

Issue Brief

Humanitarian NGOs conducting Search and Rescue Operations at Sea: A “pull factor”?

Background

Médecins Sans Frontières and other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have been running Search and Rescue (SAR) operations in the Central Mediterranean since May 2015. In late 2016, these operations were accused of being a “pull factor” for migrants and refugees to attempt dangerous sea journeys and of “deteriorating maritime safety”.

Following severe security threats by the Libyan Coast Guards towards humanitarian NGO vessels, MSF partially suspended SAR activities in August 2017.

Objective

In view of the accusations, MSF’s Operational Research Unit in Luxembourg (LuxOR) was commissioned to analyse available data on attempted sea crossings including numbers of arrivals, deaths, and missing people in the Central Mediterranean. The resulting report [1] coincides with two independent studies published by the University of Oxford [2] and the Goldsmiths Forensic Architecture agency (University of London) [3], published in March and June 2017.

This issue brief summarizes evidence generated by the three studies.

High number of sea crossing over several years

Tens of thousands of refugees and migrants have attempted to cross the Central Mediterranean every year. Data recorded by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) shows a low yearly peak fluctuation in attempted sea crossings of 9-17% between 2014 and 2016. A comparable number of people thus attempted to cross the Mediterranean irrespective of different sea operations during Mare Nostrum, Triton, European Union Naval Force – Mediterranean (EUNAFOR MED), and SAR activities by humanitarian NGOs (Fig. 1).

1 Arsenijevic, J., Manzi, M. and Zachariah, R. (August 2017): Are dedicated and proactive search and rescue operations a “pull factor” for migration and do they deteriorate maritime safety in the Central Mediterranean?

2 Steinhilper, E. and Gruijters, R. (March 2017): Border Deaths in the Mediterranean: What We Can Learn from the Latest Data. Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2017/03/institutional>.

3 Heller, C. and Pezzani, L. (June 2017): Blaming the Rescuers: Report, <https://blamingtherescuers.org/report/>

Comparing equivalent timeframes *before* and *during* humanitarian NGOs SAR operations (Nov 2014-April 2015 vs. Nov 2015-April 2016), attempted sea crossings increased by only 1.6% with humanitarian NGOs present [1]. Similarly, the University of Oxford found the number of arrivals to be higher before humanitarian NGO's started operating [2]. Both studies independently show the numbers of attempted crossings and arrivals do not support the pull-factor accusations towards NGOs.

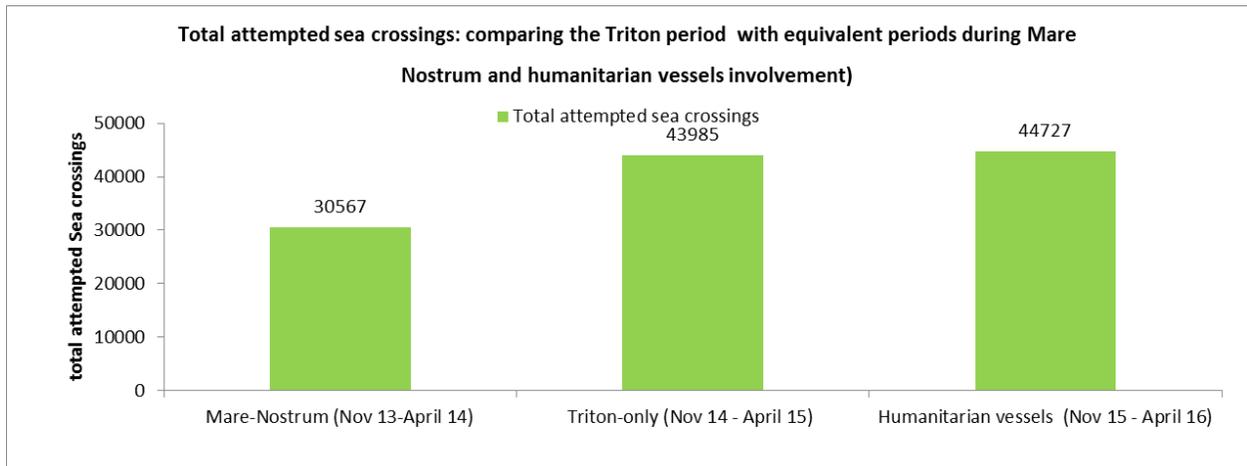


Fig 1: Total attempted sea crossings over different periods. [1]

Adaptive Smuggling Tactics and SAR operations close to Libya

Smugglers' tactics and locations of operations started changing from 2015. In a report made public by WikiLeaks, EUNAVFOR noted in late 2015 that smugglers operating in international waters risked being apprehended by EUNAVFOR MED vessels and their boats being destroyed. Smugglers consequently tended to stay within Libyan waters, using lower quality and less expensive rubber boats with less fuel, water and food on board. [3, 4]. These changing operational patterns were already observed by EUNAVFOR *before* a substantial presence of NGO SAR assets [3].

Geo-spatial analyses of MSF rescues from May 2015 to December 2016 consistently show a clear clustering of shipwrecks close to the Libyan coast [1, 3], marking the main search and rescue zone for NGOs at sea. Similarly, eight in ten boats rescued by MSF in 2016 were rubber boats, overloaded two-to-five times the recommended capacity. International conventions consider these boats in distress from the moment they launch, making preventive search and rescue operations an imperative [1, 3].

Testimonies from Libya suggest a complex and wide-spread network of smugglers at work: migrants and refugees from the Horn of Africa tend to make deals locally with smugglers for the whole journey to Europe. Those originating from Central and Western African tend to pay cash for each leg of their journey up to the embarkation point instead, and are thus at higher risk to be placed in lower quality boats [3].

4 EUNAVFOR MED Op SOPHIA - Six Monthly Report 22 June – 31 December 2015, <https://wikileaks.org/eu-military-refugees/EEAS/EEAS-2016-126.pdf>

NGO's improving maritime safety and saving lives

NGO's played a vital and life-saving role in SAR operations during 2016 and helped improve maritime safety. There were 46,806 rescues conducted by humanitarian vessels in 2016, with MSF contributing to 21,224 of these rescues. Humanitarian NGO's were the most important single SAR-actor making for 26% of rescues in 2016, followed by the Italian Navy (21%), Italian Coast Guard (20%), EUNAFOR MED (17%) and Frontex (8%) [1].

A standardized comparison of number of deaths and missing at sea shows a significant improvement of maritime safety: 59% fewer migrants and refugees died while attempting to cross the Mediterranean from May 2015 to December 2016 compared to the previous six months without any humanitarian NGO SAR operations (Nov 2014-Apr 2015), Fig 2. [1].

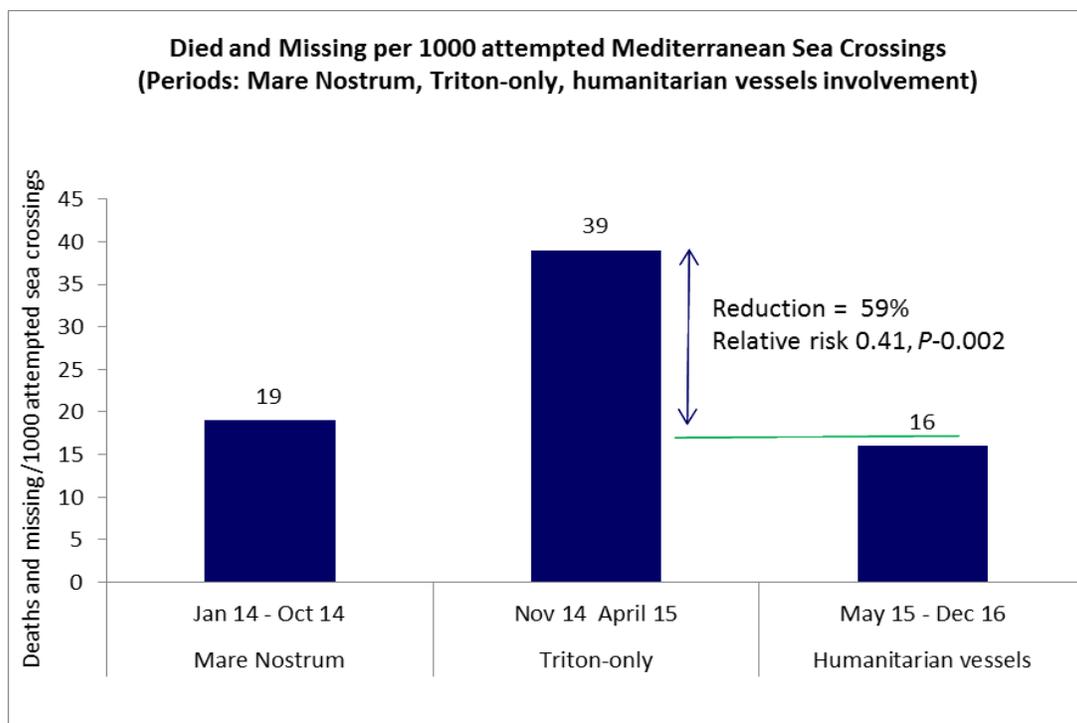


Fig 2: Mortality per 1000 attempted sea crossings. [1]

A similar comparison of mortality rates at sea done by the Oxford University confirms MSF's findings: the presence of humanitarian NGO SAR operations contributed to less deaths and missing people at sea [2].

Nevertheless the Central Mediterranean remained the most dangerous route to Europe, with a 19 times higher risk of mortality in 2016 than on the Western route via Spain. Despite the joint efforts of the Italian Navy and Coast Guard, EUNAVOR, and NGO-SAR vessels, still 5315 people died or went missing in 2016 alone [1, 2]

Conclusions

Together, the three reports provide strong evidence against the accusations that humanitarian NGO's act as a migratory "pull factor" or contribute to a deterioration of maritime safety. On the contrary, they highlight the important role humanitarian NGOs played in SAR-activities.

Irrespective of any rescue operations, large numbers of refugees and migrants attempted to cross the Mediterranean, with many drowning or suffering severe injuries en route. Beyond the simplistic discourse of pull factors, further attention and research has to focus on the multifold drivers of migration, the extensive smuggling networks, and the alarming living and detention conditions of refugees and migrants in Libya.