

**AFM BOARDS SHIP AHEAD OF MIGRANTS MID-SEA TRANSFER**

AFM NEWS-MEDIA PRESS INFORMATION RELEASE:

On Sunday 29th July '07 at 07.00hrs, the Armed Forces of Malta's Operations' Centre at Luqa Barracks was informed by the Italian Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC) that a boatload of migrants was in difficulty in a position some 73 nautical miles (NM) from il-Mara` point, M'Xlokk. Contact was established with the boat's occupants by means of a satellite phone, and it was confirmed that some 22 men and 4 women were onboard, and that they required assistance despite making slow progress on their course. Subsequently, by 07.35hrs, the occupants reported that their boat had stopped altogether, and concerns were raised as they alleged they had no lifejackets.

The Maritime Squadron's Bremse-class patrolcraft P-32 was immediately dispatched from its base in Haywharf, Floriana, but was obliged to return back barely 9NM out, as the weather conditions out at sea deteriorated. Later on, early on Sunday afternoon the Air Wing's PBN Islander aircraft was deployed to locate the reported migrants' boat, whilst attempts were made to track down merchant vessel traffic in the area to offer the requested help.

At 15.15hrs, the Air Wing's Islander aircraft spotted the migrants' boat as it was moving under its own power northwards, yet the passengers actually had lifejackets on their person. The MV Annabella, registered in Monrovia, was tracked down in the area, and it was directed to start a search for these migrants. At around midnight, the ship reported sighting the migrants and proceeded alongside them. The migrants did not request any assistance at this stage. Early this morning, the Air Wing's Islander aircraft was redeployed to relocate the migrants' boat. In the meantime, another merchant seaman, the MV FAS DAMMAM, was directed towards the migrants' boat to render assistance as required, as it had been some three hours since last contact was made with the migrants.

The AFM's Islander aircraft later spotted the now drifting migrants' boat at 09.45hrs, in a position some 48 NM south of il-Mara` point, whilst the AFM OPV P-61 was steaming towards the migrants' boat area. Excellent co-ordination with the MV FAS DAMMAM and the AFM's Islander aircraft led to a successful interception of the migrants' boat, and their rescue onboard the merchant ship, since their flimsy boat was no longer seaworthy by this time and sunk some time later. Fortunately, one migrant was actually fished out of the sea, as a matter of fact.

As P-61 continued to steam towards the MV FAS DAMMAM, the rough sea conditions posed a potentially difficult mid-sea transfer operation, and so both vessels made a rendezvous together in a sheltered area for this operation to be carried out. Concurrently to this effort, and following reports by the ship's captain that the situation onboard his vessel was rather tense amidst fears for his crew's security, at 16.16hrs the Maritime Squadron's Rapid Deployment Team of marines boarded the MV FAS DAMMAM by fastrope from an Alouette SA316B helicopter to facilitate in a safe and secure manner the mid-sea transfer of the migrants to the P-61. OPV P-61 returned to base at 19.30hrs circa with the migrants safely onboard.

In a separate case, at around 13.00hrs the AFM operations' Centre was informed by the Civil Protection Department (CPD) that two individuals were reported as missing at sea by onlooking tourists. They had last been seen in Ghajn Tuffieha bay on a yellow air-mattress (li-lo). Prior to this report, the CPD themselves had just rescued some 5 individuals who were in difficulty whilst swimming at the same bay. Since no surface CPD assets were available at the time, the MIATM's Italian Air Force AB-212 rescue-helicopter was deployed to conduct a search in the area. Whilst the air mattress was found, no other persons were spotted during the search operation. An AFM rescuer was winched to the ground to liaise better with the CPD personnel, as nothing was found in all three adjacent bays and up to one mile out from the shoreline.

During the same morning, the same MIATM helicopter assisted Police homicide investigators at Fort Campbell, Selmun, where the body of a 29-year old Syrian national (residing in Hamrun and married to a Maltese) had been found in his van underneath the cliffs of the area.