

Charities warn Italy's new migrant rules to result in more deaths



Brussels, January 10 (RHC)-- Twenty charities have denounced new rules on rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean introduced by Italy's right-wing government, saying they will result in more deaths. In a joint statement released in Brussels, the aid organizations, including Doctors Without Borders, said the new rules had gone against international law and could endanger more lives.

"The Italian decree law contradicts international maritime, human rights and European law," the statement read. "The decreased presence of rescue ships will inevitably result in more people tragically drowning at sea."

Under the new decree by Italy's far-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's new government, charity vessels must head "without delay" to the Italian port assigned to them after each rescue. Such vessels often

perform multiple rescues of people who get into trouble attempting the world's most dangerous crossing, before heading back to shore. But the order "to proceed immediately to a port, while other people are in distress at sea, contradicts the captain's obligation to render immediate assistance to people in distress, as enshrined in" international maritime law, the aid groups said.

The decree also states that charities must start gathering information from those rescued about their potential requests for asylum, and share the data with the Italian authorities. The charities said it was "the duty of states to initiate this process and a private vessel is not an appropriate place for this."

"Asylum requests should be dealt with on dry land only, after disembarkation to a place of safety, and only once immediate needs are covered, as recently clarified by the UN Refugee Agency."

Rome has been frequently assigning the ships ports which are further from search and rescue areas, the statement said. "Both factors are designed to keep SAR (search and rescue) vessels out of the rescue area for prolonged periods and reduce their ability to assist people in distress."

Captains of ships which break the new rules face fines of up to 50,000 euros and can have their vessels confiscated. Parliament has two months to convert the decree into law. The charities have urged lawmakers to oppose the decree, and appealed for "a strong reaction" against it from Brussels and other European countries.

Meloni's government has vowed to stop migrant landings. The premier also appears to be prepared to push the dispute to the top of the European agenda.

Figures by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) show that at least 20,218 people have died or gone missing on the crossing since 2014. EU member states and agencies are also accused of pushbacks of asylum-seekers and other migrants to high seas. The refugee crisis has been presented as a failure of the EU's asylum policy.

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