

## **Save the Aquarius, Save Lives**

Five years to the day after the Lampedusa tragedy in which at least 368 people died, rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea are more vital than ever. It is alarming that the last rescue ship in the Central Mediterranean may be forced to stop operating. We call on European leaders to ensure the Aquarius can continue to save lives at sea.

The decision by Panamanian authorities to strike the Aquarius, a nongovernmental rescue ship operated by SOS MEDITERRANEE and Médecins Sans Frontières, from its ships' registry, apparently in response to pressure from the Italian government, is a reprehensible move. It will deny potentially life-saving assistance to vulnerable people at risk, including injured people, pregnant women, torture survivors, people traumatized by shipwrecks and unaccompanied minors.

This is just the latest in a series of moves to delegitimize and block nongovernmental groups performing vital search-and-rescue operations in the central Mediterranean. It risks forcing the last remaining NGO ship away from the deadliest stretch of water in the world, resulting in the end of nongovernmental rescue in the area, which for years, has courageously contributed to saving thousands of lives. All other NGOs are blocked in Italian or Maltese ports by legal actions or have been forced to suspend operations given unconscionable delays or refusals to disembark rescued persons in European ports.

The death toll in the central Mediterranean could climb even higher. Even as departures from North Africa to Europe have dramatically reduced, with refugees and migrants becoming effectively trapped in abusive conditions in conflict-ridden Libya, the chances of dying at sea have skyrocketed. Since the beginning of the year, at least 1,260 have died or gone missing in waters off the Libyan coast.

We urge European countries to offer to register the Aquarius under fair terms and criteria. SOS MEDITERRANEE and MSF, along with other organizations no longer able to operate, represent the best of European, as well as universal, values: respect for human life and dignity, and solidarity with women, men, and children fleeing persecution, war, and human rights abuse. These civil society organizations have stepped in where European governments have withdrawn.

Deciding not to offer registration to the Aquarius would be tantamount to endorsing a deliberate strategy to obstruct legitimate humanitarian assistance to human beings at risk of drowning in international waters off Europe's coasts.

How European leaders respond now is crucial. Solidarity in European societies should be encouraged and celebrated, not punished. We urge you to do everything in your power to ensure the Aquarius and its crew of professional, capable, and committed rescuers can continue to save lives at sea and that the other nongovernmental organizations currently facing legal proceedings can also return to their life-saving operations.