

**Topic:** Investigation into migrant boat sinking in Nov last year

**Outlet:** Le Monde

**Journalist:** Julia Pascual

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[Translated]

“Uh, we just passed by, uh migrants, uh well, dead bodies. They’re dead.

- Okay, sir, so the migrants are in a boat? Do they look like Delta Charlie Delta ([dead] to you? – No, no, no. They’re in the water. They’re in the water, they’re in the water but, uh, they’re dead.”

It was 1:49 p.m. on November 24, 2021, when the fishing skipper of the boat Saint-Jacques 2 radioed the Gris-Nez (Pas-de-Calais) Regional Maritime Surveillance and Rescue Operational Centre (Cross) composed of military personnel and under the authority of the Maritime Prefect for the Channel and the North Sea. While fishing in the Pas-de-Calais strait, in French waters but in the immediate vicinity of English waters, he discovered some fifteen bodies scattered over several hundred meters, lying on the surface of the water. Next to them, a boat had become unusable, a deflated “boudin”.

That day, twenty-seven bodies were recovered including those of six women and a girl, only two survivors were rescued. It was the most serious shipwreck since migrants began making their way to England in makeshift dinghies. At the time, this disaster aroused a lot of emotion. Despite the tragedies, the phenomenon of Channel crossings continues to grow. Since the beginning of 2022, 40,000 people have reached England in small boats.

One year after the opening of the judicial inquiry to shed light on the tragedy of November 24, 2021, Le Monde has learned of the investigations conducted on the circumstances of the shipwreck. They show all the communications between the Cross and the shipwrecked boat, and reveal that the occupants of the boat called the French rescue services many times in the space of about three hours. The British rescue services were also contacted, although the report of their activities has not yet been included in the investigation.

At this stage, it appears that no rescue means were sent to rescue the boat. At no time does the Cross seem to have taken the measure of the danger that the passenger of the dinghy were running, despite their multiple alerts. On the contrary, in a context of saving resources in the face of numerous crossings, and taking into account the trajectory of the boat which was approaching British waters, the Cross preferred to pass the baton to the British.

November 24 looked like “a big night for migrants”, recalled Clément G., watch leader at the Cross, during his interview with investigators from the research section of the Cherbourg maritime police force (Manche). That night, about twenty boats called. “The contacts were multiplied by ten depending on the number of calls from the same boat”, explained officer Frédéric J. One boat in particular “kept calling us that night” reported watch leader Pauline M. It was the boat that sank. During their hearings, the two survivors reported that the boat had begun to deflate and sink a few hours after their departure from a beach near Dunkirk (North).

It was 1.48 a.m. when the first exchanges took place between the boat and the Cross. In English, one of the occupants explained that there were thirty-three people on board a “broken” boat. According to the usual procedure, the operator asks him to send his geolocation via WhatsApp.

At 1:51 a.m., the person calls the SAMU of Pas-de-Calais, which transfers his call to the Cross. “Apparently their boat, there is nothing going on” warns the operator of the SAMU. The communication lasted nearly fourteen minutes. “Please, please! (...) We need help, please. Please

help us.” he implored. “If I don’t have your position, I can’t help you”, repeats the Cross operator, Fanny R. On board, the passengers panicked. They are shouting and crying. “Send me your position now and I will send you a rescue boat as soon as possible”. Fanny R. repeated. The location of the boat was communicated to the Cross at 2.05 a.m. and 2.06 a.m.

However, the Cross did not send a rescue vessel but contacted the English rescue coordination centre in Dover. I have a boat next to your area” the operator informed them. I will give you its position as it is 0.6 nautical miles (from English waters)”.

At 2.10 a.m. the boat again reports its location via WhatsApp, which still places it in French waters. The people onboard continue to call. During one of these calls, t 2:15 am, while cries and cries are heard, the operator of the Cross “told them to keep calm and that the rescue boat is coming, note the investigators.

In fact, at 2:38 am, when the Cross had updated the location of the boat, it called the British back. “They are currently in your area”.

Despite this, the drifting dinghy continues to call for help but the Cross considers that it is no longer its responsibility. While the EMS tried to transfer a new call, the Cross operator argued that “they are now in English waters anyway and if they call back they should be told to call 999 {English rescue.”

Despite this, the passengers continue to call the French, no less than fifteen times between 2:43 a.m. and 4:22 a.m. in vain. All in vain. At 3:30 a.m. a passenger explained that he was literally “in the water”, but the Cross persisted in telling him: “Yes, but you are in English waters”. As the operator tried to transfer the call to Dover, the call was cut off and he was heard to comment, as an aside: “Oh well, you can’t hear me, you won’t be saved. My feet are in the water, well ..... I didn’t ask you to leave.”

At 3:49 a.m., the SAMU – which was receiving calls – reported to the Cross that the dinghy “was broken down and taking on water. The Cross operator said that they had been calling non stop for some time, that they were more or less in English waters. Two minutes later, another call for help: “We hear screams”, said the investigators. The operator told him that help would be here in twenty minutes. But they did not arrive.

At 4:09 a.m. a passenger pleads: “Please come quickly.” “The lifeboat is coming in a few minutes,” the Cross operator assures him. At 4:16 a.m., the same person calls back to say: “it’s over,” said the investigators. [The operator] told her to send him a message, she gave him her phone number again. The operator says in an aside “I will leave him the magic sentence: no position, no rescue boat.”

At the same time, a call was made to the Cross by another occupant of the small boat “We are in the water, We’re out. Over. Please help us. Help us (...) We are dying. We are in the sea, in, in (...) it is cold.”

But the Cross operator insist on asking: “Where in France did you start from? (...) We can’t see where you are.” On the phone, the passenger explains that he has no internet and begs for a helicopter. The conversation lasts seventeen minutes. We hear screams from women, men and children, as if they are trying to hail someone. “We see a big boat”, the person says at this point. “What colour is the boat?” the operator asks. The conversation suddenly cuts off.

The investigators noted that at the same time a vessel, the Concerto, reported to the Cross “seeing a boat stopped, [and] asked what to do. The Cross operator told him to continue on his way, the

Flamant [a French patrol boat] would come.

At 4:23 a.m., however, via WhatsApp, the Cross continues to instruct the passengers to call 999 because they are in English waters.

At the same time, the Flamant informed the Cross that an English border force patrol boat, the Valiant, was heading towards a boat, although it was not known if it was the one in distress. However, this is what the Cross may have been tempted to conclude. In a summary table of the boats reported that night, it notes: “Conversation cut off following arrival of the Valiant [not certain]. Shortly after 5 a.m. the event was closed under the mention “rescued”. The investigating gendarmes, disconcerted, noted a commitment of means “not very legible”, not allowing to formally identify the rescued boats and those which remained in the water”. In any case, they wrote, the French and British ships “did not spot” the boat.

Little is known about the means used by the British that night. An email from the Dover rescue centre sent to the Cross at 1:44 a.m. simply indicates that when they tried to call back one of the people on board the wrecked boat, the “tone” seemed to indicate the location in French waters. During his hearing in police custody, one of the survivors, the young Iraqi Ahmad Shexa, reported that the British rescue services had told them that by the time they got there, the waves would have taken us into French territorial waters, so they didn’t come.

Contacted on Sunday 13 November, the spokeswoman for the maritime prefecture, Véronique Magnin, told Le Monde that “there is no reason to believe that there was no coordination between the two operational centres”. At our level, she added, “we have not had any feedback from the investigation to make the link between the exchanges of that night and the wrecked boat.

When questioned by investigators about the lack of help given to the boat, several Cross military personnel retreated behind the arrival of the boat in English waters. “Afterwards, we didn’t check anymore because it was no longer in our area.” explains Fanny R. When asked how to assess the level of distress of a small boat, several members of the Cross, like the watch leader Matthieu L, point out that “often” migrants “call and shout about the danger when they have nothing. Fanny R., for her part, distinguishes between a “vital” emergency and a “comfort” emergency. They all call us, even if they are not in difficulty”. Agrees Nicholas H. head of the operations department. It is very difficult to prioritise correctly. About the wrecked boat, Pauline M. admits that “we were not worried about it”.

All of them question the lack of means from which they suffer: “The system put in place by the State is as follows: two nautical means and one aerial means, whereas there are sometimes thirty to fifty boats in the water, and therefore it is largely insufficient”, summarises Nicholas H. “I think that the work has been well done with the means available. I think that these poor people were unlucky,” explains Clément G. “We have been asking for additional resources for two years,” adds his colleague, Luc B. Unfortunately, we knew that one day this would happen.

Zana Mamand Mohamad hopes that a drama “will not happen again”. His brother Twana disappeared on November 24, 2021. The two men, Kurds from Iraq, had been in contact by phone during part of the crossing. Zana Mamand Mohamad expects the French justice to bring “those responsible for this tragedy to justice, whether it be smugglers or the coastguards of the two countries. Twana’s body has not been found.

[Original below]

## **The investigation into the death of 27 migrants in the Channel in 2021 blames the rescue services.**

The investigations on the reason for the sinking of the boat reveal that the migrants had called for help on several occasions. The French rescue service waited for them to drift into the English territorial waters. No rescue was sent to them.

[HYPERLINK]

Published yesterday at 18H25, updated at 06H12  
Time to read 8 min.

Photo

**Burial of Shakar Ali Pirot in Rania on 26 December 2021. The man died trying to cross the Channel to reach England on 24 November 2021 on a small boat. Twenty-seven persons died in this shipwreck. HAWRE KHALID / GETTY IMAGES VIA AFP**

“We just passed some migrants, well bodies. They are dead.

OK sir, therefore the migrants are on a boat? They seem to you to be DCD Delta Charlie Delta (décédés) (deceased)?

No no no. They are in the water but, well, they are dead.”

It was 13H49 ON 24 November 2021, when the owner of the fishing boat *Saint Jacques 2* alerted the Centre Régional opérationnel de surveillance et de sauvetage maritimes (Cross) Gris-Nez (Pas de Calais), composed of soldiers and under the authority of the maritime prefect of the Channel and the North Sea. As he was fishing in the strait of Pas-de-Calais, in the French waters but in close proximity to the English waters, he discovered fifteen bodies spread over a hundred meters, lying on the surface of the water. Next to them was an unusable boat, like a deflated “black pudding”.

On that day, twenty-seven bodies were fished out of the water, including six women and a young girl, only two survivors were rescued. It was the most serious sinking which occurred since migrants try to reach England onboard pneumatic makeshift dinghies. At the time, this catastrophe had caused a lot of emotion. Despite the tragedies, [HYPERLINK] the attempts to cross the Channel by migrants have increased dramatically in the first semester. Since the start of 2022, 40,000 persons reached England in small boats.

One year after the judicial investigation began which threw light on the catastrophe of 24 November 2021, *Le Monde* learnt of the investigations on the circumstances of the sinking. They are a collection of all the communications between the Cross and the sinking boat and reveal that those onboard had called the French rescue service on several occasions for about 3 hours. The British rescue service had also been contacted even though the report of their activities has not yet been provided to the investigation.

At this time, it seems that no rescue service was launched to save the boat. At no time did the Cross seem to understand the danger in which the passengers on the boat were despite the numerous alerts. On the contrary, given the means at their disposal and the numerous crossings, and taking into consideration the direction of the boat approaching the British territorial waters, the Cross let the English facilitate the passage.

The 24 November was called “the big night” remembers Clément G., watch officer at Cross, during his interview by the investigators of the search & rescue of the maritime gendarmerie of Cherbourg (Channel). That night, twenty boats had called.

*“The contacts multiplied by ten in the number of calls from the same boat”* stated the officer Frédéric J. to the policemen. One boat in particular reported the watch officer, Pauline M. to the investigators that *“they did not stop calling us that night”*. It was that boat that sank. During their interviews, both survivors stated that the boat had started to deflate and sink a few hours after their departure from a beach near Dunkirk (Nord).

It was 1H48 when the first exchanges occurred between the boat and the Cross. One of the passengers explained in English that they were 30 onboard a *“broken boat”*. According to the usual procedure, the operator asked him to send her his GPS tracking through WhatsApp.

At 1H51, this person called the SAMU of the Pas-de-Calais who transferred the call to Cross. *“Apparently, their boat, nothing goes on top of it”* the operator of the SAMU had warned. The communication lasted nearly fourteen minutes. *“Please, please! (...) we need help, please. Help us please”* he pleaded. *“If I don’t have your position, I cannot help you”* the operator of the Cross, Fanny R. repeated. Onboard, the passengers panicked. They shouted and cried. *“Send me your position now and I will send you a search & rescue boat as soon as possible”*, Fanny R. repeated. The position of the boat was communicated at 2H05 and 2H06 to the Cross. However they did not send a search & rescue boat but they contacted the English rescue coordination centre in Dover. *“I have a dinghy near your sector”* said the operator. *“I’ll give you its position, it’s at 0.6 nautical miles [of the English waters].”*

At 2H10 the boat once again gave its position through WhatsApp which found it in French waters. The persons onboard continued to call. At 2H45 during one of these calls, whilst shouting and crying could be heard, the operator of the Cross told them *“to calm down and that the rescue boat is on its way”* noted the investigators.

In fact, at 2H28 as the Cross got the position of the boat, they called the English. *“they are currently in your zone.”*

Despite this, the dinghy drifted and continued to call for help but the Cross estimated that it was no longer their responsibility. Whilst the SAMU tried to transfer a new call, the operator of the Cross said that *“In any case, they are in English waters now and that if he calls again we must tell him to contact 999 [the English rescue service.]”*

Despite this, the passengers continued to call the French, no less than fifteen times between 2H43 and 4H22 in vain. As a passenger explained at 3H30 that he was actually *“in the water”*, the Cross stubbornly retorted: *“....”* At the moment when the

operator tried to transfer the call to Dover, the communication is cut and we can hear her say as an aside *“Ah bah can't hear you, you will not be saved. I have the feet in the water, bah.... I did not ask you to leave.”*

At 3H49 the SAMU – receiving calls – reported to the Cross that the dinghy *“was out of order and sinking. The operator of the Cross said that they have been calling endlessly for some time now, that they are in English waters more or less”*. There was another call for help two minutes later: *“We could hear shouting”* reported the investigators. *The operator told him that the rescue service will reach them in twenty minutes.*” But they did not arrive.

At 4H09 a passenger pleaded: *“Please come quickly.” “The rescue boat is on its way it will be there in a few minutes”*, the Cross assured him. At 4H16 the same person called again to say: *“It's over”* said the investigators. [the operator] repeated and asked him to send her his position, *she gave him her telephone number. The operator said as an aside “I'm going to say the magic sentence: no position, no rescue boat.”*

At the same time, there was a call to Cross from another passenger of the small boat: *“We are in the water, it's the end, the end. Help us please, Help us (...) We are dying. We are in the sea, inside it, inside it (...) it's cold.*

But the operator of the Cross stubbornly asked: *“Whereabouts did you leave France? (...) We do not see where you are located.”* The passenger explained on the telephone that he does not have the Internet and begged them to send a helicopter. The conversation lasted seventeen minutes. We can hear women, men, children shouting as if they were trying to call someone. *“We can see a big boat”* the person said at this moment. *“What is the colour of the boat?”* the operator asked. The conversation is suddenly cut.

The investigators noted that at the same time a ship, the *Concerto* reported to Cross *“that they can see a boat which had stopped, [and] asked what they should do. The operator of Cross told them to continue on their way, that the Flamant [a French patrol boat] was coming”*.

Yet at 4H23 via WhatsApp, Cross continued to ask the passengers to call 999 because they are in English waters.

At the same time, the *Flamant* informed the Cross that a patrol boat from the English border force, the *Valiant* was heading towards a boat without knowing if it was the one in distress. This is what Cross tried to conclude. In a recap chart of the vessels reported that night, they noted: *“Conversation cut then arrival of Valiant (no certainty).”* Shortly after 5H00, the event is closed under the mention *“rescued”*. The investigating policemen, who are disconcerted, noted the engagement of resources *“hardly legible”* which did not allow to *“formally identify the rescued vessels and*

*those which remained in the water*". In any event, they wrote that the French and English ships "*did not locate*" the boat.

We still know very little of the resources used by the British on that night. An SMS from the Dover rescue centre addressed to Cross at 1H44 simply indicated that by attempting to call back one of the persons onboard the sinking boat, the "*tonality*" seemed to indicate its position in French waters. During his interview in custody, one of the survivors, a young Iraqi Ahmad Shexa, reported that the English rescue service said that *by the time they arrived in situ, the waves would have led us to the French territorial waters and therefore they did not come*".

On Sunday 13 November, Véronique Magnin, the spokesperson of the maritime prefecture indicated to *Le Monde* that "*nothing made us think that there had been no coordination between the two operational centres*" "*As far as we are concerned, she added, "We have not had any feed-back from this investigation to make a link between the exchanges of that night and the sinking boat"*".

Interviewed by the investigators on the absence of the rescue to the boat, several troops of the Cross justified themselves by the arrival of the dinghy in English waters. "*Afterwards, we did not check because it was no longer in our zone*", Fanny R. Sondés justified herself on the way of assessing the level of distress of a small boat, several members of Cross like the watch officer, Matthieu L., said that "*often*" the migrants "*call and shout: "danger" but there is nothing*", Fanny R. for her part made a distinction between "*vital emergency*" and "*comfort emergency*". "*They all call us even if they are not in difficulty*" corroborated Nicolas H., the head of the operations department. *It is very difficult to prioritise correctly*" Regarding the sunk boat, Pauline M. admitted that "*we were not worried about it*".

They all blamed the lack of resources. "*The mechanism put in place by the State is as follows: two nautical resources, one aerial when there is [HYPERLINK] and therefore, it is insufficient*" summarised Nicolas H. "*I believe we did our job well given the resources at our disposal. I believe these poor people were unlucky*", explained Clément G. to the investigators. "*We have been requesting additional resources for two years, added his colleague Lue B. "We knew that, unfortunately, one day, this would happen"*".

Zana Mamand Mohamed hopes that a catastrophe "*will not happen again*". His brother Twana disappeared on 24 November 2021. Both men, Kurds from Iraq had been in contact by telephone during part of the crossing. Zana Mamand Mohamed is waiting for the French judge to try "*those responsible for this catastrophe before a tribunal, be they the people smugglers or the coastguards of both countries*" Twana's body has never been found.

[HYPERLINK “[ HYPERLINK "https://www.lemonde.f/en/les-decodeurs/article/2022/11/22/death-of-27-migrants-crossing-the-channel-invetigators-consider-crimina-charges-for-hench-rescuers\_6005126\_8.html" ]”]

## **Death of 27 migrants in Channel: Investigators consider criminal charges against French rescue services**

**By Abdelhak El Idrissi and Julia Pascual**

**Published on November 22, 2022 at 05:03, updated at 12H52 on November 22, 2022**

4 mins

Read in French

### **INVESTIGATION**

After 27 migrants died trying to cross the Channel in 2021, French police investigating the sinking of the dinghy are questioning the actions of CROSS (Regional Maritime Surveillance and Rescue Operational Centre), who refused to send a rescue ship.