

Dramatic week in the Mediterranean: More than 800 people rescued by SOS MEDITERRANEE, whilst crew witnesses interceptions at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard

The Aquarius, the ship chartered by SOS MEDITERRANEE and operated in partnership with Doctors without Borders (MSF) rescued 808 people from distress at sea in less than a week. 387 lives were saved during 3 operations on Wednesday and Thursday (see press release of 23 November) and another 421 this Saturday, November 25, from a single wooden boat.

The wooden boat was spotted Saturday morning by an aircraft and then approached by a merchant ship. The Aquarius began its rescue efforts at 1.30 pm, at 24 nautical miles from the Libyan coast east of Tripoli, under the coordination of MRCC (Maritime Rescue Coordination Center) in Rome. All were brought safely aboard the Aquarius.

"The wooden boat was so overloaded that it was very unstable. A single moment of panic on board would have been enough to capsize the boat, leaving no chance for the people crammed inside. It was thanks to the team's professionalism and favourable weather conditions that the worst was avoided," said Nicola Stalla, SOS MEDITERRANEE's SAR-coordinator.

The Aquarius is now heading north, to disembark the 421 survivors in Catania, Sicily on Monday morning.

Many of the rescued have scars of violence and show signs of malnutrition, dehydration and extreme fatigue. A nine-month pregnant woman, whose contractions began aboard the wooden boat, is now under the care of the MSF midwife on board.

Transferred from Sabratha to Bani Walid "because of the war"

According to some testimonies gathered by SOS MEDITERRANEE volunteers, survivors rescued on Saturday were all part of the same group that had been detained in Sabratha for several months and recently been transferred to Bani Walid, known to be a hub of human trafficking.

"We were all in the same prison in Sabratha. Because of the war there, we were separated into groups of 20 people, put on pick-ups, and transferred to Bani Walid about a month ago. We were then crammed into another prison where we spent about a month. Yesterday (the day before the rescue, ed.), we were transferred to another place, on a beach where we had to wait under the scorching sun, without any water or food. The boat left Libya around 6 am," said a 26-year-old Eritrean to SOS MEDITERRANEE volunteers.

"In the prisons, we were beaten with electric wires. Libyans show no humanity. The whole group, we all belonged to the same man 'the boss'. 600 other people belonged to another boss. We do not pay the same price for the crossing. Some paid \$ 1,000, but another told me he paid \$ 6,000," added the same witness.

Summary of a dramatic week in the Mediterranean

After rescuing 387 people during multiple rescue operations on 22 and 23 November and recovering the lifeless body of a young woman aboard a rubber dinghy on Thursday, on Friday the crew of the Aquarius was a helpless witness to the interception of several boats in international waters by Libyan Coast Guards.

Friday morning at dawn, the Aquarius spotted a first boat in distress in international waters east of Tripoli, 25 nautical miles from the coast. Soon after a second boat was spotted. The Aquarius was ordered to remain on 'standby', with the coordination of the two operations having been assigned to the Libyan Coast Guard and the Libyan navy.

The crew of the Aquarius kept at a distance, in accordance with the instructions received from the Italian authorities and for security reasons due to the presence of the Libyan units. They became witnesses to the interception of these two boats in distress in international waters, with its offer of assistance being declined by the Libyan Coast Guard.

"We spotted a rubber boat, which, given the weather conditions and the general condition of the boat, could break and sink any minute. We remained on standby, ready to intervene. During the four hours of standby the weather conditions deteriorated, further increasing the risk of shipwreck. We were ready to launch our rescue operation at any time," said Nicola Stalla.

"This dramatic event is extremely hard time for our teams to witness; they are forced to observe, helpless, as operations result in people being returned to Libya, a place that the survivors have consistently describes a hell. This is something that we have consistently denounced since the beginning of our mission in the Mediterranean. SOS MEDITERRANEE, a European civil rescue organization at sea, cannot accept that human beings die at sea or that they are returned to Libya if their boat is intercepted by Libyan Coast Guards. Despite the particularly difficult current conditions on the high seas, our duty is to remain on site to help those who seek to escape the horror of the Libyan camps, to protect them and to continue to testify to the realities lived by these men, women and children.," said Sophie Beau, co-founder and vice president of SOS MEDITERRANEE International.