

On International Migrants Day SOS MEDITERRANEE calls for further support *#HumanityAtSea*

On 18 December, International Migrants Day, SOS MEDITERRANEE launches #HumanityAtSea, a call to raise funds for the continuation of its rescue mission in the Mediterranean, that is ever more essential in light of the failure of European States to put an end to this humanitarian crisis at sea.

According to Amnesty International, hundreds of thousands of refugees are currently trapped in detention camps in Libya, largely in inhumane conditions. Their only hope to escape from this situation is to take the seas. With the increased activities of the so-called Libyan Coast Guard, this becomes more difficult day by day. If migrants and refugees make it to the open sea, people risk their lives by embarking on unseaworthy and completely overcrowded boats. The beginning winter season and the resulting bad weather conditions increase the dangers of crossings. Since 2014, more than 10,000 people died in the attempt to cross the Mediterranean.

Massive human rights violations against migrants and refugees in Libya attracted the attention of the media and politicians lately. Several human rights organizations criticized particularly the European Union's cooperation with the Libyan Coast Guard in order to deter migrants and refugees from attempting the crossing to Europe. Over the past few weeks, SOS MEDITERRANEE teams have repeatedly witnessed how the so-called Libyan Coast Guard intercepted migrants and refugees in international waters and forcefully brought them back to Libya - [most recently a few days ago](#).

Nevertheless, hundreds of refugees have been rescued in the Mediterranean in recent days. On Friday 15 December, the Aquarius, chartered by SOS MEDITERRANEE and operated in partnership with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), rescued 166 people from a rubber boat in distress in international waters east of Tripoli. The crews then welcomed another 154 people on board on Saturday, previously rescued by humanitarian ship OpenArms and headed north for a safe harbour, with a total of 320 people including 65 women, 13 children under the age of 13, two babies and 31 unaccompanied minors. The people rescued at sea are from 22 different countries, mainly from West Africa (amongst others, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Mali, Guinea Conakry) but also from Libya, Pakistan and Yemen.

Several people suffering from fuel burns due to gasoline leaks aboard the rubber boats were put under the care of the medical team of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) aboard the Aquarius. Most of the rescued people showed signs of severe exhaustion due to ill-treatment and lack of access to care in Libyan detention centres.

Arrested at sea, sent back to prison, sold from prison to prison

"When we saw the helicopter we were afraid it was a Libyan helicopter. We were afraid that they would send us back to Libya, to prison, so we tried to speed up in order to avoid it," an Ivorian survivor said Friday night. "We travelled a long time, the boat left Libya on Thursday night and we started to be very afraid that we had gotten lost. Gasoline was leaking inside the dinghy and the mix with salt water was causing burns on our skin. Some vomited because of the fuel" they added.

According to further testimonies collected aboard the Aquarius, the rubber boat rescued Friday night had already been used in Libyan waters last week, but had *"deflated because the wooden floor had broken"* during the first attempt.

"That day we were brought back to a place where people normally keep chicken. With just a little sheet metal serving as a roof. We were mistreated there. In the meantime, the Libyans repaired the boat and then pushed us to sea on Thursday at around 4am. We were piled onto the rubber boat like livestock," the rescued told SOS MEDITERRANEE volunteers on Friday. One of them tried to cross the Mediterranean four times, he said: "the other three times we were arrested by bandits and taken back to prison. After having been pushed back, we were sold from prison to prison."

Sunday the Aquarius was filled with prayers, singing and dancing to "celebrate the escape from Libya", as our teams were told.

"People's lives are in danger, both at sea and in Libya. Today, our priority is to rescue the hundreds of people who are still fleeing and to accompany them to a safe harbour, a place where they will be protected, and where their basic human rights will be respected. In the absence of an adequate European institutional response to handle the on-going humanitarian crisis in the waters off Libya, the Aquarius will continue its rescue mission all winter - without interruption. SOS MEDITERRANEE will continue to testify to European civil society, the media and politicians and denounce the unacceptable reality in the Mediterranean that goes against the fundamental European values of humanity," said Sophie Beau, Vice-President of the International SOS MEDITERRANEE network.

The #HumanityAtSea campaign

On International Migrants Day, SOS MEDITERRANEE calls for support to fund the operation of the rescue vessel Aquarius:

1. A video filmed aboard Aquarius, in which crew members express their motivation to work at sea, is shared on social media. You can watch the video here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwHDu6ecS00>.
2. The campaign will continue until the end of December with further posts on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/SOSMEDITERRANEE>) and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/SOSMedGermany>), featuring members of the SOS MEDITERRANEE rescue team as well as survivors.

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 25.966 people. Since the beginning of 2017, the Aquarius has welcomed 14.705 people. 11.259 lives that were directly rescued by the teams of SOS MEDITERRANEE, 3.446 were welcomed on board following transshipment.

Press contacts:

France: Julie Bégin / j.begin@sosmediterranee.org

Germany: Jana Ciernioch +49 173 4071721 / j.ciernioch@sosmediterranee.org

Italy: Barbara Amodeo +39 351 208 35 68 / b.amodeo@sosmediterranee.org

Switzerland: Caroline Abu-SaDa / c.abu-sada@sosmediterranee.org

International: Mathilde Auvillain +39 347 328 24 12 / m.auvillain@sosmediterranee.org