



Volume 6
Issue 1

January 2014

CIMIC MESSENGER

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Search and Rescue at Sea



Foreword

After various serious incidents in the Mediterranean Sea in the past years, search and rescue at sea has gained high political attention. A detailed understanding of the basics and principles is of importance. The CCOE will therefore publish in this Messenger the article written by Martin Fink to provide insights in search and rescue at sea.

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COMMENT FROM CCOE

For many years, people are trying to cross international borders by sea to seek asylum. In most situations, the conditions on board of the vessels are very unsafe. Many boats are unseaworthy, overloaded with men, women and children who are prevented from taking sufficient water and food onboard due to limit weight and have “captains” with little experience.¹ As a result, many migrants lose their lives.

The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees defined 2011, the time of the initial stages of the conflict in Libya, as the “deadliest year” in the Mediterranean with 1500 migrants dead.²

In the early morning of 27 March 2011, 72 migrants left Tripoli by sea on a small ten-meter boat. The vessel ran out of a fuel and drifted for 14 days, without food and water on board, in the Mediterranean where NATO conducted Operation Unified Protector with significant naval and aerial presence. When the vessel reached the Libyan coast again, 63 people had died. Afterwards, the 9 survivors were interviewed and described the contacts with the external world in their situation of distress at sea. An aircraft had flown over, a distress call had been made via satellite telephone and a military ship had been witnessed. Only one military helicopter had provided them with a few packets of biscuits and bottles of water.³ The international press reported on the so called “left-to-die boat” case which led to widespread public outrage. Various organisations, among them Human Rights Watch, demanded further investigation of, and accountability for, the apparent violation of the international legal obligation to provide assistance to individuals in distress at sea.⁴

The described case is only one incident among many that have led to a total death of 13.417 individuals at the maritime borders of the European Union over the last 20 years.⁵ Search and rescue at sea has, logically, gained high political attention, not only of individual states but also at NATO.

Nonetheless, it should be clear that search and rescue at sea is not a topic for CIMIC. According to the Safety of Life at Sea Convention (SOLAS), every civilian and military naval bridge officer is trained and should be fully aware of the procedures when encountering a situation of distress persons at sea. Even in case of a NATO operation and a NATO naval Commander approaching a search and rescue situation, the topic remains a (legal) issue for the flag state of the individual vessel. Search and rescue at sea has thus no impact on CIMIC in a maritime environment. A detailed understanding of the basics and principles of search and rescue at sea is nonetheless of general interest and importance.

¹ Human Rights Watch, “Hidden Emergency. Migrant death in the Mediterranean”, 16 August 2012, <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/16/hidden-emergency>>.

² UNHCR, “Mediterranean takes record as most deadly stretch of water for refugees and migrants in 2011,” Briefing Notes, 31 January 2012, <<http://www.unhcr.org/4f27e01f9.html>>.

³ Charles Heller, Lorenzo Pezzani and Situ Studio, “Forensic Oceanography: Left-To-Die Boat Case”, 11 April 2012, <<http://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/fo-report.pdf>>.

⁴ Ibid 1.

⁵ Ibid 3.

This article is written by Martin Fink⁶.

INTRODUCTION

One of the effects of the Arab Spring uprisings has been the increase of people trying to find their way to the European continent via the sea, leaving hundreds exposed to possible death while trying to reach the European shores.⁷ Last October another major tragedy occurred off the coast of the Italian island Lampedusa where almost 300 people perished at sea.⁸



Photo 2: Lampedusa, la porta d'Europa

The Mediterranean Sea is an important area for NATO operations and exercises. Warships under NATO command can often encounter persons at sea in small boats that may lack seaworthiness and on which the living conditions are severely below human standards. One such example occurred during the Operation *Unified Protector* (OUP) in Libya, where NATO as part of executing a UN-mandate enforced an arms embargo off the coast of Libya and supported the protection of civilians operations from the sea.⁹

On July 10th 2011 the Spanish warship *Almirante Juan de Borbón*, taking part in OUP, rescued about a hundred persons that were adrift with their small boat approximately 75 miles out of the coast of Libya. After providing food, medical and technical

support, the Spanish warship took those persons aboard. Among the rescued were people from Ghana, Tunisia and Libya including several pregnant women. After several days of negotiation between Spain, Malta, Italy, Tunisia and the UN agency for refugees (UNHCR), the rescued persons were finally transferred to a Tunisian warship and brought to a refugee-camp in Tunisia.

Every captain of a vessel, whether a merchant master or a warship commander, is well aware that there is a duty placed upon them to help persons that are in danger of the perils of the sea. When necessary this duty may involve taking persons aboard their own vessels.

The more challenging part of rendering assistance may sometimes however be disembarking people ashore after their rescue. In areas where high streams of refugees are a serious issue for receiving states, politics may harden legal standpoints on accepting rescued persons on their territory.



Photo 3

Those who consult regularly with current international law will find that the duty to render assistance is well established in international law, but a legal framework for disembarkation of rescued persons is virtually non-existent. In these instances, and

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⁷ *The Economist*, 12 October 2013, Adrift about boat people, At: <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21587802-deaths-lampedusa-highlight-europes-contradictions-over-immigration-adrift-about-boat>

⁸ UNCHR <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refdaily?pass=463ef21123&id=52579b585>

⁹ See on this embargo operation; M.D. Fink, 'UN-mandated embargo operations in Operation Unified Protector', in *Revue de droit militaire et de droit de la guerre*, no. 50 vol. 1-2 (2011), 237-260.



under pressure of international and domestic political realities, states may take different positions on how to deal with this question, which could leave the commander at sea with a more complex situation than a simple drop-off in the next port of call.

AIM AND SETUP

This article aims to give an introduction to some general considerations on the rescue of persons in distress at sea. I will start by briefly introducing the international legal framework on rescuing persons in distress at sea and then touch upon three general aspects of international law in respect of finding a solution for disembarking and which form the framework upon which states will make decisions in particular situations.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The duty to render assistance to persons in distress at sea is an centuries old custom of the sea posed upon every mariner. Not complying with the duty to render assistance is usually also a punishable offense under domestic legislation. In the 20th century this custom has found its way into several treaties which have in a more or lesser detail codified this custom of the sea. The four most important treaties are:

- The Safety of life at sea (SOLAS) treaty (1974)¹⁰
- The Search and Rescue (SAR) treaty (1979)¹¹
- The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III, 1982)¹²
- The Salvage treaty (1989)¹³



Throughout the years some of these treaties have been subject to updates and revisions.¹⁴ Next to these treaties the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the UNHCR have given out additional guidelines on how to deal with rescuing persons at sea.¹⁵ Also the laws of naval warfare contain specific provisions with regard to the shipwrecked, but these provisions only apply during armed conflict.¹⁶ The essence that can be derived from the above mentioned treaties can be summarized in the following three principles:

1. **The duty to provide assistance:** The duty of a commander to render assistance as fast as possible to persons at sea, keeping in account the safety of one's own vessel and crew.
2. **Non-discrimination:** Everyone is entitled to be rescued. The duty to render assistance is for everyone and is not limited for example to persons of a certain nationality, whether or not they could be labeled as refugees, human smugglers, pirates or persons in leisure yachts. The key criterion for getting assistance is not their possible legal status, but whether these persons are in physical danger from the perils of the sea.
3. **The duty to rescue:** The duty is placed upon states to ensure an effective and adequate search & rescue (SAR) organization, to bring rescued persons to a place of safety and to cooperate with other states on these matters.

Applicability to Warship-Commander

Some of the above mentioned treaties and provisions do not apply to warships, but nevertheless stress urgency for compliance. Other treaties and provisions, such as UNCLOS, however also apply to warships. It may even be said that the duty to render assistance is a well-accepted



¹⁰ See chapter V, regulation 33

¹¹ See chapter 2, article. 2.1.10

¹² See article 98 UNCLOS.

¹³ See article 10.

¹⁴ Such as the SAR-treaty. Zie IMO resolution MSC.70(69) and MSC.155(78).

¹⁵ E.g. *Rescue at sea. A guide to principles and practice as applied to migrants and refugees*. Can be downloaded at:

<http://www.imo.org/OurWork/Facilitation/IllegalMigrants/Documents/Leaflet%20Rescue%20at%20sea.pdf>

¹⁶ These regulations are predominantly found in the Second and Third Geneva Convention (1949).



norm in international customary law, applicable also to warships. This view has recently been underlined by the Netherlands Government, who opined that the duty to render assistance is also imposed on warship commanders, based on UNCLOS and customary law.¹⁷ In brief, this means that also warship commanders have a duty to render assistance, but may not be bound by the more detailed regulations that arise from the different treaties.

State Duty Versus Commander's Duty

It is important to note that the third principle mentioned above is a *state's* duty, whereas the first two principles are duties placed upon the *Commander at sea*. The duty to rescue complements the duty to provide assistance at sea and focuses on the end-game of the rescue: The disembarkation of persons, and thereby lifting the commander's temporary extra burden at sea.

For those reasons most vessels are not adequately equipped to house a large amount of extra persons for a long period of time. A rescue operation takes time away that cannot be used for transporting its original cargo, and as such impacts on the economic purpose of the journey in case of merchant vessels, or impacts on the military mission in case of warships, the swiftness to disembark is important in many ways. This also leads to the practical idea that rescued persons should be disembarked at the next available port of call.

However this idea has not found its way into legally binding instruments.¹⁸



Photo 4: Are military vessels big enough for housing extra people?

Naval Operations in a Multinational Context

The duty for states and commanders applies in circumstances of peace, crisis and war. They also do not end when states allow their warships to be deployed in a multinational setting, for example under a NATO-command. As a point of departure it is argued that the duty placed upon states and commanders is neither taken over by an international commander that operates on behalf of the international organization, nor the international organization itself.



Photo 5: Exercise STEADFAST JAZZ

Forces that are brought under control of an operational commander by their states, to conduct a specific mandate in which states will keep full command over its own forces and remain responsible over other issues that may occur during the operation that do not arise from the operation. It is also not a common practice that states will give the authority to an international organization to act on behalf of the state in cases of distress at sea.

To illustrate this point naval forces in the anti-terrorism Operation Active Endeavour (OAE) have a specific mandate to find and deter terrorists at sea, but will have to act under national authority and responsibility when they encounter persons in distress at sea because states have not mandated OAE to act. In such a case it is argued that NATO does not have a formal obligation to render assistance. Individual states normally base this assistance on binding treaties and customary law. The guiding principle therefore is that rendering assis-

¹⁷ Answers to parliamentary questions by Peters en Al Fassad to the (Netherlands) Minister of Foreign Affairs, 7 May 2012. Answer to question no. 7.

¹⁸ UNHRC background note on the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees rescued at sea (2012), p. 8. At: <http://www.unhcr.org/3e5f35e94.pdf>.



tance and disembarking persons ashore stays a national responsibility. In another rescue at sea case that occurred during OUP which was investigated by a committee from the Council of Europe, the Netherlands Government commented on this particular point that NATO does not have any formal responsibility or role in rescue-operations.¹⁹

Although a NATO-commander is usually not mandated to make any decisions with regard to persons of distress at sea, which lies with the national commander and its state, an international commander however can give general guidelines to adhere to international law. It is however also arguable that the more control an international organization will take over an incident, the more it will share in the responsibility.

ONCE ABOARD: THEN WHAT?

Clearly, circumstances exist in which persons need to be brought aboard of the warship for their safety. As mentioned in the introduction, whereas the duty to rescue is legally well established and codified, the disembarkation is not a settled issue in international law. From a legal perspective the challenge of the disembarkation of persons must be seen against the background of some fundamental aspects of international law. In the next section three aspects which are of importance when dealing with rescued persons are briefly touched upon: state sovereignty, treaties and international human rights law (IHRL).



Photo 6: Once aboard: Then what?

STATE SOVEREIGNTY

In the context of disembarking rescued persons the fundamental concept of state sovereignty brings with it that a state can decide whether or not it allows persons to enter its territory. Because all states are considered equal (or in the latin adagium: *par in parem non habet imperium*) states cannot force another state to allow persons on their territory without their consent.

Consent from states may be easily obtained in many rescues at sea situations. States may however be less eager to comply with a request where the region is already overloaded with huge numbers of refugees. Other interests may then start to weigh in the balance over humanity and the direct safety of individuals. The positive aspect to sovereignty could however be that a state may feel responsible over its own subjects and may try to help seeking solutions for its rescued subjects.



Photo 7: Seeking for a solution!

MAKING ARRANGEMENTS

One way to overcome state sovereignty is by concluding arrangements, or treaties, between states. As indicated a treaty that deals with disembarkation does not exist, let alone one that is universally binding. UNCLOS only goes as far as to impose an obligation to co-operate and work together amongst states to seek a solution where circumstances require through regional arrangements.

Interestingly, in 2006 the SAR-treaty has been amended to come a step closer to dealing with disembarkation. It decrees that the state in whose SAR-region the incident has taken place has the primary responsibility to coordinate to bring people to a

¹⁹ Op cit note 12. Paragraph 3 mentions that (in Dutch): "De NAVO heeft als organisatie geen formele verantwoordelijkheid of rol bij reddingsoperaties..."



place of safety. Although this is a step forward, the SAR-treaty and its amendments still have a number of shortcomings.

- Firstly, a state must be bound to the provisions of the SAR-treaty and its amendments. In other words, a state still has to consent to be bound by the provisions.
- Secondly, even if one is bound by it, a clear definition of a *place of safety* does not exist. Although it would be possible, 'a place of safety' is not automatically also the state in which SAR-region the persons were found. It therefore does not mean that coordinating state will automatically have to take them.
- Thirdly, the provisions only go as far as a responsibility for coordination; the coordinating state still cannot overcome the state sovereignty issue.

Against the background of these shortcomings the *International Maritime Organization* (IMO) has adopted a *principle* which states that:

*(...) if disembarkation from the rescuing ship cannot be arranged swiftly elsewhere, the Government responsible for the SAR area should accept the disembarkation of the persons rescued in accordance with immigration laws and regulations of each member state into a place of safety under its control.*²⁰

HUMAN RIGHTS

In the context of disembarking persons the human rights principle of *non-refoulement* (no one can be send back to a state where he needs to be afraid that his/her life or freedoms could be threatened). This principle may disqualify the next available or closest port of call as a place of safety, or return persons to where they came from.²¹

However International Human Rights Law may also have its effects on the way in which assistance is rendered at sea. This is especially the case where warship commanders, as representatives of a state, render assistance whereby a jurisdictional human rights link may be established between the individual and the state.



Photo 8: Are there resources for housing extra people?

However at this stage the relationship between, and responsibilities under, maritime law and the duty to render assistance to persons in danger of the perils of the sea and international human rights law, which poses different responsibilities once an individual is under effective control of a state through its state agents, is not crystal clear. Does human rights law for instance affect the level of help that must be given to persons at sea? Are organizations such as Human Rights Watch right when they argue that giving food, medicine and fuel is a too minimalistic approach from the perspective of human rights? Is there more to it than the mariner's duty to help the boat to be seaworthy enough to reach the shores?

BACK TO THE *ALMIRANTE Juan de Borbón*

If we now go back to the OUP example given in the introduction, the commander of the Spanish warship was confronted with the following legal landscape: After the persons in distress were picked up the Spanish warship sailed in the direction of Malta. Malta is not bound by the SAR amendment²² and

²⁰ IMO FAL 3/circ. 194, 22 January 2009.

²¹ This has also been highlighted in a recent case before the ECtHR between Italy and Hirsi Jamaa and others. See ECtHR, Grand Chamber, Case of Hirsi Jamaa and others v. Italy, application no. 27765/09, Judgment 23 February 2012.

²² Tractatenblad, jrg. 2008, no. 117: (...) the Ministry wishes to inform that, after careful consideration of the said amendments [of 2004], in accordance with article III(2)(f) of this Convention, the Government of Malta, as a Contracting Party to the said Convention, declares that it is not yet in a position to accept these amendments.



wanted the persons to be put ashore in the nearest port from where they were rescued: the Italian island of Lampedusa. Malta was however prepared to take a pregnant woman and a baby.

Italy, already overwhelmed with boat refugees, views that the persons should be taken over by the state whose SAR-region the persons were found: Malta. As the persons are on a Spanish warship they also fall under Spanish jurisdiction. The Spanish authorities need to support the Spanish commander to disembark the rescued persons.

The rescued persons have several national identities ranging from Ghanees to Tunisian to Libyan. Apart from the question whether the human rights regime would allow such action, the situation in Libya does not particularly invite a warship that takes part in a NATO operation against that nation to sail into a Libyan port and drop off those persons. Ultimately, diplomatic efforts result in the solution that Tunisia in cooperation with the UNCHR will receive the persons from Spain²³

In the aftermath the Maltese Minister of Foreign Affairs has questioned why NATO ordered the vessel to go to Malta.²⁴ An action that was underlined by a Spanish MOD press release.²⁵ What actually happened remains unclear in open sources. Others plea for a more responsible role for NATO to do something about boat people in distress. Italy even coined the thought to interpret the resolutions applicable to Libya in such a manner that NATO would also have an implied task to rescue persons at sea.



Photo 9: Almirante Juan de Borbón

CONCLUSION

This article identifies some general considerations with regard to rescuing persons at sea. To underline just two conclusions which can be drawn from this; first, there is no international agreement or legal obligation for the swift disembarkation of rescued persons at sea. In areas that may have to deal with the influx of huge amounts of persons sovereignty of states will come to the foreground to hold of any disembarkation. In that decision making process it may speak for itself that legal considerations are not the sole consideration. The *Jesuit Refugee Service* in Malta opined in this the Almirante incident that:

'While we understand States' legitimate concern regarding the long-term implications of allowing immigrants to disembark on national territory, we believe that people are more important'.

A second conclusion that may be drawn is that during multinational naval operations there is a fair chance that boat people are encountered. Even though NATO as an organization may not be directly responsible for rescues at sea, proper planning on how to deal with these situations is still very much warranted, which may minimize possible confusion on who does what and more efficient handling of the incident.

PICTURE REFERENCES

- Photo 1:** Refugees on ship, Noborder Network, <http://www.flickr.com>
- Photo 2:** Lampedusa, la porta d'Europa Carlo Alfredo Clerici <http://www.flickr.com>
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- Photo 4:** Are military vessels big enough for housing extra people?, Andrew, <http://www.flickr.com>
- Photo 5:** Exercise STEADFAST JAZZ, <http://www.flickr.com>
- Photo 6:** Once aboard: Then what?, Noborder Network <http://www.flickr.com>
- Photo 7:** Seeking for a solution!, Noborder Network <http://www.flickr.com>
- Photo 8:** Are there resources for housing extra people? Bjorn Heidenstrom, <http://www.flickr.com>
- Photo 9:** Almirante Juan de Borbón, <http://www.flickr.com>

²³ PR 1376, Statement by the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs [van Malta], 16 July 2011. At: www.doi.gov.mt/en/press_releases/2011/07/pr1376.pdf.

²⁴ See press release nr. 1366 Ministry of information Malta: http://www.doi.gov.mt/en/press_releases/2011/07/14.asp. See also: <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/government-nato-repplies-migrants-spain-odd-decision>.

²⁵ Press release, 31 July 2011, Spanish Ministry of Defense. *La OTAN elogia la actuación española en el rescate de 114 inmigrantes*. At: http://www.defensa.gob.es/gabinete/notasPrensa/2011/07/DGC_110731_Contralmirante_visita_fragata_juan_de_borbon.htm.

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