How a migrant boat was left adrift on the Mediterranean

They were told they would reach Lampedusa within 18 hours. It was 15 days before the survivors touched land again

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In the early hours of Saturday, 26 March last year, 72 men, women and children made their way down to a small inflatable dinghy on the shores of Tripoli under the cover of darkness and set sail for what they hoped would be a new life in Europe.

People smugglers were doing brisk business on the back of the chaos and violence of Libya's revolutionary uprising and their work enjoyed the explicit support of Colonel Gaddafi who, as Nato airstrikes began pummelling his country, threatened to unleash an "unprecedented wave of illegal immigration" on to Europe's southern borders.

Those that lived to tell the tale remember that Libyan soldiers accompanied their group down to the boat. On arrival, their basic provisions were removed by the smugglers in an effort to maximise space so that even more migrants could be crammed on board.

"It was completely overcrowded," recalls Bilal Idris, one of only nine survivors from the voyage. "Everyone was sitting on everybody else. I had someone sitting on top of me, and this person had someone sitting on top of him. They don't really care how many people can fit into the boat; all they want is to get the money from each person."

Fifty men, 20 women and two small babies formed the cargo that night. They had been told they would reach the Italian island of Lampedusa within 18 hours. In fact, it would be 15 days before the boat touched land again, with barely anyone on board left alive. Through eyewitness testimony and official communications obtained by the Guardian, the Council of Europe and other journalists who have investigated the case, much of what happened in between can now be revealed.

Almost two days after the vessel had left Libya and with fuel reserves running low, Lampedusa was still out of sight. With the sea growing rougher and dark clouds gathering, many of those on board began to panic and feel sick. The Ghanaian captain had a satellite phone and a decision was taken to call Father Moses Zerai, an Eritrean priest living in Rome who is a prominent campaigner for migrant rights.

Zerai immediately contacted the coastguard and was connected to the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC) in the Italian capital, which logged and recorded his call. Several further communications with the boat took place; on the final occasion Zerai was able to get through, he heard nothing but the words "we have an emergency, we have an emergency" and the plea "help, help, be quick, be quick". Then the satellite phone's battery went dead.

Direct communication with the troubled boat was no longer possible but, luckily for the migrants, the authorities were now aware of their plight. Moreover, the phonecalls had allowed the Italian

coast guard – with the help of Thuraya, the satellite network provider – to pinpoint its exact location, some 60 miles off the north African coast.

At 7.54pm on 27 March, Rome MRCC sent out the first of dozens of distress calls targeted at nearby ships that could have come to the migrants' aid. Labelled "Priority: Distress" – the highest emergency phrase possible under the international Search and Rescue convention – the message gave the boat's co-ordinates and was broadcast on the Inmarsat satellite network, which all maritime vessels, be they commercial, private or military, must be equipped to receive. The MRCC followed up this broadcast with faxes sent to their counterparts in Malta as well as to Nato's high command headquarters in Naples and other relevant agencies.

The following day a further alert message was sent in the form of a Hydrolant navigational warning, which would have been received by all ships in the area: "Vessel, 68 persons on board [actually 72], in need of assistance … assist if possible."

Nato initially denied having any knowledge of the incident, but later it admitted its high command had received a fax from Rome MRCC raising the issue of the migrant boat and said it forwarded the information to all vessels under its command. That would have included the Mendez Núñez, a Spanish frigate that was only a few miles from the boat at the time, but the Spanish defence ministry has denied receiving any communications on the matter. Nato has criticised the Rome MRCC fax for being unclear, but the Council of Europe report into the case describes the language used in the emergency alerts as "unambiguous" and concludes: "It is clear that all maritime vessels in the region were alerted to the situation of the boat."

More than 500 miles from Rome, with the satellite phone now useless, those on board the migrant boat could do nothing but sit and hope that their pleas for help would be answered. A few hours later, a military helicopter appeared in the distance. It approached the boat and hovered above it, before disappearing and returning with some small bottles of water and a few packets of biscuits which they lowered down to the passengers below.

"Oh my God, we felt so happy at that time," recalled Abu Kurke, one of the survivors. "People were thanking the lord that we were going to survive and were about to reach Italy." The helicopter pilots, who eyewitnesses say were dressed in military uniform and carried guns, indicated that they would return and that the migrants should hold their position. The helicopter flew off and was never seen again.

Believing that a rescue was imminent, the captain threw the compass and phone overboard for fear that he would be suspected of being a smuggler upon arrival in Europe. Thus began an excruciating wait for help, hope dripping away with each passing hour. "We felt angry," says Abu Kurke. "There was nothing left to do but pray to God. Everybody prayed."

By the following day it was clear no rescue was coming. The mood shifted, arguments erupted, and finally a decision was made to use the last of the petrol to motor on in a north-westerly direction in the hope that they might find Lampedusa or another vessel. With the compass at the bottom of the ocean, the captain attempted to navigate by the sun, but within a few hours the fuel tank was empty and the migrants were stranded in the middle of the Mediterranean.

From this moment on, the dinghy was left to drift. Storms dashed large waves against the boat,

washing some overboard. In moments of calm, the migrants would sometimes see fishing boats nearby, including ones flying the Italian and Tunisian flags. A Tunisian fishing boat even approached the migrants and told them they were going the wrong way for Lampedusa; according to the survivors, when the passengers explained they had run out of fuel the fishermen simply "ran away" and the migrants were left alone again.

Over the following days, passengers were replaced by corpses. A final bottle of water had been saved for the two babies, whose parents had died of thirst and starvation, but they soon died, too. Some of the adults tried to drink seawater, but it only made them sicker. "Every morning we would wake up and find more bodies, which we would leave for 24 hours and then throw overboard," said Abu Kurke, who survived by drinking his own urine and eating small amounts of toothpaste. "By the final days, we didn't know ourselves. Everyone was either praying or dying."

On what most of the survivors believe to be their 10th day at sea, the boat encountered a large military vessel with aircraft facilities on board. The migrants came so close that they could see some of those on the deck taking photos of them, and they held up the dead babies and empty fuel tanks to demonstrate their plight. In desperation, some even jumped in the water and began pushing the migrant boat towards the military vessel. Soon, however, the ship moved away. "They kept wandering off and we kept following … gradually they just disappeared," remembers Girma Halefom, another survivor.

On 10 April, the boat washed up on the shore of Libya, less than 40 miles west of Misrata. Of the 72 who had set sail two weeks earlier, just 11 remained alive. Two more perished soon after landing.

The Mediterranean is one of the world's busiest shipping areas and is referred to in the Council of Europe's report as having "the best surveillance in the world". "When we talk about the Mediterranean, we do not talk about a deserted sea," says the report. "On the contrary, we talk about a sea with a complex and dense network of maritime traffic with a developed system of monitoring movements and dealing with boats in distress."

It was the fact that a migrant vessel in distress could be left to drift for 15 days unaided in such a sea, despite several government authorities, military powers and commercial vessels being aware of both its plight and location, that prompted the Council of Europe inquiry.

The details of the emergency calls that were passed between the different actors, from Rome MRCC to Nato and the naval assets under its command, as well as the presence of several ships in the area, are now a matter of public record. But the identity of the military helicopter and large naval vessel that had contact with the migrants remains unknown, and no nation or agency has yet come forward to apologise for their part in what the Council of Europe report has identified as a collective "human, institutional and legal" failure that led to a "vacuum of responsibility" and an entirely avoidable loss of life.

The report's author, Tineke Strik, hopes it will spur on a continued search for answers. "Hearing the testimony of these survivors really touches you deeply," Strik said. "We need more answers and I will continue to look for them. These people did not need to die and those responsible have to be called to account."