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## **INSIGHT BRIEF: MEDITERRANEAN – TUNISIA, HUMANITARIAN SEARCH AND RESCUE (HSAR)**

**27/03/2024**

### **Incident**

A Panama-flagged tanker and a Liberia-flagged container ship rescued 158 people 61M northeast of Sfax, Tunisia. Ambrey was provided with footage taken by the tanker's crew, which showed at least 20 individuals in the water. Some were wearing life vests, others were not. Additionally, an overcrowded, blue-hulled, small boat typical of those used by Central Mediterranean migrants could be seen alongside the tanker. Both of her outboard engines were operational, but the boat was unsuitable for a Mediterranean crossing. The tanker's crew embarked the migrants. Video footage showed five migrants sharing two blankets, others were wandering the deck as the crew supported the embarkation of others. One of the men in the water was thrown a life ring. The tanker proceeded to Lampedusa, Italy, to disembark the rescued individuals. After spending two hours off the coast of Lampedusa, the tanker resumed her voyage to Sfax. The tanker travelled an additional distance of 148M and spent 15 hours on the operation.

### **Context**

Irregular migration across the Mediterranean Sea and off the coast of Western Sahara represents a multifaceted challenge, encompassing political, safety, and security dimensions for merchant shipping navigating these waters. Ambrey has noted a marked uptick in the instances of Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres soliciting assistance from commercial vessels for Humanitarian Search and Rescue operations (HSAR). According to data disclosed by the Italian Interior Ministry on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2023, 155,754 migrants arrived in Italy in 2023, up from 103,846 in 2022, a 50% rise.

### **Analysis**

Human trafficking has become an industry in Libya and Tunisia. To facilitate migrants' desire to reach Europe there is a panoply of "service providers". There are boat manufacturers, financiers, facilitators, corrupt detention guards, police officers, coast guard members, and traffickers. FRONTEX estimates that the industry is worth over US \$150 million per year. The highest number of attempted crossings is between June and September. Twelve NGO vessels and an NGO aircraft regularly patrol the Mediterranean waters and rescue migrants. Earlier the same day, and in a nearby area, one of these NGO vessels, Mediterranean Saving Humans-operated MARE JONIO, made another rescue. If the NGOs wish to disembark the individuals in Italy, they must only participate in one rescue operation at a time, so this particular vessel did not participate in this subsequent operation. There were no other NGO vessels or SAR vessels in the area to rescue these people.

### **Implications**

The Italian government enacted legislation imposing restrictions on NGO vessels' operations, compelling them to sail to a northern Italian port for disembarkation. This can significantly lengthen the sailing distance of NGO vessels and diminish their presence in high-migration areas. The Italian, Maltese, and Libyan governments have not filled the void left by the absence of NGO vessels. Nor have the Libyan and Tunisian authorities effectively prevented crossings. Consequently, the combination of the vacuum created by the NGO vessels' absence and the increasing number of attempted crossings places additional pressure on merchant vessels operating in the area.

### **Mitigations**

Ambrey informs vessels crossing the Mediterranean of ongoing SAR operations. The vessels receive an advisory that will provide companies with situational awareness. This grants the vessel the opportunity to make informed operational decisions and prepare for possible requests to participate in the SAR operations. Additionally, Ambrey developed Rescue Advice Management Practices that aid crew members in planning a response and helps mitigate the associated crew safety and security risks. The presence of migrants in the Mediterranean changes day-by-day, which is why these services are provided through Ambrey's Guardian service.

For a brief on associated risks and for a Mediterranean Guardian service please contact your account manager or [intelligence@ambrey.com](mailto:intelligence@ambrey.com)