
Seminar: Rescue at Sea and Refugee Protection Larnaca, Cyprus, 16 November 2017

CONCEPT NOTE

Introduction

Since 2015, over 1.5 million people have fled to Europe. In 2017, as of 4 October, 138,200 Mediterranean sea-arrivals have been recorded. The main Mediterranean countries of arrival are Italy, Greece and Spain. Most people arriving by sea are fleeing from war, conflict or persecution at home, as well as deteriorating conditions in many refugee-hosting countries. Many seek safety for themselves and their families and the lack of legal pathways to Europe means that they risk their lives and face a treacherous journey. Since 2015, more than 11,500 people have died or have been lost at sea.

The numbers of arrivals by sea has resulted in a debate on the European Union asylum system. On the one hand, there is increasing pressure on Mediterranean countries to escalate and maintain search and rescue efforts to prevent deaths in addition to ensuring adequate reception standards for all arrivals. In addition, the rise in numbers has reignited the discussion on the sharing of responsibility of asylum-seekers in order to alleviate the first countries of asylum. A European Emergency Relocation Mechanism led to a commitment to relocate some 98,000 persons within two years of September 2015. However, as at the beginning of October 2017, less than 30,000 individuals have been reallocated from Greece and Italy to other European Member States. On the other hand, the emphasis at the European level has been to highlight the ‘first country of asylum’ principle in order to prevent onward movements and to maintain a level of security against perceived or actual terrorism. In this light, formal returns from the Greek islands to Turkey commenced in April 2016 and, furthermore, discussion has ensued on the external processing of asylum claims in North Africa or elsewhere.

Cyprus and rescue-at-sea

Cyprus is located in the extreme northeastern corner of the Mediterranean, 70 km south of Turkey and 104 km west of Syria from where the majority of refugees and asylum-seekers originate. Cyprus is territorially divided between the Republic, the north and the two Sovereign British Base Areas located in Dhekelia and Arkrotiri, and thus there are three different authorities responsible for search and rescue in the respective areas of operation.

The Joint Rescue Coordination Centre organizes the Republic of Cyprus’ Search and Rescue in the area of its responsibility responding to a number of different categories of alerts. The Republic of Cyprus has recently established the “Zenon” Coordination Centre, a modern multi-purpose search and rescue centre which hosts an integrated system of surveillance, identification and rescue. “Zenon” serves as a co-ordination centre for joint humanitarian

search and rescue operations with neighboring countries, as well as a training hub extending to European Union and other States.

Sea arrivals to Cyprus

Despite the proximity of Cyprus to countries affected by conflict or displacement, the number of boat arrivals in Cyprus remains comparatively low. However, there has been a notable increase of such arrivals in the past few years. Sea arrivals have increased from 278 persons in 2015, 377 persons in 2016, to 892 persons as of the end September 2017. The vast majority of persons who arrive are Syrian as well as Palestinian refugees from both Syria and Lebanon. In 2017, 57 per cent of arrivals were men, 12.5 per cent women, and 30.5 per cent children. Around 6 per cent of all children who arrive by sea are alone. Upon arrival, persons are in immediate need of food and clothing and some have required hospitalization.

Groups of persons arriving by boat are commonly taken to a tented facility in the village of Kokkinotrimithia on the outskirts of Nicosia. The facility in Kokkinotrimithia is only envisaged for short-term emergency accommodation and is not suitable to house people for long periods or during cold or hot weather conditions. Following a short stay at Kokkinotrimithia, most persons join immediate and/or distant family members already living in Cyprus. Fewer persons have required reception assistance and have been moved to the main reception centre located in the village of Kofinou. Kofinou Reception Centre has however largely been operating at full capacity and has only been able to absorb small numbers.

The aim of the Seminar

The increase in Mediterranean Sea arrivals has brought to the fore the need for better preparedness through early warning systems and contingency planning. Contingency planning includes setting out the possible scenarios for refugee arrivals, a comprehensive response strategy, co-ordination arrangements, and resource requirements. This seminar forms part of the emergency preparedness strategy with the aim to assist the relevant authorities in ensuring the safety and well-being of refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons who arrive by sea. The seminar is jointly organized by UNHCR and the Cyprus Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) and will provide the opportunity to address both the legal and practical framework relating to search and rescue at sea. It will address maritime law and international obligations relating to the protection of refugees rescued at sea and underscore the need for planning and preparedness in order to save the lives of those at risk, as presented through the examples of Greece and Italy and the supporting roles of Frontex and NGOs.

UNHCR Cyprus
Nicosia, 6 October 2017