

Doctors without Borders recovers 11 bodies from Mediterranean off the coast of Libya



Crew of the Sea-Watch 3 distribute life jackets to 108 people in a boat in distress in the central Mediterranean / More than 20,000 deaths and disappearances have been registered in the central Mediterranean since 2014 [File: Nora Boerding/Sea-Watch via AP]

Tripoli, June 8 (RHC)-- The aid group Doctors Without Borders has reported recovering 11 bodies and rescuing dozens of people off the coast of Libya as it criticised the migration policies of the North African country and European countries.

In a statement on Friday, the group, known by its French initials MSF, said its Geo Barents rescue vessel managed to recover the bodies following a search operation lasting more than nine hours after being alerted by German nongovernmental organisation Sea-Watch, which also rescues refugees and migrants.

“As we cannot determine the reason behind this tragedy, we know that people will continue to take dangerous routes in a desperate attempt to reach safety, and Europe must find safe and legal pathways for them,” MSF said in a post on X. “This catastrophe must end!”

Sea-Watch said it is unclear whether the bodies were victims of a previously unknown shipwreck, adding that they tried to contact Libya’s coastguard to go and retrieve the dead, but received no reply.

“The so-called Libyan coastguard – financed by the EU – ignored our call demanding that the bodies be recovered,” the group said.

Thousands of people trying to head from Africa to Europe use Libya as a departing point, with the Italian island of Lampedusa the nearest European destination as they undertake the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean to escape war, poverty and persecution.

Italy, which wants to put a stop to the migration stream, has said Libya and neighbouring Tunisia must do more to stop people from going to sea. Rome has also clamped down on the operation of the rescue ships, arguing that they encourage people to head to Europe, a charge that is denied by the charities.

Emphasising its policy on the rescue ships, Italy said on Friday that it forced the MSF rescue vessel to take the 165 people that it had saved from boats in the Mediterranean operation to the northern port of Genoa.

The port was more than 650 nautical miles (1,200 km) from their position and much farther than the more convenient ports in nearby Sicily, significantly delaying assistance to the rescued. The route in the central Mediterranean is the most dangerous migrant crossing in the world, with the United Nations registering more than 20,000 deaths and disappearances in the area since 2014.

More than 3,000 refugees and migrants went missing in 2023 while attempting to use the route, according to the International Organization for Migration.

According to Italy’s interior ministry, the number of arrivals in the country has dropped in 2024 to fewer than 21,800 people since the beginning of the year, compared with close to 53,300 in the same period last year.

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