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Answer given by Mr Brunner
on behalf of the European Commission
(15.9.2026)

The Commission is aware of the reports concerning the alleged incident of 11 May 2026 involving the vessel Sea-Watch 5 and related judicial proceedings in Italy. Preventing migrant smuggling while protecting life at sea remains a key priority. Assistance to persons in distress at sea is an obligation under international law, and suspected criminal conducts must be investigated.

Under international maritime law, coordination of search and rescue operations are a responsibility of the competent national authorities. The international legal framework, including the International Conventions on Maritime Search and Rescue, Safety of Life at Sea and Transnational Organised Crime, together with relevant EU legislation, provides the basis for search and rescue activities and the fight against migrant smuggling. The Commission has also proposed new rules to improve the investigation and prosecution of smuggling networks and reinforce European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation's (Europol) role, and more recently, a new EU sanctions regime to freeze smugglers' assets, restrict their movements and cut off their profits. These efforts are complemented by the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling, which strengthens cooperation with third countries and international organisations.

The Commission continues to work with Member States through the Search and Rescue (SAR) Contact Group¹ and engages with other stakeholders carrying out search and rescue operations. At present, the Commission is not planning to propose a binding EU code of conduct for private vessels.

¹ The SAR Contact Group aims at enhancing cooperation and information exchange between Member States, as well as with other relevant stakeholders, in the field of search and rescue. The last meeting of the SAR Contact Group took place in May 2026.