

Court overrides Salvini, allows migrant ship in Italian waters



Rome, August 15 (RHC)-- An administrative court in Rome ruled Wednesday that a Spanish rescue ship carrying around 150 migrants should be allowed to enter Italian territorial waters in defiance of a ban imposed by Interior Minister Matteo Salvini.

Salvini, leader of the far-right League party, quickly responded that he would not allow the ship entry regardless of the ruling, setting up another high-profile conflict over the issue of immigration which has proved his biggest vote-winner.

The charity vessel Open Arms had appealed to the court to let it come to Italy, saying international maritime law meant it had a right to bring the migrants to safety.

Open Arms' founder Oscar Camps, speaking to reporters in Madrid, said the boat would now set sail for the Italian island of Lampedusa. Once in Italian waters, the NGO will request medical evacuation for all those on board, Camps added.

"This is another step forward. We may be able to disembark sooner than expected," Camps said. "We can enter Italian waters without fear of being fined or having the boat confiscated."

Salvini said earlier that he would block both the Open Arms and another vessel operated by French charities, the Ocean Viking, from bringing to Italy more than 500 migrants they had picked up off Libya since last week.

In a written ruling, the Rome court said the Open Arms complaint "does not appear to be completely without legal basis." It added that the charity vessel clearly faced an "exceptionally serious" situation. As such, it said, the boat should be allowed into Italian waters and receive immediate assistance for the "most needy rescued persons." However, the court ruling did not say whether the boat should be allowed to dock or the migrants disembark.

Responding to the ruling, Salvini told supporters during a visit to Recco, in northern Italy, that he would continue to refuse the ship entry "because I will never be an accomplice to human traffickers." The interior ministry later issued a statement saying it would appeal against the ruling to the State Council, a higher administrative body because the court did not have all the relevant facts when it made its ruling.

"For days, Open Arms remained in Libyan and Maltese waters, interfering with other rescue operations, and systematically collected people with the political objective of bringing them to Italy," the ministry said.

Earlier this month Salvini introduced a new law hiking fines for ships that enter Italian waters without authorization to up to 1 million euros (US\$1.12 million).

The Open Arms, which has rescued some 160 people in the last two weeks, faced rough weather on Wednesday with storms forecast later in the evening. Several people were evacuated earlier this week to receive specialist medical treatment.

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