More than 160 migrants and refugees rescued off Libya arrive in Italy

Rome, December 25 (RHC)-- More than 160 migrants and refugees rescued off the Libyan coast have disembarked in the southern Italian port of Taranto, the NGO SOS Mediterranee announced.

The migrants, including 50 children and five pregnant women, "were rescued by the SOS Mediterranee Search and Rescue team in two critical rescues in international waters off the coast of Libya on Friday, December 20th", said the NGO, which charters the Ocean Viking rescue ship along with medical charity Doctors Without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres, or MSF).

The first operation involved a rubber dinghy that had deflated and was carrying 112 "terrified" people on board, it said. Fifty others were rescued from a wooden boat shortly before midnight the same day "in dangerous meteorological and maritime conditions", the NGO added.

The 50 could not be transported to Malta due to adverse weather conditions. Italian authorities then gave permission for all the rescued migrants to land in Taranto and the operation was carried out on Monday, SOS Mediterranee said.

"As the weather was rapidly and severely deteriorating, both cases would almost certainly have resulted in tragedies if help had arrived only a little later," said Nicola Stalla, the NGO's search and rescue coordinator on board the Ocean Viking.

In October, Italy renewed a widely criticized 2017 agreement with the Libyan coastguard to block migrants trying to leave for Europe. Rights groups say Libya routinely picks up migrants in the Mediterranean and brings them back to overcrowded detention centres, where many have been victims of abuse and forced labour.

Libya, racked by conflict since the 2011 uprising against Muammar Gaddafi, has become a major transit route for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere hoping to reach Europe.

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