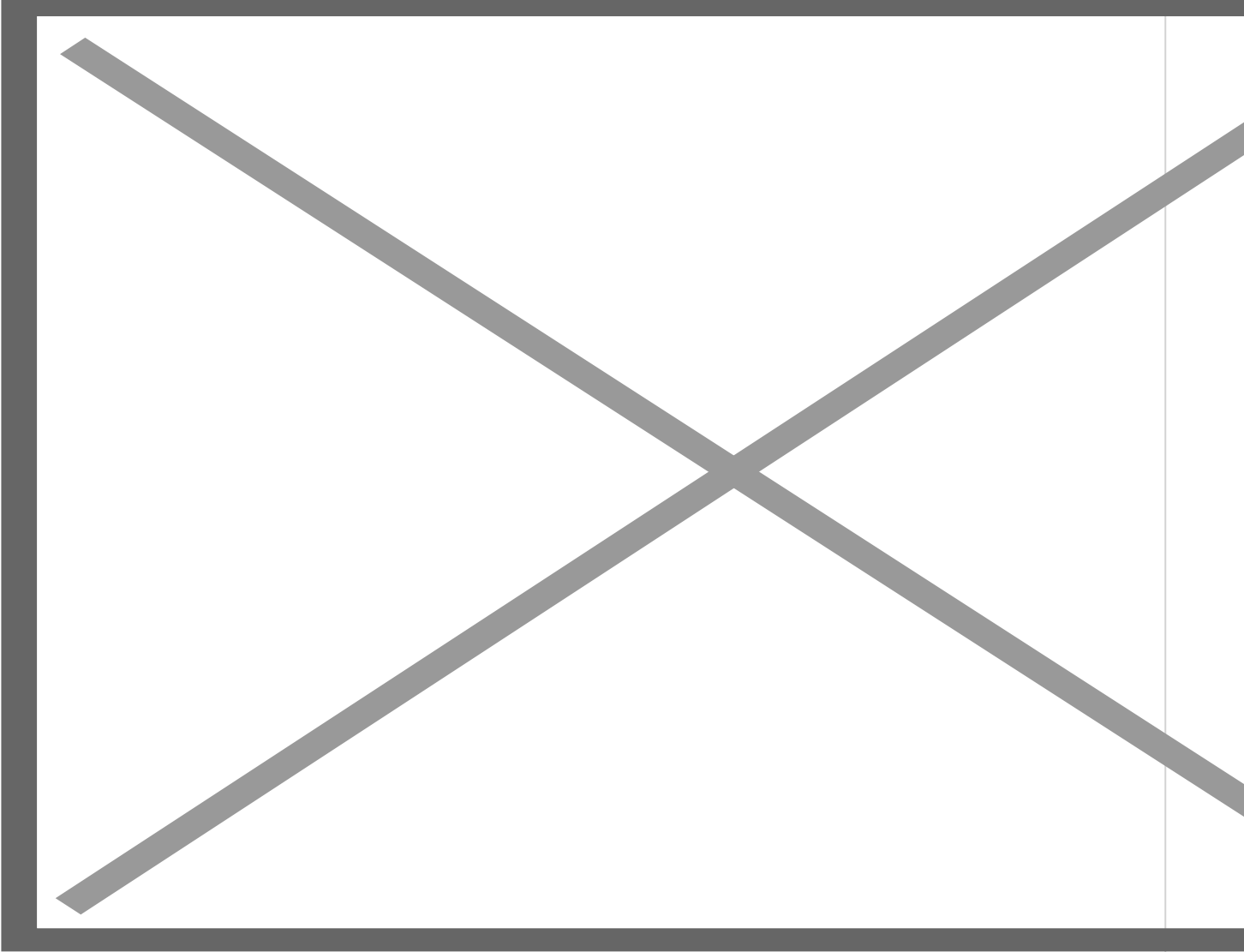


Ocean Viking ship rescues hundreds of migrants off Libya coast

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A total of 374 migrants have been rescued in two days, said SOS Mediterranee, which operates Ocean Viking aid vessel

Tripoli, January 23 (RHC)-- More than 370 migrants and refugees have been rescued off the coast of Libya by the Ocean Viking humanitarian vessel in two days, a French NGO running the boat said on Saturday. SOS Mediterranee said that "106 people were rescued ... in international waters 28 nautical miles (52km) from the Libyan coast" on Friday evening.

"The majority of the people aboard an inflatable rubber dinghy were found intoxicated by oil fumes," it said. They came from Guinea, Sudan and Sierra Leone.

On Friday morning, the Ocean Viking picked up 149 people from two boats following an SOS signal, including 58 minors and four babies – one just a month old, it said. Since Thursday, a total of 374 people have been rescued by the Ocean Viking, of whom 165 are children, SOS Mediterranee said.

Human smugglers based in Libya launch vessels, many of them flimsy rubber dinghies or rickety fishing boats, crowded with migrants who hope to reach European shores to seek asylum. The central Mediterranean route is described by the UNHCR as the most dangerous migration route in the world – one in six people who depart the shores of North Africa dies.

While many have drowned at sea, thousands have been intercepted by the Libyan coastguard, which has been backed by Italy and the European Union, and returned to Libya. They mostly end up in detention, often in horrific conditions.

Since February 2017, at least 36,000 people have been intercepted by the Libyan coastguard and returned to the North African country, UN figures show.

The Ocean Viking took to the seas on January 11 after being blocked in Italy for five months before being released in December. Authorities had cited alleged safety issues for the hold-up. Ocean Viking is currently the sole rescue ship run by an NGO in the area, according to SOS Mediterranee's head, Sophie Beau, who said "the others have been blocked by Italian authorities like the Ocean Viking earlier".

Most migrants leave from Libya and Tunisia attempting a hazardous Mediterranean crossing to try and enter Europe through Italy. More than 1,200 died last year while trying to cross the Mediterranean.

According to Italian interior ministry data, there has been an uptick in the number of people trying to reach Italy with at least 31,000 refugee arrivals in 2020, compared with almost 10,000 over the same period last year.

<https://www.radiohc.cu/index.php/en/noticias/internacionales/245504-ocean-viking-ship-rescues-hundreds-of-migrants-off-libya-coast>



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