

Six refugees dead, dozens rescued off Libya coast en route to Europe



Tripoli, June 28 (RHC)-- A woman who gave birth at sea was among 93 refugees rescued off Libyan shores as they tried to reach Europe, but six others died along the way, the UN's migration agency says.

The survivors were brought back overnight to the port city of Khoms, 120 kilometres (75 miles) west of the capital Tripoli, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said on Twitter on Saturday. "Among them was a woman who gave birth on the rubber dinghy" that had undertaken the perilous Mediterranean crossing, it said. "Migrants reported to IOM staff that 6 people have died along the journey," the statement added.

The Ocean Viking rescue ship was waiting for a safe place to dock on Thursday after rescuing 274 migrants off the coast of Libya.

Libya was thrown into chaos after the overthrow and killing of Muammar Gaddafi in a NATO-backed military operation in 2011.

Traffickers have exploited the unrest to turn the North African country into a key route for illicit migration towards Europe. The situation of refugees and asylum seekers in Libya worsened after eastern Libya-based military strongman Khalifa Haftar launched an assault on Tripoli in 2019 and the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Human rights groups have repeatedly criticized the systematic return of refugees intercepted in the Mediterranean to Libya, where they are held in crowded detention centers.

The IOM said those rescued overnight were released after disembarking in Khoms. The latest operation came just days after French charity boat Ocean Viking, picked up dozens of refugees, including 31 Pakistanis, off the Italian island of Lampedusa after they had drifted from Libya.

Nicholas Romaniuk, who coordinated the mission aboard that vessel, said rescue ships are often out-run by the Libyan coast guard who beat them to intercept refugees and return them to Libya.

Such was the case, he said, with the overnight rescue operation, deploring the lack of coordination.

"We were about an hour and a half from being nearby" when the Libyan coast guard intervened, said Romaniuk. "There is no coordination, no information sharing for life saving operations. We're talking about people who were reported to be dying, a newborn baby on board," he added.

"The fact that, even in this situation, they won't share information, it's an absolute disgrace."

The Ocean Viking, he said, was some 153 nautical miles away from the stricken boat when it received a distress signal.

More than 100,000 refugees tried to cross the Mediterranean last year with more than 1,200 dying in the attempt, according to the IOM.

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