

FHAS Foundation
for Humanitarian
Action at Sea

2025

Annual
Report



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Foreword

This first year marked an important beginning for the Foundation for Humanitarian Action at Sea (the Foundation, FHAS). We established the organisation with a clear mission: to support more coordinated, humane, and effective responses when vessels are in distress along migration routes. From the outset, we focused on bringing together the actors who can meaningfully shape these responses.

The Foundation's work encompasses three core objectives: dialogue, research and analysis, and direct support to search and rescue (SAR). A major part of our efforts this year were launching our dialogue platforms. The first meetings, held in Mauritius and Senegal, created space for constructive exchanges between states, maritime authorities, international organisations, SAR professionals, and representatives from the maritime industry. These gatherings confirmed both the appetite for collaboration and the need for practical, grounded discussions.

We also advanced our work on strengthening the evidence base. Over the past year, we began consolidating available data on maritime migration and undertook research on the legal pressures faced by masters, crews, and commercial actors involved in rescue situations. This work highlighted significant gaps and underscored the importance of reliable, accessible information to support better decision-making.

Direct support to SAR is a third element that we advanced this year. Through a collaboration with the Maritime Search and Rescue Council, we are launching an innovative SAR data portal, powered by an AI adviser. We also provided funding to the Humanitarian Pilots Initiative for underserved maritime routes in West Africa.



Partnerships have been central to these efforts. The International Chamber of Shipping and the IFRC, who have been part of our board from the start, are playing an important role in shaping and supporting our work. We also began building collaborations with organisations whose expertise strengthens specific initiatives: Babbel, supporting language training for maritime rescue coordination centres (MRCCs). These partnerships demonstrate the value of bringing together diverse capacities around a shared humanitarian purpose.

We also invested in clear and consistent communication. Through our website, social media presence, and public engagements, we aimed to present the Foundation's work in an accurate and constructive way. The positive response has reinforced the value of this approach and helped position the Foundation as a credible, pragmatic actor in this space.

As we look ahead, these first steps provide a strong foundation for expanding our engagement, deepening partnerships, and continuing to promote practical solutions to the humanitarian challenges at sea.

Richard Watts
President & Co-Founder of FHAS



Introduction

The vision for the Foundation for Humanitarian Action at Sea (FHAS) was born in 2023 from the meeting of Caroline Abu Sa'Da and Richard Watts, who, drawing on their respective experiences in humanitarian action and commercial maritime transport, identified a lack of constructive dialogue among stakeholders involved in maritime rescue for migrants and refugees.

At the time, Caroline Abu Sa'Da, then the founder and director of SOS MEDITERRANEE Switzerland, created the Centre for Humanitarian Action at Sea (CHAS) with Richard Watts, later incubated at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). In December 2024, she stepped down from her position at SOS MEDITERRANEE to fully dedicate herself to CHAS, which officially became an independent foundation (FHAS) in January 2025. At the same time, Richard Watts also left his position as president of SOS MEDITERRANEE to assume the presidency of FHAS.

Maritime migration is a major humanitarian crisis affecting multiple regions worldwide. In 2024 and 2025, more than 16,000 people died or went missing trying to cross seas, to escape conflict, poverty, persecution, or the effects of climate change. The Foundation seeks to save lives at sea by serving as a neutral platform that bridges the operational, humanitarian, and political dimensions of rescue at sea.

The organisation's strategic approach rests on three pillars: facilitating structured dialogue among stakeholders who rarely engage together (commercial shipping, states, MRCCs, humanitarian organisations, and international agencies); centralising research and data collection to document under-reported maritime routes and improve evidence-based responses; and providing direct operational and technical support to strengthen search-and-rescue capacity in critical but under-resourced regions.

By serving as a platform for dialogue, research, and action, the Foundation seeks to reduce preventable deaths at sea. It brings together the perspectives of different stakeholders while maintaining a global vision of the urgency of maritime rescue. 3

Establishment of the Foundation

January 2025 marked the formal establishment of the Foundation as an independent legal entity dedicated to advancing maritime rescue. Following months of preparatory work, the Foundation was registered with the Geneva Commercial Registry (IDE: CHE-174.957.115), subject to the supervision of the Swiss Federal Foundation Supervisory Authority (ASF) and has been exempt from taxes since 2024 for an indefinite period. The Foundation secured an office in Petit-Saconnex, established the financial cornerstone of its operation, and set up administrative aspects for staff benefits and management. This includes processing salaries, insurance, and similar matters.

Board of trustees

The Board of trustees is FHAS's highest governing body. It is responsible for strategic oversight, budget approvals, and the general direction of activities. Its members are recognised experts in the maritime, humanitarian, and legal fields.

Board members:



**Richard Watts – President and Co-founder
Founder of HR Maritime**

Richard Watts has extensive experience in maritime transport and international affairs. His commitment to sustainability and sea rescue makes him a key figure in FHAS's development.



**John Stawpert – Vice-President
Principal Director – Marine, ICS (International
Chamber of Shipping)**

The presence of John Stawpert is essential to fully integrate the commercial shipping sector into discussions on rescue operations and to improve cooperation with the maritime industry.



**Markus Mader
Strategic Advisor Under - Secretary - General of the
IFRC (International Federation of Red Cross and Red
Crescent Societies)**

This position ensures that FHAS's activities align with international humanitarian standards and principles of emergency response and relief. Markus Mader has extensive experience in both humanitarian work and organisational management.



**Guillaume Barazzone
Attorney-at-law, Partner Jacquemoud Stanislas, LL.M**

An experienced legal professional, Guillaume Barazzone, partner at Jacquemoud Stanislas firm, brings his expertise in law and governance to FHAS's activities. As a former Mayor of Geneva and National Councilor, he has in-depth knowledge of political and institutional challenges related to the shipping sector in Switzerland.

Executive Team

The operational team of FHAS is responsible for the implementation of activities, project management, and the strategic development of the foundation. It is led by:

Dr Caroline Abu Sa'Da – Director and Co-Founder

With over twenty years of experience in humanitarian action, Dr Caroline Abu Sa'Da has held senior roles at Oxfam GB, the United Nations and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). From 2017 to 2024, she founded and led SOS MEDITERRANEE Switzerland, developing recognised expertise in migration and maritime humanitarian issues.

A published author and researcher, she has written multiple books and academic publications on humanitarian action. As Co-Founder and Director of the Foundation for Humanitarian Action at Sea, she provides strategic leadership and overall direction, shaping the Foundation's vision and priorities.



Carine Fauchs – Program and Engagement Manager

With strong experience in project management and communications, Carine Fauchs is responsible for internal coordination and the operational delivery of FHAS activities, working in close collaboration with the Executive Director. She leads the development of institutional communications and digital content, prepares budgets and grant applications, and coordinates the organisation of dialogue platforms and events.

Ralph Mamiya – Director of Research

An expert in civilian protection and humanitarian affairs, Ralph Mamiya brings his expertise in research and analysis of maritime migration dynamics. He has held leadership roles at the United Nations and international research institutes. As the author of numerous publications, he plays a central role in data collection and analysis related to maritime migration.





Ambassador-at-large

The Foundation was also pleased to welcome in 2025 Guy Platten, to serve as its ambassador-at-large. Mr. Platten is the former Secretary-General of the International Chamber of Shipping, former Chief Executive of the UK Chamber of Shipping, and many other prestigious positions.

This leadership brings both strategic vision and deep technical knowledge to guide The Foundation's work, ensuring that our initiatives are grounded in operational realities while advancing meaningful reform in maritime rescue practices and policies.

Dialogue

Facilitating dialogue between diverse stakeholders is a core objective of the Foundation and a focus of many activities in 2025. Across three major regions—the Western Indian Ocean, Northwest Africa, and the Asia-Pacific—FHAS convened or prepared regional dialogues to address information gaps, operational challenges, and coordination needs in underserved maritime migration routes. This work built on the momentum and recommendations of its 2023 and 2024 Geneva Dialogues.

The dialogues in Mauritius and Senegal brought together a wide array of maritime stakeholders—including MRCCs, shipping companies, and humanitarian rescue professionals—and generated concrete action plans and fostered new partnerships and greater cooperation among maritime authorities. FHAS will, for example, be part of the coordination working group for MRCCs in the Western Indian Ocean. Alongside this, the Foundation expanded engagement with the global shipping sector and advanced its digital outreach to better equip practitioners, policymakers, and communities dedicated to saving lives at sea.

Follow-up to Geneva dialogue 2024

The foundation began the year advancing many of the action points arising from its 2024 dialogue in Geneva, itself a continuation of discussions begun in 2023. This event brought together coastal states, flag states, shipping industry representatives, UN organisations, and search-and-rescue professionals. The discussions arising out of this meeting informed many of FHAS's 2025 activities, including the regional dialogues undertaken in Senegal and Mauritius; research on the legal and policy challenges faced by merchant ships engaged in rescue; and a SAR operational data portal. All of these initiatives are elaborated upon below.

Dialogue on the Western Indian Ocean

FHAS focuses on underserved and understudied maritime routes, making the Western Indian Ocean an important area of concern. There is large-scale but poorly documented maritime migration to the French-administered departments and regions of Mayotte and la Réunion. This draws migrants and refugees from as far afield as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sri Lanka, who often make perilous journeys to reach these islands. The Western Indian Ocean has also become an increasingly vital shipping lane, as geopolitical instability in the Gulf of Aden has pushed more ships to navigate through the Mozambique Channel and around the Cape of Good Hope.

In June, FHAS and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) organised a regional dialogue in Mauritius with representatives from the Comoros, Djibouti, France, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa, and Tanzania. The dialogue brought together representatives from all MRCCs in the region along with representatives from the shipping industry, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the United Nations, and the European Union. Discussions focused on gaps in information sharing, training, and SAR capacities.



The dialogue produced an action plan with key deliverables for which FHAS is supporting execution, in strategic partnership with IOC, including the following:

- Revitalisation of a regional coordination platform for MRCCs to enhance coordination and information sharing.
- Language training for regional, developing coastal state personnel, for which FHAS completed an agreement with the online language platform Babbel to provide free lessons in maritime English.
- FHAS and IOC are currently in the process of developing a public-private partnership to strengthen maritime surveillance of the Western Indian Ocean through drone surveillance and satellite data analysis, for the benefit of regional developing coastal states in managing maritime migration and maritime safety.
- FHAS is working with IFRC to develop models for a community-based alert system, relying on coastal communities to provide real-time information on vessels-in-distress.
- FHAS and IOC are planning a follow-up dialogue in Mauritius to continue work on this action plan in the second quarter of 2026.



Dialogue on the Northwest African Atlantic route

A second key maritime route runs along Northwest Africa, where migrants and refugees embark on maritime journeys from Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal, and Guinea-Bissau, seeking to reach the Canary Islands. This journey takes them across open ocean on a route that can cover more than 1,000 km. Some estimates put the annual maritime deaths at more than 9,000 per year.

In October, FHAS, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Senegal's HASSMAR (Haute autorité chargée de la coordination de la sécurité maritime, de la sûreté maritime, et de la protection de l'environnement maritime) organised a regional dialogue in Dakar on the Northwest Africa route. The event brought together a wide range of actors, including MRCC and state representatives from Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Morocco, Senegal, and Spain; as well as the Abidjan-based CRESMAO (West Africa Regional Maritime Security Centre), the African Union Migration Observatory, ISMI (Institut de Sécurité Maritime Interrégional) and maritime industry actors. Humanitarian and rescue experts also attended, including the Humanitarian Pilots Initiative, the Mixed Migration Centre, SOS MEDITERRANEE, and IOM. Together, they exchanged views on operational challenges, migratory dynamics, and ways to strengthen safety at sea and regional cooperation.



During the dialogue, a consensus emerged that safety at sea and the protection of human life must be addressed in a holistic manner, including technical, institutional, and human elements. The next steps will include:

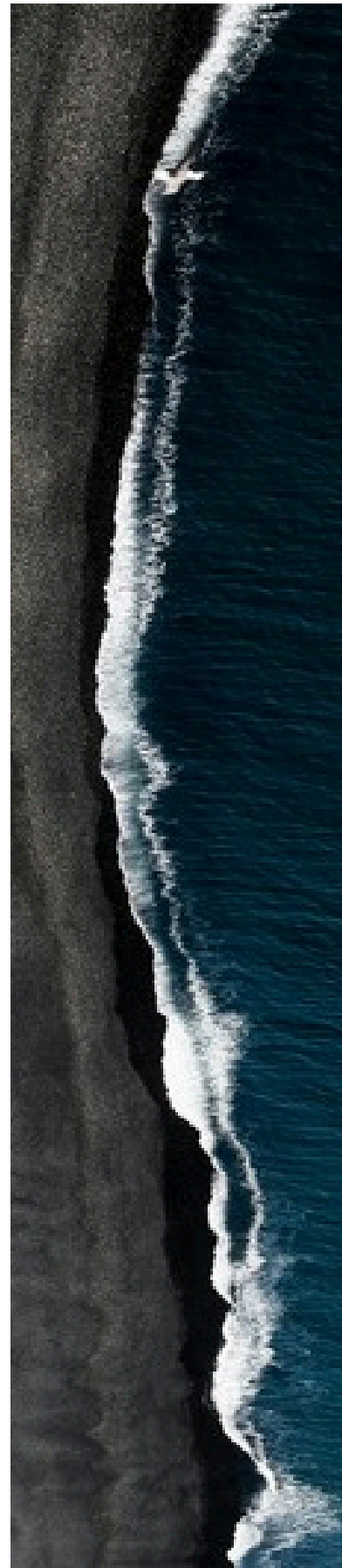
- The creation of a network of regional focal points for real-time information exchange.
- The consolidation of SAR capacities through training, technical and theoretical support, pooling of resources, and clarification of intervention protocols.
- The implementation of joint simulation exercises.
- A joint FHAS–HASSMAR monitoring framework.

FHAS is currently supporting the implementation of all of these steps and is planning a follow-up dialogue with HASSMAR in 2026.

Dialogue preparation for the Asia-Pacific region

The Asia-Pacific region includes two major maritime migration routes: Rohingya refugees moving from Myanmar and Bangladesh across open ocean to Indonesia and Malaysia; and routes that bring people from countries as far as Nepal and Sri Lanka to Australia, via routes through the Malay Archipelago. Migration is a sensitive issue for many states in the region, and these seas comprise the busiest set of shipping lanes in the world. Together, these factors make the Asia-Pacific region a complex and challenging one.

FHAS has begun to engage multiple actors in the region in preparation for a planned regional dialogue in Singapore in April, 2026, during the Singapore Maritime Week. This includes regular preparatory discussions with the S. Rajaratnam School for International Studies (RSIS) in Singapore, with which the dialogue will be organised. FHAS also provided briefings to the Regional Consultative Group on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination in Thailand, during November 2024, and to the Australian Civil-Military Centre and Australian Council for International Development in Canberra in November 2025. Both of these engagements provided opportunities for FHAS to present its work to a broad audience of state representatives from the Asia-Pacific region and to engage with regional humanitarian actors.



Engagement with the maritime sector

Throughout 2025, FHAS consistently engaged with the shipping sector, including a shipping conference in Madrid in May, and a virtual briefing, organised by BIMCO to its members, in October. These engagements enabled FHAS to continue its outreach with shipping companies as key stakeholders in improving maritime rescue. There was further engagement throughout the year, including with the companies that attended the dialogues in Mauritius and Senegal, for industry experts to train the AI chatbot for operational advice (described below), and to advise on a variety of other Foundation initiatives.

The Foundation also serves as part of the steering committee for the global search-and-rescue review of the International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF). This review assesses SAR capacities around the world and seeks to take stock of state and non-state capacities and interests.

The Foundation also conducted outreach with the broader maritime community in Switzerland and around the world. This includes engagements with the Swiss Federal Maritime Navigation Office, responsible for supervising all Swiss-flagged commercial and recreational vessels. It also includes participating in the Inter-agency Standing Committee, the highest-level, United Nations-chaired, humanitarian coordination body on protection at sea.

Digital outreach and communications

The Foundation advanced its communications strategy with the development of a recognised visual identity and the launch of its new website. The website serves as both a comprehensive introduction to our organisation and a vital resource for the maritime rescue community. It provides easy access to our complete library of reports and research, while also offering curated materials on maritime rescue law and policy for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers worldwide. Key features include maps with detailed contacts for MRCCs, dedicated sections addressing mental health support for those involved in maritime rescue operations, and an interactive survey platform for seafarers to share their experiences.

Our enhanced social media presence has amplified this reach, helping to foster important conversations about maritime rescue and expanding our network of stakeholders committed to saving lives at sea. This includes online videos on key maritime routes and explainers on legal concepts. These materials are already being used by students.





Research and analysis

Research and analysis are the Foundation's second major objective, enabling us to build the evidence base necessary to address the complex legal, operational, and human challenges facing maritime rescue. Over the past year, we have deepened our work on legal and policy challenges facing merchant ships engaged in rescue, expanded our assessment of humanitarian actors' capacities, and forged new partnerships with academic institutions and seafarer welfare organisations. These efforts position FHAS to inform policy, support practitioners, and strengthen overall understanding of rescue at sea.

Report: “Double jeopardy: Legal and policy challenges facing commercial ships conducting maritime rescue”

In December, the Foundation finalised the report on the legal and policy challenges facing commercial ships conducting maritime rescue. This report includes a comprehensive review of merchant ship rescues involving maritime migrants and refugees, with nearly all ships facing either delays or legal cases. It finds that there remains a significant degree of legal uncertainty for merchant ships engaged in rescue, particularly in the Central Mediterranean, and provides a set of recommendations to address key challenges. In researching this report, FHAS worked with the law firm DLA Piper through its partnership with UNHCR, which provided pro bono legal research assistance. The report will be launched at the Geneva Graduate Institute in February 2026.

Assessment of Red Cross / Red Crescent Society rescue capacities

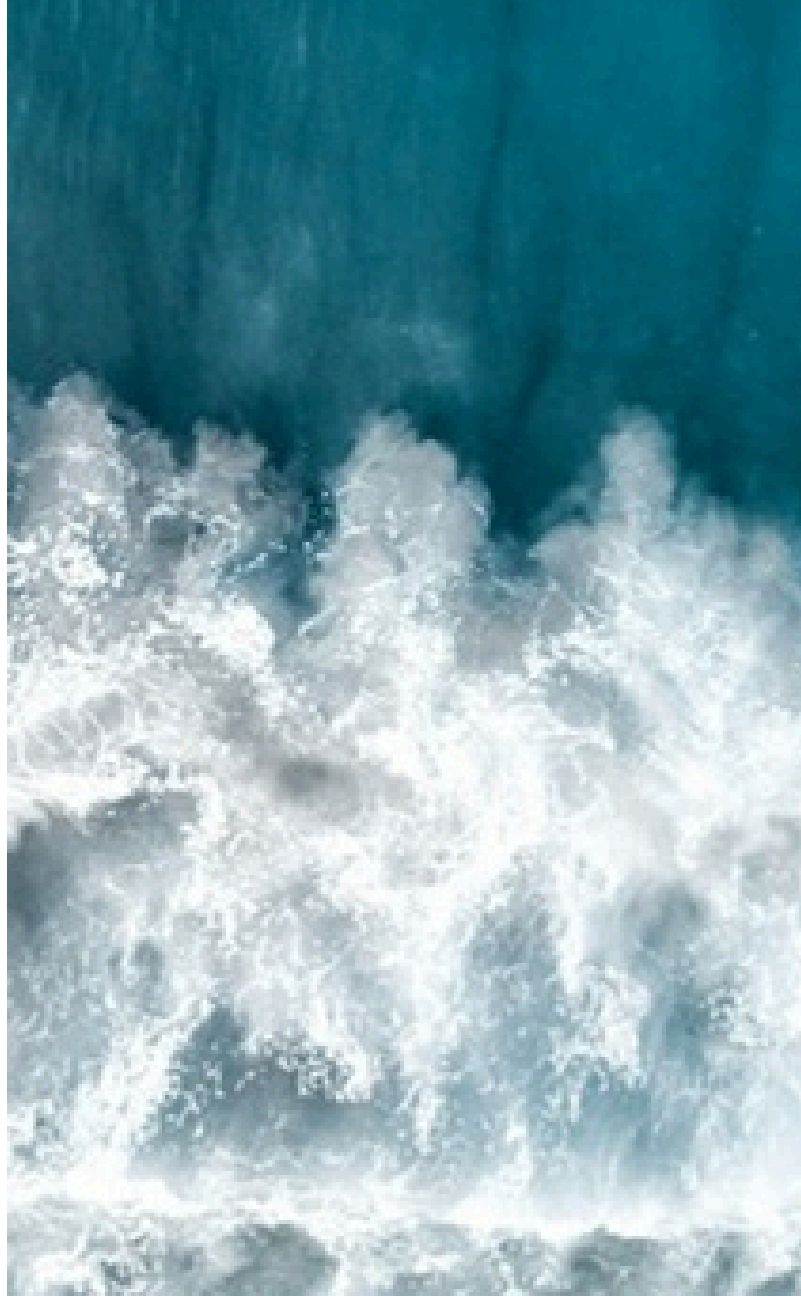
The Foundation is undertaking a review of national societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, in partnership with the IFRC. These confidential assessments will provide an evidence base for technical partnerships with a range of national societies and help shape FHAS and IFRC work regarding maritime migration. National societies represented in the areas of recent and upcoming regional dialogues —the Western Indian Ocean, Northwest Africa, and Southeast Asia — are prioritised. This project is iterative and ongoing.

Research outreach and partnerships

As part of its research outreach and partnerships, the Foundation was featured in a special issue of the Forced Migration Review (Oxford University), in May 2025. The Foundation's featured article focused on the important role of the commercial shipping industry in rescue at sea and included elements of the Foundation's research.

FHAS established a partnership with the Geneva Graduate Institute in October 2025 as part of the school's Applied Research Projects and Practice programme. During the 2025-2026 academic year, the Foundation will mentor four graduate students undertaking research to support the Foundation's work.

In addition, the Foundation is scoping research work on seafarer mental health with the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN). Rescue events can be traumatic for seafarers as well as the rescued people. The Foundation plans to expand on the limited literature in this area through surveys and interviews with chaplains and other seafarer welfare providers beginning in 2026.





Direct support to rescue-at-sea

Operational support is one of the Foundation's key activities, advanced in 2025 through a series of measures to support operational actors and incubate innovative tools. This includes supporting the Humanitarian Pilots Initiative and a partnership with the Maritime Search and Rescue Council to develop a SAR data portal with an AI-powered adviser.

Support to the Humanitarian Pilots Initiative

The Foundation supported the Humanitarian Pilots Initiative (HPI), a Swiss NGO established in 2015, with a grant to support an assessment for the November aerial surveillance mission of maritime migration along the Northwest African route. HPI has been an important actor in providing real-time information on rescues to state and NGO rescue professionals and can strengthen coordination for commercial ships involved in rescue where necessary. The Foundation's support fills a critical gap for HPI that serves as a strategic enabler for broad-spectrum rescue response in an underserved route like the Northwest coast of Africa.

An aerial photograph showing the wake of a ship in the ocean. The water is a deep blue, and the wake is a white, frothy trail that curves across the frame. The ship's deck is visible at the bottom, with several orange lifebuoys and a yellow object. The text is overlaid on a white rectangular background in the center of the image.

SAR operational data portal

The Foundation and the Maritime Search and Rescue Council partnered to develop a SAR data portal. This data portal is designed to provide real-time advice and information for ships engaged in rescue. The Foundation is supporting this innovative mechanism through funding, training and mobilising MRCCs and other maritime experts to vet and train the AI model.

The SAR operational data portal includes SAR data analysis tools and an AI chatbot designed to answer seafarers' questions on SAR in real time. The chatbot is powered by ChatGPT 5, trained by FHAS on a broad corpus of maritime manuals and literature and vetted by a group of maritime industry and search-and-rescue veterans. The chatbot provides accurate, context-sensitive answers on SAR operations by combining technical datasets, doctrinal materials, and expert human review. The SAR operational data portal is currently being tested by MRCCs and it will go live in 2026.

2025 in Review



2 new regional dialogue platforms held

Mauritius (Western Indian Ocean)
Dakar, Senegal (Northwest Africa)

3 maritime regions addressed

Western Indian Ocean
Northwest Africa (Atlantic route)
Asia-Pacific (dialogue preparation)



MRCC cooperation strengthened

MRCCs were actively involved in the regional dialogue platforms, opening the way for FHAS to take part in coordination exchanges and selected MRCC meetings.



18 countries represented across both regional dialogues

11 in Mauritius | 7 in Senegal



1 featured article published

FHAS was featured in Forced Migration Review (Oxford University) in May 2025.

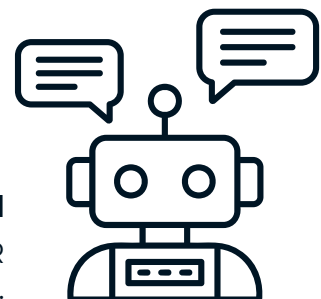


1 SAR data portal under development

Developed with the Maritime Search and Rescue Council to support real-time operational guidance.

1 AI-powered SAR chatbot developed

Trained on maritime manuals and vetted by SAR and maritime experts; testing started with MRCCs.



2 direct operational grants

Provided to Humanitarian Pilots Initiative (HPI) - Northwest African route, and to the Maritime Search and Rescue Council (MSARC) - Liberia



1 language partnership finalised

An agreement with Babbel was completed to support maritime English training for MRCC personnel.



2.5 full-time equivalents (FTE)

FHAS operated with a core team of 2.5 FTE in 2025.

Seafarer mental health research scoped

Initial scoping was launched with plans to expand surveys and interviews in 2026.



Academic partnership established

A partnership with the Geneva Graduate Institute (IHEID) was launched to mentor four graduate students (2025–2026).

1 major research report finalised

Double Jeopardy on legal and policy challenges for commercial ships conducting rescue at sea.





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