



PRESS RELEASE - EMBARGOED UNTIL 15/07, 09:00 CEST
July 2022

New investigation reveals that Frontex and Hellenic Coast Guard vessels are responsible for the illegal-at-sea-expulsions of 27,464 asylum seekers in the Aegean Sea

DiEM25 has had access to a new report by Forensic Architecture/Forensis into 'drift-backs' - illegal at-sea expulsions of asylum seekers in the Aegean Sea - that verifies and maps over 1000 cases, involving the expulsion of 27,464 people, evidencing the systematic and widespread nature of the practice and demonstrating the culpability of specific vessels of the Hellenic Coast Guard and FRONTEX, the European Coastguard agency.

Yanis Varoufakis, DiEM25 co-founder, reacted to these findings as follows: "With every pushback of non-Europeans in the Mediterranean, Europe loses another fibre of its soul. As Europe's soul is stripped away slowly, painfully, Europe is prepared for greater inhumanity toward its own citizens. No European should sleep easily while non-Europeans are pushed back into the menacing seas. Their nightmare today, tonight, will haunt our dreams forever."

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The case

For more than a decade, migrants and refugees making the sea crossing from Turkey to Greece have suffered egregious and well-documented violence at the EU's south-eastern frontier, including forced detention, arbitrary arrest, beatings, and non-assistance.

Since March 2020, a violent and illegal new method of deterrent has been documented in the Aegean Sea. Migrants and refugees describe being intercepted within Greek territorial waters, or arrested after they arrive on Greek shores, beaten, stripped of their possessions, and then forcefully loaded onto life rafts with no engine and left to drift back to the Turkish coast.

This new research shows that 'drift-backs', as the practice of abandoning asylum seekers at sea has come to be called, are now routine throughout the Aegean, often resulting in injuries and death by drowning. The data presented in the platform demonstrates that the scale and severity of the practice is increasing. Drift-backs reported from the coast of the Greek mainland, and as far south as the island of Crete.

Drift-backs are manifestly illegal, and demonstrably contravene numerous international protocols including the inalienable rights to apply for asylum and to seek rescue at sea. Despite



mounting pressure and well-documented evidence, Greek authorities deny that drift-backs take place in the Aegean. But FA/Forensis' research shows that this is not a plausible denial - rather, what emerges is evidence of a systematic, widespread and highly calculated lethal practice.

A new investigation

Drawing on material sourced from asylum seekers, monitors and activists such as AlarmPhone and Aegean Boat Report, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency FRONTEX's own Joint Operations Reporting Application database, the website of the Turkish Coast Guard, and the results of open source research, FA/Forensis was able to geolocate and verify evidence of more than 1000 drift-backs between March 2020 and March 2022. The platform is already supporting ongoing legal action, independent monitoring, reporting, and advocacy, as well as growing demands for accountability and international calls for defunding national border guards and FRONTEX. The platform will be updated periodically, as evidence of drift-backs continues to emerge. Additional Research was contributed by Border Violence Monitoring Network, Bellingcat Global Authentication Project, the Crisis Evidence Lab and the Digital Verification Corps (DVC) at Amnesty International.

Conclusions

- Between March 2020 and March 2022, 1018 drift-backs were documented in the Aegean Sea, involving the expulsion of 27,464 people.
- Of these 1018 incidents, 378 were found to have taken place from, or off the shores of, Lesbos island, 136 off Chios, 194 off Samos, 122 off Kos, 92 off Rhodes and 79 in the rest of the Dodecanese.
- In 16 recorded cases, asylum seekers were intercepted deep inside Greek waters before being taken to the border and then cast adrift. Such cases show a high degree of cooperation among different agents and actors, suggesting a system that is carefully designed to deny access to the Greek shores, regardless of their distance to their border.
- FRONTEX, the European border and coast guard agency was found to have been directly involved in 122 drift-backs, mainly by spotting the incoming vessels and alerting the Greek authorities, while it has knowledge of 417 such incidents, having logged them in their own operational archives codified and masked as 'preventions of entry'.
- In 3 cases, the German NATO warship FGS Berlin was present on the scene.
- 26 cases were recorded where people were thrown directly into the sea by the Hellenic Coast Guard, without the use of any flotation device. In 2 of these cases, the people were found handcuffed.

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- 11 people were documented to have drowned during a drift-back, and at least 4 more went missing.

Quotes

Stefanos Levidis, a Forensic Architecture researcher , said:

'Demonstrating the scale and cruelty of this enduring crime, our study erects a wall of evidence against the Greek government's increasingly hollow denials. It shows how the Greek Coast Guard cynically uses rescue equipment in reverse, to deny access to safety to thousands of asylum-seekers, leaving them adrift to the sea currents.'

'The Aegean Sea, a global symbol of hospitality and mobility, here shows its dark side. It has been sealed and turned into a weapon, a conveyor belt for people whose lives are measured differently at Europe's edges. As citizens of Greece and Europe, we demand that this cruel practice ends immediately. We have seen enough.'

Milena Marin, head of the Crisis Evidence Lab at Amnesty International, said: 'The platform is a true testament to the power of data - by collating such a large pool of evidence, including video footage, testimony, vessel tracking data, oceanographic, and meteorological data we can see clear patterns and relationships between the cases. The systematic and widespread nature of the deadly "push back" practice is now undeniable.'

About Forensic Architecture

Forensic Architecture is an interdisciplinary research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London. We undertake spatial and media analysis for international prosecutors, human rights groups and NGOs. Our research is presented in political and legal forums, truth commissions, courts, and human rights reports, as well as in exhibitions and public events.

About Forensis

Founded in 2021 in Berlin as a non-governmental, not-for-profit association, Forensic Architecture's sister agency, Forensis, works at the request of, interest of, or in collaboration with individuals, communities, or environments threatened by state and corporate violence.

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Note to Editors

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<https://diem25.org>

DiEM25 is a pan-European movement of democrats, united under the conviction that the EU will only survive if it is radically transformed. The environmental, economic and coronavirus crisis have shown that real solutions for the majority and not the minority can only come about if we join forces across borders. This is the mission of DiEM25: through a coordinated effort, across Europe, to unite citizens and create enough energy to save the EU from itself.