

Rescue charity to take Italy to court over migrant boats standoff

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Migrants and refugees are seen on a wooden boat in the Mediterranean sea

Berlin, November 8 (RHC)-- German charity SOS Humanity says it will go to court to try to overturn efforts by Italy's new right-wing government to prevent some of the people the nonprofit group had saved from the sea from stepping onto land. "It is unlawful to allow only some of the survivors ashore," the charity said on Monday on Twitter.

The non-profit announced its intention to sue as two rescue vessels -- the German-flagged Humanity 1 and the Norwegian-flagged Geo Barent -- were given permission to dock in Catania, Sicily, over the

weekend. They were allowed to let off about 500 migrants, mainly women and children, leaving about 250 still on board.

The government has ordered the ships to return to sea, but their captains have so far refused. Two other boats from non-governmental organisations, the Ocean Viking and the Rise Above, are still at sea off Sicily carrying about 300 refugees.

The cabinet of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, known for her anti-migrants stance, has accused the charity ships of acting as a de-facto taxi service for migrants seeking a better life in Europe. It is threatening 50,000 euro (\$50,000) fines if the boats refuse to leave port.

Rome has insisted that the countries whose flags these NGO boats are flying should bear responsibility for the migrants and refugees on board. Interior minister Matteo Piantedosi told local media that Italy's government had intended to give flag-bearing countries an "immediate signal."

"We cannot bear the burden of migrants collected at sea by foreign vessels operating systematically without any coordination with local authorities," he said. Norway said it bears no responsibility under human rights conventions or the law of the sea towards people taken on board private Norwegian-flagged vessels.

The charities, including France's Doctors Without Borders, which operates the Geo Barents, say they play a vital role saving lives along one of the world's most deadly migration routes and accuse Italy of breaking international law. "The partial and selective disembarkation, such as suggested in the Italian government's decree, is heinous and can't be considered lawful according to maritime conventions," Doctors Without Borders said on Monday.

The United Nations agencies for migration and refugees said the stranded migrants "need to be disembarked swiftly without any further delay." This should be followed by "meaningful responsibility-sharing between all concerned states", the agencies said in a joint statement.

France, Germany and Norway have all called on Italy to take in the migrants. However, Hungary's right-wing prime minister, Viktor Orban, has praised Rome's hardline approach. "Finally! We owe a big thank you to Giorgia Meloni and the new Italian government for protecting the borders of Europe," Orban wrote on Twitter at the weekend.

Pope Francis also entered the debate, saying European Union member states should share responsibility for taking in migrants and not leave frontier countries like Italy to face the problem alone. European Commission spokeswoman Anita Hipper said member states had a "legal and moral duty" to save people's lives regardless of the circumstances that led them to sea.

Italy has seen a sharp increase in migrant arrivals this year with about 88,000 people landing so far in 2022 against 55,000 in the same period last year, official data showed. Most of them were from Egypt and Tunisia.

NGO rescues account for about 15 percent of migrants who disembarked in Italy this year, the UN said, while the rest arrived on autonomous boats or were picked up at sea by Italian state-led ships.

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