

Migrant rescue boat defies racist ban and heads for Italian coast



Rome, June 28 (RHC)-- The Sea-Watch 3 ship carrying 42 migrants rescued in the Mediterranean reports it was headed for the island of Lampedusa despite the threat of hefty fines from Italy's far-right interior minister.

"I've decided to enter the port of Lampedusa," Sea-Watch Captain Carola Rackete said, adding that they were still waiting for the coast guards to react. "I know this is risky, but the 42 shipwrecked on board are exhausted. I will bring them to safety."

Marine tracking websites confirmed the vessel had entered Italian territorial waters after spending 14 days sailing back and forth off the coast of Italy's southernmost island. "Enough, we're entering. Not to provoke, but by necessity, responsibility," Sea-Watch tweeted.

Italy's far-right Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini has tried to ban the Dutch-flagged vessel from approaching under a "closed ports" policy, which has seen migrants repeatedly stranded at sea in inhumane conditions. "We will use every lawful means to stop an outlaw ship, which puts dozens of migrants at risk for a dirty political game," Salvini said after Sea-Watch set course for Italy. "I will not give permission for anyone to disembark... Our patience is over. The Netherlands will answer."

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg declined on Tuesday to intervene but called on Italy to "continue to provide all necessary assistance" to vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers. While the German charity group Sea-Watch had asked the ECHR to impose "interim measures" on Italy, saying the court could ask Rome to take urgent steps to resolve the standoff in order to "prevent serious and irremediable violations of human rights".

The far-right Premier threatened on Tuesday that the charity vessel could "stay there until Christmas and New Year" but would never be allowed in. Earlier this month, Italy's government issued a decree that would bring fines of up to US\$57,000 for the captain, owner, and operator of a vessel "entering Italian territorial waters without authorization."

On Lampedusa, where Salvini's far-right League won 45 percent in May's European elections, a priest has camped in the street to demand those on board -- including three minors -- be allowed to disembark.

Dozens of German cities have said they are ready to welcome them, and the Bishop of Turin, Cesare Noviglia, said his diocese would be willing to take them in. "We can't hold on any longer. It's like we're in prison because we are deprived of everything. Help us think of us," one migrant from the Ivory Coast said in a video broadcast by Sea-Watch.

In January, 32 migrants rescued by the vessel were stranded on board for 18 days before they were allowed to disembark in Malta thanks to a distribution deal made between several European countries.

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