



72 survivors of a deadly shipwreck and an interception now safe aboard the Aquarius

Press release

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«Rescuers and witnesses: Our presence in the Mediterranean is needed now more than ever»

On Saturday, 3 March, the Aquarius, chartered by SOS MEDITERRANEE and operated in partnership with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), has welcomed 72 survivors rescued by a merchant ship following two tragic operations in the Central Mediterranean. Hours earlier, the Aquarius had been an immediate witness to an interception of a boat in distress in the international waters by the Libyan Coast Guard.

72 survivors, many missing

Among the 72 survivors transferred onto the Aquarius on Saturday evening, 30 had been rescued the night before from a sinking wooden boat, and 42 more had escaped a rubber boat which was later intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard in the international waters at 53

nautical miles from the Libyan coast. All were rescued by the Cypriot merchant vessel MV Everest.

According to testimonies by the survivors welcomed aboard the Aquarius, many are missing: **21 persons, including at least one pregnant woman, are believed to have drowned in the shipwreck of the wooden boat, and about 90 people have been returned to Libya by the Libyan Coast Guard**, who have intercepted the rubber boat with approximately 130 persons, including women and children.

The rescued people aboard the Aquarius are from 12 different countries, mainly from West Africa (Nigeria, Guinea, Gambia, Ghana), but also from Sudan and South Sudan. Among the rescued are 3 women, one of whom is pregnant, and 14 minors, all unaccompanied. Some survivors showed signs of physical exhaustion following a lengthy detention in Libya as well as a traumatising crossing at sea.

« We were 51 in the wooden boat. But when the people panicked at night and the boat practically capsized, people fell into the water. There had been 5 women on board, 4 drowned, including one pregnant woman. I have lost my brother; he is dead », a young survivor from Gambia told volunteers from SOS MEDITERRANEE.

Interceptions

A few hours before receiving the 72 shipwrecked people on board, the Aquarius had been mobilised by the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Rome (IMRCC) to search for a boat in distress in the international waters east from Tripoli. When the Aquarius arrived at the position indicated by an aircraft of the operation EUNAVFORMED at 42 nautical miles from the Libyan coast, the boat was in the process of being intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard, who declined the offer of assistance by the rescuers and medics onboard the Aquarius. The passengers of the vessel, including women and children, were returned to Libya.

Sunday morning, as the Aquarius was searching for a new boat in distress west from Tripoli beyond the Libyan territorial waters in line with the instructions from the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Rome (IMRCC), a patrol boat from the Libyan Coast Guard approached the Aquarius at high speed in collision course – a behaviour both dangerous and not in compliance with the code of the navigation -, and unresponsive to the radio calls from the Aquarius. The Libyan patrol boat then changed the course, approached the Aquarius again, and aggressively ordered the Aquarius via radio to distance itself, while the Aquarius informed

the patrol boat that it was conducting a search and rescue operation according to the instructions of the MRCC in Rome. The Libyan Coast Guard later declared that it was assuming coordination for the rescue operation of the boat in distress.

*« The Aquarius, the only search and rescue vessel present in the area on Saturday and Sunday, was involved in complex search and rescue operations over the course of 24 hours, going from East to West over a distance of roughly 120 nautical miles. **The lack of an adequate rescue asset has once again come at a high cost of human lives: 21 persons have drowned as they were not detected and rescued in time,** and we remain without news on the boat in distress which was signalled on Sunday morning. The perilous and illegal behaviour of the Libyan Coast Guard units only emphasise once again the dangers of this area of the sea, which is already the deadliest of the world »* declared Nicola Stalla, the Search and Rescue Coordinator of SOS MEDITERRANEE.

The Aquarius has since taken a northern course for the disembarkation of the 72 shipwrecked people in a port of safety in Italy.

« For many months, unacceptable scenarios have been repeating and aggravating in full view of the European authorities, who are deaf to the calls for solidarity with Italy. Far from responding to the lack of resources in order to prevent new dramas, Europe allows the greatest confusion to unfold in the search and rescue zone off the Libyan coast. This results in the new loss of human lives and the return of people to the very hell they were seeking to escape. Rescuers and witnesses: Our presence in the Mediterranean is needed now more than ever », declared Francis Vallat, president of SOS MEDITERRANEE France.

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For interviews, photo material and footage contact:

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

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

Germany: Jana Ciernioch +49 30 22 05 68 11 / 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