

## Interview with Einar H. Valsson, Commander of Icelandic Coast Guard vessel Aegir, on Patrol in Med.



Aegir is a 70-meter Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV). It has a crew of 18, which includes two emergency medicine technicians and two divers.

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**Your deployment in Spain is almost over. Could you say couple of words about your mission here?**

We were deployed to support maritime surveillance activities in the Western Mediterranean as part of EPN Indalo. During this deployment, which lasted almost six weeks, we conducted a number of search and rescue operations and intercepted over 130 migrants. During one operation we rescued 24 migrants from a boat drifting in bad

weather. They were all from Algeria. Last year we were also deployed in Spain and the situation was similar. We intercepted over 190 migrants; the majority had to be taken on board following a rescue operation.

**Aegir has been deployed in several Frontex operations. Which ones?**

We have been deployed in operation Hera in the Atlantic Ocean, in operation Poseidon Sea in Greece and in operation Indalo

here in Spain last year. In open sea areas the sea gets very rough and big vessels, such as Aegir, are needed. Aegir is able to sail fast in rough seas, which is of crucial importance especially in search and rescue operations on the open sea.

**You and your crew have seen migrants in different parts of the Mediterranean. Are there difference for example between migrants coming to Spain and Greece?**

Facilitators in different countries of departure use different methods for people smuggling. In Algeria and Morocco, facilitators simply put migrants on rubber boats or small fishing vessels and instruct them to sail to Spain using a GPS or compass.

These boats, which are up to 10m long, carry up to 65 people. It is not difficult to imagine that a journey on overcrowded boats driven by a migrant with often no navigation experience is very dangerous. Bad weather or problems with the engine can quickly lead to a tragedy. Last summer Aegir alone rescued almost 500 migrants during search and rescue operations off the coast of Spain and Greece. Most migrants heading for Spain come from Morocco and Algeria, but there are also migrants from Sub-Saharan countries, Syria and Afghanistan, among them often children and pregnant women.

Facilitators who smuggle migrants from Turkey to Greece and Italy use different methods. Migrants are hidden on pleasure boats, such as large sail boats and luxury yachts. These boats are driven by facilitators.

There are also facilitators who bring migrants to the closest European coast and abandon them. Last year in Greece we received a call that migrants had been abandoned by facilitators in a remote coastal area. The information was based on a single phone call from a migrant. It took us 14 hours to find them but when we finally did it was truly a great feeling. The migrants, who were originally from Afghanistan and Syria, were exhausted but all alive. Among them were many small children and a pregnant woman who two days later gave birth to twins.

**You have been deployed in Frontex-coordinated operations for several years now. How are these missions different from your regular work in Iceland?**

Icelandic sailors are very interested in Frontex operations. My crew and I are very proud to be part of this mission. What we do here is very different from our daily work in Iceland.

The Icelandic waters are more difficult to navigate than the Mediterranean but there are no stranded migrants along our coast. ■

