

Press release

Palermo, Marseille, Berlin, 31.03.2017

About Search and Rescue in the Mediterranean, by SOS MEDITERRANEE and Médecins Sans Frontières

The EU's failure to reduce the number of deaths in the Mediterranean has forced humanitarian organizations to step up and take on search and rescue activities to prevent further loss of life at sea. All activities are carried out under the coordination of the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome.

SOS MEDITERRANEE and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) jointly operate the rescue vessel Aquarius, which has saved over 1,500 lives in these past 10 days alone. On **Friday, 31st March, 10:30 am**, we have invited journalists aboard our ship in Catania, to hear first-hand from our rescue teams on the work they undertake.

Background

SOS MEDITERRANEE is a European civic rescue organization that was founded in 2015 as a response to the failure of European States to address the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Mediterranean. As a humanitarian rescue organization with sections in Germany, France and Italy, the presence of SOS MED in the Mediterranean is based on the humanitarian belief and duty to save lives and protect those in need. Since launching its rescue operation in February 2016, the organization has saved 11.069 lives and welcomed another 4.598 individuals, transferred from other ships.

Operations

Maritime law and international conventions¹ are extremely clear: any vessel at sea - be it a merchant or NGO vessel – has a duty to aid another vessel in distress. Offering assistance to thousands of people whose lives are in danger is thus a legal obligation. Italian law states that not answering an SOS call from a boat in distress is an omission of rescue subject to a penalty of one to five years of detention.

In the absence of an official SAR mission and despite the increasing efforts made by civil society organizations, deaths have increased. With more than 5.000 deaths, 2016 was the deadliest year for migrants and refugees crossing the Mediterranean. It is the lack of an institutional response and the continuation of the tragedy, which forces NGOs to intervene.

100% of SOS MEDITERRANEE's rescue activities are coordinated by the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC), the Italian Coast Guard Center for the Coordination of Rescue at Sea based in Rome, which falls under command of the Italian authorities. The MRCC determines when and how we can respond to vessels in distress, as well as the ports of disembarkation for those rescued by our teams at sea. Every person rescued by SOS MEDITERRANEE is met at port by Italian and EU border guards.

If a boat in distress is spotted by our team, we inform the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in

¹ SOLAS, SAR, UNCLOS conventions.

Rome which is responsible for coordinating the rescue. The MRCC, under international law, decides which ships in the area are best positioned to assist (this includes all vessels: the Italian Coast Guard, Italian navy ships, Frontex, Eunavfor Med, NGOs and commercial ships).

The Aquarius is patrolling in the Search and Rescue (SAR) zone in international waters, where most of the shipwrecks, i.e. boats in distress are noted. It is thanks to this professionalism and the sturdiness of our ship, that we have been able to remain at sea all year round.

“We are carrying out our mission continuously for more than one year now, with the utmost rigor and with full respect for institutions and regulated frameworks. Our operations are led in complete transparency and compliance with international maritime law. We strongly deny all accusations that were made recently against our humanitarian rescue activities at sea. We are wondering why these allegations are coming now. Is this intended to unsettle the minds of the public and the media, sway public opinion and discredit our vital lifesaving mission? », asks Sophie Beau, Vice-President of SOS MEDITERRANEE.

Professionals on board

The marine crew, MSF's medical team and SOS MEDITERRANEE's search and rescue team - composed of professional seafarers and rescuers - all form the *Aquarius* crew. Over 60 journalists and film makers have been welcomed in full transparency on the *Aquarius* so far, to witness the situation in the Mediterranean, our rescue efforts and bear witness: Times, Die ZEIT, AFP, TF1, France 2, Arte, Le Monde, BFMTV, Nice matin, Rai News, NDR, WDR, The Times London, Reuters, France Culture, Internazionale, Channel 10, BBC, TV 2000.

Our finances

SOS MEDITERRANEE is financed at 99% by private donations coming from the 3 national associations: SOS MEDITERRANEE Germany, France and Italy. Today, nearly 13,800 donors put their trust in SOS MEDITERRANEE. In addition, our medical partner Médecins Sans Frontières contributes to the cost of chartering the vessel on a monthly basis.

Rescue operations require considerable technical and financial means: 11,000 euros per day are required. This budget finances the lease of the ship, its crew, the fuel, the lifesaving equipment and all the equipment needed to take care of refugees.

Our position

« Deliberately leaving people, who are seeking safety and protection, would be to deny our values, the very same values upon which the European project is founded. It would mean denying the very foundations of our basic humanity. SOS MEDITERRANEE will continue its search and rescue efforts in the Central Mediterranean, for as long as people continue to risk their lives to seek refuge. The organization will play its part in reducing this senseless loss of life, as much as possible » explained Sophie Beau, Vice-President of SOS MEDITERRANEE.

People rescued by our teams on the *Aquarius* have reported an extreme level of violence in Libya, pushing them to flee the “Libyan hell” by any means.

Contrary to criticisms alleging that SAR efforts function as a pull factor for migration across the Mediterranean, we believe that SAR operations have little effect on the number of departures, while they obviously reduce mortality risks for people in danger at sea (or conversely, the absence of

SAR operations leads to more deaths). This was documented recently by a post on Oxford University Law Faculties' "Border Criminologies" blog series².

It is within this current context that SOS MEDITERRANEE is committed to continue its mission alongside its medical partner MSF, to save lives, protect the rights and interests of those forced to flee, and raise awareness amongst the public opinion on the sufferance endured by migrants before and whilst crossing the Mediterranean. It is only the deficit of institutional response and the continuation of the tragedy which forces NGO's to continue to intervene.

SOS MEDITERRANEE calls on all European institutions and heads of government:

- To stop the criminalization of NGO's,
- To put in place the necessary means for rescuing lives on the high seas, to avoid the unnecessary loss of lives.

Priority should be given to the preservation of life and human dignity at sea.

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Pictures and videos on request.

² <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2017/03/border-deaths>