

INSIGHT BRIEF: 32 MERCHANT VESSELS PARTICIPATED IN A SAR OPERATION SOUTH OF CRETE

Incident

On 15 October at approximately 18:00 UTC, Ambrey reported via its Sentinel service that a Hellenic Coast Guard Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) was observed performing multiple low-altitude flyovers 22NM south of Gavdos, Greece. Shortly afterwards, five merchant vessels arrived in the area and began participating in a Humanitarian Search and Rescue (HSAR) operation for over 100 people aboard a small boat that had departed from Libya, bound for Crete, Greece. Ambrey later learned that the boat had capsized, and people were in the water. Two Hellenic Coast Guard vessels and a Greek Navy aerial asset were also deployed. A Turkey-flagged container vessel rescued 96 people and sailed to Kali Limes, Greece, to transfer them to Greek authorities. On 16 October, the vessel arrived at Kali Limes anchorage and handed over the rescued individuals, while many others remained missing at sea. Ambrey observed additional vessels joining the search for the missing. At the time of writing, three days after the incident, rescue efforts were still ongoing. More than 30 merchant vessels had participated in the SAR operation thus far.

Context

According to Greek officials, crossings on the Eastern Mediterranean migration route, which primarily brings migrants to Greek islands, increased by 39% compared to the same period last year. Overall, the number of migrants arriving in Greece rose by 120%. However, the real figures are likely higher, as only detected crossings are accounted for. Several push and pull factors contribute to this significant rise in seaborne crossings. Human traffickers continually adapt their operations to exploit the least monitored routes. Ambrey has been monitoring merchant vessel involvement in HSAR operations for over two years, observing notable changes in irregular migration routes to Europe. While some routes and departure points have declined, others have become active. One such emerging route is from eastern Libya to Crete, now a primary launch point for northern African crossings into the European Union. This shift is largely due to changing law enforcement dynamics in western Libya and Tunisia. Italian and Spanish investments in the Libyan Coast Guard in western Libya, tied to curbing crossings to Lampedusa and Sicily, have forced traffickers to adjust their operations. Additionally, Italy has imposed stringent regulations on NGOs involved in rescue missions at sea, resulting in multiple vessel arrests and detentions for non-compliance. Furthermore, Italy has begun deporting irregular migrants to detention centres in Albania, which may serve as a deterrent.

Analysis

Ambrey observed and recorded the movement of over 31 merchant vessels involved in the incident that started on 15 October. The operation involved 16 tankers and 15 dry cargo vessels, the vessels spent over 280 hours (11.6 days) and sailed for an additional distance of 2,286 nautical miles combined, and at the time of writing, the operation was still ongoing. A distance comparable to sailing from Southampton to Athens. Unlike in the western Libyan waters where NGOs, FRONTEX and the Libyan Coast Guard operate, in the event of an emergency, there is a greater reliance on merchant vessels to conduct SAR operations. In the last 12 months, Ambrey recorded a marked increase in merchant vessel involvement in these operations of the coast of Crete. From October 2023 till March 2024 Ambrey recorded 22 merchant vessels participation in the SAR of the coast of Crete. Between March 2024 to October 2024, it was over 140 vessels.

Implications

Humanitarian Mass Rescue Operations (HMRO) conducted by merchant ships present significant risks to both the rescued individuals and the crew, as well as potential hazards to the vessel. While preserving life remains the top priority, numerous considerations and variables must be addressed. Unlike dedicated Search and Rescue (SAR) vessels, merchant ships and their crews face a considerable capability gap. By definition, HMRO goes beyond the typical operational capacity of merchant vessels. The absence of NGOs and FRONTEX in regions places additional pressure on merchant vessels to fill this gap. Even the best-prepared merchant vessels and crews are not fully equipped to handle HMROs. A merchant tanker, with an average crew of 22, is typically neither designed nor sufficiently trained and equipped to conduct HMRO effectively without putting the rescued and the crew at risk. Furthermore, those being rescued, individuals attempting irregular crossings to Europe, usually lack maritime experience. Many are likely to be in severe distress and the boat's passengers may include minors, which further complicates the situation. Additionally, language barriers can make it difficult for the crew to convey instructions to the rescued, who may not understand or follow them. Rescue operations often take place in challenging conditions, such as low visibility, which amplifies the risks to both the rescued and the rescuers, as well as to the vessel itself. When laden tankers are involved, the potential for environmental disasters, due to a collision, also increases. The search and rescue operations were taking place through the night. Ambrey observed a variety of search and rescue patterns with parallel searches, forms of expanding square searches and others with no discernible pattern. This indicated no overarching coordination. Without a coordinated and concerted effort from transnational bodies and governments, such as those of Egypt, Greece, and Libya, the reliance on merchant vessels for HMRO will likely continue. This status quo heightens the risks for vessels, crews, and irregular migrants, and may not prevent further loss of life.

Mitigations

Maritime risk management companies, like Ambrey, can act as force multipliers by enhancing maritime domain awareness. Greater cooperation and communication between the MRCCs, merchant vessel operators and maritime risk management companies can lead to more informed and coordinated responses. With improved communication channels and real-time intelligence sharing, these partnerships can help identify appropriate responses earlier, optimize rescue efforts, and ensure that merchant vessels are better prepared when they are called upon for rescue missions. In summary, integrating the expertise of maritime risk management companies strengthens the overall safety and efficacy of HMRO efforts, ensuring better outcomes for both the rescued individuals and the vessels involved.

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 response and help 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