

Witness to "outrage to the conscience of humanity" at the gates of Europe - SOS MEDITERRANEE will continue to rescue those fleeing the Libyan hell

Over the past 20 months of continuous operation, European NGO SOS MEDITERRANEE, which operates the rescue vessel Aquarius in partnership with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), rescued 24.388 people in a total 147 rescue operations. Our teams are direct witnesses to the suffering of migrants fleeing Libya, which was recently described as "an outrage to the conscience of humanity" by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid.

Since the beginning of its mission at sea in February 2016, SOS MEDITERRANEE has been alerting civil society, the media and politicians to the terrifying testimonies of rescued people fleeing Libya, gathered at the frontiers of Europe.

"We thought that these women, men and children rescued at sea would tell us about the terrible trauma of the crossing, the unimaginable conditions in which they embark on flimsy boats unfit for navigation on the high seas. But right away from the first rescues, it must be noted that, above all, they spoke of the Libyan hell: kidnappings, rapes, extortion of ransoms under torture, mistreatment and humiliation; forced labour; slavery. All of which they fell victims to on the other side of the Mediterranean," says Sophie Beau, co-founder and vice president of SOS MEDITERRANEE.

The testimonies of the survivors rescued by SOS MEDITERRANEE, confirmed by the medical examinations of the teams of MSF, leave no room for doubt about the extent of the violence suffered by the migrants and refugees in Libya:

Torture – *"The lashing occurs in the morning, afternoon and evening. It's our daily bread. Libyans beat us all the time, for no reason. They put us in jail for no reason. Prison guards, they kill people and they throw them into a hole. They only close the hole once it is filled with bodies,"* (M., Cameroon, testimony collected aboard the Aquarius in August 2017)

Rape – *"They took women and girls, girls who were even younger than me. They raped them in front of us and we had to watch. As did their fathers or their brothers. Those who tried to interfere were killed on the spot,"* (Y., 17 years old, Gambia, testimony collected aboard the Aquarius in November 2016)

Slavery – *"In Libya, Arabs come to prisons to buy blacks for labour. They sell blacks for a thousand dinars [about 620 €],"* (C., 20, Nigeria, testimony collected aboard the Aquarius in February 2017)

Mass graves – *"I was forced to work, picking up the corpses of migrants. The bodies are placed in mass graves, sometimes the head was the only thing left. More recently there were also the bodies of pregnant women,"* (L., Gambia, 20 years old, testimony collected aboard the Aquarius in August 2017)

Insecurity – *"The world must know what is happening in Libya, the situation is dramatic. People are killed for no reason and if nothing happens, everyone will eventually die,"* (A. and Y., age 25, Libya, testimony collected aboard the Aquarius in September 2017)

Refoulements – *"When the Libyan Coast Guard intercepts us during the crossings and brings us back to the coast, they tell us that they will deport us to our countries. But all they do is sell us to someone else,"* (C., 20, Nigeria, testimony collected aboard the Aquarius in February 2017).

*“I was pushed back to Libya three times. The first time, I was intercepted at sea, arrested and sent to jail for 6 months, the second time I was sent back to prison for a month. The third time, the Libyan navy and the police arrested me and I went to jail in Sabratha for three months in. (...) We were placed in small cells, there were up to 60 people in each of them. No toilets, we had to go about our needs on the ground and we had to sleep in the same place. The guards placed a dish of food on the floor for about 20 prisoners to share. They beat me with electric cables. To get out of prison you had to pay. They asked 480 € for my freedom. Prices differ according to people. **There is no way to live in Libya, no way to escape, no way to return to our country.**” (B., Sierra Leone, testimony collected aboard the Aquarius in September 2017).*

During the past 12 months, SOS MEDITERRANEE has repeatedly denounced the lack of adequate solutions proposed by the European Union to this humanitarian crisis. We have also repeatedly invited European leaders to reconsider the goals set in Malta in February 2017.

SOS MEDITERRANEE renews its call to drastically increase the means of maritime search and rescue in the central Mediterranean, to ensure that rescued persons are brought to a port of safety in accordance with international regulations. Here, priority should be given to the protection and preservation of human life and dignity, including at sea, and halting the criminalization of NGOs whose sole purpose is to save lives in the Mediterranean.

“Despite the lack of response from European leaders to the testing of fundamental human values at the gates of Europe, SOS MEDITERRANEE cannot accept being a bystander whilst human beings die at sea, or to see them being brought back to Libya once their boat is intercepted by Libyan Coast Guards. More than ever, the Aquarius must maintain its presence in the central Mediterranean, to rescue those who seek to flee hell, to protect them and to continue to testify to the reality lived by these men, women and children in search of protection,” says Beau.

About SOS MEDITERRANEE

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. In April 2017, SOS MEDITERRANEE was awarded the UNESCO Peace Prize for its life-saving work.

For immediate release.

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