

**SOS MEDITERRANEE:  
An open letter to Europe**



The Mediterranean Sea has become the world's deadliest border. In 2016 alone, 5,079 people died in their attempt to cross the Mediterranean, and several tens of thousands have perished since 2000. This humanitarian tragedy has been taking place on Europe's doorstep for more than 15 years now. On 9 May 2015, a group of European citizens founded SOS MEDITERRANEE, because we believe that it is unacceptable to let people drown without giving a helping hand. This happened only a few months after Europe made the deliberate choice to end *Mare Nostrum*, the large-scale rescue operation headed by the Italian navy for one year. Since then, we have witnessed the lack of sufficient rescue means as well as a more general lack of a political response in the Mediterranean.

**Save, protect, testify**

Our European humanitarian maritime rescue organization SOS MEDITERRANEE is based on the principle of respect for human life and dignity. Our organization is composed of three sister associations in Germany, France and Italy, all committed to the following objectives: to save lives, to protect and assist the rescued persons, as well as to testify about the realities of migration in the Mediterranean, in order to raise awareness amongst the general public in Europe.

Since launching 14 months ago, we have completed 101 rescue operations under the authority of the Maritime Rescue Coordination Center (MRCC) in Rome and welcomed a total of nearly 18,000 persons aboard the *Aquarius*, 1/4 of them being minors, most of them unaccompanied. Those rescued by our teams had many different reasons for leaving their countries of origin, but now all have the same objective: to escape Libya, which they describe as hell, and to find a safe future.

**For a Europe of Solidarity and Humanity**

As maritime and humanitarian professionals, we feel compelled to step up and act, motivated by a universal principle: every person in distress at sea has to be rescued and treated with dignity. No matter where they come from, no matter where they go. We consider this a moral and legal duty, based on the principles of humanity and solidarity at sea and on international maritime law.

We have gathered numerous testimonies aboard the *Aquarius*, clearly illustrating the extreme levels of violence endured in Libya. While stories vary from one person to another, all have one thing in common: in Libya, violence against refugees and migrants is a daily occurrence. It occurs in the form of arbitrary arrests and kidnappings, extortion and forced labor, physical abuse and torture in

detention centers, sexual violence and murder. Our medical partner, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), confirms these terrifying accounts during their medical examination.

*"The men are sold between 325 and 3,250 euros according to what they know how to do. Women are sold between 150 and 1,500 euros. They are mistreated, raped, sometimes they force us to watch. Sometimes, whilst under armed threat, they force some of us to rape women, they make videos that they then send to the families. Or they sell these women to prostitution networks, which they call the houses of connections ... When I speak of women, this also includes very, very young girls ... "* states Sofiane, one of the rescued persons whose testimony is included in SOS MEDITERRANEE's first book, *Les naufragés de l'enfer* ("Rescued from hell", Digobar Editions).

### **End the criminalization of NGOs**

Despite their tireless efforts to save lives in the Central Mediterranean throughout the past year, NGOs have recently faced attacks from various sides, including the EU border agency Frontex, Sicilian chief-prosecutor Carmelo Zuccaro and last but not least the Libyan Coast Guard.

SOS MEDITERRANEE clearly distances itself from these allegations. Humanitarian action is not the cause of this crisis but a response. Humanitarian organizations carrying out maritime search and rescue at sea have saved tens of thousands of people from drowning each year. Without our presence at sea, even more people would die.

We acknowledge that maritime search and rescue alone is not a sustainable solution to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Mediterranean. However, in the absence of safe access ways for people seeking refuge, it is up to the European leaders to provide a joint response.

### **Our demands to the European authorities**

That is why today on Europe Day, SOS MEDITERRANEE calls on all European institutions and heads of governments to put into practice its common values of solidarity and humanity, by providing the necessary means to save lives at sea. All persons in distress at sea, regardless of their background, must have their human rights respected and protected, and in particular the right to receive humanitarian assistance.

Therefore we ask the European institutions:

- To support and drastically increase the means of maritime search and rescue in the central Mediterranean. The presence of NGOs is a limited contribution, and we cannot be the only solution;
- To ensure that rescued persons are brought to a port of safety, in accordance with international law;
- To end the criminalization of NGOs whose sole purpose is to save lives;
- To prioritize the protection and preservation of human life and human dignity, also at sea.

For its part, SOS MEDITERRANEE will continue its mission, whenever necessary and against all odds.

### **Press contact:**

Jana Ciernioch | SOS MEDITERRANEE Germany e.V. | [j.ciernioch@sosmediterranee.org](mailto:j.ciernioch@sosmediterranee.org)