

Woman found dead at bottom of rubber boat after rescue operation in Central Mediterranean

The rescuers of the Aquarius, the ship chartered by SOS MEDITERRANEE and operated in partnership with Doctors without Borders, rescued 387 people during 3 rescue operations on Wednesday 22 November 2017 and Thursday 23 November 2017. A body was recovered from the bottom of a rubber boat on Thursday morning. According to information of the MRCC, a total of 1,100 people were rescued in the Mediterranean Wednesday 22 November 2017, in 11 separate operations.

The rescue operations conducted by Aquarius took place in international waters east of Tripoli in strict and consistent coordination with the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre Rome (MRCC).

Big day of rescues in the Mediterranean

Wednesday at dawn, the Aquarius assisted an operational units of the European naval force EUNAVFORMED in the rescue of 279 people from two rubber dinghies. Later that night, all rescued individuals were transferred to the Italian Coast Guard ship Diciotti.

A dead woman found on a rubber boat

Thursday at dawn, MRCC Rome instructed the Aquarius to proceed to the position of a boat in distress in international waters east of Tripoli. Upon arrival, the Aquarius made visual contact with the boat, but was first instructed by MRCC Rome to remain on stand-by and subsequently asked to leave its position, as the rescue had been assigned to the Libyan Coast Guard, who was not yet present in the area.

Following a long wait and in the absence of any activity by the Libyan Coast Guard, the MRCC Rome - through Italian military ship Tremiti - assumed the coordination of the operation (SAR Case 1884) and instructed the Aquarius to proceed with the rescue.

"Almost two hours after the first visual contact, we were finally able to launch our rescue boats. There was not a minute to lose. This long wait caused great anguish aboard the Aquarius, but also aboard the dinghy in distress. The people were very agitated by the time we arrived," said Nick Romaniuk, SOS MEDITERRANEE Deputy SAR-Coordinator.

The lifeless body of a woman was found aboard the dinghy. Passengers on the inflatable boat told MSF medical staff aboard the Aquarius that the victim had died just before leaving the Libyan coast, following tragic childbirth. According to the witnesses, the young woman had given birth to a stillborn baby just a few days before.

The 108 passengers, mostly Eritrean and including 16 women and 34 minors, were safely taken aboard the Aquarius and subsequently transferred to the Spanish NGO ProActiva OpenArms.

"Go die in the Mediterranean"

"My child is a year and a half old, he was born in the Niger desert. In Libya we were in a prison in Sabratha for 5 months - with the baby. Women died. One of them died after giving birth, the umbilical cord was cut with wire, because there is nothing, no doctors, no medical care. We did not wash. They put drugs in the food, the water was undrinkable. I am still breastfeeding my child, because it's the only means I have to protect him," explained a young Cameroonian mother rescued on Tuesday.

"Slave trade still exists in Libya. In Libya everyone is armed, even children. Shots are being fired all the time. They take women, lock them up, and torture them; they search you and strip you down. Men and

children were sodomized. Everyone. They cut women's fingers by smashing them in between doors," women rescued on Tuesday said. *"The smugglers pushed us out to sea, saying, 'Go die in the Mediterranean.' Then we just heard the sound of the sea, it was completely dark"* another Cameroonian woman told a SOS MEDITERRANEE volunteer aboard the Aquarius.

"Since the beginning of our mission at sea in February 2016, SOS MEDITERRANEE has alerted civil society, the media and politicians about the on-going humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and the terrifying testimonies of people fleeing Libya, gathered on the Mediterranean; at the gates of Europe. Despite the lack of reaction from European leaders to the challenges and violations of fundamental values, SOS MEDITERRANEE cannot accept to see human beings die at sea, or to see them being returned to Libya upon their boats being intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard. 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 of the realities lived by these men, women and children in search of protection," said Sophie Beau, President of the international SOS MEDITERRANEE network.