

INSIGHT BRIEF: CANARY ISLANDS, IRREGULAR MIGRATION RISE

27/02/2024

Incident

A Bahamas-flagged tanker was tasked by MRCC Spain to assist in a humanitarian search and rescue (HSAR) of 58 irregular migrants aboard a small wooden hulled boat 57M southwest of Boujdour, Western Sahara. The vessel spent six hours, and transited an additional 22M, during the operation, until the arrival of the Spanish SAR asset SALVAMAR MACONDO.

Context

There has been a notable and measurable increase in the number of irregular migrants attempting to reach the Canary Islands, Spain, aboard small boats. These migrants typically embark on their journeys from Western Sahara, Mauritania, and Senegal. The number of people per small boat varies between 35 to 125 pax. According to data from the Spanish Ministry of the Interior, from January 2024 until the end of February, the Canary Islands have witnessed the arrival of over 12,000 irregular migrants by sea. This figure represented a 631% increase compared to the same period in the previous year. Over the same period in 2023, Spain recorded 37 irregular migrant boat arrivals, whereas in 2024 the number of boats recorded to reach the Canary Islands surpassed 200. A proportion of these small boats reach the islands under their own power; however, Ambrey is aware of a rising number of instances in which merchant vessels came across these boats or were tasked by the Spanish MRCC to assist in HSAR operations.

Analysis

AIS data has indicated that the number of vessels passing the Canary Islands has more than doubled in 2024. This is likely partly due to the Red Sea Houthi attacks on vessels affiliated with the US, UK and Israel. Many impacted ship owners and operators have elected to sail around the Cape on their way to Europe and the US. Additionally, the trade between Europe and South America has also risen. Whilst the increased number of merchant vessels passing the high-migration areas of North-Western Africa decreases the likelihood of a vessel's participation in HSAR, the rise in the number of people crossing has more than offset the decreases in the likelihood of a vessel's participation in HSAR due to traffic. The impact on the vessels varies significantly. Ambrey recorded events in which vessels sailed for an additional distance of 110M and incurred a delay of over 20 hours; in other events vessels sailed below 10M and completed the operation under two hours. Ambrey also recorded an event in which the rescued people, upon learning that the vessel was not headed to Europe, took over the vessel using bladed weapons and forced the master to sail to the Canary Islands, however, security incidents were rare.

Implications

The irregular migration off the coast of the Canary Islands, western Sahara and Mauritania has become a safety and security concern for merchant shipping crossing the area. The frequency of HSAR operations necessitated by merchant ships in this region is on the rise. This area is unlike the Mediterranean Sea, where there is a combination of non-governmental organization vessels, European governmental aid to Libyan and Tunisian MRCCs, and Frontex air reconnaissance missions that assist distressed migrants. In the Atlantic approach to the Canary Islands, such support is markedly absent. AIS data indicates that the Spanish SAR vessels limit their operations to approximately 50M off the coast of the Canary Islands. As a result, the dependency on commercial vessels for HSAR operations is notably higher and expected to increase in tandem with the growing number of migrant vessels and crossings. Ambrey assessed that there is a distinct difference in the threat profile to crew members and vessels involved in HSAR operations, particularly when assisting large groups of up to 135 pax. These individuals, potentially having been at sea for weeks often with minors, may require medical assistance for communicable diseases, and are in a state of desperation to reach Europe, presenting a unique set of challenges compared to standard search and rescue operations for regular seafarers.

Mitigations:

Recognising that masters and operators rerouted from the Red Sea to alternative routes towards Europe and the USA might not possess the awareness of risks of HSAR operations, Ambrey developed a comprehensive guidance protocol to aid masters. The Rescue Advice Management Practice (RAMP) is designed to support shipmasters throughout the HSAR process, encompassing pre-rescue preparations, the embarkation and transit of rescued individuals, and post-disembarkation procedures. RAMP aims to enhance the readiness and response efficacy of merchant shipping in managing the complex and humanitarian demands of HSAR operations in the Atlantic.

For a complete RAMP checklist and a brief on associated risks please contact intelligence@ambrey.com