup>15</sup> Some survivors gave testimonies together – for example, with friends or family – meaning the total number of texts (51) is lower than the number of people.

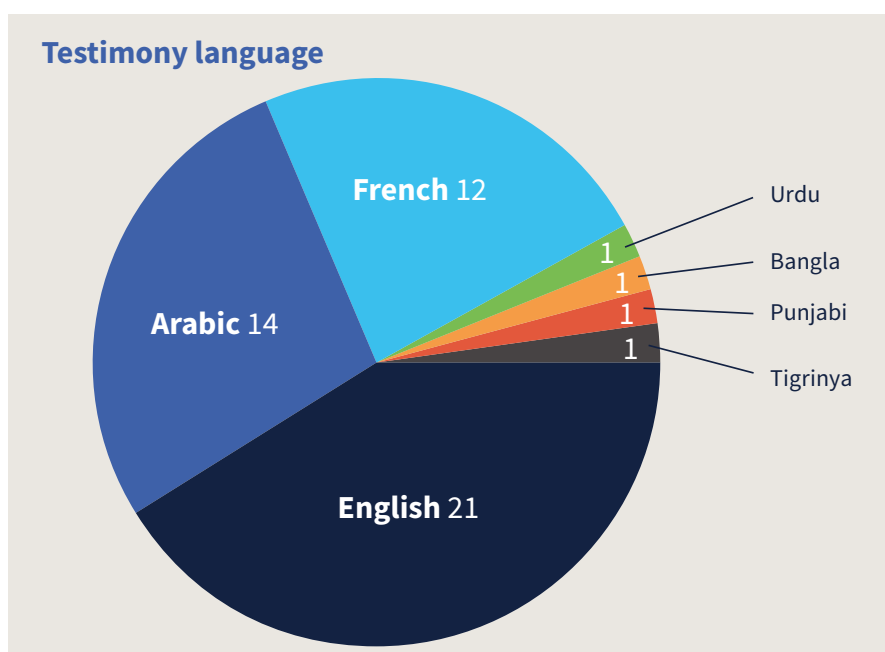
All of those rescued departed from **Libya (83%)** or **Tunisia (17%)**, which is again roughly in line with the overall

proportion of countries of departure analysed in ‘Humanity Overboard’ (Libya: 73%; Tunisia: 18%).<sup>16</sup> Many took long, complex and non-linear routes to reach the country of departure, passing through multiple countries of transit over several years, and some crossed (voluntarily or forcibly) from Libya to Tunisia or Tunisia to Libya. Furthermore, many attempted to cross the Mediterranean numerous times before being rescued.<sup>17</sup> One survivor, **Fidaa\***, reported making eight separate attempts to cross the Mediterranean together with her five children, one of them disabled.

### Countries of origin and departure



Survivors gave testimonies in seven different languages: **English, French, Arabic, Urdu, Bangla, Tigrinya** and **Punjabi**. A member of Humanity 1’s crew (such as the Cultural Mediator) or another survivor provided live interpretation to and from English for the Communications Coordinator taking the testimony. After each rescue operation, the testimonies were then transcribed, either manually or automatically, to confirm the accuracy of this live translation where necessary.



### Gender and age

A bar chart titled 'Gender and age' showing the number of people in three categories: Adult male (39), Adult female (19), and Minors (6). The y-axis represents the count, ranging from 0 to 40. The bars are colored red for Adult male, blue for Adult female, and green for Minors.

Category	Count
Adult male	39
Adult female	19
Minors	6

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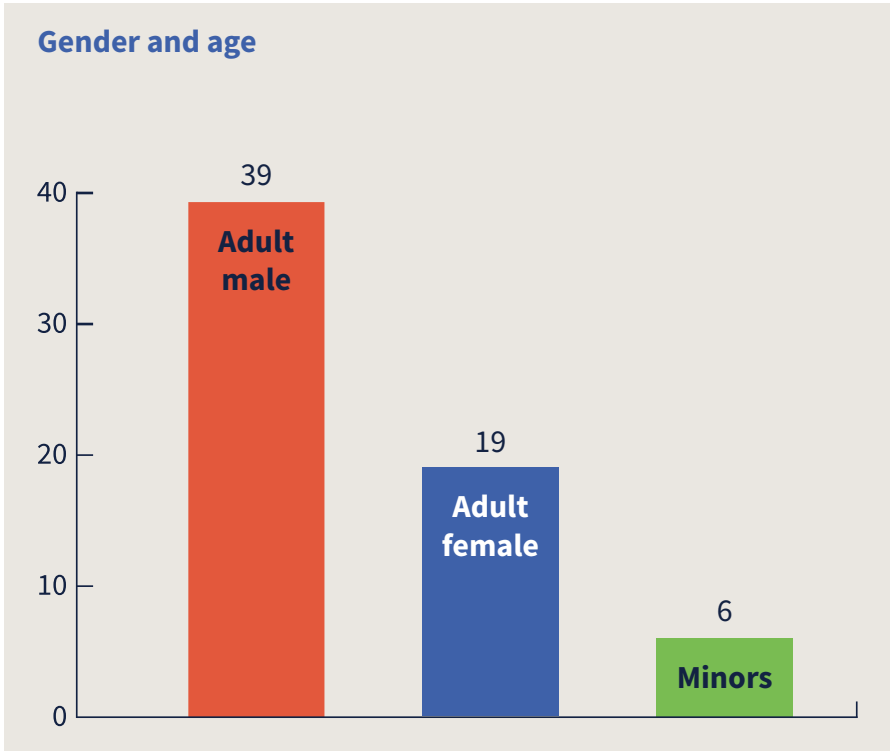
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### 3. The EU's Externalisation Policies

**“Migration over the Mediterranean is a problem and a catastrophe, because the European Union is financing Libyan authorities. The authorities use terrorism against the refugees. They are not a government. They do human trafficking, they hand the migrants from person to person, from employee to employee.”**

Refugee from Sudan (R07)<sup>19</sup>

#### Externalisation<sup>20</sup>

In the past decade, the EU and its member states have devised more and more ways to hinder people on the move from crossing EU borders and applying for asylum. *Externalisation* describes the outsourcing of border control and shifting of responsibility for

international protection – codified in the Geneva Convention of 1951 and EU law<sup>21</sup> – to non-EU third countries.<sup>22</sup> Externalisation is a key element of Europe's ‘closed-door policy’ and has become an increasingly common approach by the EU and several member states.

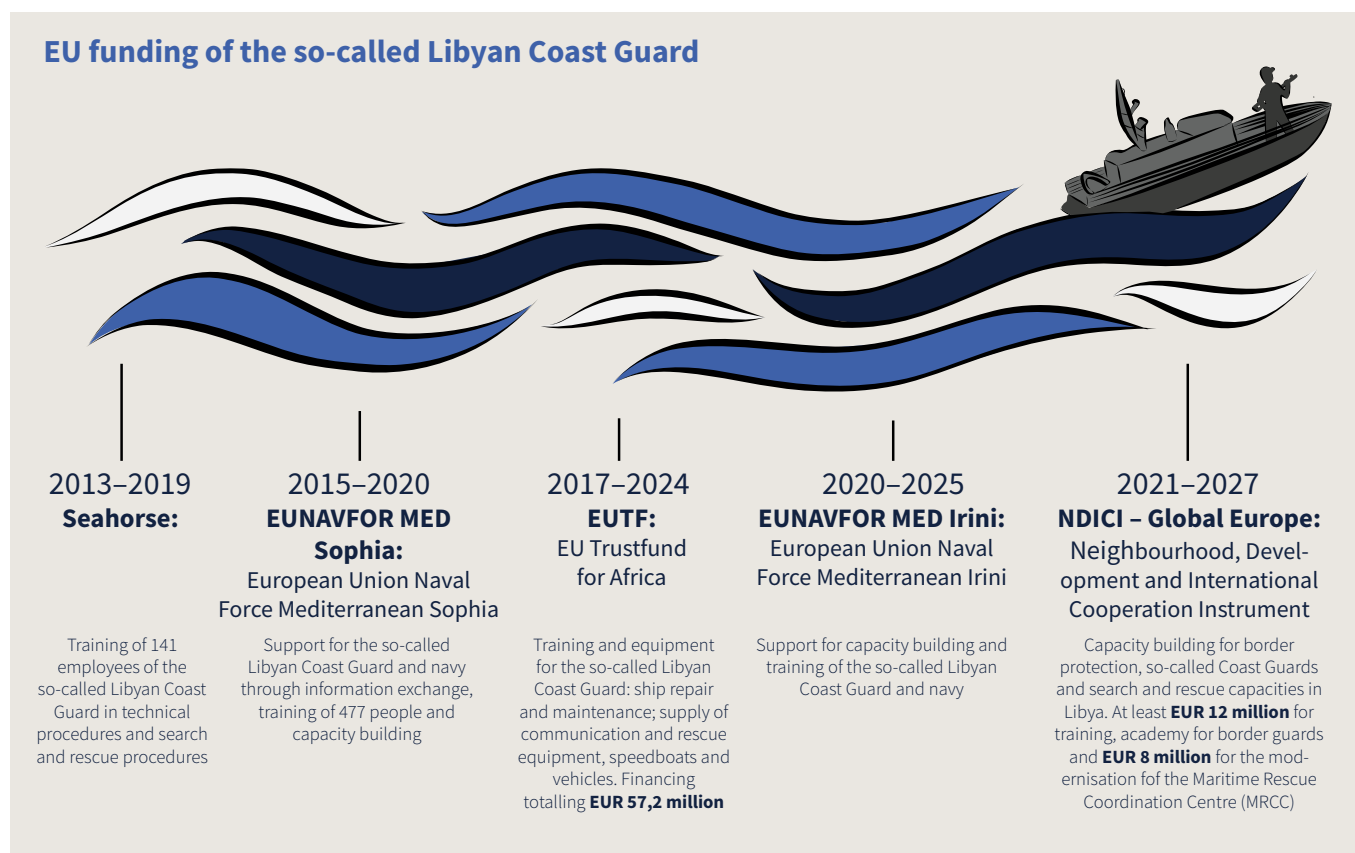
#### Background

Between 2013 and 2014, the Italian search and rescue operation Mare Nostrum prioritised rescuing people in distress in the Central Mediterranean. However, its end in 2014 signalled the start of a shift away from European state-organised search and rescue.<sup>23</sup> Since then, EU military and financial capacities have instead been directed towards preventing people from reaching European shores. The establishment of the Libyan and Tunisian Search and Rescue (SAR) zones in 2018 and 2024 further enabled the EU and its member states to outsource the duty of maritime rescue and the responsibility for coordinating distress cases to Libyan and Tunisian authorities. This has led to an unprecedented increase of illegal ‘pull-backs’.

Moreover, in the past two years alone, five new EU partnerships with coastal states bordering the Mediterranean have been established<sup>24</sup>, including a cooperation with Tunisia which entails

€105 million<sup>25</sup> for border and migration control. Some EU member states have also signed bilateral agreements with non-EU third countries.<sup>26</sup> Since 2023, a new form of externalisation policy emerged with the agreement between Italy and Albania to outsource asylum procedures. Under this deal, migrants rescued in the Mediterranean by Italian state vessels are to be transferred to

detention centres on Albanian soil, where they undergo asylum procedures under Italian jurisdiction.<sup>27</sup> Although the disembarkation of people in Albania who have been rescued from distress at sea violates international law and the rights of people seeking protection, it is being discussed as a blueprint within the EU for further forms of externalisation policy.



## A threat to people on the move and their rights

By establishing agreements with countries that violate fundamental human rights and are unable to process protection seekers in line with international law, the EU and its member states are aiding and abetting severe human rights violations. Although these violations of international law are flagrant and publicised, numerous EU countries have expressed interest in or endorsed measures to outsource responsibility for asylum seekers.<sup>28</sup>

Apart from the suffering these agreements cause for individual people on the move, externalisation measures threaten the observance of international law. They are eroding the international protection system codified in the Geneva Refugee Convention of 1951. Due to the increasing number of human rights violations associated with externalisation, the UNHCR states in its “Note on the ‘Externalization’ of International Protection” in 2021, that any policies “ [...] designed, or effectively serving to avoid responsibility or to shift, rather than share burdens are contrary to the 1951 Refugee Convention and principles of international cooperation and solidarity”<sup>29</sup>.

In other words, these policies contradict international refugee law, codified in the most important international and legal document for the protection of refugees. The Convention was adopted after the refugee crisis caused by the Second World War, one of the darkest periods in European history. The EU, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012, claims to be proud of its constitutionality and values, such as human dignity, the rule of law and human rights. One of its stated aims is strict adherence to international law. Its political actions, however, tell another story. Even agencies within the EU itself have published numerous reports demanding accountability measures and investigations into widespread rights violations at Europe’s external borders.<sup>30</sup>

## Externalisation measures in the Central Mediterranean

A key concept in international maritime law is the ‘place of safety’ (PoS), wherein the lives of survivors are no longer threatened and their basic human needs (such as food, shelter and medical care) can be met.<sup>31</sup> The UNHCR states clearly: “The need to avoid disembarkation in territories where the lives and freedoms of those alleging a well-founded fear of persecution would be threatened



is a consideration in the case of asylum-seekers and refugees recovered at sea.”<sup>32</sup> No survivor from distress at sea may ever legally be taken to Libya or Tunisia since they cannot be considered places of safety.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, Central Mediterranean states like Italy and Malta, as well as the EU’s Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex, facilitate violations of these international codes, including illegal interceptions by the Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards despite the disastrous human rights records of both countries. European and non-European Rescue Coordination Centres, Coast Guards and other EU assets (such as those operated by Frontex) regularly violate the law of the sea and international law for migration control. These policies are the reason for increased deaths at sea and the illegal return of asylum seekers to countries where they face abuse, as demonstrated in survivor testimonies.<sup>34</sup>

**New Search and Rescue (SAR) zones and Coast Guards**

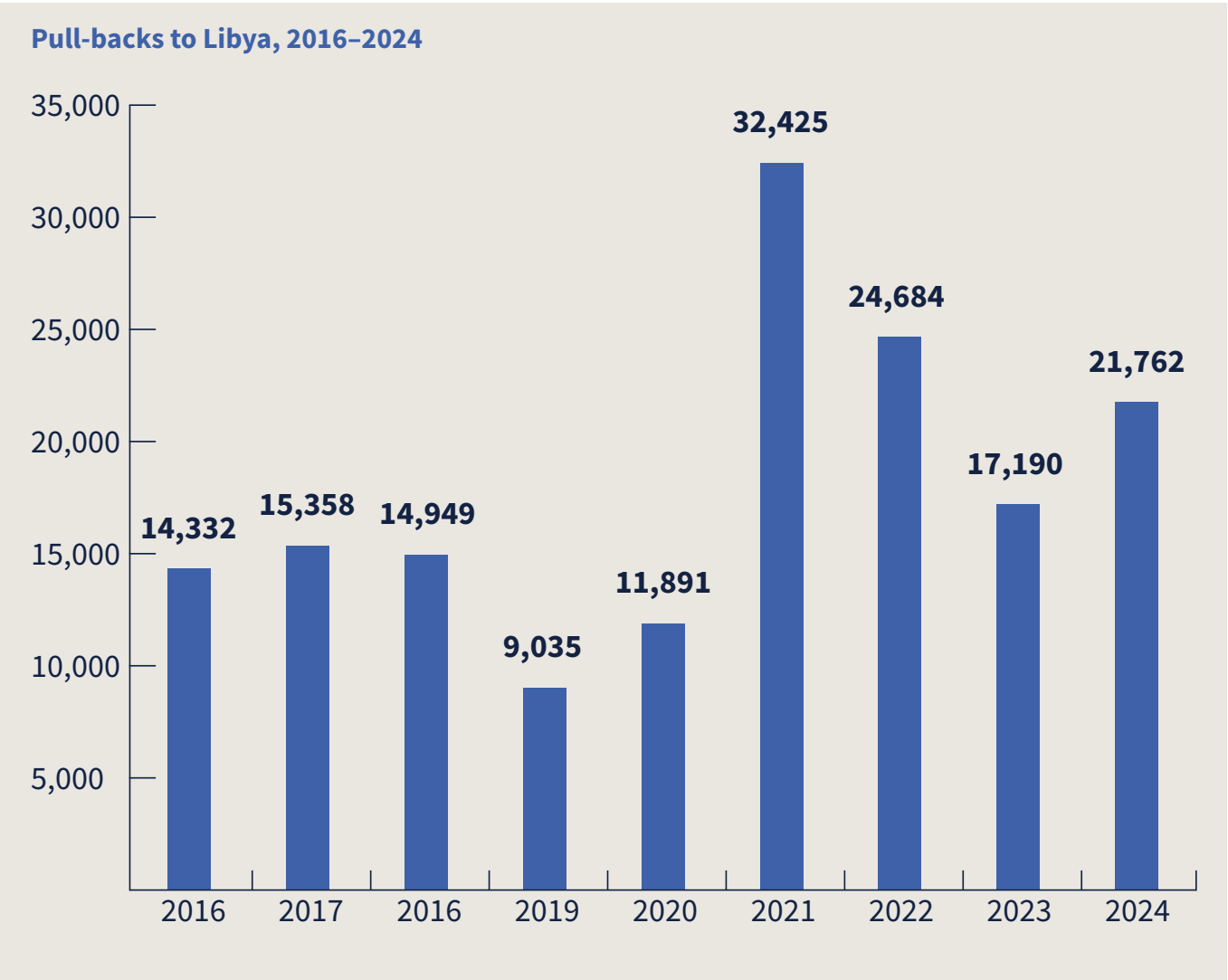
Nevertheless, the EU has strongly supported the establishment of Search and Rescue (SAR) zones,<sup>35</sup> Rescue Coordination Centres (RCCs) and Coast Guards in Libya and Tunisia under the pretext of saving lives at sea.

These SAR zones lend a false legitimacy to ‘rescues’ by the so-called Libyan and the Tunisian Coast Guards, which are in reality illegal pull-backs that have nothing to do with search and rescue. Significantly, the so-called Libyan Coast Guard has been identified as dysfunctional and illegitimate in several court rulings.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the EU enables large-scale human rights violations against people on the move by normalising illegal actions carried out by the so-called Libyan and the Tunisian Coast Guards.

The EU and its member states have been training the so-called Libyan Coast Guard since 2016 and supporting them with the delivery of patrol boats, training, repair and maintenance services, equipment supply and financial resources.<sup>37</sup> The EU has also provided financial and material support to the Tunisian Coast Guard since 2015.<sup>38</sup> The true aim of the EU’s cooperation is clear: stopping people crossing at all costs.

**Illegal interceptions by Coast Guards**

By capturing people in distress and forcing them (back) to Libya, where they face violent conflict, torture, arbitrary detention and systematic ill-treatment, the so-called Libyan Coast Guard breaches international law, often using violence and firearms. Between 2017 and March 2025, the so-called Libyan Coast Guard



forcibly returned a total of 166,393 people to a country described by multiple survivors as ‘hell’.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, the Italian and Maltese Maritime Coordination Centres and Frontex continue to work with Libyan authorities by directly referring cases of distress at sea to them instead of informing nearby (rescue) vessels like Humanity 1 that comply with international law.

The same pattern of cooperation to enhance illegal pull-backs can be observed in Tunisia. The EU and member states such as Italy and Germany support the Tunisian Coast Guard, which also carries out illegal pull-backs. According to Alarm Phone<sup>40</sup>, these operations involve the use of violence against people in distress at sea, the removal of engines and dangerous manoeuvres that provoke shipwrecks. Furthermore, researchers recently reported<sup>41</sup> that these pull-back operations are linked to the organised and regular expulsion of Black migrants to the desert border region between Tunisia and Libya or Algeria, as well as their exploitation through human trafficking by Tunisian and Libyan actors.

**A high price in euros and lives:  
The cost of externalisation policies**

Through externalisation agreements, the EU and its member states are not only paying the price of credibility and integrity.

It also costs enormous sums of money to keep refugees and migrants at arm’s length. Between 2015 and 2027, the EU will have invested at least €290.5 million<sup>42</sup> in the border regimes of Libya and Tunisia alone (including funding for Libyan and Tunisian RCCs and Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards), funded by EU taxpayers. Averaged out over a ten-year period, this corresponds to €242,083,333, vastly more than the costs of operating a rescue ship like Humanity 1.

Instead of financing measures that are in line with international refugee law – for example, a search and rescue programme in the Mediterranean<sup>43</sup> – millions of euros are perversely used to capture people in the Mediterranean and force them back to countries of departure in violation of international law.<sup>44</sup>

The money spent on externalisation policies by the EU also leads to even more deaths at sea through the violent and negligent behaviour of the Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards, described below by survivors. In 2024, 1,719 protection seekers lost their lives crossing the Central Mediterranean alone.<sup>45</sup>

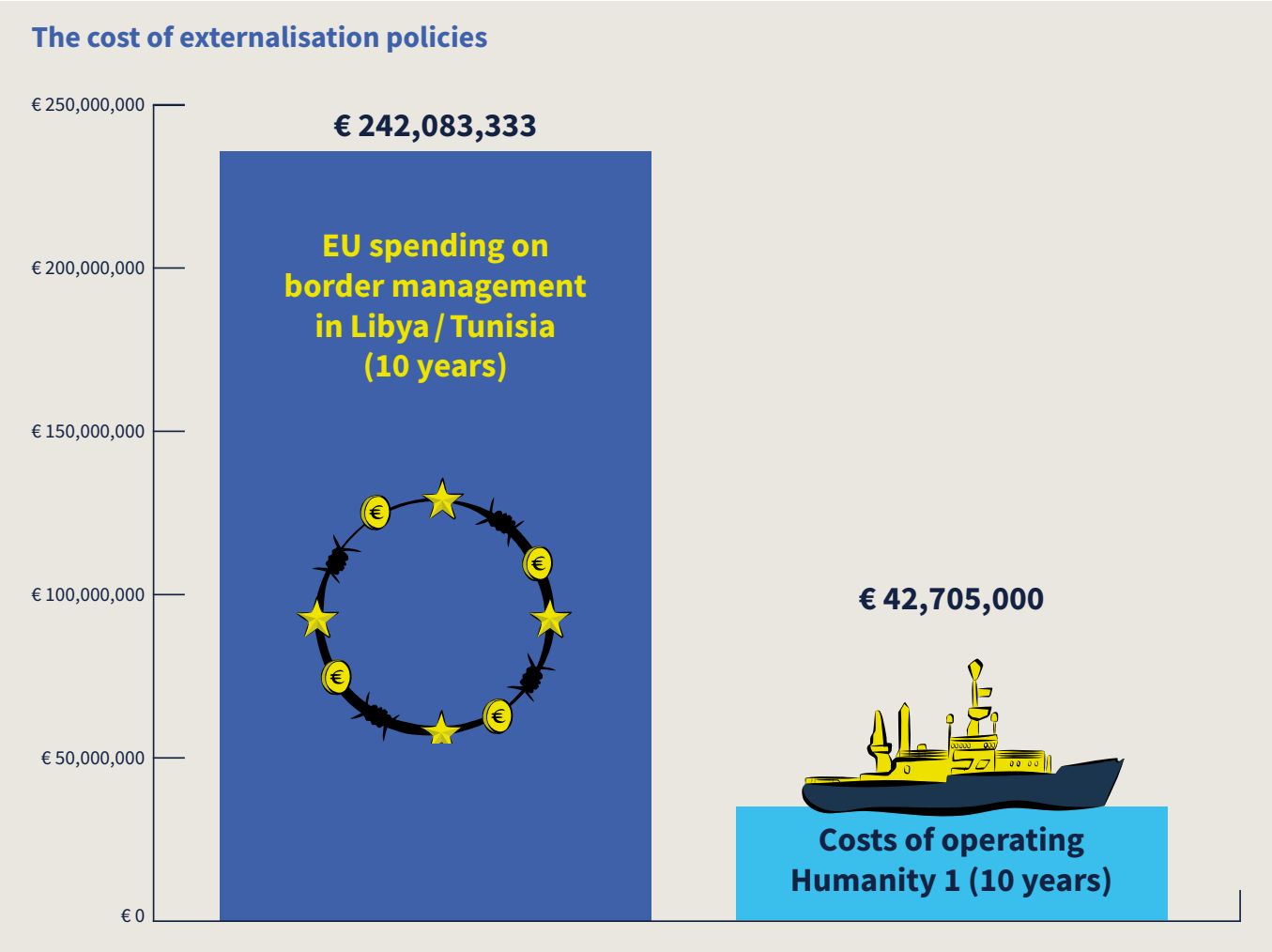




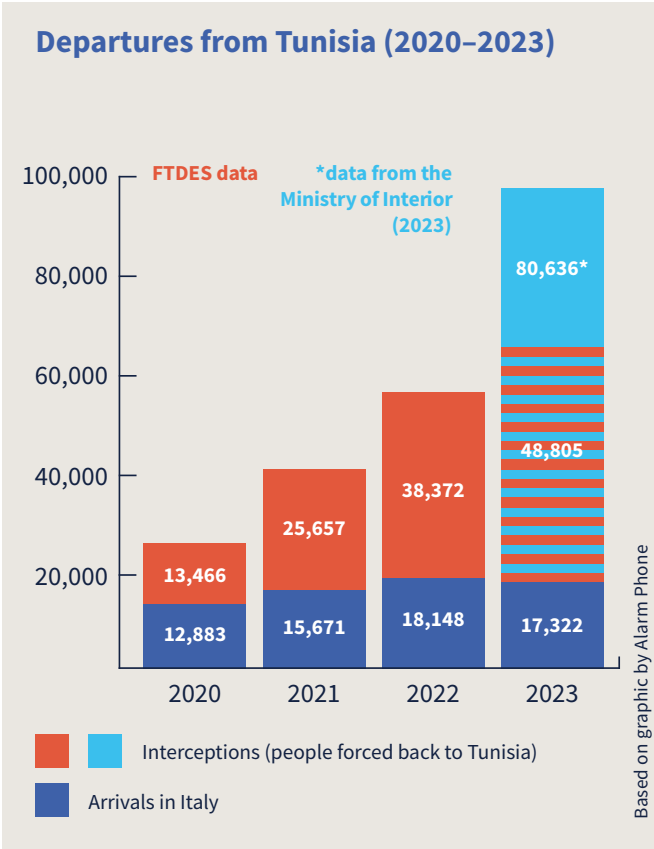
Photo: Rapael Schumacher/SOS Humanity

## 4.1 Countries of Departure: Tunisia

*“ I wasn’t allowed to go out.  
They didn’t pay me.  
I was like his slave.”* Romeo\* (R06)

The human rights situation in Tunisia, once regarded as the ‘success story’ of the Arab Spring, has deteriorated dramatically in recent years. Under the rule of President Kais Saied, re-elected in 2024 in an election condemned by Human Rights Watch<sup>46</sup> for the exclusion of most opposition candidates, Tunisia has become increasingly autocratic. At the same time, Saied’s speeches attacking sub-Saharan African migrants have legitimised and intensified existing anti-Black racism in the country, resulting in widespread and often horrific violence described in *The Guardian* as “a pogrom on a tiny migrant population”.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, civil society organisations and political opponents have experienced crackdowns and minorities, such as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, have faced rising state-sponsored persecution.<sup>48</sup>

Although Tunisia has signed the Geneva Refugee Convention, it does not grant people on the move the right to asylum nor does it have a working national asylum system. Consequently, people





on the move are discriminated against in the country, and their right to international protection is violated.<sup>49</sup>

As a result, Tunisia cannot be considered a place of safety.<sup>50</sup> This applies particularly to refugees and migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, but also to many with Tunisian citizenship – including women, non-Muslims, political opponents, civil society (including journalists, lawyers and human rights defenders) and the LGBT-QIA+ community.<sup>51</sup> This was reaffirmed in a statement signed by dozens of organisations, including SOS Humanity, in October 2024, on the occasion of the establishment of a Tunisian SAR zone.<sup>52</sup>

As the situation within the country worsens, the number of people crossing the Central Mediterranean from Tunisia has risen in recent years: in 2023, more people fled from Tunisia than from Libya;<sup>53</sup> last year, according to the UNHCR, around 29% of those who arrived in Italy had set off from Tunisia.<sup>54</sup> These survivors are represented here in eight of our 51 testimonies, all recorded during our sixth rescue mission in 2023.

These testimonies reinforce the brutal treatment of sub-Saharan Africans in particular (the testimonies below were given by survivors from Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Guinea) in Tunisia. All of those interviewed experienced systematic discrimination, which comprised day-to-day discrimination, **denial of rights including the right to medical treatment**, financial exploitation and modern-day slavery, as well as the **persecution of minorities**. Many suffered from violence, including **physical violence, torture, and sexualised violence**. Lastly, survivors were threatened with or experienced so-called ‘**desert dumping**’ or **human trafficking** across the border to Libya.

## Discrimination & persecution

Black survivors universally report being treated as second-class citizens in Tunisia. This has extremely serious consequences, including the denial of basic medical care and the lack of protection from state institutions. It leads to financial exploitation, with many subjected to modern-day slavery. Men, women, and children testify about working in slave-like conditions in Tunisia, with no basic rights or ability to move freely and little or no remuneration, even when promised. Other forms of persecution in Tunisia, which often intersect with but also extend beyond racist discrimination, include the persecution of political opponents, persecution based on sexuality, and religious persecution.

*“Even when you go to the shop the Tunisians will pretend to chat with their brothers or sisters, they don’t look at you, another Tunisian comes and is served, and you’re ignored. They don’t even pay you. They haven’t paid me my salary. I finished work at ten in the evening. I started the next day at six in the morning. You’re kept on your feet until the time they want.”*

Ange\* (R06)

*“I work, I get robbed, my money gets stolen, I go to the police. But the police never do anything. On the contrary, the police encourage the perpetrators to continue.”*

Demsey\* (R06)

*“You go to hospital, even if you’re pregnant, they don’t give you any consideration.”*

Anna\* (R06)

*“One day, I was very ill, I said: ‘I can’t go to work’. They took an iron bar and hit me. Someone hit me and it tore my skin here [indicates scars on his face and body]. He hit me again. I had to protect my face because otherwise it would have destroyed my eyes. And I’m not going to show you everything, either, because I’ve lost a lot of things. One of my testicles is ruptured. You see, that’s what he did. One’s broken, only one’s left. I often feel pain. I prayed before, when I was in Tunisia, but my boss stopped me. Because they’re Muslims, and I’m a Christian.”*

Romeo\* (R06)

## Physical and sexualised violence

Most survivors interviewed on our sixth rescue mission described threats and acts of violence, often causing permanent and visible damage. Many feared that they would not survive if they stayed in the country, a crucial factor in the decision to flee across the Mediterranean. The women interviewed were also subject to sexualised and gender-based violence, such as sexual harassment. This was sometimes targeted at pregnant women.

*“You see my eye, it has a defect. They attacked me, six youths. They threw stones at me. Thank God I wasn’t wearing my glasses. The pieces of glass would have pierced my eyes, and I’d have lost my sight completely. Often, when you’re passing by the youths, they will touch your breasts.”*

Ange\* (R06)

*“One day I went to football training. My wife was pregnant, she was at home. The Tunisians ask her to come out. She says my husband is not there, I can’t go out. When I came back, they had beaten my wife, her abdomen was bleeding, she was vomiting. We went to the hospital. But the doctors told me there was no room for her. I lost my baby.”*

Demsey\* (R06)

*“In Tunisia, people would threaten me with knives, and if I didn’t hand over my phone, they would stab me. If I stayed in Tunisia, they were going to kill me. I didn’t have a choice.”*

Mariam\* (R06)



Photo: Max Cavallari/SOS Humanity

## Trafficking & ‘desert dumping’

Tunisian authorities, including the police, are complicit in the practice of ‘desert dumps’, whereby migrants are forcibly taken into the desert and abandoned, sometimes dying there.<sup>55</sup> Several interviewees referenced this practice. Some of them were threatened with trafficking across the border to Libya, again with the involvement of state authorities. As survivors report, this practise is also combined with (sexualised) violence, including rape.<sup>56</sup>

**“The police threatened to bring me to the desert, at the border with Libya. I didn’t know what I was going to do.”**

Mariam\* (R06)

**“In Sfax authorities and militias took people and deported them to the desert between Tunisia and Libya. A friend of mine told me that he was brought to the desert with a group of other people. He saw 37 women that have been raped there. Women who try to defend themselves get threatened and beaten with weapons. The deported men had to watch it and some of them are family or friends.”**

Refugee from Sudan (R07)

**“We were also hunted by the Tunisian police. If they catch you, they send you to the desert.”**

Demsey\* (R06)

## EU-sponsored human rights abuses

As a result of the EU’s ‘migration control’ externalisation policies, the lives of people on the move who are prevented from leaving Tunisia, or are forced back to Tunisia, are thus knowingly endangered. While Libya is ruled by rival groups competing for power in its vast territory, Tunisia is a functional, albeit authoritarian, state.<sup>57</sup> It is all the more shocking that the EU and its member states cooperate so closely with state authorities which tolerate, enable or even systematically perpetrate human rights abuses.

Chiming with the sexualised violence quoted above, the same Tunisian Garde Nationale which the EU is supporting with a contract of €18 million<sup>58</sup> has been shown to rape refugees and migrants “in large numbers”.<sup>59</sup> The police forces who encouraged violence against survivors such as Demsey\*, or threatened to abandon them in the desert, are part of a Tunisian security apparatus benefitting from planned EU funding of €164.5 million.<sup>60</sup> Money earmarked to combat ‘smugglers’ ends up financing human trafficking, supporting a national guard which forces people to the Libyan border and negotiates their sale.<sup>61</sup> The list goes on.

In January 2025, the EU suggested that it would include more human rights safeguards in funding assigned to Tunisia,<sup>62</sup> due to reports of abuses such as sexualised violence by EU-funded security forces. So far no concrete changes have been made, and no existing funding can be recovered.<sup>63</sup>





Photo: Alessio Cassaro/SOS Humanity

## 4.2 Countries of Departure: Libya

**“In Libya, not even your dead body is safe.”**

Buba\* (R02)

Libya has been in the throes of a destructive civil war since 2014, creating a legal and political vacuum and a deadly black hole for people on the move. In recent years, Libyan detention centres holding refugees and migrants have been labelled “concentration camps” by Pope Francis<sup>64</sup> and even by German diplomats.<sup>65</sup> The last independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, commissioned by the UN Human Rights Council, concluded in 2022 there were “reasonable grounds” to believe crimes against humanity were being committed against migrants in Libya.<sup>66</sup> Most recently, in March 2024<sup>67</sup> and again in February 2025,<sup>68</sup> mass graves were found containing the bodies of people on the move. In the wake of this latest discovery, SOS Humanity joined dozens of non-governmental organisations in calling for an urgent review of EU funding to Libya.<sup>69</sup>

All this is despite the fact that Libya – like Tunisia – has signed the Arab Charter on Human Rights, in which, among others, the prohibition of torture and unlawful detention are enshrined.<sup>70</sup> The situation in the country is critical for many categories of people, including sub-Saharan African refugees and migrants

but also many Libyan nationals such as women and girls, human rights defenders, non-Muslims and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.<sup>71</sup> Civil society organisations like Refugees in Libya document regular, systematic human rights abuses in the country,<sup>72</sup> matching the reports in the testimonies collated by SOS Humanity: further proof Libya cannot be considered a place of safety.<sup>73</sup>

Last year, the majority of refugees and migrants arriving in Italy departed from Libya: around 63 %, according to UNHCR data.<sup>74</sup> These people also make up the overwhelming majority of the testimonies recorded by SOS Humanity: 43 out of 51. Survivors fleeing Libya came from a wide variety of countries – all fifteen of the nationalities recorded amongst testimony givers – spanning West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. This includes people who originally came to Libya as migrants, without the intention of crossing the Mediterranean, but were forced to flee due to the deteriorating human rights situation.

Their stories reflect day-to-day discrimination, the absence of human rights, and persecution of minorities, including religious persecution. An almost universal theme was arbitrary detention, often intertwined with modern-day slavery and/or human trafficking, where dire conditions included the lack of food or medical treatment. Physical violence was widespread, along with



sexualised violence; as in Tunisia, at least one interviewee was threatened with being left to die in the desert.

## Discrimination & persecution

Survivors reported systematic discrimination in all aspects of daily life, both on grounds of race (for example against Black refugees) and nationality (for example against Syrian refugees). Many commented on the absence of any form of human rights in the country, emphasising that even drowning would be preferable to being unable to leave. A few survivors described the religious persecution of non-Muslims in Libya. While it was not mentioned in a testimony that we received, LGBTQIA+ refugees suffer persecution through repressive laws and extrajudicial executions.<sup>75</sup>

**“ Libya wasn’t welcoming to Black people like me; they often mistreated us, pointing guns and forcing us into cramped car boots when we tried to go to work. [They] don’t consider themselves Africans because they have lighter skin, and they are just killing Black people.”**

Obiba\* (R04)

**“ The situation in Libya became crazy. Because there’s a lot of racism towards Syrian people. The biggest issue was: in the school that our eldest son went to, kids were getting kidnapped. So we decided: this is not safe. We are not going to put our children in school here.”**

Bader\* (R10)

**“ Prisoners from Bangladesh and Ethiopia are never given access to phones to contact their families for money. It seems the guards know their families can’t afford to send money, so they leave them in the back of the prison for months, subjecting them to constant violence with no regard for their fate.”**

Nasser\* (R14)

**“ I preferred to kill myself in this water rather than staying in Libya. Because there’s no peace, no respect for human rights, and no freedom of mind. There are no human rights in Libya at all. Libya is just like hell.”**

Sekou\* (R04)

**“ I believe in orthodox Christianity. I had to hide every day. If they saw this cross, they would have killed me.”**

Ashar\* (R13)

## Modern-day slavery, human trafficking & ‘desert dumping’

Key to the treatment of refugees and migrants and Libya is a violent, interconnected cycle of forced labour, trafficking, extortion and detention which deprives them of their liberty whilst sub-

jecting them to brutal conditions at every step. This cycle may begin on or after arrival in Libya,<sup>76</sup> but also occurs when people on the move are captured by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard and handed to militias or (semi-)official authorities associated with one of Libya’s two rival governments. These actors will often openly sell survivors for money and/or detain them.<sup>77</sup> Even those not detained are forced to work without pay in conditions equivalent to slavery. At least one survivor was threatened with abandonment in the Libyan desert.

**“ I started working in Zuwara with another man, who treated me terribly. He was a devil. He would say things like, ‘You’re not even human.’ I just wanted to leave. I was afraid that if I tried to escape, he would find a way to catch me. He had a good relationship with people in the city, the guards, and the police.”**

Victor\* (R04)

**“ There are different militias in Libya. Around five to six that I know about. But there is no such thing as a ‘official military’, they are all militias, because they use all the same methods and the same system: beating, insulting, torture and human trafficking. The refugees are handed and sold from person to person, from officer to officer, and even between different militias.”**

Refugee from Sudan (R07)

**“ Libya is a group of gangs that sell people to each other. Anyone in Libya sees a Syrian guy walking on the street, he is kidnapped and asked for ransom. The minimum ransom was around 1,000 to 5,000 [dinar]. Libya is a place where people are sold, like human trafficking.”**

Jamaal\* (R10)

**“ As soon as we got off the buses and were handed over to the prison authorities, we became mere numbers. They never asked for our names, only our nationalities. That night, in Ghout al-Shaal prison, they demanded \$ 1,500 from each of us, but no one paid. We couldn’t fully understand whether we had been sold or not. The next morning, the guards of Ghout al-Shaal sold us to the militia responsible for Bir al-Ghanam prison. There, the demanded amount increased to \$ 2,500.”**

Ramadan\* (R14)

**“ In order to show us that they were not joking they led us into the desert. And anyone who doesn’t agree to give money must die.”**

Leo\* (R12)

**“ I did three departures from Libya. Each time, the Libyans caught us. Three attempts, three times in prison. They torture you. It’s a business, it’s like theft, if you’re Black, they’ll come and take you at night.”**

Keita\* (R06)

## Arbitrary detention

After being captured and/or sold, survivors are generally detained in facilities often described in testimonies as ‘prisons’; in reality, these are unofficial detention facilities closer to concentration camps, designed to facilitate their torture and extortion. Food, water and medical facilities are minimal or non-existent. Friends and family back home are forced to transfer the little money they have in exchange for a detainee’s release. For those who cannot pay, the cycle may end here in indefinite detention or death.

“After three months, suddenly we found the police surrounding the building we were staying in from all sides. They took us to prison. They took our passports, phones, and everything we had.”

Marwan\* (R13)

“The prison was essentially made of metal sheets embedded in the ground, forming a metal dome above us. From 10 a.m. until 5 p.m., the heat would rise to 60 or 70 degrees Celsius. It was impossible for a human being to survive in such conditions. Diseases were rampant. There was no hygiene, no care, and nothing sanitary. Before mealtimes, people would collapse from the heat and hunger. When someone fainted, no one would come to take them outside. Our bones ached from the heat, and our skin became so fragile that it felt as if it no longer covered our bones.”

Ramadan\* (R14)

“Every day they only brought us four pieces of bread and we were a family of six. We were always hungry. Clean water was almost non-existent. Every two days they would bring us a few bottles of water that we distilled so we wouldn’t die of thirst. The heat was unbearable, and we were forbidden to leave the place, as the outer doors were locked and guarded.”

Fidaa\* (R13)

“We had one plate of pasta for a dozen people. Everyone was hungry, very hungry. We had to eat slowly. We tried to slow down the swallowing, but we couldn’t swallow properly. So, we threw up everything we ate. People got sick too. Some had a fever, an itch or other issues. If anybody asks for medicine, they come with guns and they hit you. There are people dying in the prison. They are dying by hunger, by sickness, they are dying by getting rotten. We had no water to take a shower and no clothes”

Mohamed\*/Abdul\* (R11)

“The prison was not a prison for humans. It was a farm for animals. It was called the sheep farm. One patient came to me and said he needed a drug or something. They took him outside and beat him. They kept beating him until he went unconscious. They opened the jail door and locked him in. We wiped his blood and treated him.”

Jamaal\* (R10)

“There was an Egyptian man who was ill and tried to escape. He was initially seeking to travel to Italy for treatment because he suffered from chronic headaches and was very fearful at night. They mocked him. When he attempted to escape, a guard caught him and struck him on the head with an iron lock. He remained unconscious for three days and was on the brink of death in our hands.”

Nasser\* (R14)

## Violence

Both inside and outside these ‘prisons’, violence in Libya is rampant, with tension still simmering between rival factions in the wake of the Libyan Civil War, police and security forces themselves often perpetrating violence, and widespread gun crime. Inside detention centres, this violence is committed with impunity, often as part of the cycle of torture and extortion, up to and including murder.

“For the men, they beat you every day until you pay to get out – by metal, by sticks, by everything they get their hands on. They call your mother, your family, and scare them: ‘We are going to kill him.’ They record the sound and send it to them, so that they pay.”

Ashar\* (R13)

“They took us to prison, they tormented, they beat us. People even died in the prison. They don’t release you, so if you don’t have an opportunity like a job that you can do, you will die there.”

Gigi\* (R12)

“On a regular basis, men would get beaten with hoses and sticks, even on the ground. I saw a guy that lost his eye due to the beatings. There was blood everywhere and I was trying to help him.”

Jamaal\* (R10)

“A lot of my friends died there in Libya. They shot them, right in front of me. Thank God I finally left Libya after four years. Four years of suffering.”

Refugee from Cameroon (R08)

“There is no security there; all the time we heard gunshots; you can’t go out, even 100 meters away, you have to run for your life.”

Ishar\* (R12)

“The Libyans took my baby and threw him to the floor. I screamed and cried and when I took him back, his face was covered in blood.”

Suzanne\* (R03)



Photo: Max Hirzel/SOS Humanity

## Sexualised violence

As well as physical violence, women and girls are frequently subjected to sexualised violence, sexual slavery and rape, be it in private houses, in smuggler's warehouses en route to Italy, or in detention facilities. This was even reported by pregnant women and women with young babies.

**“One day the kidnapper came and – bang bang bang bang – started shooting everyone around. I was lucky they didn’t kill me. I ran and escaped. The girls that stayed were sold for prostitution.”**

Aisha\* (R03)

**“Many, many women, many girls, they kidnap them, and they do everything they want. By sexual force. They make the girls cook, by force, or clean the house. They sleep with them. Because of that, many girls have unwanted pregnancies and mental problems.”**

Dina\* (R13)

**“The Libyan in charge of the warehouse tried to convince me to go with him to his house. When I refused to go with him, he put me in the dirtiest part of the warehouse to pressure me into agreeing. He asked me if I was afraid that he would rape me. I told him I would kill myself if he tried.”**

Jamila\* (R13)

### [CONTENT WARNING]

**“They took me to Tripoli and put me in prison. There they give you food with drugs, so you sleep all the time. These drugs affect the baby too, and it’s like having an abortion. In this place they don’t have a heart. They baby was born after seven months, too soon, because of the drugs. The second time I was imprisoned, I already had my baby. I asked for water for my baby so many times, but they didn’t give me anything. They just beat me, touched me, and raped me. And then they ejaculated on me while I was holding my baby.”**

Adama\* (R03)

## Fighting the traffickers – or funding them?

Those fleeing from Libya are forcibly returned to the conditions described above on a systematic basis by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. This alone would constitute grounds to end its funding and training by the European Union. Yet the report of the 2020–23 UN Fact-Finding Mission also provides evidence that the so-called Libyan Coast Guard’s personnel is rife with militias and smugglers and, thus, part of the “business” of systematic human rights violations in Libya.<sup>78</sup> Legal experts such as the ECCHR (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights) have called on the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate the EU’s extensive support of this so-called Coast Guard.<sup>79</sup>





Photo: Nicole Thyssen/SOS Humanity

Between 2017–27, the EU will have spent at least €84 million in Libya on ‘border management’ alone.<sup>80</sup> The total amount spent there in the area of migration is far higher: €465 million between 2015–21.<sup>81</sup> This funding has come under repeated scrutiny – even from within the EU itself. The European Court of Auditors stated in 2024 that “human rights risks are not properly addressed” in the disbursement of these funds – and their investigation team were unable to visit the detention centres where the abuses described above took place.<sup>82</sup> The NGO Statewatch notes that neither transparency nor democratic scrutiny are listed as criteria in the decision-making process for the EU’s ‘migration control’ spending.<sup>83</sup>

The usual justification given by the EU and its member states – notably Italy – for the financial support of Libyan ‘migration control’ is the need to combat people smuggling and trafficking.<sup>84</sup> However, the plausibility of even this motivation is further called into doubt by cases such as that of Osama Elmasry Njeem, a Libyan general, police chief, and commander of the Mitiga detention centres.<sup>85</sup> Njeem is currently wanted by the ICC, to which Italy is a state party, for murder, torture, rape and other crimes against humanity – as well as for human trafficking.<sup>86</sup> Yet, on 18th January 2025 he was able to visit Turin, Italy, to watch a football match. After being briefly held by Italian authorities, he was released on 21st January and flown back to Libya by Italy’s supposedly ‘anti-smuggler’ government. Meanwhile, Libyan militia leader Ahmad ‘al-Ammu’ al-Dabbashi, blacklisted in 2018 by the UN as a “significant leader in illicit activities related to the trafficking of migrants”,<sup>87</sup> has organised numerous highly unsafe Mediterranean crossings, including that of one survivor who gave

a testimony on board Humanity 1 in 2024.<sup>88</sup> According to media reports, the Italian government struck a deal with al-Ammu the year before his blacklisting, resulting in him being paid to guard a valuable oil complex partly run by an Italian company.<sup>89</sup>

When Libyan traffickers can holiday in Europe with impunity despite ICC warrants or profit financially from the Italian government, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the EU’s primary focus has never been preventing human trafficking or people smuggling, still less saving lives. The EU’s externalisation policies have one aim only: preventing people reaching Europe and, with it, safety.



## 5. The Central Mediterranean

**“The first time we tried to escape, the Libyans came. They took our money and shot at the boat, so we started to capsize. I lost my two brothers in the sea, they both drowned.”**

Fatime\* (R03)

Every year, thousands of refugees and migrants flee violence and persecution in Libya and Tunisia by boarding small boats across the Central Mediterranean. Many pay smugglers for a place on board, although the condition of these boats is generally nothing like those advertised. Some are abused by these smugglers during their journey. Others are forced into boats at gunpoint and told they will be shot if they change their mind, or made to sail the boat and take responsibility for dozens of lives with no seafaring experience. The Central Mediterranean is a chaotic and often lawless zone where numerous vessels with competing interests operate, including smugglers and militias, the Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards, European Coast Guard or military ships, and non-governmental rescue ships like Humanity 1.

### People smugglers and militias

#### Unseaworthy boats

The small boats provided by people smugglers are overcrowded and unseaworthy, without sufficient food, water, life-saving or navigational equipment. A single wave can capsize them or throw people overboard; several survivors witnessed fellow passengers drown. Their engines often leak fuel which, mixed with sea water, causes second degree burns, while fumes can lead to serious intoxication and unconsciousness. The condition of these boats means that, under international maritime law, they are by definition distress cases which should automatically trigger a rescue operation when spotted.<sup>90</sup> Yet the outsourcing of protection by the EU means that, instead of creating safe refugee routes, distress calls are often ignored and responsibility passed on until it is too late.

**“They told us that it’s fibreglass, but they sent us by plastic boat. When we saw the plastic boat we lost our hope, but you cannot back out or they shoot you. We started at 3 a.m. in the night. In the boat, because of the smell of the fuel, [my wife] Dina was vomiting from the start till the end.”**

Ashar\* (R13)





Photo: Max Cavallari/SOS Humanity

“There were 275 people on the boat, not counting the children. People were packed tightly, sitting on top of one another and along the edges of the boat. We were genuinely in danger and at risk of drowning at any moment.”

Ramadan\* (R14)

“There was no hope left. We didn’t even know where we were. It was over. Honestly, it was over. Water was coming into the boat.”

Ange\* (R06)

“The sea was rough at night and our boat wasn’t a proper one. You’ve seen it. We tried to control the situation, but before we could, some of our friends fell into the water. Some of those who could swim could come back up on the boat. But those who couldn’t, disappeared. We don’t know how many. Some say five, some say six, others say nine people. Some of us still think about them. It’s a horrible thing that has happened.”

Bakary\* (R02)

“The smugglers placed a sheep on the boat, which we later found out was a gift for the Libyan Coast Guard for the holiday, to bribe them to let us continue the journey if they intercepted us.”

Jamila\* (R13)

“We pay the militias so they allow us to travel on the boat, and then another militia comes and forces us back to shore.”

Yousif\* (R07)

“The men working with the smugglers were waiting for the arrivals [after the boat was forced to return to Libya], beating people with sticks and making them sit in one place. After the boat was emptied and no one was left on it, they went to the boat in a speed-boat, boarded it, and stole all the belongings left by the people, such as mobile phones, money, bags, and other items.”

Fidaa\* (R13)

### Bribery & collusion

The close ties between smugglers, traffickers, militias and the so-called Libyan Coast Guard were noted by survivors. These include sharing of information, overlap of personnel and bribery or collusion.

## Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards

### Pull-backs

Under the non-refoulement principle in customary international law, the return of people to a country where they are at risk of torture or other serious human rights violations (a ‘pull-



back' or 'push-back') is prohibited. Moreover, a rescue is only complete when survivors are disembarked in a place of safety with food, shelter and medical care and no danger of further persecution.<sup>91</sup> This means that forcing people on the move back to Libya and Tunisia violates international law and cannot be understood as a 'rescue'. Nevertheless, European authorities and agencies like Frontex facilitate these pull-backs by providing information and resources to the Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards.

**“ We said we were in an international zone. The Libyans can't come here. There were more than twenty-five women, but no boat came. We waited all night, until twelve o'clock. We even reported distress. We publicised the fact there was a boat in distress with 125 people. But no boat came. Finally, we saw [the so-called Libyan Coast Guard] come to take us. It's a boat that the Italians are paying for. We were angry. They made us get in. We were hungry, we were so hungry.”**

Keita\* (R06)

**“ [The so-called Libyan Coast Guard] approached the other boat. They told the people to come on their boat, but they refused. They launched lines into the boat, but the people sent it back. They didn't want to come on board. A first man jumped in the water, he knew he will end up in prison and that it could lead to his death. It is better to die in the sea than in Libyan prisons. A second man jumped, and a third. Finally, they ended up being six in the water. The [so-called Libyan Coast Guard] speedboat followed them, but they refused to come on board. They came close to our boat and fired shots in the sky and in the sea. They forced us to get off the boat and took the whole boat with them. There were old men, some little children and a pregnant woman.”**

Mohamed\* (R11)

**“ The Tunisian National Guard captured us on the water. We were caught, we spent two days in prison in Tunisia before being brought to Libya, to a prison there.”**

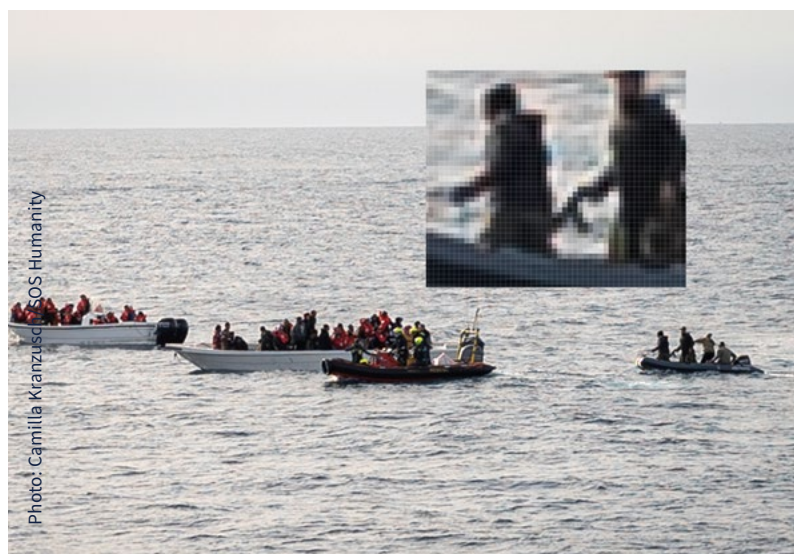
Ishar/Amir\* (R12)

**“ A Tunisian fishing boat took us all on board. I asked the captain if he could take us to Italy. He said, we can't, I already talked to the Tunisian Coast Guard and they told me to bring you back to Tunisia.”**

Abu Muhammad al Suri (R14)

### Physical and sexualised violence

Both the Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards are highly armed, often toting AK-47s. As well as carrying out dangerous manoeuvres at sea<sup>92</sup> they employ violence against people on the move, beating men, women and children, threatening to kill them, firing live ammunition and capsizing boats.<sup>93</sup> sexualised violence has also been reported on land and at sea.<sup>94</sup>



**“ They're bandits, the people who caught us on the water [the so-called Libyan Coast Guard]. They shot at the Ocean Viking, a rescue ship, they shot in the air.”<sup>95</sup> We were beaten up and tied up.”**

Keita\* (R06)

**“ When we boarded the [so-called Libyan] Coast Guard ship, my son Adil, who has autism, was looking at the armed men beating the young men with rifle butts and he was laughing at them. He didn't understand what was happening, but the soldiers thought Adil was mocking them, so they started hitting him with the rifles, and he fainted.”**

Fidaa\* (R13)

**“ Ten guys on board decided to jump from the Libyan Coast Guard ship into the water. The Libyans, to keep control, they started beating and using electro shocks. And then they started shooting to [scare off] the [NGO] ship and they started boarding the rest of the survivors. They took the engine from the boat and set fire to the boat.”**

Abu Muhammad al Suri\* (R14)



**“** *[After a violent confrontation between two rival Libyan Coast Guards] The Sabratha Coast Guard turned on the engine, and rammed our boat, they made a hole in it. Water came in and the boat sank. Then they left. At some point, another official [so-called Libyan Coast Guard] boat arrived, and decided to help. They were embarking the women first, and one soldier on that boat started touching one woman. Her husband was on board. So the woman started screaming, ‘Get away!’ and her husband was shouting, ‘Please don’t touch her!’ The soldier went to the husband, and caught him, and wanted to throw him overboard.”*

Abu Muhammad al Suri\* (R14)

**“** *The Tunisian national guard caught us. There were forty-seven of us. The national guard hit one of the women. We called them and asked them to please let us go. We asked them: How can an African stop another African from going off to find the life he’s looking for?” [referring to another attempted crossing]*

Keita\* (R06)

**“** *We encountered the Tunisian National Guard who told us to turn around. We had no choice. They told us that if we refused to turn around, they would overturn our boat, our little boat, and make us fall into the water.”*

Michael\* (R06)

### Leaving people to drown

The callous disregard for human life shown by both actors extends to threatening refugees and migrants with drowning – in some instances, making good on these threats. While they may profit from bringing groups of survivors to shore and selling them back into the cycle of trafficking and violence, both the Tunisian<sup>96</sup> and so-called Libyan Coast Guards have shown indifference as to whether individual refugees and survivors live or die.

**“** *When the Libyan Coast Guard arrived, they started beating all the young men. Three young men jumped back into the sea due to the severe beating they endured. The Libyan Coast Guard left them to die before our eyes, even cursing them as they drowned, saying to each other, ‘Let them die; it’s easier for us and for them.”*

Fidaa\* (R13)

**“** *The second time I tried to escape, the man in charge came to us, took a gun out and started shooting people who were in the boat. Fourteen people died. They just watched people die, they all drowned, and they only watched.”*

Mari Therese\* (R03)



**“ Although the area was full of patrols, coast guards, and militias, no one came to help us [after their boat was forced to turn back]. The young men on the boat began helping all the families and children reach the shore by swimming. Several people drowned on their way to the shore. After all that, the Libyan official TV station and other channels like Al Jazeera and Orient came and interviewed the smugglers who had just been beating people. They started talking in front of the camera about their heroism and how they saved the boat and the migrants on it, claiming they rescued everyone and didn’t let anyone drown, even though they did not contribute to saving a single person from the boat or from drowning while swimming to the shore.” [referring to another attempted crossing]**

Fidaa\* (R13)

**“ After two and a half days at sea, we were intercepted the Libyan Coast Guard. And we asked them, how did you find us? And we were told that Malta had [informed them].”**

Malik\* (R10)

**“ [When] we reached Maltese territorial waters, a small reconnaissance plane came around and took pictures of our boat. About four hours later, a Maltese plane arrived and dropped a smoke bomb near us, it seemed to be a signal for the Coast Guard. About half an hour later, the Libyan Coast Guard came from behind our boat and took us back. In fact, the Coast Guard is not directly connected to the prison, but they sell us to them for money, as a way to make a profit.” [referring to another attempted crossing]**

Ramadan\* (R14)

## European actors

### Collusion in illegal pull-backs and failure to rescue

European involvement in pull-backs at the EU’s external border goes beyond financial and material support for the Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards. Regular failures to initiate search and rescue operations for boats in distress contributed to major shipwrecks such as at Cutro<sup>97</sup> and Pylos<sup>98</sup>; this same apathy was reported in survivor testimonies. Coastal states like Italy and Malta not only allow these ‘Coast Guards’ to capture protection seekers who could and should be brought safely to Europe;<sup>99</sup> they provide information which facilitates illegal push- and pull-backs and thus the subsequent cycle of abuse.

**“ We travelled about 135 miles until we reached Italian waters. There was an Italian rescue ship about six miles away from us, and there was another ship, but I don’t know what it was. We could see the Italian rescue ship with the naked eye. When we contacted them, they apologised, claiming it was dangerous for them. After that, the Libyan Coast Guard came and took us back to Libya.”**

Ramadan\* (R14)

**“ We called once, twice, and three times but there was no response. The Italian Coast Guard answered in the end, but when we explained that we were almost drowning and dying, they responded that it was normal and that they can’t do anything for us at the moment.”**

Rami\* (R02)

**“ The Maltese stopped us on the water. At first I thought it was a rescue. They told us they were going to send us to Italy. To my great surprise, we saw the Libyan Coast Guard arrive and they took us to Libya. That day was not easy. We thought we were arriving in Italy, but in the end, without saying a word, we were back in Libya.”**

Refugee from Cameroon (R08)

### Externalisation policies kill

If the purpose of the EU’s externalisation policies over the last decade was to stop people taking to the water, they have failed. In 2024, 188,913 refugees and migrants fled across the Mediterranean, while the previous year saw more crossings than any year since 2016.<sup>100</sup> The reasons for the desperation of those risking their lives at sea to flee Tunisia and Libya can be seen from previous chapters, as well as from the absence of any safe refugee routes.

However, the testimonies in this chapter demonstrate that human rights abuses are also rampant on the Mediterranean itself – and European authorities bear responsibility. By providing information and distress case coordinates to the Tunisian and so-called Libyan Coast Guards, but often not to non-governmental rescue ships like Humanity 1,<sup>101</sup> institutions like Frontex become complicit in violent and illegal pull-backs. It is a cruel irony that the word ‘illegal’ has become normalised in discourse around (legal but irregular) arrivals to Europe, while blatant violations of the non-refoulement principle on the Mediterranean are framed as ‘border control’. In many cases, the perpetrators of this violence are using vessels paid for by Europe: since 2022, Italy has donated twelve vessels to the so-called Libyan Coast Guard alone.<sup>102</sup> Other states, such as Malta, shirk their legal responsibilities by failing to carry out search and rescue at all whilst enabling pull-backs.<sup>103</sup> The implementation of Tunisian and Libyan Search and Rescue (SAR) zones and dysfunctional Rescue Coordination Centres<sup>104</sup> lends a veneer of respectability and authority to actions which are the diametric opposite of search and rescue.

What kind of ‘Coast Guard’ watches people drown, disrupts rescue operations or shoots those in distress at sea? This question was posed by a court in Crotona, Italy, overturning the illegitimate detention of Humanity 1 in 2024, which ruled: “It cannot be maintained that the activity carried out by the Libyan Coast Guard can be qualified as a rescue operation.”<sup>105</sup> Yet year on year, taxpayer euros fund the activities of violent actors whose behaviour only adds to the almost 25,000 deaths of people on the move recorded in the Central Mediterranean since 2014. **Knowing the deadly cost of externalisation policies, the European Union and its member states must decide how many more deaths it will take to acknowledge that the border of inhumanity has been crossed.**





Photo: Judith Bütke/SOS Humanity

## 6.1 Europe: Hopes and Dreams

**“If Europe could make us happy again, just take us as human beings, that would be fine, we are human beings. If they cut me, it is blood which flows; if they cut you, it is blood. It’s the same blood, yes or no?”**

Ange\* (R06)

Each of the 64 people whose testimonies were reviewed for this report underwent a complicated, perilous journey before their attempted crossing(s) of the Mediterranean and rescue by the crew of Humanity 1.<sup>106</sup> However, the journey that follows after reaching European soil is often equally rife with uncertainty. Although these testimonies cannot attest first-hand to survivors’ experiences after disembarking from Humanity 1, they offer insights on their hopes, wishes and demands for the future.

### Safety & protection

A primary wish of many survivors was for themselves and their family to live in safety and stability, reflecting the violence, conflict and persecution to which they have often been subjected before being rescued.

**“If I arrive in Italy, the first thing I will ask for is protection.”**

Leon\* (R12)

**“For the first time [on board Humanity 1] our little girl runs to us every morning to hug us, and this never happened in recent times. And the kids are saying, we don’t want to go back to the warehouse, we want to stay here on the ship. For the future, we wish for stability, security, and for the kids to get an education. We want them to eat proper food and to sleep at regular times, to have toys – to have a normal life.”**

Jasina\* (R10)

**“When you told us ‘Welcome to Europe’, we were all happy. We had suffered so much. It’s been three years of troubles to get to Europe.”**

Celine\* (R06)

## Acceptance

Another frequently expressed hope was that of acceptance by European countries, on a personal, cultural or societal level.

**“My dream is simply to reach Europe. If Europe accepts me, I will be a European citizen. I am a hard worker, and I’m already involved in catfish farming. If Europe gives me the chance to continue this business or any other way I can contribute and help Europeans, I would be more than willing to do so.”**

Obiba\* (R04)

**“I hope to find a better life, and I hope that my brothers’ children can integrate into Western life, which is culturally different from our life, and that they will find opportunities for learning, work, and have a better life without fear.”**

Rami\* (R02)

## Education & employment

Related to the desire for stability was the wish for education and employment for survivors themselves or their family. These goals correspond to the analysis in previous reports by SOS Humanity, identifying the search for education and work opportunities as important reasons for leaving countries of origin before reaching Tunisia or Libya.<sup>107</sup>

**“My goal is to go to Europe and study. Ever since I was a child, I’ve always wanted to be a translator. That is my dream. I want to continue my studies and be a translator, and then take care of my family, because my family’s only hope right now is me.”**

Keita\* (R06)

**“When I go to Europe, I would like to get more education about photography, about computers. My dream is to be a photographer.”**

Dina\* (R13)

**“In Italy, I would like to go back to school. Building and construction is my dream, so I want my [injured] hand to be fine again. And then I know that my family can have something to eat.”**

Gigi\* (R12)

**“I have only one plan. I will try to go to school because I love to learn new things. I want to be more educated, and I want to attend school. Maybe I will be able to try many different things afterwards. But for me, my ambition is to become a journalist. I love the idea of being a journalist.”**

Sekou\* (R04)

**“I want my daughter to go to school. I want her to do well in her studies and to become a lawyer.”**

Celine\* (R06)

## Human rights & freedom

Many of the hopes and dreams expressed revolve around the desire to access basic human rights on arrival in Europe, be it safety, protection from torture and violence, shelter, medical care, or freedom of movement and expression. This is particularly true for the rights of more vulnerable groups including women, Black people and LGBTQIA\* survivors.

**“The ones who migrate to Libya in order to reach Italy do so because they have no rights at home. There are people who come to Libya knowing that Libya is full of death, but they still risk their lives to secure a future.”**

Yousif\* (R07)

**“I heard there are human rights in Europe and said to myself: I have to go there!”**

Refugee from Sudan (R07)

**“I don’t know what life in Europe is going to give me. But they know about human rights. What I experienced in Tunisia, I know that I won’t have that in Europe and I can have a better life.”**

Ange\* (R06)

**“I will always urge the U.N. to pay attention to the plight of Black people because we suffer too much. Black people are suffering. And our women, our women have no future. They tell them to go to school, but still, they end up carrying water on the streets, with nowhere to rest their head. It’s not good. Africans are suffering.”**

Obiba\* (R04)

**“[During the crossing,] we always saw birds flying past us. We wondered which side they came from, we didn’t recognise them, we couldn’t see any island, but we could see that there were two of them following us, then when we stopped moving, they left. I thought they were going to show us the route: ‘you have to go this way, you have to go that way.’”**

Refugee from Cameroon (R08)





## 6.2 Europe: SOS Humanity's Demands to the EU and Germany

The EU and its member states must adhere to their obligations to save lives at sea and protect refugees as set out in international and EU law – and in line with the demands of many survivors

in their testimonies. They must not circumvent and dilute their responsibilities to uphold human rights by outsourcing these to third countries.

### We call on the EU and its member states:

1. **to fulfil their duty to save lives at sea by complying with the international law of the sea.**

→ **to implement international law at the EU's external borders.**

This includes the duty of states to coordinate maritime emergencies, the duty to rescue at sea, and the disembarkation of rescued persons to a place of safety as soon as possible.

→ **not to force people rescued from distress at sea back to Tunisia and Libya or participate in illegal returns**

Returns to Libya or Tunisia are illegal. The responsible European coastal states, Malta and Italy, and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex must ensure that people rescued from distress at sea are not brought ashore in Libya or Tunisia.

→ **to assign nearby places of safety to NGO rescue vessels**

The systematic practice of assigning distant ports to non-governmental search and rescue organisations contradicts international maritime law.<sup>108</sup> As competent EU coastal states, Italy and Malta must immediately coordinate rescues and assign a safe port in the immediate vicinity of a rescue ship.

“We are following the law of the European nations. There is nothing we can do other than tell them that the situation right now isn't good for us. We need their help.”

Michael\* (R02)

“[On Italy's distant port policy] That's not a good solution. The port has to be close, you have to leave the port and come back to the Mediterranean.”

Keita\* (R06)

2. **to end any cooperation with Tunisia and Libya in the field of migration or maritime search and rescue that leads to the violation and restriction of refugee rights, namely:**

→ **to end support for the so-called Libyan and Tunisian Coast Guards**

The EU and its member states must immediately stop training, equipping and funding the so-called Libyan and the Tunisian Coast Guards. Supporting actors who commit human rights violations and are associated with human trafficking means sharing responsibility for these violations.

→ **to revoke official recognition of the Libyan and Tunisian Search and Rescue (SAR) Zones**

The Libyan and Tunisian Search and Rescue Zones fulfil neither the technical nor the humanitarian requirements necessary to coordinate search and rescue operations properly.<sup>109</sup> The EU and its member states must work within the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to ensure that the recognition of the Libyan and Tunisian Search and Rescue Zones is revoked.

“The payment to Libya and Tunisia is used in a bad way. Europe should stop the support of militias. I ask the European Union to stop the support for Libya and use the money for poor countries instead.”

Refugee from Sudan (R07)

3. **to establish an EU search and rescue programme.**

→ **The search and rescue programme shall be established, financed and coordinated by the EU.**

It should have a humanitarian mandate and focus solely on ensuring safety at sea and protecting human lives. The programme's resources and funding must be managed in a transparent and publicly visible way to fulfil responsibility and accountability requirements.

“We're in an international search area. Normally, if immigrants arrive in the search zone, there should be a rescue boat to save them, but there were no boats on the water.”

Keita\* (R06)





## Our demands to the German government

As an influential EU member state, Germany must work towards ending any cooperation with Tunisia or Libya that

leads to restrictions on refugee protection. Germany must not be complicit in human rights violations.

### We call on the German Federal Government to:

1. **oppose the outsourcing of EU migration control to Tunisia and Libya and urge an end to existing cooperation agreements.**
2. **end personnel and financial support for the Tunisian Coast Guard and Rescue Coordination Centre** through actors such as the German Federal Police and Germany's international development agency (GIZ).

The testimonies analysed and cited in this report, as well as the human rights violations documented amongst others by the crews of Humanity 1, demonstrate the urgent need for a change of course in the migration policies of the EU and its member states. Through our work at sea and on land, SOS Humanity aims to bring more humanity to the EU's external borders, where inhumanity is currently the norm.

So far, Europe has not deemed the sheer number of deaths of people on the move in the Central Mediterranean sufficient to trigger the policy changes outlined above. **It is our sincere hope that, now or in the future, the individual voices of those who lived to tell of their experiences in Libya, Tunisia and the Central Mediterranean will be listened to, and that meaningful change, in line with international law and European moral responsibility, will follow.**

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## Imprint

### Published by:

**SOS Humanity e. V.**

P.O. Box 44 03 52

**Telephone:** +49 (0)30 / 23 52 56 82

**Homepage:** [www.sos-humanity.org/en](http://www.sos-humanity.org/en)

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**Editorial deadline:** 18.04.2025

**\* Note:** The rescued persons depicted do not correspond to the persons quoted, among other things to preserve the anonymity of the rescued persons.

**Cover photo:** Protection seekers jump into the sea during a rescue to avoid capture by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard (SOS Humanity/Max Cavallari)





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