

## **SOS MEDITERRANEE in non-stop action // seven rescue operations in 36h //Syrians report: "In Libya, money is extorted from you depending on your nationality"**



People are still crossing the central Mediterranean in search for a better life, with first-hand accounts saying it is becoming increasingly more difficult. SOS MEDITERRANEE along with its medical partner Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) performed six rescues within the last two days, saving 606 lives. The operations were carried out in coordination with the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome.

On October 10<sup>th</sup>, the Aquarius teams rescued two boats in distress in international waters east of Tripoli at 30 and 35 nautical miles from the coast, carrying 29 and 144 people respectively. Another 36 people were transferred from a merchant ship to the Aquarius on Tuesday night. They had been brought to safety earlier that day.

On Wednesday, October 11<sup>th</sup>, with the Aquarius already hosting 209 people on board, the MRCC Rome gave new instructions to proceed to a rescue of three rubber boats carrying 350 people, east of Tripoli. Late Wednesday night the Aquarius' teams ended their operations after 36 hours and transferring a final 47 people from NGO Save the Children.

*"The Aquarius was mobilized for seven operations in less than 36 hours: five rescues and two transfers, first to the east of Tripoli then to the west, then again to the east. Thanks to the professionalism of the rescue teams and the mild weather, the rescue operations went smoothly. All those who were in serious danger on these makeshift boats in the open sea, are now safe on board the Aquarius",* said Madeleine Habib, Search and Rescue-Coordinator aboard the Aquarius.

The Aquarius is currently heading towards Sicily to disembark the rescued in a port of safety, as instructed by the MRCC Rome.

### **40% minors – Survivors report widespread violence in Libya**

40% of those rescued during Tuesday's and Wednesday's operations are minors – the youngest is only a few weeks old. Many of the rescued women, mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa, reported to have experienced repeated sexual violence and imprisonment for several months if not years.

**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 23.689 people. Since the beginning of 2017, the Aquarius has welcomed 12.428 people. 9.830 lives that were directly rescued by the teams of SOS MEDITERRANEE, 2.598 were welcomed on board following transshipment.

The rescued people are from more than 15 countries: Egypt, Eritrea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Syria and others, as well as one person from Turkey.

### **50 Syrians fleeing Libya**

During Tuesdays' operations, the Aquarius teams assisted 50 Syrians, including whole families, in their attempt to cross the Mediterranean, fleeing Libya.

*"We fled Syria and arrived in Libya in 2012. I worked in the construction sector in Syria, and I continued in Libya. But soon, everything became chaotic in this country. In Libya, there is no longer access to hospitals, services, no economy, no money, no more work. Everything is now turned to racketing and human trafficking: depending on your nationality you are asked for a certain amount of money",* explained an about sixty-year-old Syrian to the volunteers of SOS MEDITERRANEE.

*"In Libya, if they see Syrians they say 'give me your money.' They stole my car. It has become impossible to live there. It's the same for all foreigners: if you're not a Libyan, you're nothing. I had no other choice, my passport had expired, it was the sea or certain death,"* continued the Syrian eyewitness who wishes to seek asylum in Germany, where part of his family has already settled.

*"We tried the crossing three times. But the first time the boat almost sank, the second time the weather was too bad and fishermen advised us to go back to the coast, otherwise we were going to die at sea, the third time it was this time. The smugglers gave us a compass saying: 'If you go in this direction you will arrive in Malta. If you go in this direction you arrive in Venice. If you go in this direction, you get to Andalusia,'" added the shipwrecked Syrian, who confirmed that the boat departed from Garabulli, east of Tripoli.*

*"The seven rescue operations carried out by the Aquarius over the past 36 hours and across a very large geographical area show that the humanitarian crisis in the Central Mediterranean is continuing. The men, women and children rescued at sea, flee the chaos and violence in Libya. Without a safe alternative they have no choice but to attempt the crossing along the deadliest maritime route in the world!",* said Sophie Beau, Vice-President of the international SOS MEDITERRANEE network. She continued: *"SOS MEDITERRANEE calls once more on national and European leaders to deploy adequate search and rescue means in the Mediterranean, so that people seeking refuge do not have to cross the Mediterranean in unseaworthy boats. Faced with the lack of an adequate institutional rescue system, SOS MEDITERRANEE continues its mission at sea".*

**For immediate release. Photo credits:** Anthony Jean

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