



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR MIGRATION AND HOME AFFAIRS

The Director-General

Brussels, 27 October 2025

7th meeting of the European Contact Group on Search and Rescue¹

16th July 2025, Brussels

Minutes

1. Nature of the meeting

The seventh meeting of the European Contact Group on Search and Rescue (SAR) took place on 16 July 2025 in Brussels, Belgium. Group members, i.e. Member States and Schengen Associated Countries' authorities took part in the meeting in person.

2. Approval of the agenda and of the minutes of previous meeting

Welcome and opening by the Commission (DG HOME), chairing the meeting: the Commission highlighted that developments in the first half of the year have demonstrated once again the relevance and importance of the work of the Contact Group. DG HOME reiterated that through information exchange and learning from different national contexts, the Group remains an important platform to continue supporting Member States in assuming and implementing their national competence on search and rescue, by having an improved common understanding of the different practices out there, in line with international and European law. The Commission outlined the meeting's main purpose as delivering on its objectives regarding Search and Rescue, as articulated in the political guidelines of the new European Commission and further specified in the mission letter of the Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration, which

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states: *“One life lost in the Mediterranean is one life too many. We need stronger coordination of rescue operations, including with neighbouring third countries, and increased surveillance capabilities for Frontex.”* Additionally, another key objective of the meeting was to present the outcomes of the work undertaken on the points agreed upon by the Group during its previous meeting, in particular on exploring safety standards in the context of SAR as part of technical study carried out by the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA). DG HOME also updated Group members about the implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, which continues to progress at a steady pace, as well as the state of play of legislative developments to strengthen the fight against migrant smuggling networks and the Commission’s plans to organise the second international conference on the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling on 10 December 2025 in Brussels. The agenda for the meeting was approved without comments.

3. List of points discussed

- Update on Frontex’s work in view of strengthening coordination of search and rescue operations: during the first session the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) was invited to provide an overview on its work carried out in supporting Member States in search and rescue, including by deploying its maritime surveillance capabilities. While SAR is a national responsibility, Frontex, within the remit of its border management mandate, supports Member States in a meaningful and complementary way – particularly through its operational presence and support in maritime surveillance. The Commission recalled that the urgency of this work is echoed in the political guidelines of the new European Commission and in the mission letter of the Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration. Frontex outlined the wide range of activities that it is already engaged in directly or indirectly to enhance the EU Member States’ SAR posture. This includes close cooperation with European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) and European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA) under the European Coast Guard cooperation framework – an important platform that brings together capabilities, expertise, and assets across Member States’ coast guard authorities and the Agencies to support maritime safety and security, including in SAR-relevant contexts. Notably, Frontex, together Member States’ authorities, EFCA and EMSA has also been actively fostering dialogue and capacity-building through targeted initiatives, such as regional SAR workshops, which have served as valuable forums to exchange best practices, test coordination mechanisms, and engage with both Member States and key third-country partners. While one Group member underlined that Frontex is not a rescue organisation but one with a law enforcement mandate – and therefore can only provide support to Member States to support them in implementing their national competence on SAR – they welcomed Frontex’s work related to the use of new innovative technologies, mainly in the realm of artificial intelligence with the caveat that human control must be maintained during SAR operations. Another Group member strongly welcomed the presentation of Frontex’s activities and inquired about the legal challenges the Agency is facing with regards to the use of drones. In response, Frontex explained that certain licensing and data protection issues still need to be clarified when it comes to Frontex’s role to fly drones owned by Member States. Another Group member (supported by one other Group Member) underlined that SAR is a responsibility of Member States and that SAR exercises carried out by the Agency should not aim to increase the capabilities of Frontex but rather to increase cooperation and interoperability among the various entities engaged in SAR operations. Frontex agreed that SAR is a Member State responsibility and underlined that the Agency’s

focus is on sharing good practices and providing innovative ideas on the use of emerging technologies to Member States.

- Update on the European Commission’s and Frontex’s work in view of strengthening coordination of search and rescue operations with neighbouring countries: The Commission recalled that strengthening the coordination of SAR operations with neighbouring countries remains a strategic priority during its new mandate, particularly in the context of increasing migratory pressure and the growing complexity of maritime operations taking place beyond the EU’s borders. This commitment is also firmly anchored in the new political guidelines of the European Commission and reflected in the mission letter of the Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration. Against this background, the Commission (DGs MENA and INTPA), as well as Frontex, were invited to outline efforts to strengthen coordination of SAR operations with neighbouring third countries, including on the current state of play on the Commission’s financial support to third countries (in North and West Africa) aimed at strengthening their SAR capacities, as well as the steps being taken to reinforce coordination and operational partnerships with key third countries on SAR. One Group member (supported by two other Group members) underlined their strong interest for Frontex to be more engaged in third countries to support prevention of departures, expressing strong hope that next year’s relevant EU proposal will allow for deeper engagement of the Agency. Another Group member also highlighted the challenging migratory situation they are currently facing and emphasized their need for the Agency’s continued support.
- Updates on latest key developments relevant to search and rescue: during the third session Cyprus, Greece, Italy and France presented on recent trends and other relevant developments on SAR that took place since the last meeting. France also presented their operational sea rescue doctrine—“Numerous Victims in the Maritime Environment (NOVIMAR)” – to deal with SAR operations involving a large number of people at sea. Meanwhile, Italy informed the Group of a continuously evolving modus operandi by smugglers. Finally, Slovenia provided a short debrief on the “Adriatic Sea SARex 2024” Multi Mission Operation exercise that was hosted by the Slovenian Maritime Administration last year.
- Note on the information that shipmasters may exchange with rescued persons following SAR events: The Commission recalled that this working paper – which was re-circulated to Group members ahead of the meeting - was prepared over the course of 2022-23 to serve as a note of indicative nature that aims to achieving a better overview of the type of information that might be useful to be exchanged by shipmasters with rescued people and does not aim to establish any rules of any nature. The Commission reminded Group members that at the last SAR Contact Group meeting in April 2024, the idea of organising a lunchtime event at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) to present the paper - for information only - was proposed. However as there has been no explicit support to this initiative since, was decided that the Commission would not seek to present the paper at the IMO for now. One Group member (supported by another) also remarked that asking too many questions at sea should be generally avoided as the focus needs to be on the actual rescue activities, including providing assistance to rescued people.

- Update on the EMSA technical study on main safety aspects relevant for SAR operations at sea: The Commission recalled that the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) prepared its technical study looking at the safety aspects in the context of Search and Rescue based on discussions at the SAR Contact Group in 2023 and 2024. The study was prepared with the intention to present safety elements that could be taken into account for vessels used for SAR operations and its aim was not to assess, review or identify what are best practices and what are not, but to give a comprehensive overview of safety aspects related to both the ships and their operations. Furthermore, the study was also not aimed at identifying any possible gaps or shortcomings of any vessel – either state or non-state operated – involved in SAR operations, and its conclusions are entirely non-binding. Representatives of EMSA presented the main highlights of the technical study, which was also circulated to Group members ahead of the meeting. One Group member welcomed and thanked the EMSA for the study, which has some very useful observations that expressed hope that flag state administrations will consider taking them into account. This Group member also informed the Group of the recent use of pleasure crafts by NGOs for SAR operations and expressed concern that such vessels are not complying with the necessary safety requirements for such activities. They encouraged the Group to reflect further on this issue. Another Group member also thanked EMSA for the excellent report and informed to have shared it with relevant authorities who will analyse it. A third Group member expressed doubts about EMSA’s competence to prepare a study on main safety aspects relevant for SAR operations at sea. Furthermore, the Group Member expressed the view that there is no need to establish specific safety requirements for vessels carrying out SAR, considering the sufficiently adequate provisions of Article 94 of UNCLOS, yet they remain open to the idea of discussing any initiatives at European level in the future. The Commission underlined that the study is properly within the mandate of EMSA and given the evolving nature of the subject it is reasonable to ask the Agency to look into this matter. A fourth Group member also congratulated EMSA for the study and informed that in the past they had prepared specific guidelines for small rescue boats that could be shared with EMSA and fed into their study. EMSA welcomed the suggestion and agreed to include, where appropriate, additional elements in the study. Following the interventions of Group members, the Commission suggested that given the evolving nature of the subject, it is recommended to keep the study as a ‘living document’ that could be continued to be updated regularly. The Commission also informed the Group that the current version of the study will also be shared and discussed with NGOs carrying out SAR activities later this year.
- Latest updates on situational awareness on SAR: The session provided updates on the latest developments when it comes to the implementation of the Common Information Sharing Environment (CISE), as well as EUROSUR, both of which are key components in establishing a situational picture at EU level. The Commission (DG MARE) also briefly presented the outcomes of the CISE-ALERT project’s 6 months-long testing phase that concluded in October 2024 to test all capabilities offered by CISE in an operational context.

4. Conclusions/recommendations/opinions

DG HOME concluded the meeting underlining the importance of continuing to focus on delivering on the objectives of political guidelines of the new European Commission and the

mission letter of the Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration when it comes to stronger coordination of rescue operations, including with neighbouring third countries, and increased surveillance capabilities for Frontex. The Commission invited Group members to share their views whether they would be interested in further discussing Frontex’s SAR-related support, including to neighbouring third countries at future SAR Contact Group meetings. Group members were also invited to engage with Frontex and reflect how its support in these activities could be further enhanced in full respect of its mandate and the relevant legislation.

Regarding the technical study that was prepared by the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) on the safety aspects of vessels that carry out SAR operations, Commission views the study as a ‘*living document*’ and expressed its will to continue to update it regularly, given the evolving nature of vessels used in such operations.

The Commission pointed out the overall importance of making progress on improving situational awareness on SAR events at sea, including via the use of CISE and EUROSUR.

Regarding the working paper on the type of information shipmasters may exchange with rescued people it was decided that the Commission would not seek any follow up actions on the note for now.

The Commission also informed Group members to hold its next regular dialogue with NGOs carrying out SAR activities later this year, during which DG HOME will also share and discuss the current version of the technical study prepared by EMSA.

The Chair informed that Group members will receive the minutes of the meeting for comments and approval. As usual, members will also be consulted on the draft agenda of the next meeting in advance.

5. Next meeting

The Commission and Cyprus informed Group members that the next SAR Contact Group will be hosted by JRCC Larnaca on 4 June 2026, followed by a JRCC commanders meeting the following day.

6. List of participants

#	Delegation	Organisation
1	Bulgaria	General Bulgarian Maritime Administration
2	Cyprus	Joint Rescue Coordination Centre
3	Cyprus	Joint Rescue Coordination Centre
4	Germany	Permanent Representation of Germany

5	Denmark	Ministry of Immigration and Integration
6	Greece	Permanent Representation of Greece
7	Spain	Guardia Civil
8	Spain	Ministry of Interior
9	Finland	Permanent Representation of Finland
10	France	Permanent Representation of France
11	Croatia	Ministry of the Interior
12	Croatia	Ministry of the Interior
13	Ireland	International Protection Office
14	Ireland	Irish Coast Guard
15	Italy	Italian Coast Guard
16	Italy	Italian Coast Guard
17	Italy	Ministry of Interior
18	Lithuania	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
19	Luxembourg	Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs
20	Latvia	Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre Riga
21	Latvia	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
22	Malta	Permanent Representation of Malta
23	Netherlands	Ministry of Justice and Security
24	Norway	Norwegian Mission to the EU
25	Romania	Ministry of Internal Affairs
26	Slovenia	Ministry of Infrastructure