

**4 rescues in 48 hours in international waters west of Tripoli  
265 people safe aboard SOS MEDITERRANEE's Aquarius  
"In Sabratha, it is a real hell" (testimony)**



On Tuesday and Wednesday the Aquarius, chartered by SOS MEDITERRANEE and operated in partnership with Médecins Sans Frontières, rescued three boats in distress and transferred 143 people previously rescued by a merchant ship in international waters west of Tripoli.

265 people, including two unaccompanied Syrian minors aged 13 and 17, a little girl only one year old, several pregnant women and a number of injured persons were brought safely aboard the Aquarius. The ship is now on its way to Pozzallo (south of Sicily), which had previously been identified as a "port of safety" by the Italian authorities.

The rescued people are from 21 different countries, mainly Western Africa (Nigeria, Guinea Conakry, Mali, The Gambia ...) but there is also a number of people from Libya (24) and Syria (7).

The rescue operations were carried out under the coordination of MRCC Rome, about 40 nautical miles from the Libyan coast near offshore oil extraction platforms.

*SOS MEDITERRANEE is a European organization for the rescue of people in distress at sea. It was founded in 2015 and launched its rescue operations in February 2016. Together with its medical partner Doctors Without Borders (MSF), the organization has assisted more than 20.000 people within its first year of rescue activities.*

## **Near the oil platforms**

The first boat rescued by the Aquarius on Tuesday morning had previously been spotted by the Vos Thalassa, a merchant navy ship operating near the platform. The rescue of the rubber boat carrying 143 people was performed by the freighter Asso Venticinque also operating near the platforms. The rescued persons were then transferred to the Aquarius, following instructions of the MRCC Rome.

*"I was in Sabratha. I was waiting in a kind of bunker made of orange bricks, in the bush, outside the city. It was terrible. The ceiling of this place was very low. There were insects, fleas. I could not do anything. I was waiting for my name to be called. And then that day, the Libyan guard called us, together with my friend. He took us to Zuwarah. Down there were 5 Arab people waiting for us to get on the small boat. The Libyan told us, 'go in that direction' and they pushed us into the sea. All we could see at night was the big fire (the flare) of the oil platform"* a young Gambian told a volunteer of SOS MEDITERRANEE. He was rescued alongside 6 other people from a small wooden boat spotted by the Vos Thalassa on Tuesday morning.

## **Fleeing Sabratha in wooden boats**

On board a second, larger wooden boat rescued on Tuesday was a group of Libyans fleeing violence and fighting on land. *"Our friends die every day, or they are kidnapped by the militia. Each militia is specialized in one type of business: kidnapping, ransom demand, etc. We are fleeing the war, but we are also fleeing because there is no money left in Libya, the government is not printing anymore currency"* the survivors said. 97 people, including two children under the age of five, were aboard this wooden boat rescued off Sabratha.

On Wednesday, aboard a third wooden boat carrying 18 people, most of them Syrians, were two unaccompanied minors from Damascus, two brothers aged 13 and a 17. They explained that they had traveled alone by plane from the Syrian capital to Khartoum, then from Khartoum to Tripoli, from where they were then taken to Sabratha to embark on a boat.

*"Over the last 48 hours, 4 boats were rescued. 3 of them were wooden boats, a little less overcrowded than we had seen over the past months for this type of vessel. Nonetheless, these boats were found in distress, as they are not stable and can capsize at any moment. They are absolutely not made for crossing the high seas. Fortunately they were found on time, 40 nautical miles off the coast of Libya"*, Nicola Stalla, SAR coordinator for SOS MEDITERRANEE said.

## **"The bodies were placed in mass graves"**

Several people injured and suffering from violence and a lack of medical care in Libya were taken care of by the medical team of Médecins Sans Frontières, partner of SOS MEDITERRANEE aboard the Aquarius.

The physical state and the testimonies of the rescued collected by the volunteers of SOS MEDITERRANEE verify that the situation of migrants ashore in Libya is steadily worsening.

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*"In Sabratha, you don't go out anywhere. This place is a real hell. When you go to Sabratha, you know you're going to suffer"* said a young Gambian, pointing to the scars of beatings on his body. Another Gambian said he had been forced into labor, picking up the bodies of migrants who died at sea, and whose bodies washed ashore on Libyan beaches, as well as the bodies of those who died in prison: *"The bodies were placed in mass graves, sometimes all that was left was the head. Lately, there were also bodies of pregnant women,"* he said.

*"We can only reiterate our call to the European and Mediterranean States to hear these terrifying testimonies before it is too late, and before even more people die at sea, trying to flee Libya or are turned back and returned to the hands of their executioners"* said Sophie Beau, vice-president of SOS MEDITERRANEE.

Since the beginning of 2017, the Aquarius has welcomed 11,431 people on board of which 9,025 were directly rescued by the team of SOS MEDITERRANEE, and another 2,406 that were accommodated on board after transshipment.

**For immediate release.** Photo credit: Hara Kaminara

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