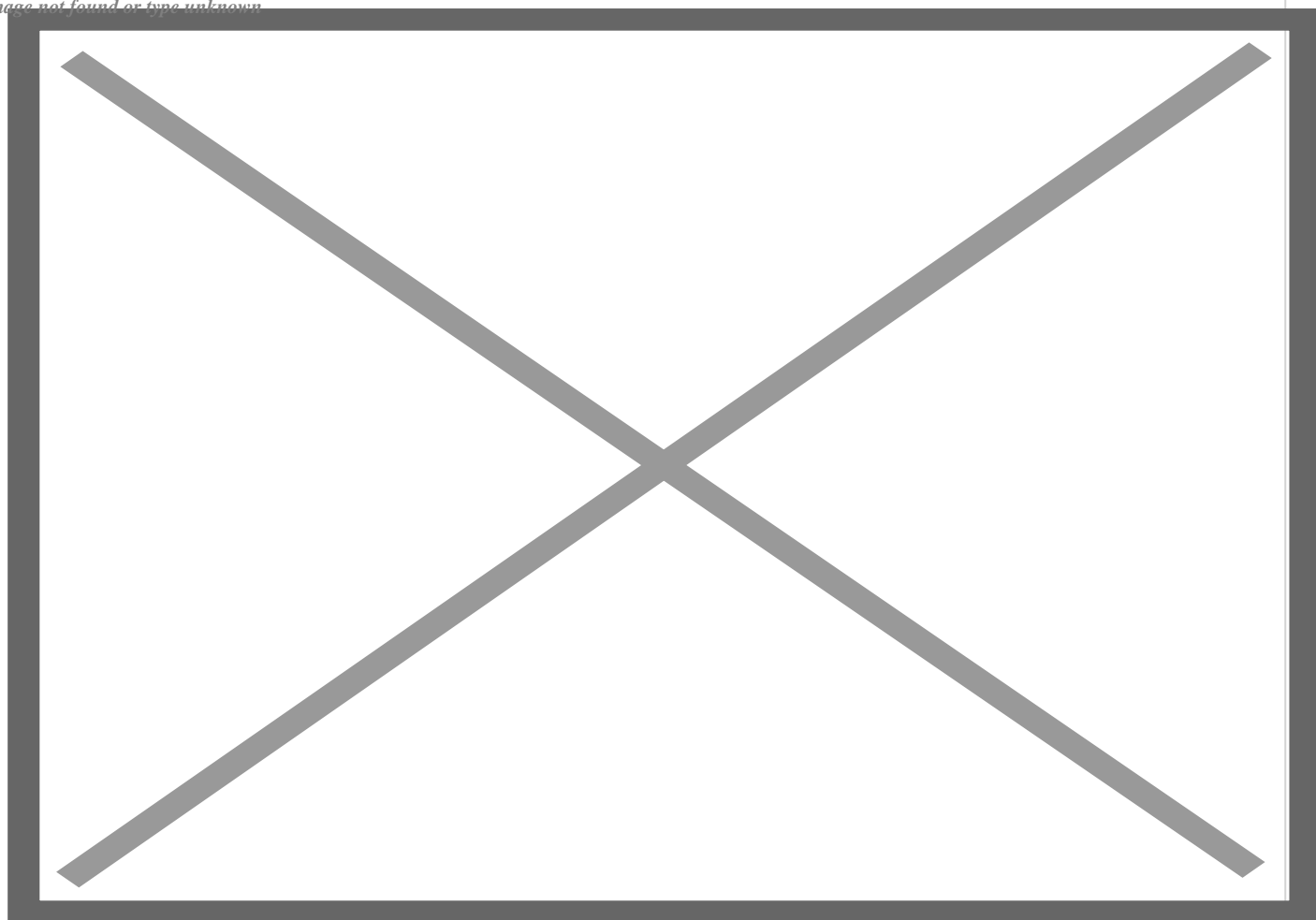


More than 800 migrants rescued in Mediterranean head to Italy

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Ocean Viking pulled the migrants to safety four days ago from two rubber dinghies [File: Nicolas Tucac/AFP]

Rome, May 2 (RHC)-- A charity ship has sailed towards Italy's Sicilian port with 236 people rescued in the Mediterranean from traffickers' boats, while Italian coastguard and border police brought 532 others to a tiny island.

The maritime rescue group SOS Mediterranee said on Saturday a ship it operates, Ocean Viking, pulled the migrants to safety four days ago from two rubber dinghies.

SOS Mediterranee said some passengers told rescuers they were beaten by smugglers based in Libya and forced to embark on the unseaworthy dinghies despite high waves. On Italy's southern island of Lampedusa, which is closer to North Africa than to the Italian mainland, Mayor Salvatore Martello said migrants from four boats that needed rescue stepped ashore overnight. They were brought to safety by the Italian coastguard and customs police boats.

Separately, an Italian navy vessel rescued 49 migrants, Italian state TV reported. Still in the central Mediterranean Sea on Saturday was another charity boat, Sea-Watch 4, which with 308 people on board who had been rescued in four separate operations from trafficker-launched vessels, Sea-Watch said in a statement.

The first rescue, of 44 people, took place on Thursday, it said. Sea-Watch 4 has requested a port to disembark the migrants from both Italy and Malta. "The fact that we, as a civil rescue ship, saved so many people from distress at sea in such a short time again demonstrates the fundamental rescue gap European states have created at the world's most dangerous maritime border," said Hannah Wallace Bowman, the head of mission for Sea-Watch 4.

Warmer weather in the spring often increases the number of vessels launched towards Europe by Libya-based migrant traffickers. Last month, SOS Mediterranee personnel and a merchant ship spotted several bodies from a shipwrecked dinghy, believed to have been carrying 130 migrants.

People on the boat had appealed for help in the waters off Libya, but no coastguard vessels from Libya, Italy or Malta came to their aid, the group said. No survivors were found.

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