

MEDITERRANEAN REFUGEES



A group of refugees on board a vessel after rescue

THE SITUATION

In the last few years, there has been a significant increase in immigration to Europe from war torn areas in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. This has also resulted in a recent wave of refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean in vessels of various sizes and conditions.

Sometimes, these vessels are purposely sunk to force rescue from the closest EU Coast Guard. This often has tragic consequences resulting in the drowning of a large number of refugees.

The most common route used is the Central Mediterranean route from North Africa to Italy and Malta.



A single rescue operation may involve a great number of persons.

Most of the refugees are however Syrian, Eritrean, and Afghan. Frontex, the EU's border agency estimates that 40,000 refugees crossed on this route alone during 2013. And according to the New York Times, an equal amount of refugees is estimated to already have crossed during the first half of 2014.

The summer is high season for refugees in the Mediterranean, and numbers are expected to increase.

EUROPEAN UNION REACTION

After several incidents where boats sank and hundreds of refugees drowned, the local authorities in the relevant European countries are taking this very seriously, and the rescue efforts are well organized.

The Club has seen several incidents where the Italian Coast Guard has contacted a cargo ship transiting the Mediterranean and asked them to pick up refugees, as the closest ship to a sinking boat.

We have found that the rescue process is very efficient.

The cargo vessel will be asked to call a port, usually in Sicily, and disembark the refugees at that port. There is usually little delay to the vessel and no trouble with the local authorities.

Hot tip : It is, however, important that the crew counts how many refugees board, so to make sure that all are disembarked.

As it can be hundreds of refugees, it is not easy to keep track of everyone. Our correspondents in Sicily (or other relevant locations) can assist if necessary.

The second largest route is the Eastern Mediterranean where refugees enter Greece, Bulgaria, and Cyprus mainly from Turkey but there are less maritime incidents on this route.



A crew man providing food to rescued persons

OTHER STOWAWAY ISSUES

The Club has also seen situations where stowaways board vessels in North Africa, and then claim to be Syrian as they are aware that Syrians are more likely to obtain political asylum in European countries than citizens from North African countries. The local correspondents in the first port of call can assist with contacting authorities and providing assistance to determine the stowaway's true nationality.

SOLAS OBLIGATIONS

It is worth keeping in mind that Vessels have a duty under the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) 1974 to render assistance to another vessel in distress if in close proximity or assistance has been requested by a Government Agency.

Specifically under Regulation 33:

"The Master of a ship at seas which is in a position to be able to provide assistance, on receiving information from any source that persons are in distress at sea, is bound to proceed with all speed to their assistance"

"This obligation to provide assistance applies regardless of the nationality or status of such persons or the circumstances in which they are found."

LOSS PREVENTION ADVICE

The Association would recommend that whenever a vessel is asked by a Government authority to assist in a rescue operation, or is facing a situation where it has to respond to distressed people of its own volition, that the Club be advised as soon as possible, so that advice and support can be given.

Furthermore the Association has published advice on how vessels should approach Stowaway situations, in its publication "Safely with Skuld" which can be accessed here :

<http://www.skuld.com/library/safely-with-skuld/safely-with-skuld/>

CREDITS

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