

MSF calls on Italy to release seized rescue vessel

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The Geo Barents was placed under administrative detention on July 2 following an inspection in the Sicilian port of Augusta which identified 22 'deficiencies' with the ship [File: Antonio Parrinello/Reuters]

Rome, July 5 (RHC)-- Medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) has urged Italian authorities to release one of its rescue ships, claiming the detention was politically motivated.

MSF's research ship, the Geo Barents, was placed under administrative detention on July 2 following an inspection in the Sicilian port of Augusta which identified 22 "deficiencies", the charity said in a statement.

The Italian coastguard said 10 issues flagged had warranted holding the vessel because they risked the safety of the crew and any passengers. The ship, they noted, only had life-saving equipment for 83 people.

Earlier, the vessel had rescued more than 400 people including dozens of unaccompanied children from flimsy boats in back-to-back operations during June, an MSF spokesman told Reuters. Many were from countries experiencing conflict including Syria, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, and Mali.

MSF said it was willing to comply with authorities' requirements and make all "necessary adjustments", but cautioned that inspections on its vessel could "represent an opportunity for authorities to pursue political objectives under the guise of administrative procedures".

The charity described the coastguard's claims regarding safety as a "disingenuous interpretation of maritime law." MSF highlighted that Italian authorities had detained NGO vessels on 13 occasions since 2019.

Four were currently detained, "leaving almost no lifesaving activities in the central Mediterranean Sea", said MSF. Thousands of migrants and refugees embark each year on the crossing, often departing in small, inflatable boats from Libya with hopes of reaching Europe.

So far this year, 866 deaths have been recorded in the Mediterranean, according to the United Nations' migration agency. Most of them, 723, died on the central Mediterranean route where the MSF vessel was operating.

A UN report in May said that the European Union and its 27 member states were partly to blame for the fatalities because they had played a part in blocking humanitarian rescue efforts. While the EU has cut back its own official search and rescue operations, governments have prevented humanitarian agencies from rescuing people in distress by impounding their vessels, which have for years patrolled the central Mediterranean, and targeting individuals with administrative and criminal proceedings, the report said.

The Italian coastguard said on Saturday that since the beginning of 2021, it had inspected 681 foreign-flagged ships of different types that called at Italian ports, and 55 were subjected to administrative detention.

The Open Arms rescue ship, run by a Spanish charity, was released late last month after more than two months held in Sicily. "Inspections of NGO vessels in Italian ports are long and thorough, aiming at finding irregularities in order to prevent the ship from returning to sea to save lives," said Duccio Staderini, an MSF search and rescue representative.

"We are faced with a crushing reality: while humanitarian NGO vessels are detained, lives continue to be needlessly lost in the Mediterranean."

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