Mr Matthias OEL  
Director of Directorate B  
Schengen, Borders & Visa  
DG HOME, European Commission

Dear Mr Oel,

In reference to your inquiry please see below the necessary elements for a concise reply to the written question E-1757/2022 “Division of tasks for Frontex drone flights”:

1. **What personnel or liaison staff has Frontex seconded to the ground station for control and operation of the ‘Heron 1’ sensor payload from the international airport in Malta, and how are the Airbus personnel there supported or supplemented by Frontex staff?**

   Following the multipurpose aerial surveillance (MAS) and Frontex surveillance aircraft concept, Frontex is contracting a service from provider, the EU company Airbus DS Airborne Solutions GmbH, which operates Heron MALE RPAS. In support of the operations conducted with the RPAS with Call Sign ‘HERON 1”, Frontex does not have any staff deployed in Malta working at the Ground Control Station. The data captured by the sensors on board of RPAS, including video, are streamed to the Agency’s headquarters in Warsaw, where the European Surveillance Team makes their analysis and assessment of the situations detected. Simultaneously, same data and video are streamed to the Maltese competent Authority.

2. **What other Frontex staff or personnel seconded to Frontex from individual Member States are involved in the command and supervision of these flights and in the processing and analysis of sensor data in Malta, Warsaw or elsewhere, and what are the specific job titles of the officers responsible for these tasks?**

   As mentioned in the previous answer, the information elements captured by the on-board sensors of the RPAS are streamed to Frontex headquarters in Warsaw, where the European Surveillance Team makes its analysis and assessment of the events detected. The European Surveillance Team consists of the Agency’s staff and standing corps (Team Leader and Reporting Officer), and Member States’ Experts with different backgrounds (i.e. law enforcement, search and rescue). The Fundamental Right Officers or staff of the Fundamental Rights Office (FRO), including the Fundamental Rights Monitors, are integral part of the Team and monitor operational activities to ensure they comply with fundamental rights. The Team can be complemented by additional experts from other EU Agencies, if so, agreed with the Host Member State.
3. In the Commission’s view, what personnel from Airbus (control), Frontex (image data evaluation) or the Maltese air force (official operator of the drone) are responsible, to comply with international conventions, for classifying maritime emergencies detected during missions and for notifying the competent control centres, and what tasks do Frontex Fusion Services staff in Warsaw carry out in that connection?

Considering the international legal framework on search and rescue (SAR), Frontex is not legally competent to formally state in which SAR phase an incident is (uncertainty, alert or distress according to International Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue Manual). This responsibility, as all other responsibilities related to SAR incident coordination, falls on the competent Rescue Coordination Centre.

Taking into account the legal framework, upon detection of a vessel in a situation assessed as life-threatening or having the potential to evolve into a life-threatening situation, Frontex notifies of the assessment the competent Rescue Coordination Centre. This assessment provided by the Agency includes imagery and other essential elements facilitating an informed decision on launching a SAR operation, such as coordinates, weather conditions on scene, number of people on board, speed, course and other vessels in the vicinity.

Yours sincerely,

Electronically signed

Aija Kalnaja
Executive Director ad interim