

Stranded migrants disembark in Italy as one ship heads to France

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Migrants remaining on the rescue ship Geo Barents hold banners after Italy allowed the disembarkation of children and sick people. File: Antonio Parrinello/Reuters

Rome, November 10 (RHC)-- The remaining passengers on two humanitarian ships that Italy had initially refused to take in have been allowed to disembark, as another vessel carrying 234 people headed to France in the hope of a safe port.

The Ocean Viking, operated by the European organisation SOS Mediterranee, left Sicily for the French island of Corsica on Tuesday. It was not yet clear if the ship would be allowed to dock by the French

government, which had previously called on Italy to grant a safe port to the refugees and migrants.

The organisation told reporters on Wednesday that it had sent nine “place of safety” requests but had not yet received any response. The Ocean Viking has been at sea for more than two weeks since its first rescue in the Central Mediterranean.

The new hard-right government of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni last week remained silent to repeated requests by rescue groups to provide safe harbour, effectively blocking at sea the Norwegian flag-bearing Ocean Viking and Geo Barents and the German-flagged Humanity 1.

Rome sent letters to the embassies of Norway and Germany, saying NGO ships flying their flags were not following European security rules and were undermining what it described as the fight against undocumented immigration.

On Sunday, Italian authorities allowed only selected refugees and migrants deemed “vulnerable” to disembark from the Geo Barents and Humanity 1, intending to send the nearly 250 remaining people back to sea. Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi drew outrage on Monday after he referred to those singled out by the authorities over the weekend as “residual cargo” who do not need to be rescued.

In an apparent U-turn, all passengers were allowed to disembark late on Tuesday. The Humanity 1, operated by the SOS Humanity group, disembarked its remaining 35 passengers in the Sicilian port of Catania. They had previously announced they were entering a hunger strike to draw attention to their fate after other 144 people were let off the boat.

“We are relieved that the people can go ashore and that all those rescued from distress at sea have finally been assigned a place of safety, as required by maritime law,” Till Rummenhohl, who is in charge of ship operations for SOS Humanity, said in a statement. “However, we are appalled at the blatant disregard of laws and human rights by Italian authorities.”

The non-profit earlier this week announced its intention to take legal action against an Italian government decree allowing the selective disembarkation of migrants considered vulnerable while spurning others. As per the decree, the captain of the Humanity 1 was on Sunday asked to leave the port again with the 35 survivors on board, which he refused. “It is my duty to complete the rescue of people in distress by disembarking all survivors in the port of Catania as a safe place. I cannot leave the port until all survivors rescued from distress at sea have disembarked,” Joachim Ebeling said.

The Geo Barents, run by Doctors Without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres, or MSF), was also allowed to disembark its remaining 214 passengers. “This is the end of the rescue operation as per international convention, maritime law and obviously ethical and moral needs,” Riccardo Gatti, MSF team leader, said.

The organisation said in a tweet that the vessel would be back at sea on Wednesday for a new rescue operation. “That’s our answer to EU’s reckless policies of non-assistance,” it said.

Two Syrian men who were denied permission to disembark over the weekend jumped from the Geo Barents on Monday and spent the night on the quay after refusing to board again.

One man, identified by the organisation as Ahmad, left Damascus in 2020. He reached Libya and tried six times to reach Europe. Each time, he was taken back to Libyan detention centres, where he experienced abuse.

The second man, identified as Youssef, said he was “going crazy” on the boat. “I left northern Syria to offer a safer life to my family. I have four daughters who are in Syria and I hope [they] can join me soon,” he said. “In the past few years we’ve seen bombs fall on our city and they can’t go to school because it’s still not safe. I simply want to find a place where we are free from fear.”

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