

Italy stops own ship transporting refugees to southern shores



Rome, July 11 (RHC)-- Italian authorities have refused to take in refugees on board an Italian ship, sending a strong signal to allies in the European Union that the new populist government in Rome is determined to force a change in the EU refugee policy.

An Italian Interior Ministry source said Tuesday that authorities had told a commercial ship flying an Italian flag that it would not be allowed to bring home some 66 refugees it had rescued off the coast of Libya.

The ship, which supplies oil platforms off the coast of Libya, finally decided to transfer the refugees to an Italian coast guard vessel on Tuesday after a quarrel broke out on the deck between the refugees and the ship's crew.

The commercial ship had pulled the refugees to safety on Monday. The Italian Interior Ministry source said the ship had been told to wait for Libyan patrol boats to come and retrieve the refugees. The source would not confirm whether the refugees will be brought to Italy by the coast guard vessel.

Since taking office on June 1st, the new Italian government has closed its ports to humanitarian ships that rescue refugees off the coast of Libya. The new policy is aimed at forcing other EU members to share the burden of hosting an influx of displaced people.

Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, a leader of Italy's far-right, said Tuesday that Italian ports will remain closed to the refugees and that Libya had the facilities to ensure the safety of the deported people. "The Libyan ports are more than safe and as minister I can guarantee you that the good times are over for the traffickers," said Salvini while visiting a camp for refugee farmers in southern Italy.

European interior ministers are planned to meet in Austria on Thursday to discuss the refugee crisis. A main theme of the meeting is how to convince Italy to take back refugees based on the EU's Dublin regulations, which requires the states receiving asylum seekers for the first time to handle their applications.

Salvini said in an interview on Tuesday that Rome would never accept demands by countries like Germany and Austria to take back refugees. "What is certain is that for Italy there is no plan to take back those who have gone abroad. It's the last thing that could happen," Salvini said, adding: "If the Germans and the Austrians are thinking only about sending migrants back to us, helping us close the external borders first would be a step forward."

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