

Over 2,100 Migrants Rescued Off Libyan Coast



Rome, February 16 (RHC)-- The Italian coastguard has rescued a total of 2,164 people as part of a major rescue operation to try to save migrants in trouble in the Mediterranean Sea. Italian media reported on Sunday that all migrants aboard 12 boats that set out from Libya's coast have been helped to safety near the Italian island of Lampedusa.

An ATR42 plane, four coastguard ships, two tugboats, a navy ship, and nearby cargo ships took part in the operation. Four armed men in a speedboat approached the rescuers during the operation and forced them to return a boat that had been emptied of migrants, the Italian transport ministry said in a statement.

On Saturday, some 600 migrants aboard six rubber dinghies were rescued by Italian guards and merchant vessels while 300 others died in a major tragedy last week.

Following the Saturday incident, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) called on the European Union "to urgently change its approach to dealing with sea crossings with a view to ensuring that saving lives is the top-most priority."

Italy ended its full-scale coast guard operation known as Mare Nostrum, and the EU replaced it with Operation Triton. The new scheme has a monthly budget about a third of the previous one, with its patrols generally restricted to territorial waters of the bloc's member states.

According to UNHCR, more than 3,200 people died during 2014 in the Mediterranean Sea between Italy's Lampedusa and North Africa. The route has been described by the United Nations as the world's deadliest migrant crossing.

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