Resolution on the need for EU action on search and rescue in the Mediterranean

2023/2787(RSP) - 13/07/2023 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the need for EU action on search and rescue in the Mediterranean.

The text adopted in plenary was tabled by the EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA and the Left groups.

According to International Organization for Migration (IOM) figures, 27 633 persons have been recorded as missing (presumed dead) in the Mediterranean since 2014. In 2022, 2 406 persons were recorded as dead or missing and for 2023 the figure has already reached 1 875 dead or missing. This route is only one of many deadly routes taken by persons seeking to reach Europe.

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) is currently operational in the Mediterranean through Themis (which supports Italy in the Central Mediterranean), Poseidon (which supports Greece at the Greek sea borders with Türkiye) and Indalo (which supports Spain in the Western Mediterranean). The Libyan coast guard continues to intercept or rescue a large number of persons at sea. However, on several occasions the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre in Libya has failed to fully meet its obligations under international maritime law to coordinate rescue operations, is often unresponsive to distress calls, has hindered NGO vessels from saving lives and has put lives at risk when rescuing or intercepting persons at sea. People intercepted by the Libyan coast guard are transferred to detention centres where they are systematically exposed to arbitrary detention in inhumane conditions, and where torture and other ill-treatment, including rape, as well as arbitrary killings and exploitation are endemic.

Parliament considers that a permanent, robust and effective Union response in SAR operations at sea is crucial to preventing an escalating death toll of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

In its resolution, Parliament expressed its deep regret and sorrow at the recurring tragic loss of life in the Mediterranean, most notably the recent shipwreck of 14 June 2023, when a fishing boat sank in the Ionian Sea off the coast of Pylos, Messenia, Greece while carrying an estimated 750 persons, of whom 104 were rescued, with 82 bodies having been recovered and the rest missing, presumed dead. It urged the EU and its Member States to do their utmost to identify the bodies and the missing persons, and to inform their relatives.

The Commission is called on to assess current Member States' practices regarding search and rescue (SAR) operations and to start work immediately on a new, more sustainable, reliable and permanent approach to them, and providing material, financial and operational support to Member States in order to enhance the overall capacity for saving lives at sea and coordinating SAR operations. Moreover, Member States and Frontex are called on to enhance proactive SAR operations by providing sufficient vessels and equipment specifically dedicated to SAR operations and personnel along the routes where they can make an effective contribution to saving lives.

Parliament reiterated that safe and legal pathways are the best way of avoiding loss of life and urged Member States to intensify resettlement measures and, where necessary, put in place humanitarian corridors to the European Union. It called for the establishment of a comprehensive EU SAR mission implemented by the Member States' competent authorities and Frontex.

According to the resolution, all actors in the Mediterranean should proactively transmit information and, where appropriate, **relay mayday messages** concerning persons in distress at sea to the authorities responsible for SAR operations and, where appropriate, to any vessels in the vicinity that could imminently engage in SAR and bring those persons to a safe port of disembarkation. Parliament also called on Member States to maintain their nearest safe ports open to NGO vessels and not to criminalise those who provide assistance to migrants in distress.

The Commission is called on to:

- step up its coordinating role within the SAR Contact Group by convening more regular meetings and associating all actors involved in SAR, including NGOs and shipowners and report regularly on the activities of the SAR Contact Group to Parliament;

- examine whether actions taken by some Member States in accordance with their national law to prevent rescue boats from entering their territorial waters without prior authorisation are in line with Union and international law;

- share comprehensive information about all the types of support the EU and its Member States provide to border and coast guards in third countries, including Libya, Türkiye, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. Moreover, the Commission and the Member States are called on to assess the allegations of serious fundamental rights violations by the Libyan coast guard and to end cooperation in the event of serious fundamental rights violations faced by people intercepted at sea;

- put forward proposals to make **funding to third countries conditional on cooperation** on the management of migration flows and the fight against human traffickers and migrant smugglers.