



# **DEADLY MANOEUVRES: OBSTRUCTION AND VIOLENCE IN THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN**



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March 2025

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The data presented in this report reflects the situation as of 1 March 2025. Any conclusions drawn from this information are based on data available up to that date.

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## INTRODUCTION

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been actively engaged in search and rescue (SAR) activities assisting migrants and refugees in the Central Mediterranean since 2015, working on eight different SAR vessels, alone or in partnership with other organisations, and rescuing more than 94,000 people. Throughout these operations, MSF has aimed not only to save lives and provide emergency medical care to people rescued, but also to bear witness to the consequences of European migration management policies and make survivors' voices from one of the world's deadliest maritime borders heard.

MSF chartered its latest rescue vessel, the *Geo Barents*, in March 2021. Between June 2021 and December 2024, the *Geo Barents* rescued and disembarked in a place of safety 12,675 survivors at risk of drowning in the Central Mediterranean. Of these, 3,479 were children, 2,831 of them travelling alone. Fourteen survivors were evacuated from the *Geo Barents* due to urgent medical conditions and one baby was born on board while the vessel was still out at sea.

During this period the MSF team also recovered the bodies of 24 people, including people who died on board following rescue. Beyond the life-saving activities of the *Geo Barents*, the ship has enabled us to be present and denounce the violence that European governments want to keep out of sight.

As of today, we have had to bid farewell to the *Geo Barents*, because our current mode of operations has become untenable in the face of ever more restrictive Italian laws and policies on search and rescue. While we are challenging these restrictions through all available channels, people continue to perish daily at sea.

Survivors tell us that despite the terrifying experience of being pulled from the water, they found a safe haven and a few days of respite on board. This sense of dignity and humanity is what the *Geo Barents* represents and what fuels our commitment to return to the Central Mediterranean as soon as possible.

## METHODOLOGY

This report draws on medical and operational data as well as testimonies of rescued people collected on board the MSF rescue ship *Geo Barents* between January 2023 and December 2024. All data in this report, and the processes used to collect it, comply with MSF's data collection policy and respect medical confidentiality. All survivors quoted in this report chose freely to share their stories and gave consent for them to be shared publicly. The report also draws on direct observations from MSF teams involved in SAR operations, MSF's official communications with national maritime authorities, as well as exchanges with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private vessels operating in the Central Mediterranean.

**BETWEEN JUNE 2021 AND DECEMBER 2024,  
THE *Geo Barents* RESCUED AND  
DISEMBARKED IN A PLACE OF SAFETY:**



**12,675**  
PEOPLE IN DISTRESS



**3,479**  
WERE CHILDREN

**81%**  
WERE TRAVELING ALONE



**14**  
SURVIVORS EVACUATED  
DUE TO URGENT MEDICAL  
CONDITIONS



**1**  
BABY BORN WHILE  
AT SEA



## CONTEXT

Over the last 10 years the EU and its Member States have gradually disengaged from their SAR obligations towards migrants and refugees in the Central Mediterranean. After the ending in 2014 of the Italian maritime operation *Mare Nostrum*, which had the explicit mandate to safeguard human life at sea, all subsequent EU or state-led operations have focused on border control and migration management. In the absence of any dedicated SAR action, NGOs remain the only reliable source of assistance for, and witness to the experience of people who cross the sea to seek safety and protection in Europe. However, as humanitarian actors stepped up efforts to fill the gap, EU Member States responded with a systematic crackdown on civil search and rescue activities at sea.

Since 2017, MSF and other NGOs active in the Central Mediterranean have faced increasing criminalisation and a proliferation of restrictive laws and policies. Active collaboration with the responsible maritime authorities has given way to public defamation campaigns against NGOs, ship seizures and criminal charges, prolonged inspections and long stand-offs due to denial of access to ports.<sup>1</sup> Against the backdrop of a polarised public debate around migration in Europe, the change in government in Italy in 2022 brought about further radicalisation of policies and practices aimed at obstructing civil SAR operations. In November 2022 the Italian authorities prohibited SAR ships from stopping in their territorial waters and eventually opted for selective disembarkation of survivors considered to be most vulnerable.<sup>2</sup>

In January 2023, the so-called Piantedosi decree (Decree-Law 1/2023) introduced a new set of rules<sup>3</sup> applicable exclusively to civilian rescue ships, and a set of sanctions for non-compliance, ranging from 20 days' detention in port, up to confiscation of the vessel.<sup>4</sup> Among other rules, the decree requires NGO ships to head immediately to the assigned port after each rescue and thus limits the scope for multiple rescues in a single voyage.

The negative impact of this requirement is compounded by the practice of assigning distant ports for the disembarkation of survivors after rescue, thus forcing vessels to make long, unnecessary journeys. The overall effect of the measures has been to severely limit the ability of SAR NGOs to save lives, by drastically restricting their active presence at sea and increasing the cost of operations.

In the meantime, the externalisation policies of the EU and individual Member States are successfully preventing migrant arrivals to European shores at the cost of more and deadlier interceptions by proxy in Libya and Tunisia. The establishment of the Tunisian Search and Rescue Region (SRR) in June 2024 raises significant concerns that it will replicate the Libyan model, with disastrous consequences for migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean. Yet the financing of the Libyan and Tunisian coastguards with a steady supply of EU and Member State money continues unabated,<sup>5</sup> against the backdrop of unprecedented violence against people on the move and humanitarian staff at sea.

<sup>1</sup> MSF, [Left to drown in the Southern European border: One year of Geo Barents at sea](#), July 2022.

<sup>2</sup> MSF, ["No one came to our rescue": The human costs of European migration policies in the Central Mediterranean](#), November 2022.

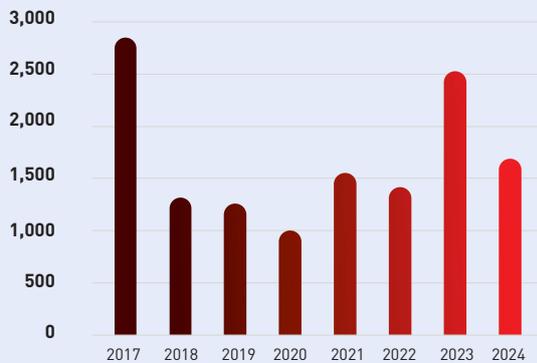
<sup>3</sup> Decree-Law No. 130/2020 converted with amendments by Law No. 173 of 18 December 2020, as amended by Decree-Law No. 1 of 2 January 2023 converted by Law No. 15 of 24 February 2023. Decree-Law 1/2023 is known as the "Piantedosi Decree" after Matteo Piantedosi, the interior minister who championed it.

<sup>4</sup> Under the Piantedosi rules, the main administrative sanction is a fine ranging from €2,000 to €10,000, whereas the detention of the vessel is an auxiliary measure: however, the latter has much greater impact on the operations of humanitarian actors.

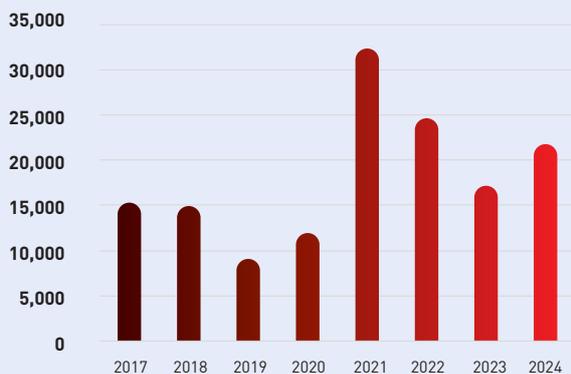
<sup>5</sup> EU, [Support to Integrated border and migration management in Libya - Second phase](#), accessed 7 March 2025. See also EU, [Memorandum of Understanding on a strategic and global partnership between the European Union and Tunisia](#), accessed 10 March 2025.



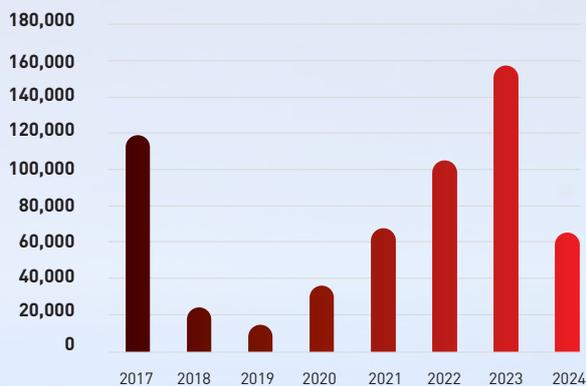
### NUMBER OF DEAD AND MISSING PERSONS ON THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN MIGRATION ROUTE



### NUMBER OF PEOPLE INTERCEPTED AND FORCIBLY RETURNED TO LIBYA



### NUMBER OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES ARRIVING TO ITALY AND MALTA BY SEA\*



\* 2024 data missing for Malta from April to December  
Source IOM

The cycles of exclusion and abuse at the external borders of the EU have been further reinforced and entrenched by the formal adoption of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. After a long process of negotiation, the Pact entered into force in June 2024, albeit with a two-year delay in application.<sup>6</sup> While a reform of the EU asylum system has been long overdue to address crucial issues, such as more equitable burden-sharing, the underlying logic of the new rules is to block, deter and filter people seeking protection at every step of the journey. The Pact, in other words, writes into EU law many of the harmful practices that Member States already deploy to keep migrants and refugees out at all costs.

While the fortification of the EU's southern border is close to complete, the Central Mediterranean remains one of the deadliest migration routes globally. According to available data, 24,467 men, women and children died or went missing on this stretch of the sea between 2014 and 2024, with 1,692 in 2024 alone.<sup>7</sup> This means that on average nearly five people died every day, making 2024 the second deadliest year on record since 2017, despite the observed decrease in departures. What is more, interceptions and forced returns to Libya and Tunisia are on the rise,<sup>8</sup> which reveals the real cost behind the hailed decrease in arrivals in Italy.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, keeping humanitarian actors out of sea does not only deprive people on the move of a life-saving resource, it eliminates the witnesses.

<sup>6</sup> European Commission, [Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), 21 May 2024.

<sup>7</sup> International Organization for Migration, [Missing Migrants Project](#), accessed 3 February 2025. While based on robust methodology, IOM data remains incomplete. The actual number of dead and missing persons in the Central Mediterranean each year is likely much higher, due to "invisible" shipwrecks. The number of interceptions and forced returns to Libya is equally an underestimate, since IOM is not present at all disembarkations.

<sup>8</sup> Despite a decrease in the number of recorded departures from Libya, the number of interceptions increased by 21% in 2024 compared with 2023, amounting to 21,762 people forcibly returned (IOM, [IOM Libya](#), accessed 3 February 2025). No official data has been reported regarding the interceptions carried out by the Tunisian Coast Guard in 2024, but in May 2024 the Tunisian National Guard declared to the media that 21,545 people had been intercepted in the period January-April alone (InfoMigrants, [Tunisie: plus de 20 000 migrants interceptés en mer pendant les quatre premiers mois de l'année](#), 13 May 2024).

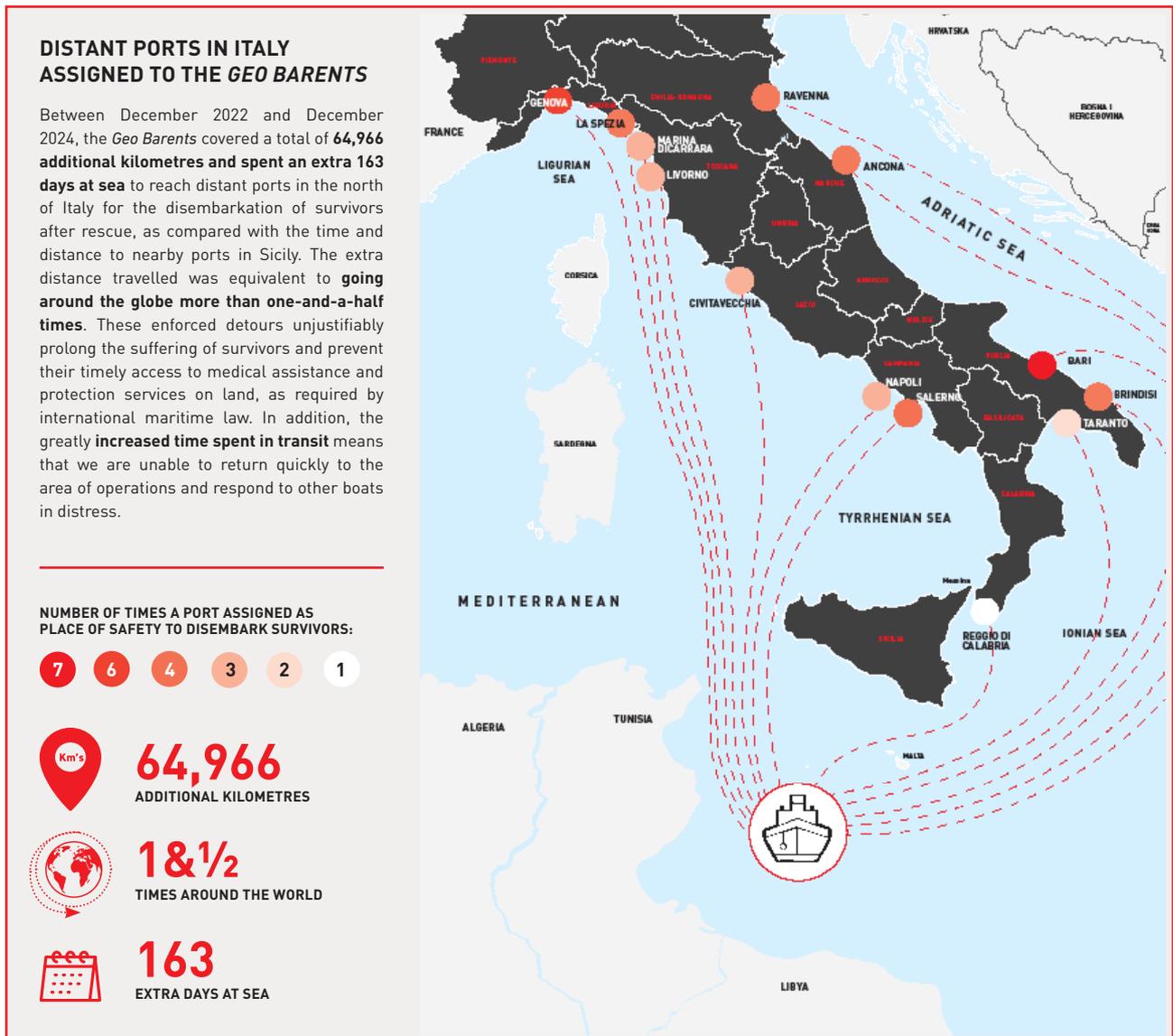
<sup>9</sup> The number of arrivals to Italy and Malta in 2024 decreased by 58% compared with 2023 and 38% compared with 2022 (IOM, [Displacement Tracking Matrix](#), accessed 3 February 2025). While the data on the number of arrivals to Malta has not yet been reported, it has been consistently marginal over the past years due to Malta's complete disengagement from its SAR obligations. See also The Guardian, [The brutal truth behind Italy's migrant reduction: beatings and rape by EU-funded forces in Tunisia](#), 19 September 2024.



## RACE FOR LIVES

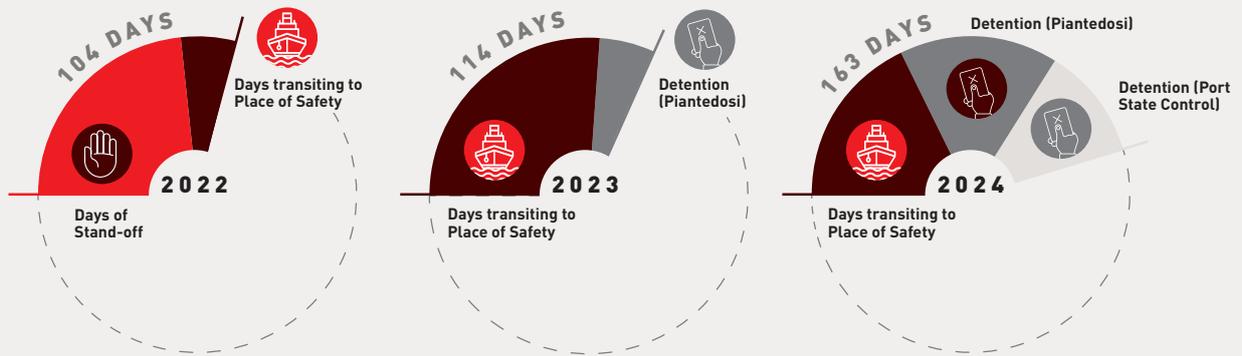
Since the implementation of the Piantedosi decree at the beginning of 2023, the rescue capacity of the *Geo Barents* has been significantly underutilised and actively undermined. The vessel is a perfect instrument, fit for purpose, which at the peak of its activity conducted up to 13 rescues in one rotation,<sup>10</sup> taking on board 650 survivors. Yet, in one striking example of the application of the Piantedosi rules, coupled with the practice of assigning distant ports only to NGO vessels, the Italian authorities in June 2023 made the *Geo Barents* travel all the way north to La Spezia to disembark 13 survivors. The regime of the decree thus presents an unprecedented structured and institutionalised mechanism for the obstruction of civil search and rescue activities. Simply put, it is a game of attrition to make us quit.

As a result of the Piantedosi restrictions, the number of people that the *Geo Barents* was able to rescue declined dramatically in 2024 (2,278) to half the 2023 total (4,646). The decrease was due mainly to the cumulative period of over three months during which the ship was prevented from sailing as a result of four separate detention orders. Three of these orders were issued under the Piantedosi decree, while one, the third, followed a very in-depth Port State Control (PSC) inspection, yet another procedure instrumentalised by the Italian authorities to obstruct the work of humanitarian SAR NGOs. The impact of these sanctions, along with the practice of assigning distant disembarkation ports, has worsened over the years, forcing us out of the area of operations for nearly half of 2024.

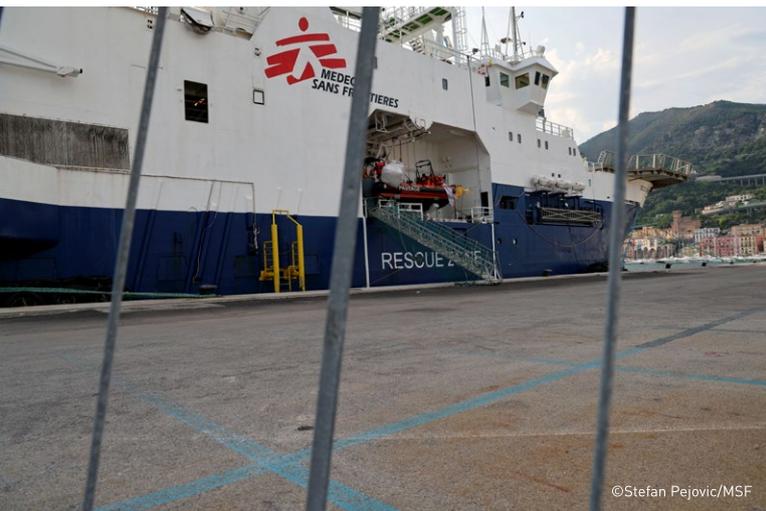


<sup>10</sup> A rotation is the period between leaving port and arriving at the port of disembarkation.

**DAYS OF GEO BARENTS' SAR AVAILABILITY LOST TO OBSTRUCTIVE MEASURES, 2022-2024**



Another aggravating factor is the requirement under the Piantedosi rules for NGO ships to head to port as soon as it is assigned, usually after they have carried out their first rescue in a given rotation. Humanitarian actors are thus unable to patrol areas left entirely uncovered by European SAR assets, meaning that when more distress calls come, the ships are already too far north. Since the implementation of the Piantedosi decree, whenever the *Geo Barents* was able to assist additional boats in distress after completing a first rescue, the MSF team had to obtain a prior authorisation from the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Center (MRCC). Due to these impediments, the average number of survivors rescued per rotation dropped steadily in 2023 and 2024 to a level much below the rescue capacity of the *Geo Barents*.<sup>11</sup>



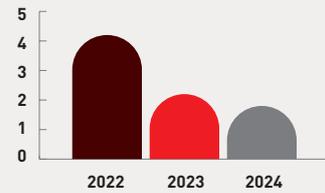
©Stefan Pejovic/MSF

<sup>11</sup> Based on MSF observations, the size of the boats in distress also decreased in 2024, carrying on average fewer than 50 people. This development has further amplified the impact of the Piantedosi restrictions, as SAR NGOs are by default allowed to assist only one distress case before heading for their assigned disembarkation port.

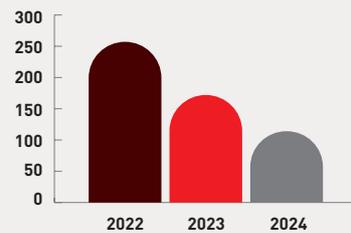
**UNDERUTILISED CAPACITY OF THE GEO BARENTS DUE TO PIANTEDOSI RESTRICTIONS, 2022-2024**



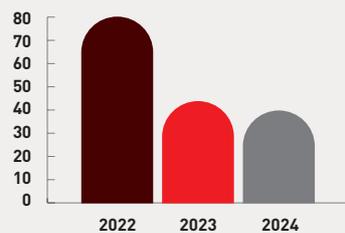
**AVERAGE NUMBER OF RESCUES PER ROTATION**



**AVERAGE NUMBER OF SURVIVORS PER ROTATION**



**% OF ROTATIONS WITH MORE THAN 100 SURVIVORS**



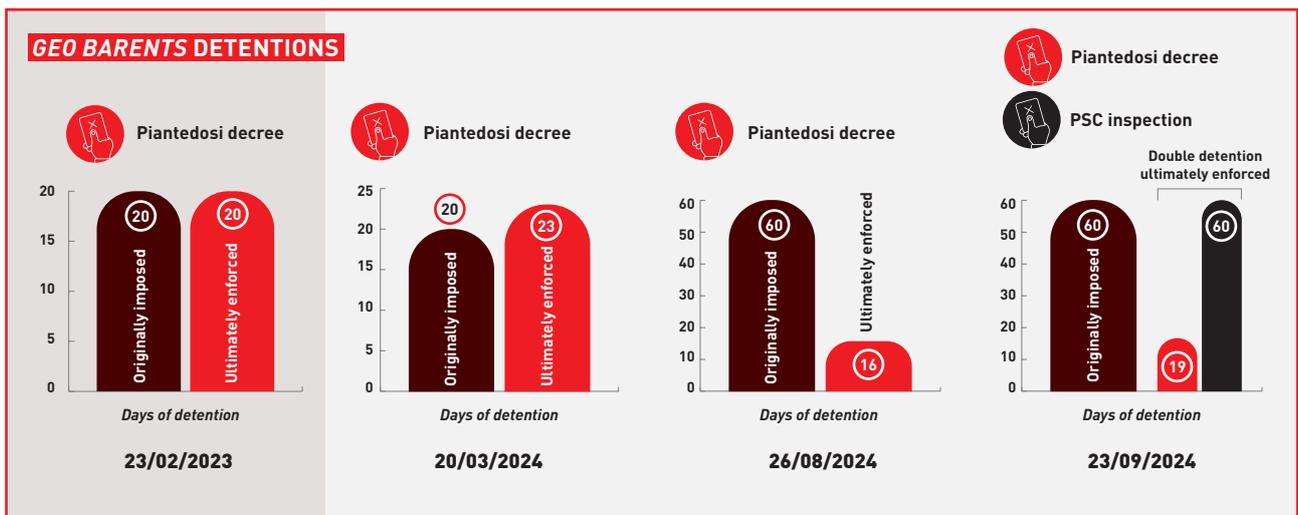
## LEGAL BATTLES

Overall, the *Geo Barents* has been sanctioned four times under the Piantedosi decree, amounting to 160 days of imposed detention. While in 2023 the rescue vessel was detained once for 20 days, in 2024 we faced three separate detentions under the decree, the last two for 60 days each and closely following each other. Successful legal appeals reduced the penalties to a total of 78 days of detention over the two years, but the *Geo Barents* spent an additional 41 days in detention in 2024 subsequent to a PSC inspection,<sup>12</sup> giving a total of 119 days out of operation in 2023 and 2024. Challenging these punitive measures has taken considerable time and resources away from MSF and other humanitarian organisations, whose main objective and expertise is not to fight legal battles, but to assist people in need.

The detention orders against the *Geo Barents* exemplify a pattern of escalating harassment of NGO rescue vessels that seeks deliberately to keep them out of operation. By the end of 2024, civilian rescue ships had been detained 26 times under the Piantedosi decree, amounting to a combined total of 640 days in port, when they could have been saving lives. The restrictions also force NGOs and the captains of their vessels to choose between the legal obligation to render assistance to people in distress and the protection of their vessels against detention and ultimately confiscation.<sup>13</sup> One of the most perverse consequences of the Piantedosi sanctions is that by blocking NGO ships, the Italian authorities are actively undermining what is effectively a free resource for the discharge of the state's own search and rescue obligations under international and European law.



The grounds for detention have varied, but in 2024 Italian officials consistently sanctioned NGOs for failing to comply with the instructions of the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG). The first detention of the *Geo Barents* under the Piantedosi decree in 2023 related to the failure to provide the Italian authorities with data from the voyage data recorder. We considered this request illegitimate, because such data is customarily stored solely for the purpose of investigating maritime incidents and a rescue does not represent an incident under international maritime law. The subsequent three detentions were based on the recurrent allegations that the *Geo Barents* had failed to comply with the instructions of the LCG, following what were usually violent encounters with Libyan armed actors in international waters.



<sup>12</sup> Prior to the implementation of the Piantedosi decree, the *Geo Barents* had been detained for 25 days in July 2021 on similar grounds, but had since successfully passed subsequent inspections. The way the 2024 inspection was conducted indicated a strong intention to keep the ship out of operation at any cost.

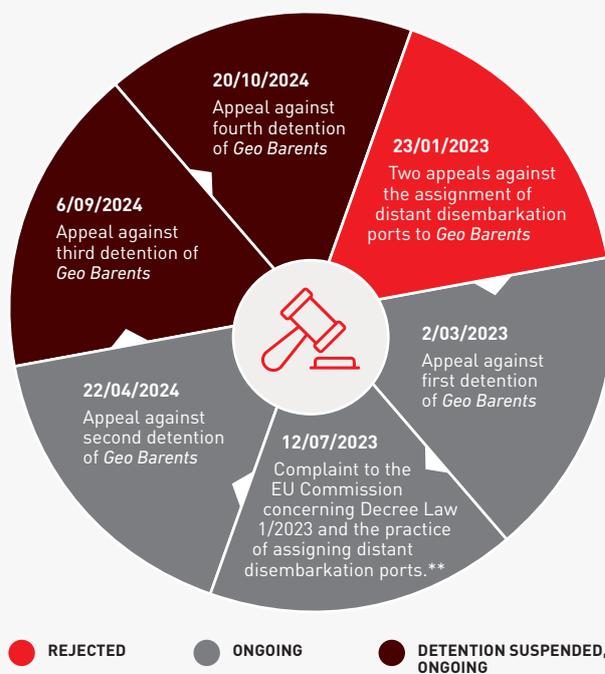
<sup>13</sup> The sanction under the Piantedosi decree is issued personally to the captain of the ship.

We have challenged each sanction under the decree in court and have obtained two suspensions of the 60-day detention orders, pending review on the merits. In the appeal against the third administrative detention of the *Geo Barents*, for instance, MSF rejected the reconstruction of the events advanced by the Italian authorities, in which they rely solely on the interpretation conveyed to them by the Libyan MRCC. We argued that the mere request by the LCG that the *Geo Barents* should leave the area did not amount to coordination of rescue. In this instance, the judge at the Civil Court of Salerno agreed and ordered the suspension of the detention, which was subsequently confirmed on 7 March 2024, stating that the *Geo Barents* had been engaged in an unavoidable rescue operation and that “enforcement of 60 days of detention would irreversibly jeopardise pursuit of humanitarian objectives of unquestionable intrinsic value”.<sup>14</sup>

MSF has pursued all available legal channels, but justice is slow and often ineffective, while people continue to perish daily at sea. Following NGO court victories, the Italian government has responded by tweaking the Piantadosi rules to avoid further successful challenges. Recent legislative amendments, for example, make the penalty system leading to the confiscation of a vessel easier and faster for the authorities to implement. The main change is that a vessel’s owner now shares responsibility for violations allegedly committed by the ship, which means that an increased sanction for a repeat offence will apply even if a different captain is in charge at the time of the second or third violation. Unless MSF’s or another NGO’s legal action leads to a wholesale repeal of the decree,<sup>19</sup> these amendments will likely have the effect of bringing to a halt NGO search and rescue activities in the Central Mediterranean.

Despite the clear position of the UN on the dire human rights situation in Libya,<sup>15</sup> Italian authorities continue to issue detention orders on the basis of non-compliance with the instructions of the Libyan Coast Guard. On 17 February 2024 Italy’s highest court, the Supreme Court of Cassation, reaffirmed the UN’s assessment and ruled that handing over migrants to the LCG constitutes a crime, because Libya is not a safe place.<sup>16</sup> In June 2024, in line with the Supreme Court of Cassation’s decision, the civil court in Crotone, Italy, ruled that the detention of the ship operated by the non-governmental organisation SOS Humanity on the basis of non-compliance with the instructions of the LCG was unlawful, as the Libyan MRCC and the LCG could not be considered legitimate search and rescue actors in the Mediterranean.<sup>17</sup> By disregarding these authoritative pronouncements, officials in Italy are effectively undermining established mechanisms for upholding human rights and the rule of law.<sup>18</sup>

### CHALLENGES TO PIANTEDOSI RESTRICTIONS



\*\* MSF has submitted an official complaint to the European Commission, urging it to examine the restrictions in light of EU law [MSF, [MSF files complaint to European Commission on search and rescue law](#), 13 July 2023].

<sup>14</sup> Civil Court of Salerno, Decree No. 128861 of 11 September 2024.

<sup>15</sup> The final report of the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya states that “crimes against humanity were committed against migrants in places of detention under the actual or nominal control of...the Libyan Coast Guard”, among others (UN, [Libya: Urgent action needed to remedy deteriorating human rights situation](#), UN Fact-Finding Mission warns in final report, 27 March 2023).

<sup>16</sup> The decision upheld the conviction of the captain of the Italian private vessel *Asso 28*, which on 30 July 2018 rescued 101 people in the Central Mediterranean and then handed them over to the LCG to be returned to Libya (InfoMigrants, [Ship captain sentenced to prison for returning migrants to Libya](#), 15 October 2021).

<sup>17</sup> SOS Humanity, [Final court decision: Detention of Humanity 1 was unlawful!](#), 25 June 2024.

<sup>18</sup> The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders and other UN experts sent an official communication to the Italian government on 31 May 2024, expressing their concern that detentions on the basis of the Piantadosi decree “have been without justification, and amount to a restriction on the right to freedom of association and the right to promote and protect human rights” (UN, [Italy: administrative detention of civilian search and rescue ships in the Central Mediterranean \(joint communication\)](#), 20 August 2024).

<sup>19</sup> In all challenges to the Piantadosi sanctions, MSF has asked the reviewing court to refer the decree to the Italian Constitutional Court for assessment of its compatibility with fundamental rights and principles enshrined in the Italian Constitution. Our requests have so far been unsuccessful, but a judge of the Court of Brindisi in the appeal by SOS Méditerranée ultimately made such a reference on 11 October 2024, with the outcome expected in no less than a year (SOS Méditerranée, [The Constitutional Court called upon to rule on the Piantadosi decree](#), 11 October 2024).

## MORE ACTORS, MORE VIOLENCE

The grounds for the *Geo Barents*' detentions illustrate how the Italian authorities continue to legitimise the Libyan Coast Guard. In the meantime, LCG vessels persist in intimidating or directly threatening NGO vessels, putting in grave danger the lives of humanitarian staff and people in distress. In 2023 and 2024 four SAR NGOs suffered incidents that involved the use of firearms by the LCG. Since January 2024 we see a new escalation of violence against SAR ships. During 2024 there were seven incidents in which LCG vessels donated by Italy assaulted NGO vessels, with the use of firearms in two cases. Six of these cases resulted in the detention of the rescue vessels by the Italian authorities for allegedly failing to follow the LCG's instructions.

The collaboration between the Italian authorities and the Libyan Coast Guard goes beyond an expected coordination between MRCCs. In 2017, Italy signed a memorandum with Libya for cooperation on migration that included the provision of four patrol vessels. The same year, a series of accords were also signed between Libya and the EU. The EU project "Support to Integrated Border and Migration Management in Libya" (SIBMMIL), with the Italian Ministry of the Interior as the implementing partner, started on 27 July 2017 with the specific objective to "enhance operational capacity of the competent Libyan authorities ..., including the strengthening of SAR operations."<sup>20</sup> The patrol boat that assaulted the *Geo Barents* on 19 September 2024 was also donated as part of SIBMMIL, and the then EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement had actually been present at its handover ceremony.<sup>21</sup> Audit of the funds dedicated to SIBMMIL has since revealed that there is no adequate mechanism in place for monitoring their compliance with human rights.<sup>22</sup>



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<sup>20</sup> EU, [Support to Integrated border and migration management in Libya – First phase](#), accessed 7 March 2025.

<sup>21</sup> InfoMigrants, [Italy hands over patrol boat to Libyan government](#), 8 February 2024.

<sup>22</sup> European Court of Auditors, [Special report 17/2024: The EU trust fund for Africa – Despite new approaches, support remained unfocused](#), 25 September 2024.

On 19 September 2024 the *Geo Barents* performed two rescue operations, safely retrieving 206 people out of the water, including many women and children, the majority travelling alone. The ship received a green light from the Italian MRCC to assess the second distress case and was the only vessel on scene on arrival. Given the seriousness of the situation and the captain's obligation under international law to render immediate assistance, the MSF team proceeded with the rescue. An LCG patrol boat arrived more than five hours after the first alert about the case, demanded an immediate halt to the ongoing rescue operation, threatened to shoot and carried out unsafe and intimidating manoeuvres around the people in distress, before eventually leaving the area. On 23 September, the *Geo Barents* disembarked all survivors in Genoa and received two separate detention orders from the Italian authorities.

**TESTIMONIES FROM SURVIVORS DETAIL THE INTERCEPTIONS AND DANGEROUS MANOEUVRES CARRIED OUT BY THE LCG, IN WHICH THEY THREATEN THE LIVES OF THE PEOPLE ON BOARD, OR RISK CAPSIZING THE BOAT IN DISTRESS:**

“ We started sailing at 1am and we spent 12–13 hours at sea before the Libyan Coast Guard intercepted us [the survivor identifies a *Corrubia* class vessel]. [...] One of our two engines suddenly died, causing us to slow down and allowing the Libyans to begin a dangerous manoeuvre, crossing our bow to produce waves. They were also shouting and insulting us, throwing metal objects, pointing weapons at us and splashing water inside the boat. They smashed into our boat twice before stopping us and taking us on board their boat, beating us one by one. ”

– Syrian man rescued by the *Geo Barents* in June 2024

“ So we went to Garabulli and got on a boat at 11pm. After 17 hours, at around 4pm the next day, we were intercepted. We were already close to Lampedusa when the Libyans arrived. They already had people on board, including women, children and many others. [...] The Libyan patrol boat had a smaller fast boat that chased us and threatened us with guns. We heard the patrol boat call their speedboat and tell them not to shoot at us as there was a plane flying overhead filming. They took out guns but they just threatened us and we were taken back. While we were going back to Libya, the Libyans intercepted another boat. In total, they intercepted three boats, making a total of about 180 people. We were disembarked in the port of Tripoli and from there put on buses to Seqqa [Tarik al Sikka detention centre]. ”

– Syrian man rescued by the *Geo Barents* in January 2024

©Myriam Diallo/MSF



The reality that people on the move and MSF teams witness at sea is very different from the narrative of a unified and coherent Libyan Coast Guard which the EU and the Italian authorities advance. On the *Geo Barents* we hear from actors on the radio identifying themselves as the LCG, but are often unable to confirm whether such self-identification is genuine, particularly in light of divergent insignia or conflicting requests, at times seemingly coming both from positions on land and from vessels at sea. We have observed an overall increase in the activity of Libyan vessels, and are experiencing more frequent interactions with them during our operations, including with new and unidentified vessels. While we witnessed incidents involving Libyan actors during 38% of our rotations in 2023, this figure rose to 65% in 2024. In 2023 and 2024 MSF has documented 30 confirmed or suspected interceptions of migrant boats by Libyan vessels.

On 28 November 2024 the *Geo Barents* arrived to assist a deflating rubber boat in distress, to find that armed men in a fast boat were close by. The crew of another fast boat present at the scene claimed to be from the LCG and urged the *Geo Barents* to carry out a rescue as the rubber boat was sinking. The MSF team then rescued 83 men and boys, but survivors reported that 29 women and children had been intercepted at gunpoint and transferred to the fast boat of the armed men before our arrival. The LCG said that they would allow MSF inflatables to transfer the women and girls, but the armed men did not comply and instead left, forcibly separating the women and girls from their male family members and taking them back to Libya.

©Simone Boccaetto





What is evident from these interactions and survivor testimonies is that the Libyan Coast Guard is incapable of providing effective assistance in this stretch of the sea. A number of survivor accounts elaborate on the collusion between the LCG and armed actors including smugglers and criminal gangs, who cooperate mainly with the aim of making a profit from those intercepted at sea by handing them over to other criminal groups who will then exploit or traffic them:

During the interception, they [the LCG] also took the engines. The Libyan Coast Guard sailed first to Tripoli where they sold the engines to someone at the port and then to Tobruk, where they sold us to the militia. The Libyan Coast Guard vessel waited at sea, in front of the beach, for the militia to come, pick us up with a smaller boat and shuttle us to the beach in groups. In the place where the militia took us, similar to a farm, there were people with blue waistcoats, maybe the UN. They distributed bags of food and filmed the help we received – they filmed so that you could see the blue waistcoats. There was also a medical team who visited the sick people, including me as I was vomiting blood.

As soon as the medical team left, they took off the waistcoats and they all had guns. They took back the food they had distributed and started beating us. I was still vomiting when someone kicked me violently in the back. We were deprived of food. They detained us in an animal farm in Tobruk. (...)

[The second time I tried to cross], it was a two-deck boat. We were 130 people in total and there were also women. They started to move us from the beach to the boat, and beat us to get inside the boat, down in the lower deck where the engine and fuel were. I was hoping either to be rescued or intercepted as soon as possible, with the risk of being detained, just to get out of that boat.

We were intercepted after 12 hours at the sea by vessel number 664 [the survivor identifies LCG vessel 664, also known as Houn, as the boat that intercepted him]. After taking us on board they handed us over, they sold us, in Gout Al Shaal to the Libyan forces, for US\$500 each.

– Syrian man rescued by the Geo Barents in May 2024



## THE SCARS REMAIN

Two of the Libyan soldiers jumped in with their guns. They robbed us of our phones and money before embarking us in their boat. They were so violent with us. I still have a scar from where I was hit. When they finished collecting us 77 people, they intercepted another boat, and the same thing happened to the other group of people. They took all the women among us separately.

– Guinean man rescued by the Geo Barents in August 2024

[After intercepting us], they took the driver, and we did not see him again. One of the guards hopped into our boat and managed to start the engine again. They received an order to intercept another boat, so they opted to take only the engine [from our boat] and chose a person to go down and do it. The guy returned with severe gasoline burns on his entire lower body.

One hour later we reached the other boat to intercept: it was a little wooden boat, a bit broken and overcrowded, adrift with the engine off. They were all sub-Saharan, including two women. To board them, they used more violence against them because they were black.

– Syrian man rescued by the Geo Barents in June 2024

We spent five hours navigating at sea, until we were caught by a Libyan boat, five men in uniforms – they took us all onto their boat. This was around 9am. As we were a family with small kids they took us inside the boat – everyone else was left out on deck. The Libyan Coast Guard started patrolling, superfast, looking for other boats. Everyone on the bow was freezing – one man turned blue. Yet the Libyans continued sailing from the Bouri oil platforms to Tripoli, back and forth, never letting us get off the boat. They kept us on board for about 53 hours, more than two days, while they kept looking for other boats, going back and forth the whole time. They didn't give us any food, any water. They didn't allow us to use the bathroom – we had to urinate on ourselves. My husband got up to go to the bathroom, he was threatened and told not to move again. My brother was so afraid for he lost the sensation in his legs as he couldn't move for so long, he was crying and vomiting. He has been suffering from incontinence since those days. I have no idea why they kept us for so long, we begged them to take us back. We were vomiting, we were dehydrated, but they never took pity on us. They were eating fish, they were drinking, but never gave us anything. Only at one moment they took pity on my daughter and gave her a pack of biscuits, that's all we ate in those days.

– Syrian woman rescued by the Geo Barents in February 2024

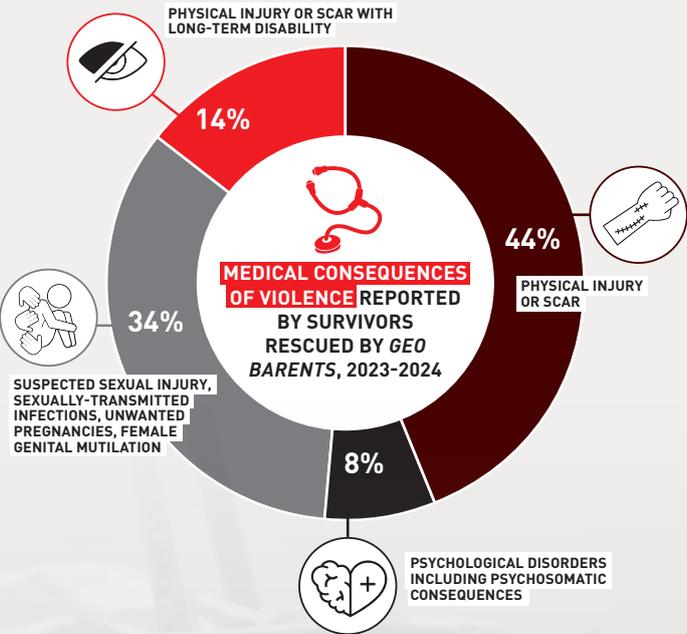
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The escalating violence by proxy at the EU’s southern border is leaving lasting marks on the minds and bodies of survivors. In 2024, the MSF medical team carried out 2,658 general consultations onboard the *Geo Barents*, compared with 4,665 consultations in 2023. Despite the significant reduction in the number of people rescued in 2024, due to the impact of the Piantedosi restrictions, the overall number of medical referrals still increased – particularly urgent referrals, which went up by 14%, suggesting that a considerably higher percentage of those rescued were in a critical state and required vital specialist care on land. Two rescued people in 2024 had to be medically evacuated from the *Geo Barents* due to life-threatening conditions as a result of inhalation of fuel and water. Unfortunately, during the same rescue one person was recovered dead and another died on board, following unsuccessful attempts at resuscitation.

The long-term consequences of the violence perpetrated against migrants and refugees trying to cross the Central Mediterranean, either in their countries of origin or along their migration journey, include scars, physical disability, psychological disorders and sexual injuries, including sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancy or female genital mutilation (FGM).<sup>23</sup>



Some of the findings of the physical medical examinations of survivors on the *Geo Barents* further show correlation with various recognised types of torture.<sup>24</sup> In December 2024, for instance, the MSF medical team documented three cases of *telefono*, or cutting of the victim’s ears, often with hands, which causes severe pain and leads to hearing loss. Survivors reported being subjected to this type of torture for not following orders or not handing over money to secure their release from detention centres in Libya.

<sup>23</sup> No systematic screening for violence is done on the *Geo Barents* and patients self-refer. With the limited space and time on board, only some survivors manage or feel able to raise the question of violence with the medical team. Not all incidents of violence lead to a consultation, which serves as the basis for our records, meaning that the prevalence of violence among survivors is likely much higher.

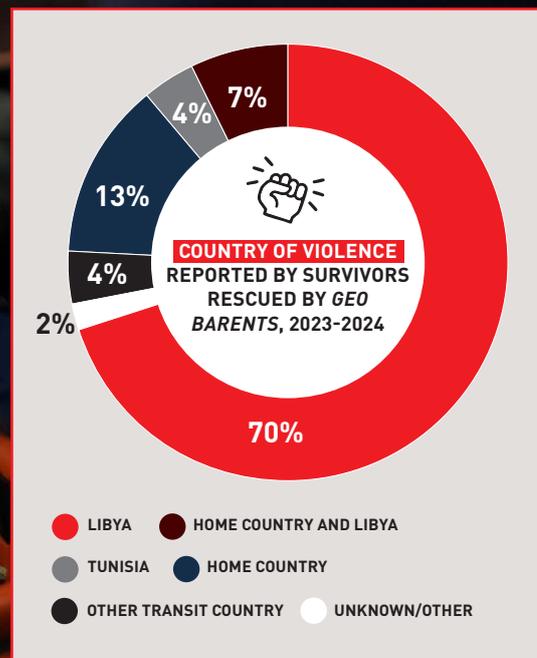
<sup>24</sup> Dignity, *Fact Sheet Collection Health*, accessed 7 March 2025.



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In 2024, all 124 patients seen by the psychologist on the *Geo Barents* had experienced physical and/or psychological violence while on the move, with half of them reporting abuse during detention as the primary event. Specifically, 25% of the patients in individual consultations reported being abused or tortured with water, electricity or objects, or being exposed to traumatic noises or smells. Another 25% described being slapped, kicked or beaten, either directly or with an object, during detention. Among men, torture was reported by half of those seen in individual psychological consultations. Among the 18 women seen in individual psychological consultations, half disclosed being survivors of sexual violence. As a result, many rescued people struggled with intrusive images, fear and anxiety, difficulties sleeping, flashbacks and suicidal thoughts.

In 2023 and 2024 detention in Libya continued to be the primary setting where survivors on board the *Geo Barents* reported suffering violent incidents in the course of their journey.<sup>25</sup> A total of 77% of all violence-related consultations in 2023 and 2024 stemmed from violence experienced in Libya, predominantly in detention and frequently following interception, leading survivors to share chilling stories of complex and compounding trauma. Of all incidents of sexual violence reported over the same period, 68% also took place in Libya, including in forcible confinement, with numerous episodes of gang rape and exploitation for profit and blackmail. The identified perpetrators passed people on to each other like commodities in a long chain of pain and suffering.



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<sup>25</sup> This sample of violent incidents is not fully representative. 84% of all survivors rescued by the *Geo Barents* in 2023 and 2024 departed from Libya and 16% departed from Tunisia.

## CONCLUSIONS

The orchestrated removal of the *Geo Barents* and other rescue ships from the Central Mediterranean under the Piantadosi rules cuts a lifeline for survivors fleeing horrendous violence in Libya. The detention of NGO vessels in Italian ports mirrors the mounting interceptions of migrants and refugees close to the Libyan shores by the Libyan Coast Guard and affiliated militias. Both those in need and those willing to help are prevented from leaving the unbridgeable shores between Europe and Africa, while the few who dare are punished, beaten or drown. Libyan officials, on the other hand, come and go undisturbed in Italy, often in government planes, rather than small boats overflowing with despair. The humanitarian crisis in the Central Mediterranean is man-made, carefully engineered and well financed; and the Italian government, the EU and their Libyan proxies are partners in very real crimes.

Paying the Libyan Coast Guard to do search and rescue is a cynical ploy for Italy and the EU,<sup>26</sup> which effectively entails dumping millions of euros to armed actors in Libya to do the dirty work of keeping people out of Europe. With one hand the LCG take European money to intercept and return, while with the other they resell survivors to more thugs down the line to double the profit. The Italian government and the European Commission know perfectly well who they are dealing with, but such

lawlessness suits them better, as long as it delivers. The EU Delegation to Libya, for instance, acknowledges that the LCG have flouted the standards expected of a national coast guard conducting SAR by shooting at migrant vessels, but they are still one of the main recipients of funds.<sup>27</sup> What is more, Italy and the EU would go to great lengths to protect their investment, undermining in the process any attempt at accountability or bringing perpetrators to justice.

The EU's and Italy's deadly engagement with any semblance of authority in Libya is part of the overarching pattern of externalisation, which has been spreading farther and farther away from the Union's borders like a contagious disease. Shady deals for migration management are now in place with Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Senegal, Mauritania, and the list keeps getting longer, beyond the possibility of any challenge or scrutiny. By entrenching cycles of violence as a means of deterrence, the EU makes sure that people seeking safety and protection can come nowhere close to its territory. Italy, in turn, has been the pioneering member state in taking the externalisation logic even further by introducing offshore asylum processing under the Italy–Albania agreement. Such spatial and mental separation allows the EU to maintain the pretence of a “union of rights and values, based on the rule of law”, just with dead bodies washing up on its shores.

<sup>26</sup> “Italy” and “EU” are used here as collective designations for what are essentially acts of the executive, namely the Italian government and the European Commission. Attempts at checks and balances by the European Parliament or the Italian judiciary, for instance, have had limited impact.

<sup>27</sup> EUDEL Libya, *Stakeholder mapping on migration in Libya*, 27 October 2023.

# MSF DEMANDS



## TO ITALY

1. The Italian authorities must immediately stop obstructing NGO lifesaving assistance at sea and repeal Decree Law 1/2023.
2. Sanctions on NGO SAR vessels must be ended, as must Italy's systematic collusion with the Libyan Coast Guard to prevent people from seeking safety and protection in Europe.



## TO THE EU AND ITS MEMBER STATES

1. The EU and its Member States, including Italy, must immediately suspend financial and material support to the Libyan Coast Guard and stop intentionally fuelling the forced returns of people to Libya.
2. Moreover, the EU and its Member States must investigate the responsibility of their coastal states, including Italy, for the unlawful pushbacks occurring almost daily in the Central Mediterranean Sea, as a result of which they are complicit in grave human rights violations.
3. The EU and its Member States must establish a proactive, state-led SAR mechanism and deploy dedicated SAR ships to the Central Mediterranean with the clear objective of saving lives at sea and ensuring disembarkation in a place of safety.
4. The EU and its Member States must prioritise the creation of safe and legal pathways for those seeking safety and protection in Europe, to ensure that people trapped in unsafe places have other options besides risking their lives crossing the sea.



## TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

1. The European Commission in its role as Guardian of the Treaties must continuously scrutinise Italian Decree Law 1/2023 and its subsequent amendments, which hinder the SAR operations carried out by NGOs in the Central Mediterranean, leading to a grave risk of increased loss of life at sea.
2. The European Commission must uphold and protect the fundamental rights of all people across Europe, in line with obligations under European and international refugee and human rights law and the values of the Union. SAR NGOs are filling the shameful void in the provision of emergency assistance at sea left by EU Member States, and instead of obstructing their work, Member States should involve them in EU-wide SAR efforts.





**MEDECINS  
SANS FRONTIERES**

#SAFE PASSAGE



**SAVING LIVES IS NOT A CRIME**

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#### Acknowledgment

This report is the result of a collaborative effort, and we are deeply grateful to all who provided guidance and insightful feedback. We extend special appreciation to our frontline colleagues whose work prevents further loss of life at sea, and to those supporting from ashore, developing technical positions and analysing data. Our sincere thanks also go to Margot Bernard, Loan Torondel and Benilde Perez Amez for their valuable contribution.

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