

505 people safely aboard the Aquarius - "Europe needs to provide an adequate rescue fleet"

The Aquarius, chartered by SOS MEDITERRANEE and operated in partnership with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), had a particularly intense day on Tuesday, January 16: five consecutive rescue operations led to the saving of 505 people. According to the Italian Coast Guard, which coordinated a total of 11 operations in the area on the same day, 1,400 people were rescued in international waters off the coast of Libya.

After facing rough seas all night – with waves reaching 4 to 5 meters – the Aquarius arrived in the port of Catania Thursday morning for the disembarkation of 505 women, men and children from more than 25 countries. They had been rescued on Monday and Tuesday in international waters close to the coast of Libya. Many of them were suffering from various diseases and injuries, connected to the conditions of detention and violence in Libya.

"On Tuesday, we rescued five boats in distress in less than 12 hours! All the ships active in the area had to be called to the rescues: the Aquarius, a French navy vessel, a merchant vessel and an Italian Coast Guard vessel. On Tuesday, over 1,400 lives were saved off the coast of Libya. Rescue vessels reached their full capacity and cargo ships had to be redirected for assistance. The whole system of rescue off the Libyan coast is overwhelmed by the increase in boats in distress. Given that weather conditions are favorable for departures, this extremely dangerous situation may continue in the upcoming days. Once again hundreds or thousands of lives are at stake. As soon as the survivors are disembarked by the Aquarius in a port of safety, we will immediately head back south, to return to the rescue zone as soon as possible ", said Klaus Merkle, SOS MEDITERRANEE's rescue coordinator.

SOS MEDITERRANEE repeats its call for the immediate establishment of an adequate rescue fleet, to meet the needs of the humanitarian crisis unfolding at the gates of Europe.

A challenging day

From Monday night to Tuesday morning, the Aquarius was instructed to search for a wooden boat in the rescue zone west of Tripoli. It had been spotted around 6:00 a.m. at 15 nautical miles from the Libyan coast. After successfully locating the target and in the midst of rescuing the 121 people aboard, another wooden boat in need of assistance was reported to SOS MEDITERRANEE. Upon successful completion of the first rescue, SOS MEDITERRANEE's speedboats immediately proceeded to the second boat in distress, carrying 87 people.

During the second rescue, a grey dinghy was spotted on the horizon. After the distribution of lifejackets to its 109 passengers, a person slipped and fell into the water causing about ten other people to fall into the sea. Everyone was immediately recovered by SOS MEDITERRANEE's rescue team.

While the teams on the Aquarius were distributing water, food and dry clothes and the medical team provided first aid, the speedboats were dispatched to a fourth boat in distress - a green dinghy. Halfway there, the rescuers came across a fifth boat in distress, lost in international waters, carrying 15 people. Both boats were evacuated and their passengers safely escorted to the Aquarius, which, following instructions from the MRCC Rome, remained on stand-by in the rescue zone for several more hours.

A ghost ship

On Tuesday evening, following the five rescues, with the Aquarius actively searching for a boat in distress east of Tripoli, SOS MEDITERRANEE's rescuers spotted the remains of an empty dinghy, 37 nautical miles off the Libyan coast. The wreck was missing its engine and the only trace left behind was the clothes still floating around. Despite dispatching a speedboat for inspection and continuing to search the area, no passengers could be found.

"Where are the passengers of this boat? What happened to them?" – the crew of SOS MEDITERRANEE wondered, while the MRCC Rome - which had received no reports of a sinking ship - instructed the Aquarius to continue westward for the transfer of 67 people rescued a few hours earlier by Spanish military ship Santa Maria.

“As long as Europe doesn’t provide the necessary means needed for rescuing lives, more deaths are inevitable!”

Following this particularly difficult day at sea, Sophie Beau, Vice-President of SOS MEDITERRANEE International, commented on the lack of coordinated European rescue efforts in the Mediterranean: *"It is impossible to cover the entire rescue zone with the three NGO boats that are currently active in the area. European states **can** avoid the thousands of impending deaths, it is just a question of political will. Looking at the present conditions, it is an illusion that the Libyan coastguard can assume this task. We will keep on reiterating: Europe needs to set up a proper rescue fleet, in line with maritime conventions and other international law. In the face of the lack of adequate responses, the Aquarius will continue its mission throughout the winter and in 2018, for the third year in a row".*

About SOS MEDITERRANEE, European Rescue Association in the Mediterranean Sea:

SOS MEDITERRANEE is an association founded by a group of European citizens in 2015, determined to take action and respond to the tragedy of continuing shipwrecks at the Mediterranean Sea.

The association is founded on humanitarian values and pursues one main goal: saving lives at sea. Thanks to an exceptional mobilization of European civil society, SOS MEDITERRANEE was able to charter the Aquarius and launch its rescue operations off the coast of Libya at the end of February 2016. In its first year, SOS MEDITERRANEE aided or rescued 11,261 people, another 15,078 people in 2017, and thus far 532 people in 2018. In almost two years, the organization has rescued a total of 26,871 lives.

Every day at sea costs 11,000 euros, needed to finance the charter of the ship, its crew, the fuel, and all the equipment necessary to take care of the refugees. The association calls on all civil society actors: individuals, NGOs, foundations, companies and public authorities, to support its vital work. 98% of the organization's budget in 2016 was covered by private donations.