

More than 120 refugees from Libya rescued in the Mediterranean

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The people rescued from the boat in distress were dehydrated, freezing, and exhausted after being adrift in the rough seas [Nora Adin Fares/Al Jazeera]

Tripoli, January 19 (RHC)-- In the pitch-black hours of early Thursday morning, the Humanity 1 rescue ship approached a sky-blue wooden boat in distress in the central Mediterranean Sea. On board were at least 126 people who were suffering from hypothermia, dehydration and exhaustion from clinging to the boat for hours as it struggled to stay upright amid waves as high as two metres (six feet).

“We were ready for death, we were dying,” a 30-year-old Syrian survivor told Al Jazeera as he clung to the orange rescue RIB (rigid inflatable boat) shuttling the refugees to the mothership while fighting against the high waves.

Among the survivors were one newborn and 30 minors, most of whom had embarked on the treacherous Mediterranean crossing on their own without an adult to accompany them. “The newborn was completely covered in blankets, it was not easy to recognise that there was a baby inside.

“We also had very old people this time, some of them weren’t even able to walk by themselves due to dehydration and exhaustion,” Viviana di Bartolo, Humanity 1’s search and rescue coordinator, said.

According to the survivors, they had departed from the Libyan coast two days ago and were in distress due to rough weather conditions and high waves when they were intercepted by Humanity 1 while drifting in Maltese waters.

They boarded the Humanity 1 barefoot, completely soaked in saltwater and obviously suffering from the cold and severe dehydration. Many were disoriented and afraid they would be taken back to Libya.

The survivors spoke to Al Jazeera about the horrific ordeals they had suffered to make it across the Mediterranean, especially human rights violations on the Libyan side. A young Syrian survivor in his early 20s, suffering from severe hypothermia, said he had tried to make the crossing from Tripoli to the south of Italy three times and that every time he had been intercepted by the Libyan coastguard.

“It has been hell. Libya is hell. I tried leaving for eight months now without success, over and over again, we were forced back,” he said.

Another survivor on board Humanity 1 testified to the inhumane conditions in Libyan prisons over the past year, after he had been forced back in a failed attempt to leave the North African coast in early 2023.

“You don’t understand, we were not even treated as humans”, he said.

The Humanity 1 was assigned a port of safety in Genova, north of Italy – but will request a closer port to disembark the suffering survivors sooner. “We’ll ask for a closer port of safety because of the rough weather conditions and the fact that we have several vulnerable cases on board and people that require medical attention,” Lukas Kaldenhoff, Humanity 1’s press officer, says.

The desperate people who make these dangerous crossings have usually paid every last penny they have to human smugglers who put them on board rickety boats with no concern for their safety. As the boats flounder on the high seas, often the only hope these refugees have of survival is that their plea for help is picked up by a vessel that is willing to come help.

“They [the survivors] were not only in distress because of the water conditions, but because of the boat,” di Bartolo said, exhausted after shuttling refugees between the wooden boat and the mothership for more than two hours.

“It was very poorly structured, had no safety equipment at all or people that could navigate. The people on board had no life jackets or even basic stuff such as water, food or even a toilet. This kind of boat is not meant to sail in a safe way, not at all,” she continued.

According to international law, vessels have a clear duty to help boats in distress. That definition is determined on a case-by-case basis but, according to di Bartolo, the term “boat in distress” is applicable

to nearly every departure from Tunisia and Libya that aims to cross the central Mediterranean route.

On Wednesday night, Humanity 1's crew had received two different Mayday calls about boats in distress, and they desperately tried to clarify whether there was another boat nearby. The first Mayday came from Frontex, the European border control, regarding a wooden boat carrying 40 people and the other from Alarm Phone, [a hotline for people in distress] regarding 90 people.

"We're now sure that both calls were regarding the boat we rescued this morning", Kaldenhoff said.

Humanity 1 is operated by the German NGO SOS Humanity and has been undertaking risky search-and-rescue missions across the Mediterranean Sea since 2022.

At least 2,498 refugees, migrants and asylum seekers are known to have drowned in 2023 while crossing the central Mediterranean according to the International Organization for Migration, making it the deadliest year since 2017. But the real number is believed to be far higher.

The Central Mediterranean is the deadliest known migration route in the world, with more than 17,000 deaths and disappearances recorded by the Missing Migrants Project since 2014.

Most of the departures are from Libya and Tunisia – but the refugees and migrants have often travelled far from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Turkey or Egypt, fleeing violence, discrimination, and a loss of livelihood.

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