

Boat carrying 500 asylum seekers disappears in Mediterranean Sea

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Rome, May 26 (RHC)-- A boat carrying about 500 asylum seekers, including a newborn baby and pregnant women, has disappeared in the central Mediterranean, according to two humanitarian organizations. Alarm Phone, a group that picks up calls from refugee vessels in distress, said on Friday that it had lost contact with the boat on Wednesday morning.

At the time, the boat was adrift with no working engine in high seas about 320 km (200 miles) north of the Libyan port of Benghazi and more than 400 km (250 miles) away from Malta and Italy's southern island of Sicily.

Italian NGO Emergency said on Thursday that its Life Support ship and the Ocean Viking, another charity vessel, had looked for the missing boat for 24 hours but found no sign of it or any shipwreck. A spokesperson for Emergency said on Friday that the search was continuing, adding that the people onboard might have been picked up by another boat or may have managed to fix their engine and continue sailing towards Sicily.

The Italian coastguard on Thursday reported the rescue of 423 people and 671 people in two separate operations in Italian search and rescue waters, and Alarm Phone said they were unrelated to the missing boat.

In a separate incident, the German charity SOS Humanity said 27 people were picked up at sea by an oil tanker and illegally taken back to Libya. Under international humanitarian law, asylum seekers cannot be forcibly returned to countries where they risk harsh treatment, and widespread refugee abuse has been extensively documented in Libya.

Performance Shipping, the Greek company that owns the P Long Beach tanker allegedly involved in the incident, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

European governments have taken an increasingly hard line on migration, including in Italy, which is facing a surge in sea arrivals.

More than 47,000 refugees have arrived by boat so far this year, up from about 18,000 in the same period of 2022.

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