

Ship carrying 230 people docks at French port after Italy dispute

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The Ocean Viking rescue ship arrives at Toulon with dozens of people on board [Christophe Simon/AFP]

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Paris, November 11 (RHC)-- A rescue ship carrying 230 people has docked at the French port of Toulon, according to maritime authorities, amid a French-Italian dispute over which country is responsible for them. The Ocean Viking, operated by a French NGO, had picked up the people at sea near the Libyan coast before spending weeks seeking a port to accept them.

France had never before allowed a rescue vessel carrying people from the Mediterranean to land on its coast, but did so this time because Italy had refused access. French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said on Thursday that the people were Italy's responsibility under European Union rules, and that the French move was an "exceptional" measure that would not guide future action.

He said Italy's refusal to accept the people was "incomprehensible" and that there would be "severe consequences" for Italy's bilateral relations with France and with the EU as a whole. He said France had acted according to its "humanitarian duty".

The Ocean Viking ship had initially sought access to Italy's coast, which is closest to where the people were picked up, saying health and sanitary conditions onboard were rapidly worsening. Italy refused, saying other nations must shoulder more of the burden for taking in the thousands of people trying to reach Europe from North Africa every year.

A French doctor boarded the ship before it docked, Meryl Sotty, a spokeswoman for its operator SOS Mediterranee, told the AFP news agency. The doctor was to identify the most vulnerable members of the group who would be brought on land first, followed by women, children and families, she said.

The rescued people, more than 50 of whom are children, are to be placed in an international waiting zone pending the processing of requests for asylum.

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