

*Mediterranean crossings continue through the winter- 450 survivors safe aboard Aquarius en route to a port of safety*

**“New testimonies affirm once again the atrocities being carried out in Libyan camps. Our absolute priority is to rescue those fleeing Libya”**

On Saturday, December 9, the Aquarius, the rescue ship chartered by European civic organisation SOS MEDITERRANEE and operated in partnership with Médecins Sans Frontières rescued 115 people from a rubber boat in distress in international waters off the coast of Libya. Following several transfer operations, another 335 people that had been rescued on Saturday and Sunday by NGO ProActiva and other merchant ships were welcomed aboard.

*"The rubber boat, very fragile, overloaded, was jostled around by waves as high as one and a half meters. Winter weather conditions are making operations ever more delicate and require the skills of professional rescuers. Aboard the boat in distress, people are terrified because of strong winds, the cold, the seasickness, they have no lifejackets or any maritime knowledge, but what they fear more than this is being intercepted and sent back to the 'Libyan hell' they have just fled from," says Nicola Stalla, SOS MEDITERRANEE's Search-and-Rescue (SAR) coordinator.*

On Saturday and Sunday the Aquarius, in cooperation with NGO ProActiva Open Arms and under the coordination of the MRCC of Rome, transferred a total of 335 people rescued at sea, some of whom had been rescued in extreme conditions Sunday morning by a merchant ship off an oil platform, 50 nautical miles from the coast, following an entire night of search of their rubber boat.

The weather conditions added further complexity to the transfer operations, but on Sunday night the Aquarius was finally heading north towards a port of safety, with the 450 survivors safely on board.

The survivors currently aboard the Aquarius are from 26 different countries, reaching from West Africa (Senegal, Ivory Coast, Guinea Conakry, Mali and other), to North Africa, with significant numbers from Eritrea, Syria, Libya, Palestine and Pakistan. Among them are 78 women (6 of whom are pregnant) and 101 minors, 60 of whom are unaccompanied.

Most of the survivors are suffering from seasickness due to poor weather conditions. An Eritrean woman in labour and a severely disabled person are under the care of the team of Médecins Sans Frontières, medical partner of SOS MEDITERRANEE aboard the Aquarius.

**"I was no longer afraid, I was already dead" (testimonies)**

*"On the beach people were scared upon seeing the rough sea. But the guards in uniform pointed their guns at us to force us to embark," said one of the passengers of the rubber boat rescued Friday morning.*

*"I'd rather die than go back to prison," a 25-year-old Cameroonian told SOS MEDITERRANEE teams. "In prison in Libya, one day a guard fired into the air and everyone fled, not me. I was lying on the floor and the guard threw stones on my head until I was bleeding. In the cell we were hit, our hands and feet were tied. We would be suspended from the ceiling: feet up, head down. We were beaten for*

*three days. The Europeans came to visit, the guards told us not to speak. They chose who to show to the Europeans. But I spoke and when they left they punished me by dragging me along a road for 200 meters. After the violence, you were put back into your cell," he continued.*

*"I spent 2 months in Libya. We were ghosts. We had to hide all the time. Several times we ended up in prison. A man from the group I was with from Guinea was sold for \$700," said a woman from Guinea. "One time an official representative of Guinea came to our prison, to visit and send people to the airport to send them back to the country. My friend was scared that it was a lie and they would just take us and torture us, so we hid. A few days later, she was raped and beaten, she died," she continued.*

*"We were doing everything to try to get out of there, we dug a hole in the toilet to escape, but the guards realized what we were doing. We tried to escape from the prison, A friend and I almost managed to escape but they caught us on the fences, they hit us, I fainted, I vomited blood, I pissed blood. My eye was damaged in the process and now my vision is blurry. I had never dared to try to escape before, but I was no longer afraid of anything, I was already dead," reported the 25-year-old Cameroonian further.*

A 13-year-old Guinean minor says he tried to escape from Libya by sea twice: *"The first time the boat was deflated, everyone shouted, we were carried back to the beach by the waves, towards the Tunisian coast. The second time the boat was stopped by the Asma Boys, the gangsters of the seas, and we were pushed back."*

#### **An unacceptable reality, against our fundamental European values**

*"The testimonies collected Sunday aboard the Aquarius testify to the extreme gravity of the situation for the migrants and refugees in Libya, who, for lack of safe alternatives risk their lives at sea to escape what they call the Libyan hell. Today the priority is to rescue those who continue to flee at sea and to accompany them to a safe place where they will be protected, and where their basic human rights will be respected," said Sophie Beau, Vice-President of SOS MEDITERRANEE.*

On Friday, 8 December, the Aquarius witnessed the interception of a boat in distress in international waters, 35 nautical miles from the Libyan coast, by a vessel marked as the Libyan coastguard. The vessel was spotted and identified by a EUNAVFORMED aircraft and an Irish military vessel, part of Operation Sophia was present during the interception. The offer of assistance of our humanitarian rescue ship and its crew of professional rescuers was declined by the Libyan coastguards, who assumed coordination of the operation and subsequently requested that the Aquarius move away from the area. People intercepted by the Libyan coastguard were taken back to Libya.

*"SOS MEDITERRANEE will continue to bear witness and testify to European civil society, the media and politicians. We will continue to denounce the unacceptable reality in the Mediterranean that goes against the fundamental European values of humanity. In the absence of an adequate European institutional response to deal with the on-going humanitarian crisis off the coast of Libya, the Aquarius will continue its rescue mission all winter without interruption," commented Sophie Beau, Vice-President of SOS MEDITERRANEE.*

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