

## Aquarius teams rescue nearly 600 people in 18 hours of operation



Rescuers of the Aquarius, the ship chartered by SOS MEDITERRANEE and operated in partnership with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), carried out 4 operations at sea – 1 transfer and 3 rescues – on Wednesday 1st of November. 588 people were rescued and welcomed aboard the Aquarius after 18 hours of operations.

On Tuesday morning, the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome alerted the Aquarius to two boats in distress in international waters, 30 nautical miles off the Libyan coast. While proceeding towards the indicated position, MRCC Rome asked the Aquarius to keep a safe distance and remain on standby. The Libyan Coast Guard had assumed the coordination of the rescue. The two rubber boats were intercepted by a Libyan coastguard vessel and the about 200 passengers were brought back to Libya.

On Tuesday night, SOS MEDITERRANEE crews transferred 248 shipwrecked from the Italian coastguard ship "Diciotti", following instructions from MRCC. The survivors had been rescued earlier during the day by NGO Sea Eye, merchant ship "Seim Barracuda" and the "Diciotti".

### **3 non-stop rescues, including boat already sinking**

At 5 am Wednesday, new boats in distress were reported to the Aquarius by the MRCC. The Aquarius proceeded to rescue a first rubber boat carrying more than 100 people. Straight afterwards, a second boat in distress was spotted near the Aquarius. Before being able to hand life jackets to everyone aboard the rubber boat, the backboard of the boat broke, water quickly entered the boat, in response to which a general panic erupted and people proceeded to jump into the water. The SOS MEDITERRANEE teams immediately mobilized all floatation devices, distributed life jackets and pulled people from the water, including one man in cardiac arrest. He was then successfully revived by the teams aboard the Aquarius and later medically evacuated by helicopter.

*"On Wednesday, the Aquarius conducted 4 operations in 18 hours: one transfer and three rescues. 588 people were brought to safety. One rescue was particularly dramatic. Yesterday, we have again faced boats of incredible fragility, the people on the boats are rarely wearing life jackets. We conducted one smooth rescue with 108 people from a rubber boat and then we prepared to rescue a second rubber boat. Before our RHIB arrived on scene people began jumping in the water and the boat broke apart. There were many people in the water. We launched floatation devices and stabilised the situation. The Aquarius teams have shown tremendous professionalism in this very complex situation. Although we*

*did everything we could, we can never be certain that everyone was saved,"* said Madeleine Habib, SOS MEDITERRANEE search and rescue coordinator aboard the Aquarius.

One Algerian family that had been aboard the sinking rubber boat said: *"People were afraid, some panicked and stood up, which made the boat crack"*.

Only a few hours later, a third rescue took place in stormy weather conditions. All persons were safely welcomed aboard the Aquarius. In total 340 people could be brought to safety during these three rescues. All operations were coordinated by MRCC Rome, which also directed the Aquarius to the port of safety; Vibo Valentia, where the 588 survivors will be disembarked.

Once again, survivors aboard the Aquarius reported on large-scale human rights violations in Libya. Ferary, a 27 year-old Nigerian, who had spent 3 months in Libya before embarking on a rubber boat told the Aquarius team that he saw one of his friends being killed right in front of his eyes: *"Just because he was black. In Libya they hate black people, they treat us worse than animals."* Ferary had to hide in bushes not to end up in detention centres.

*"As we are approaching the winter months, these last two days confirm that the humanitarian tragedy in the central Mediterranean continues. Hundreds of people fleeing the Libyan hell were taken back by the Libyan Coast Guard, back to a place rife with human rights abuses, a place they were trying to flee. Others were rescued from a shipwreck, in very difficult conditions, by the teams of SOS MEDITERRANEE and MSF, to whom we owe our deepest gratitude. We are witnessing the desperate escape of women, men and children, who have no choice but to leave the Libyan chaos across a merciless sea. Rescue conditions are increasingly complex and it is clear that in the absence of sufficient institutional rescue capacities, SOS MEDITERRANEE will continue its mission in the Mediterranean Sea all winter,"* said Verena Papke, General Director of SOS MEDITERRANEE Germany.

Since the beginning of 2017, the Aquarius has welcomed 13.127 people on board. 10.170 were rescued directly by the teams of SOS MEDITERRANEE, 2.957 were welcomed on board after transshipment.

**For immediate release.**

Press contacts: