

1004 people rescued by the Aquarius Rescue operations disrupted by gunshots



Yesterday, Tuesday 23 May, new levels of disorder were reached in the daily tragedy unfolding in Mediterranean. In just one day, the teams aboard the Aquarius, operated jointly by SOS MEDITERRANEE and *Doctors Without Borders*, rescued a record 1004 people from 11 boats - 9 rubber boats and two wooden boats.

"This was one of the most complex and tricky rescue operations we have had since the beginning of our mission at sea – an absolute emergency," said Mathias Menge, Search and Rescue coordinator aboard the Aquarius.

A new level of disorder was also reached, due to the fact that guns were fired by the Libyan coast guard. This unfolded during the rescue operations conducted by SOS MEDITERRANEE and MSF, in cooperation with NGO *Save The Children* and *Jugend Rettet* and under the coordination of the MRCC. All the while being monitoring by the Libyan coast guard.

Libyan coast guards firing shots in the air

The first rescues began around 10:30 am on Tuesday, following an air patrol report noting the presence of several boats in distress in international waters and subsequent instructions from MRCC Rome.

It was around 12:30 pm and the Aquarius and its rescue boats were in international waters at about 14 nautical miles from the Libyan coast when a boat armed with 4 stationary machine guns and identified as belonging to the Libyan Coast Guard, first approached the operations in progress at high speeds, creating large waves, thereby jeopardizing the delicate rescue of people aboard extremely fragile rubber boats.

Shortly after, at 12:46 pm, a series of gunshots could be heard aboard the Aquarius, coming from the direction of one of the inflatable boats, amidst its rescue. The shots were fired in the air, aimed

at intimidating the passengers and it was reported by witnesses on the scene that two members of the Libyan coast guard boarded one of the rubber boats.

Thankfully, there were no casualties or direct injuries, but 67 people that were still on board the dinghy, jumped into the water in panic and swam in the direction of the Aquarius.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of our teams, everyone could be rescued, as most of them were already wearing lifejackets, which had been distributed earlier by SOS MEDITERRANEE.

"When the Libyans pointed their weapons at us, asking us to give them all our money and cell phones and telling us to jump in the water, we did what they said and many of us jumped into the water. I was not afraid, I preferred to die at sea than being pushed back and to die Libya," said a Gambian survivor to the volunteers of SOS MEDITERRANEE.

Call to the G7: A human solution to this major humanitarian crisis

Despite these difficult circumstances, a record of 1004 people, many of them women and young children - a 15-day old newborn child- were transferred safely to the Aquarius.

The rescued people come from more than 20 different countries, most of them from West Africa.

"In the absence of Frontex naval units in the rescue area where most shipwrecks occur, NGOs were once more forced to step in to save hundreds of lives. What would they have done without our presence? The rescued individuals will disembark in Southern Italy on Friday – all ports in Sicily are closed due to the G7 summit that is held in Taormina", said Sophie Beau, vice-president of SOS MEDITERRANEE.

"The dramatic situation on Tuesday - the sad daily situation in the Mediterranean - shows once again the completely inadequate response to the humanitarian crisis that has cost already tens of thousands of lives. The imperative of maritime search and rescue cannot be left to NGOs alone: it is up to the politicians and international institutions to find an adequate solution to protect people seeking refuge. In a few days, the G7 will meet in Sicily, where hundreds of thousands of people rescued in the Mediterranean have landed in the past years. We call on the leaders to take up the matter, to urgently propose a solution to this major humanitarian crisis at the gates of Europe. A solution that respects international law and human rights," said Sophie Beau, Vice -President and co-founder of SOS MEDITERRANEE.

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