

Malta abandons thousands at sea and allows forcible returns to Libya

Press Release

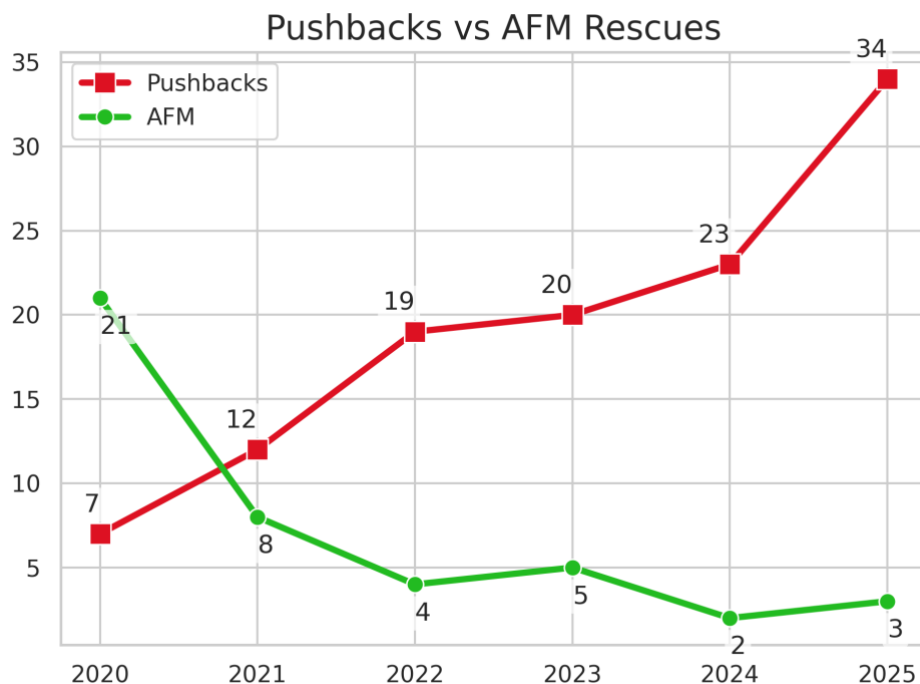
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New data on distress cases in Malta's search and rescue zone for the last six months of 2025 brings to light a pattern of non-assistance and illegal pushbacks to Libya.

New data from the [Malta Migration Archive](#) reveals that in 2025 there were over 23,500 people in distress in Malta's search and rescue zone. Out of 565 cases, the Maltese Armed Forces only rescued three boats, less than one percent, despite their obligation to respond to all distress cases within Malta's SAR zone and to ensure people are disembarked in a safe place.

For the authorities in Malta, avoiding and delaying rescue has become normal practice. They have also refused to coordinate rescue with NGO and merchant vessels. These refusals are deadly: more people suffer and die at sea because of our government's actions and inactions. Indeed, the Mediterranean continues to be the deadliest region in the world for migrants: more than 1,300 people [died](#) along the Central Mediterranean route in 2025.

As egregiously, the Maltese authorities allowed the so-called Libyan coast guard to enter Malta's search and rescue zone at least 34 times in 2025 in order to forcibly return people to Libya. Over 1,500 were thus returned to face further grievous human rights abuses: rape, torture, extortion and other violence are rife and [well documented](#) in Libya.



This provides more evidence of a clear trend: since 2020, Malta has rescued fewer and fewer people in distress. The authorities have also more frequently allowed the Libyan coast guard to enter Malta's search and rescue zone in order to illegally and forcibly return people to Libya. They have done so despite the human rights violations rife in Libya and despite the unlawful and dangerous actions of the Libya coast guards at sea.

In October 2025, the so-called Libyan Coast Guard [shot at](#) a boat carrying 160 people inside Malta's search and rescue zone. Despite this violent attack, the Maltese Armed Forces did not respond to the boat's distress calls. After 24 hours, the travellers were finally [rescued](#) by the Italian coast guard. One person was in a coma and fighting for their life, with a bullet lodged in their skull. Two other people were also seriously injured by the Libyan gunfire.

Just this month, the Libyan coast guard again [attacked](#) a vessel, this time the *Sea Watch 5* after it had rescued 90 people in distress, attempting to seize the ship and force it to sail to Tripoli.

The Malta Migration Archive was launched in June 2025 and advocates against such border violence by Malta and the EU. It documents the non-assistance of the Maltese authorities and reveals what has occurred in the Maltese search and rescue zone since 2020. Participating in various events, the Malta Migration Archive stands in solidarity with people in distress at sea and with people suffering from Malta's migration policies and practices.

In our work, we are indebted to the [CMRCC SAR](#)chive and the wider Civil Fleet for their tireless work in bringing to light the border violence and border struggles in the Central Mediterranean and elsewhere. Without them, much of this border violence would remain invisible.

For more information on select cases in 2026 that do not yet appear on our map, see our [news section](#).