

Italy orders rescued migrants to board quarantine ship



Rome, April 14 (RHC)-- Italy has ordered migrants and refugees on board a rescue ship off its coast to be quarantined on another vessel to test them for the coronavirus before allowing them to disembark. The Alan Kurdi, run by the German non-governmental group Sea-Eye, is sailing in international waters off the western coast of Sicily after rescuing 150 people off Libya's coast last Monday.

On Sunday, Italy's transport ministry said in a statement that those on board would be screened by health authorities after being transferred and quarantined on that ship.

Last week, Italy closed its ports to NGO vessels rescuing migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean for the entire duration of the national health emergency enforced due to the coronavirus pandemic, a ban due to remain in effect until July 31st.

The transport ministry statement said allowing the migrants to disembark without being screened would put too much pressure on already stretched health services in Sicily. It gave no details on the planned transfer, its timing or location.

The development comes three days after Libya refused entry to about 280 returning migrants whose boat was intercepted by the country's coastguard in the Mediterranean as they attempted to cross into Europe.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the situation was "tragic" as it called for "a comprehensive approach to the situation in the central Mediterranean." "The status quo cannot possibly continue," said IOM official Federico Soda.

Libya acts as a major gateway for African migrants hoping to reach Europe. Currently, there are close to 700,000 refugees and migrants in the war-torn country. More than 16,700 people have died crossing the Mediterranean for Europe since 2015, including at least 241 this year.

More than 500 migrants departed from Libya in the last few days, attempting to reach Europe, according to the IOM. In addition to those intercepted and rescued, 67 reached the Italian island of Lampedusa, where they entered a two-week quarantine because of COVID-19.

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