

**Two rescues conducted by SOS MEDITERRANEE to the west of Tripoli
371 people safely aboard the Aquarius
"Migrants need urgent help in Libya" (testimony)**



On Thursday, the Aquarius, the rescue ship chartered by SOS MEDITERRANEE and operated in partnership with Médecins Sans Frontières, rescued 262 people in two rescue operations in international waters off the Libyan coast, west of Tripoli.

All rescued persons, including 56 women, 7 children under 5 years (a one-week old newborn) and 48 unaccompanied minors are now safely aboard the Aquarius where they are under the care of Médecins Sans Frontières' medical staff.

For the two rescue operations, coordinated by the Libyan Coast Guard in cooperation with the MRCC Rome, assistance from the Aquarius was requested. They took place in international waters at 25 and 23.5 nautical miles from the Libyan coast, north of the town of Sabratha.

The two rubber boats rescued by the SOS MEDITERRANEE could have broken or deflated at any moment after having sailed for several hours on the open sea and were in need of immediate assistance. Later in the evening on Thursday, the Aquarius received another 109 people on board, who had previously been rescued by the humanitarian ship Vos Hestia chartered by NGO Save the Children. SOS MEDITERRANEE's rescue ship will now accompany the 371 people to a port of safety, a port where their fundamental rights and right to seek asylum will be observed.

"These recent rescues clearly show that hundreds of people continue to flee Libya by sea aboard unseaworthy boats and that there is a persisting humanitarian crisis at the gates of Europe. After the developments of the summer, it is obvious that NGO ships remain essential to ensure necessary humanitarian assistance in the central Mediterranean. The Aquarius will continue its mission as long as people continue to risk their lives at sea to escape the Libyan hell," declared Sophie Beau, vice president of SOS MEDITERRANEE International.

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. Since the beginning of 2017, the Aquarius has welcomed 11.802 people. 9.287 lives that were directly rescued by the teams of SOS MEDITERRANEE, 2.515 were welcomed on board following transshipment.

Testimonials: "African migrants in Libya need urgent help"

The vast majority of people rescued on Thursday came from sub-Saharan Africa: Nigeria, Cameroon, Gambia, Mali, Sierra Leone and others. Amongst them were also two Syrians. All of them testified on the appalling situation migrants face in Libya: kidnapping, extortion, imprisonment, forced labor, repeated rapes, ill-treatment, violence, torture and the lack of protection for them and their fundamental rights.

B., a 20-year-old from Sierra Leone, said he tried to cross the Mediterranean three times before being rescued by a humanitarian ship on Thursday: *"The first time I was intercepted, arrested and sent to jail for six months, the second time I was turned back again and sent to jail for a month. The third time was in 2016. The Libyan navy and the police arrested me and I went to prison for three months in Sabratha. In the morning they gave us spaghetti to eat, in which they put drugs to weaken us. Then in the evening they fed us drugged spaghetti again. We were put in small cells, there were up to 60 people in each cell. No toilets, you had to go about your business on the floor. And we had to sleep in the same place. The guards placed a dish of food on the floor, for about 20 prisoners. They beat me with electric cables. To get out of prison you had to pay. They demanded 480 € for my freedom. Prices vary by individual. There is no way to live in Libya, no way to escape, no way to return to our country,"* the young man explained to a volunteer from SOS MEDITERRANEE.

"Hurry up and tell our story. African migrants in Libya need your help, you Europeans. You are in Europe, you are free, it is urgent!" urged a young man from West Africa wishing to remain anonymous.

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

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For immediate release. Photo credits: Anthony Jean

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