

Report crew 8:

11 boats in 6 nights and intimidation attempts of the so-called Libyan coastguard



By Mirjam Reininger, crew member on the Nadir in September 2024

September 2024 was a busy month for the crew of the Nadir, with many night operations. A total of 446 people, including several small children and babies, were found on 11 boats in the dark. All the refugees survived the dangerous crossing to Italy. Two attempts to intimidate by the so-called Libyan coastguard forced the Nadir to change course.

We found the first boat in distress on the night of September 20/21. We knew from the NGO Alarm Phone that it had to be very close to us and yet it took us hours to find it. Every little light on the horizon gave us new hope of finding the people. Using radar and a thermal imaging camera, we tried to make up for what our eyes were no longer able to see, until we were finally able to make out the silhouette of a black inflatable boat. There were 37 people on board, including two little girls with their mothers. We took the people on board and brought them to Lampedusa.

We searched for this boat for so long that we had to ask ourselves whether we had passed it by in our search and, if so, why the people had not drawn attention to themselves. A few days later, we got to know a potential reason for this - the so-called Libyan coastguard.

Libyan intimidation attempts

On both September 23 and October 1, we encountered the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. At the first encounter, we were in the so-called Libyan Search and Rescue Zone (SAR), where we had searched in vain for a distress at sea a little earlier. The so-called coast guard ship approached us and told us via radio (“Get out! Get out!”) that we were not welcome in this area. We were about 60nm off the Libyan coast, well within international waters, where any ship is allowed to be. The Libyan ship did not seem to know the difference between international and territorial waters. In response to our attempts to talk to them about the legal situation, they only responded with more “Get out!” shouts. We decided to de-escalate and set course north. They followed us for a few miles, then turned around. We suspect it was the same ship that later forced 54 people on the move off a boat deep in the Maltese SAR zone to take them to Libya.



Our second encounter with the so-called Libyan Coast Guard took place in the Maltese SAR zone. After a long night operation, we had 78 people from two boats on board and were on the lookout for a third, which we suspected was on our route to Lampedusa. Around midnight, a very bright and rapidly growing light appeared on the horizon. Fearing a collision, we tried again and again to make radio contact - no reply.

We soon realized that the bright light was a searchlight directed at us by a large, grey and initially unidentifiable ship. We assumed that it was the so-called Libyan coast guard. However, we were only able to confirm this definitively afterwards by comparing the images we had taken with previous sightings, as the ship did not respond to any form of communication during our night-time encounter. Instead, it came alarmingly close to us and then turned and passed so close to our bow that we changed course. We don't know what happened to the boat we were looking out for.

Attempts of intimidation like this clearly show that the so-called Libyan coastguard is not interested in a safe passage for people on the run. Instead of bringing people in need to a safe port, they are hampering NGO ships and making the life-threatening escape route across the Mediterranean even more unsafe. We are grateful for the relative calm that the people fleeing on board the Nadir have been able to maintain despite this threatening situation.

Operations with the Italian Coast Guard

The second of the 6 nights we found boats was the night of September 24th to 25th. We were again searching for a distress case at sea reported by the NGO Alarm Phone. Shortly after we found the boat in the dark, the Italian coast guard came and took the people on board. At the request of the coast guard ship, we put our tender in the water so that we could intervene if anyone went overboard during the rescue operation. All 45 people made it safely onto the coastguard vessel.



As we were aware of another case nearby, we then set off to search for it with the Italian coastguard. Nadir supported the Italian coastguard in its search for the distress case, relaying information under the coordination of the coastguard, until the distress case was finally found. At the request of the coastguard vessel, the Nadir tender again helped to ensure that all 48 people were brought safely on board the coastguard vessel.

Fisherman makes misleading emergency call

On the night of September 25-26, we followed the mayday relay of a fisherman who had reported a boat in his immediate vicinity whose engine had failed. When we arrived, he told us that only one of two engines had failed. The boat had been out of sight for a long time by then. He offered to help us search, but even with his help and that of the Astral, a ship from the NGO Open Arms, which was searching from the north, we were unable to find the boat.

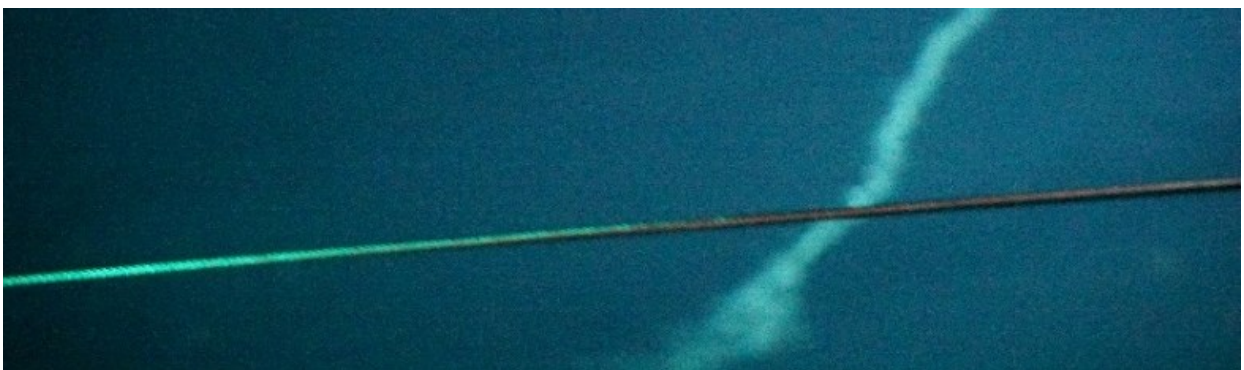
Later that night, however, we found a rubber boat with 25 people on board. When we distributed life jackets with our tender, we saw in what a bad state it was. The engine had to be held in position with ropes to prevent it from falling into the water and one of the tubes had already lost air. We decided to take the people on board, where they soon fell asleep exhausted. As it got light and Lampedusa slowly appeared on the horizon, the first people called their relatives and friends - a special moment for every operation.



Evacuated boat sinks in front of our eyes

We also heard of a distress case the following night from September 26 to 27. The darkness, which had become a constant companion during our rotation, made the search difficult. It was three o'clock in the morning when we were finally able to make out the faint flashing lights. It was cell phone flashlights of refugees on a white fiberglass boat with about 45 people on board.

As we were about to lower our tender into the water, our own flashlights spotted something else. At some depth, we noticed a thin white line under the Nadir. We didn't know where it came from and we didn't know where it went. What we did know, however, was that if it was connected to the fiberglass boat, it could unbalance it if we moved with the Nadir. We only realized how deep the line really was in the water after several unsuccessful attempts to grab it with a hook. After some time, in constant megaphone contact with the fiberglass boat that was waiting for us, we finally got hold of it. We had unintentionally caught a fishing line, which fortunately only ended up in a big knot.



With the tender finally in the water, we saw that the people were already scooping water out of their boat. We decided to evacuate it onto the Nadir. When the boat was empty, it began to sink due to the two heavy engines at the stern. The weight of the people alone had kept it in balance.

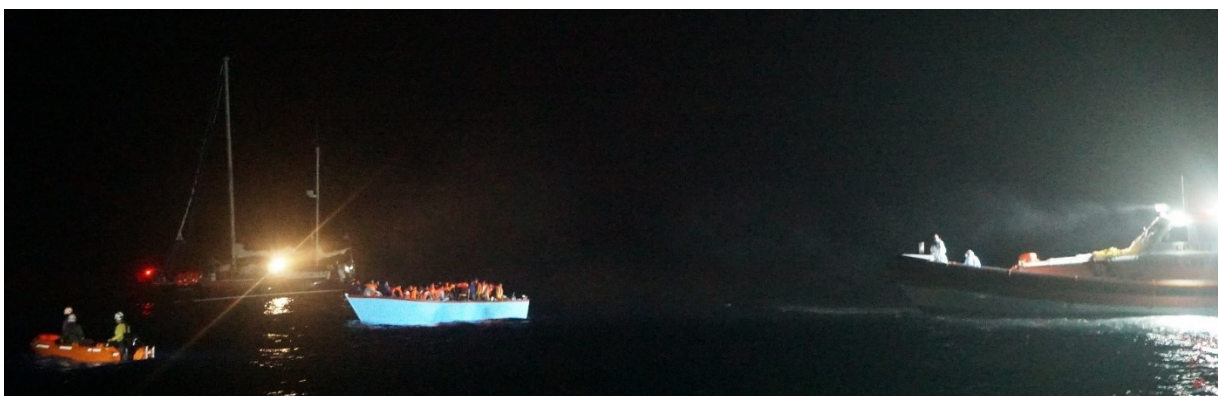
While the refugees on the Nadir were still having to watch the boat they had just been on sink, a small black rubber boat emerged from the darkness. We also took these 22 people on board and brought them all safely to Lampedusa.



Three boats, the Dakini and a drone

The next night, from September 27 to 28, was our fourth operational night in a row. We set course for a distress case reported by the NGO Alarm Phone. When we arrived, another sailing vessel from the civil fleet, the Dakini, was already on site and distributing life jackets. We lowered our tender into the water to get an overview of the situation. There were 64 people on board the overcrowded wooden boat.

Shortly afterwards, a ship arrived from the Italian coastguard, which the Dakini had already informed. All the people were taken safely on board the coastguard vessel. It set course for Lampedusa, but it was not to be the last time we encountered it that night.



At around one o'clock in the morning, we happened to come across a boat with 58 people on board. As we approached that boat, we saw some faint lights slowly approaching us - the third boat of the night with 24 people on board.

While we were handing out life jackets and notifying the Italian authorities, we saw a triangle of lights circling above us and the boats. We had already noticed similar drones during other cases. Coast guard ships from the EU and Frontex are not allowed to take refugees back to Libya, that would be an illegal pushback. Therefore, there is an inhumane trend towards no longer monitoring the Mediterranean with ships but with aircraft and drones in order to send out distress calls instead of rescuing people, to which the so-called Libyan coast guard then responds. The latter brings the people back to Libya, where they are usually taken back to camps where they are exposed to human rights violations and often have to buy their freedom again. A man on board the Nadir, who was on his fifth escape attempt, also told us about this cycle of camps, buying his freedom, attempts to flee and pull-backs.



In the case of the two boats we had met by chance that night, to our relief the Italian coastguard sent the same coastguard vessel to us, which had already followed the Dakini's mayday relay earlier and still had the people from the first boat on board. It picked up all the people and set course for Lampedusa again with almost 150 people on board.

Two rubber boats and operational conclusion

During the night of October 1 to 2, we heard of three distress cases reported by Seabird, a civilian observation aircraft. As dusk fell, we spotted the first boat on the horizon with 43 people on board. After the successful evacuation, we also found the second boat, which the Trottamar III, another ship of the civilian fleet, was already searching for. We took all 36 people on the Nadir. With three babies on board, we set course for Lampedusa, where we were able to bring everyone safely ashore. On the way, we had the aforementioned second unpleasant encounter with the so-called Libyan coastguard. We don't know what happened to the third boat.

This marked the end of an intensive period of operations for us. We probably can't imagine how exhausting it was for the people on the move. What remains is the hope that all the boats we searched for in vain survived their journey to Europe unharmed; the gratitude that we did not have

any people in the water or any very severe medical cases during our rotation and, finally, the anger at a dehumanizing asylum system that puts the EU's policy of isolation above people's lives. The civilian fleet can only try to make a difference for individuals. What is actually needed are legal and safe escape routes, an anti-racist rescue infrastructure and a Europe that is finally beginning to live up to its responsibilities.

