

Free the ElHiblu3! End the Trial!

Two years ago, on 28 March 2019, the merchant vessel ElHiblu1 arrived in Malta and three teenagers were arrested and accused of having committed a multiplicity of crimes, including acts of terrorism. An alliance of human rights activists calls on Malta to drop the charges immediately.

On 26 March 2019, 108 people were rescued from a rubber boat in distress. The boat had departed Libyan shores trying to escape to Europe. Co-ordinated by an airplane of the EUNAVFOR Med operation, the people in distress were found and rescued by the merchant vessel *ElHiblu1*.

After the rescue operation, the captain of the *ElHiblu1* reassured the rescued that they would be brought to a port of safety in Europe. Yet, following the order of European authorities, the crew tried to return the 108 survivors to the inhumane conditions in Libya from which they had just escaped.

When the survivors realised they were being returned to Libya, they began to protest the attempted push-back. Three of them, who we collectively refer to as the **ElHiblu3**, acted as translators and mediators between crew members and the rescued. The captain of the *ElHiblu1* redirected its course and steered north to Malta.

Upon arrival, the three teenagers aged 15,16 and 19 at the time were arrested and accused of having committed multiple crimes, including acts of terrorism. The three, who we collectively refer to as the **ElHiblu3**, were imprisoned for seven months before they were bailed out in November 2019.

Since then, they have remained on parole in Malta. They have to register every day at the police station and attend monthly hearings during which the prosecution seeks to establish the potential charges to be brought forward. If found guilty by a jury in Malta, they could face a lengthy prison sentence.

Until recently, none of the people rescued by *ElHiblu1* were heard in court. While members of the Maltese police and crew members of the merchant vessel were heard promptly after the landing of the *ElHiblu1*, it took the Maltese prosecution two years to ask one of the rescued witnesses to testify. Only in March 2021 the first, and so far only, survivor was asked to testify.

To us, an alliance of human rights activists in support of the **ElHiblu3**, it is clear that the Maltese state is trying to make an example of the three accused in order to deter others from protesting push-backs to Libya.

The criminalisation of the **ElHiblu3** in Malta is yet another puzzle piece in a systematic attempt to oppress acts of solidarity and dissent at Europe's borders. In Greece, on Lesbos, two minors were sentenced to five years in prison for arson one week ago, following a deeply unfair trial lasting one day that didn't bring any credible evidence to light. In Italy, several human rights groups and NGOs face charges of "aiding and abetting illegal immigration", simply for having rescued thousands in distress at sea. While we witness how EU member states and institutions continue to break international law through violent push-backs as well as forms of non-assistance and abandonment, migrants trying to escape from inhumane conditions and those in solidarity with them become criminalised.

Instead of being prosecuted, the **ElHiblu3** should be celebrated for their actions in preventing the return of 108 precarious lives to Libya. Their imprisonment and prosecution constitutes a deep injustice.

Resisting illegal push-backs to Libya is not a crime!
Dismiss the trial in Malta immediately! Free the ElHiblu3!

