

Italy finally gives safe port to vulnerable refugees on board Humanity 1

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Rome, November 6 (RHC)-- Italy has allowed a rescue ship carrying 179 refugees and migrants to enter a port in Sicily and begin disembarking children and sick or “vulnerable” people, according to rescue workers and an Italian legislator.

But the far-right government of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni continued to refuse on Sunday to respond to requests for safe harbour from three other ships carrying nearly 900 people and stranded in nearby waters amid rough weather.

The Humanity 1, run by German charity SOS Humanity, said it was told by Italian authorities to come to the port of Catania to land minors and people needing medical attention, but challenged the government's move to distinguish "vulnerable" refugees and migrants, saying all of the people on board were rescued at sea and that alone qualified them for a safe harbour under international law.

Italy's only Black legislator in the lower chamber, Aboubakar Soumahoro, met the Humanity 1 at the Catania port and decried the government's closure of ports to non-governmental organisation (NGO) ships as a "shame."

"Right now, in the port of Catania there is a selective disembarkation underway," Soumahoro said on Twitter. "Worn bodies of castaways already exhausted by cold, fatigue, trauma and torture are considered objects by the government of Giorgia Meloni."

Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi said that the Humanity 1 would be allowed in Italian waters only long enough to disembark minors and people in need of urgent medical care. The measure was approved after Germany and France each called on Italy to grant a safe port to the refugees and migrants, and indicated they would receive some of the asylum seekers so Italy would not bear the burden alone.

No such provisions have been offered to the other three ships. The Norway-flagged Geo Barents, carrying 572 refugees and migrants, and the German-run Rise Above with 93, entered Italian waters east of Sicily this weekend to seek protection from storm-swollen seas, but without receiving consent from Italy or a response to repeated requests for a safe port.

The Ocean Viking, operated by the European charity SOS Mediterranee, with 234 refugees and migrants on board, remained in international waters south of the Strait of Messina. Its requests for a port also went unanswered.

"We have been waiting for 10 days for a safe place to disembark the 572 survivors," said Juan Mattias Gil, head of mission for the Geo Barents, which is operated by Doctors without Borders. Media adviser Candida Lobes told Al Jazeera that water was being rationed and food supplies were also dwindling. Due to overcrowding, respiratory and skin infections were also spreading, she said. "The situation is simply unacceptable," Lobes said.

SOS Humanity, which operates Humanity 1, said it had made 19 requests for a safe port, all unanswered. The boat was carrying 100 unaccompanied minors as well as infants as young as seven months, said Till Rummenhohl, the group's head of operations.

The minors "are struggling a lot with their mental health," Rummenhohl told Al Jazeera from aboard the rescue ship. "They saw people drowning in front of them, relatives and friends."

Speaking prior to the Italian government's decision to allow the ship into port, he said: "The nights are getting cold, rain hits us, winds hit us and the people are sleeping on deck ... We can provide these people with food, blankets, clothes, water and basic medical support. But we've been doing this already for two weeks and it's clear that we cannot provide them with any safety which they would need being rescued at sea." He added: "Our supplies will last till the beginning of next week. Then, we will run out of food."

Italy's new government is insisting that countries whose flag the charity-run ships fly must take on the refugees and migrants. Speaking at a news conference late on Friday, Piantedosi described such vessels as "islands" that are under the jurisdiction of the flag countries.

Most of the refugees and migrants have travelled via Libya, where they set off in unseaworthy boats seeking a better life in Europe, often facing abuses by human traffickers along the way. While the humanitarian-run boats are being denied a safe port, thousands of refugees and migrants have reached

Italian shores over the last week, either on their own in fishing boats or rescued at sea by Italian authorities. On Saturday, 147 arrived in Augusta, including 59 on the oil ship Zagara that also carried two bodies.

The situation on the Rise Above, operated by the German NGO Mission Lifeline, was said to be particularly desperate, with 93 people packed aboard a relatively small 25-m (82-foot) boat.

Spokeswoman Hermine Poschmann described a “very critical situation that ... led to very great tensions” on board because passengers saw land and did not understand why they were not docking.

The head of mission on the vessel, Clemens Ledwa, demanded a port of safety immediately, citing bad weather and the limited capacity of the small ship. “This is not a wish. This is everyone’s right.”

<https://www.radiohc.cu/index.php/en/noticias/internacionales/304128-italy-finally-gives-safe-port-to-vulnerable-refugees-on-board-humanity-1>



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