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Tunis, August 2 (RHC)-- Two humanitarian rescue ships have pulled 394 migrants from a dangerously overcrowded wooden boat in the Mediterranean in an operation lasting about six hours, Reuters news agency reported.

The German and French NGO ships Sea-Watch 3 and Ocean Viking overnight on Sunday rescued the migrants in Tunisian waters 68km (42 miles) from the North African coast, near oil facilities and other ships.

Sea-Watch 3, which assumed command of the operation, took 141 of the survivors while Ocean Viking took the rest. The yacht Nadir, from the German NGO ResQ Ship, later gave support. It was not clear if there were any deaths or injuries among the migrants who were in the wooden boat, which was crammed with migrants on deck and inside the hull.

The craft was taking in water and its engine was not working, a Reuters witness said. The NGO ships had already rescued people from distress at sea earlier this week. After earlier rescue operations over the weekend, the Ocean Viking alone had about 555 people on board by Sunday evening.

The ship is now very full and needs to find a safe harbour as soon as possible, a spokesperson said, noting that a three-month-old infant was among those who were rescued. Berlin-based organisation Sea-Watch called the current situation on the Mediterranean “extremely critical.”

Sea-Watch 3 was also carrying dozens of people. Six were taken to land by the Italian coastguard due to their poor health. On Sunday, the vessel picked up another 26 people, bringing the total number of people on board to about 250.

According to the United Nations-affiliated International Organization for Migration, more than 1,100 people fleeing conflict and poverty in Africa and the Middle East have died this year in the Mediterranean.

The crossing to reach European Union countries via the Central Mediterranean is dangerous and the overcrowded vessels often get into distress at sea.

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