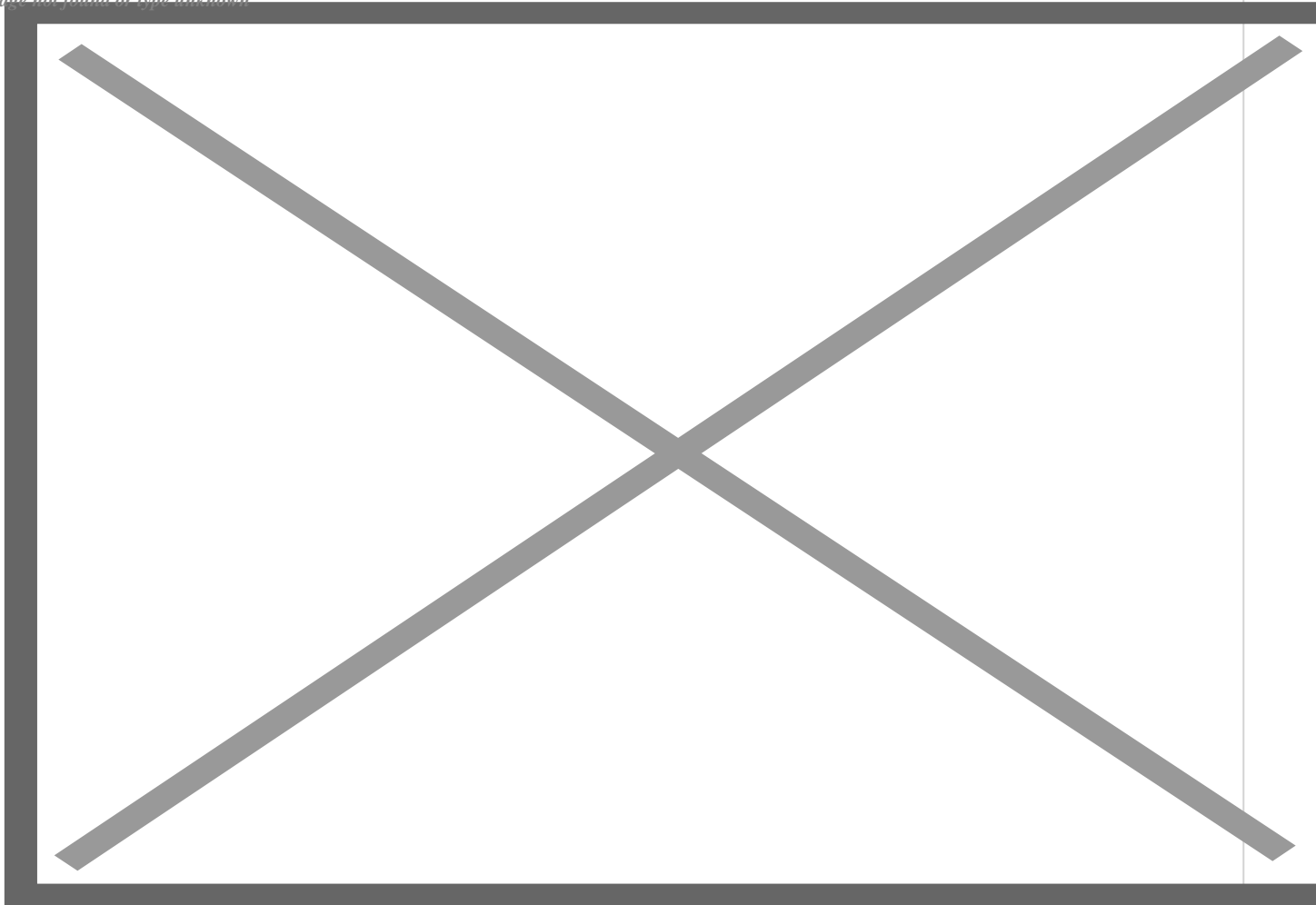


Italy detains two NGO vessels for defying new migrant rescue law

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The migrant search and rescue ship Sea-Watch 3

Sea-Eye says Italy's law aims at criminalising NGO rescue operations [File: Darrin Zammit Lupi/Reuters]

Rome, June 4 (RHC)-- The Italian Coast Guard has apprehended two vessels from non-governmental organisations operating in the Mediterranean Sea, after they were found to be in breach of a new law preventing ships deployed to rescue migrants from carrying out multiple operations in a row.

A 20-day detention was imposed on the German rescue ships Sea-Eye 4 and Mare*Go on Friday evening, said the organizations Sea-Eye and Sea-Watch that operate the vessels.

The law passed in Italy on February 24 prevents rescue ships from carrying out several consecutive rescues. Under a decree named after the interior minister, Matteo Piantedosi, rescue vessels are required to request the assignment of a port and sail to it immediately after each rescue.

NGOs say the measure aims to curb arrivals, as they are forbidden from conducting multiple missions and are often required to travel to faraway ports, which increases operational costs and reduces the time for rescues. They also maintain that the law contravenes international law, under which it is a duty to rescue persons in distress at sea.

Sea-Eye 4 was being detained for disobeying an “unjust law aimed at criminalising solidarity,” tweeted Giorgia Linardi, a spokesperson for Sea-Watch in Italy, on Saturday. Sea-Eye 4 was detained after rescuing 17 people in the Libyan search-and-rescue zone and operating a second consecutive rescue in the Maltese zone shortly after, without first heading to the assigned port of Ortona, in the central region of Abruzzo.

The NGO said the vessel later responded to a distress call from a boat with more than 400 people on board in the Maltese zone, and decided to turn back as no government authorities had confirmed coordination for the emergency.

Italian authorities told the Il Giornale newspaper that Sea-Eye 4 violated the order to reach Ortona, sailing instead towards the boat, which was already being monitored by the Coast Guard. Gorden Isler, chairman of Sea-Eye, said in the statement that the boat in distress eventually reached the Italian search-and-rescue zone on its own, and that its passengers were only rescued by the Italian Coast Guard shortly before reaching Sicily.

“It is therefore wrong for the Italian Coast Guard to claim that a patrol boat was already on its way. The people first had to reach the Italian search-and-rescue zone under their own power in order to receive help there,” he said.

“Italy’s new strategy is perfidious and transparent. The long journeys to assigned, distant ports will always mean that we have to decide on the way there whether to respond to more incoming distress calls,” Isler said. He added that the law creates the “public impression that our action is illegal”, which was “another reprehensible attempt to criminalize sea rescue ... in order to justify ever more brutal state action.”

On Friday, Mare*Go, a four-metre-long Pleasure craft built in 1917 on its first mission, contacted Italian authorities after rescuing 36 people. It warned them it would not be able to cover the distance to reach the assigned port of Trapani, on the west coast of Sicily.

Officers from the Italian Coast Guard and the European border agency Frontex awaited the vessel as it entered the port of Lampedusa shortly before midnight. “This current new law is another tool to let more people on the move drown at sea,” the organisation said in a statement, calling the far-right government of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni “post-fascist.”

Italy’s anti-migrant League party, headed by Matteo Salvini, told Il Giornale it was satisfied with the way Italian law had been enforced. “Foreign NGOs do not respect Italian laws? A hefty fine and the detention of the vessel,” it said. “Norms and borders must be respected, in Italy as in the whole world.”



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