

A SMALL SHIP WITH A BIG MANDATE

von Giulia Guffanti, Crew-Mitglied auf der Nadir auf Mission 6/2023, translation/ interpretation Jelka

In the face of escalating violence, abuses and racist attacks in Tunisia, many people are setting out to flee across the Mediterranean. During this time, the small sailing vessel *Nadir* embarked on her sixth deployment in 2023, helping more than 880 people in distress on 21 boats during the 14-day mission in the central Mediterranean.

AN URGENT MEDICAL EVACUATION NEEDED AND NO AVAILABLE ASSETS

We encountered three boats on the evening of our first operational day. After an initial assessment and handing out of life vests we identified various medical cases. While we started to evacuate the serious medical cases onto *Nadir*, another, fourth boat had reached the scene in the darkness without us noticing. Only later, in the light of the flashlights, we noticed that the number of people in distress around us had multiplied.

A thorough medical examination of the people on board confirmed six pregnant women were in critical condition. One of them had severe abdominal pain and fainted. Although we tried to medically stabilise the patient on board, her condition remained problematic – she needed urgent hospitalisation. However, when we contacted the relevant authorities for an emergency evacuation, we received the frightening response that no resources were available. This information came as a shock to all of us, as we had long since reached the limit of our capacity, but by no means had all the people been taken care of.

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Left alone by the authorities and in urgent need of bringing people ashore, we decided to take all people in distress on the 18-meter *Nadir* to head for the nearest safe place in Lampedusa as soon as possible. Fortunately, a Coast Guard vessel approached shortly thereafter to take over the medical emergencies. The Coast Guard ship was already packed with people when it arrived, but it still picked up a total of 60 people from the overcrowded *Nadir*, so we were mobile again and able to navigate more safely. We started a long journey to Lampedusa with the remaining guests on board. After 10 hours we reached the port.

SHIPWRECKS OFF LAMPEDUSA

For almost three days, we were forced to seek shelter in Lampedusa due to b were able to recharge our batteries both physically and emotionally. While the wind repeatedly dragged our anchor out of the ground, we learned of two shipwrecks off Lampedusa. Two people were found dead and more than 30 people remained missing. Civilian rescue assets were unable to operate because of the weather or had been sent far away to more northern ports by Italian authorities. We could only wait helpless and bear testimony to yet another horrific event unfolding, showing us so vividly the immediate effects of the European border regime.

Indulging our rage and sadness, we suddenly received some good news from the Coast Guards medical team. They told us that 2 of the evacuated women of our first night had given birth. One right on the pier upon arrival and the other the next day. Mothers and children were all healthy and were being cared for at the Lampedusa hospital.

600 PEOPLE IN 48 HOURS

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With this positive news in mind, we left the port as soon as the weather allowed us to. We encountered several boats in distress which we were able to hand over to the Italian Coast Guard after first aid and stabilisation. We also stabilized a double-decker wooden boat until the Ocean Viking of SOS Méditerranée reached the place and could take the people on board. In advance we brought an unconscious 19-year-old man as an emergency on the Nadir, who was later evacuated by the authorities. Immediately afterwards, we were instructed by the MRCC Rome to support the sailing vessel Astral of Open Arms, which was taking care of three boats in distress. Astral had already evacuated one of the three boats and distributed life jackets to the others when we arrived at dawn. On board, they were handling a medical emergency. While we were still trying to assess the situation, another boat appeared on the horizon.

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As the fourth boat was rather fast and seemed to be stable, we all started moving together towards the Italian SAR region – Astral, Nadir, two tenders and three iron boats. While our progress was slow due to recurring problems with the boats' engines and the sun was rising higher and higher, the situation and the well-being on the boats changed drastically. Two of the boats had already been on the water for three and four days and some people started drinking seawater. So we started the evacuation of the boat that had already been on the water for four days. It became clear how eminent this decision was, when we brought an unconscious woman and three pregnant women to the Nadir.

As we continued to disembark people from the rusty iron boat, new boats kept appearing in the vicinity – first one, then another, two, three, four... It became impossible to attend to people and keep an overview of needs. As the Astral slowly moved on towards Lampedusa and the Ocean Viking appeared on the horizon, we sent boats with working engines and supplied with life jackets in their direction and were incredibly happy with the all-day cooperation with various assets of the civilian fleet.

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PEOPLE'S BORDERS (LIMITS)

Having people on board is often an emotional roller coaster. Before boarding, the tender sends information to the Nadir about the people evacuated, so that medics and guest care know what to prepare for. In one case, the information came in about a presumed unconscious person who was brought to the mother ship. It turned out that the person was unresponsive in a form of apathy. This type of condition is a very intense and rare psychological reaction that can occur as a result

of extreme stress or trauma. Fortunately, the person was able to recover and later share her experience.

On the other hand, we also experience exhilarating moments with the people on the ship. The spirit and strength of the group of 54 people after boarding Nadir was absolutely unique. People were joking, kissing, embracing our rainbow flag, singing and sharing their dreams and experiences. We made new friends and some of us even fantasised about going to the PRIDE parade in Berlin together soon.

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The day ended surreal. Catching the last rays of the sun, singing and accompanied by dolphins, we reached Lampedusa. We were asked to moor at the commercial pier, where the ferry normally lowers its car ramp. We stayed for one or two hours without anyone appearing. We were all very tired and understood that the number of arrivals in Lampedusa had at least doubled in 2023 and all the official bodies were acting at their limits. But after days at sea it is unbearable to stare at the empty pier without being allowed to set *foot on it*. Even hours later, when we were finally able to go ashore, our previous guests stood all alone on the pier in a line, waiting hours for a bus to come and pick them up. No one was there to answer any questions. These are the first impressions Europe leaves on people who survive the Mediterranean passage. A warm welcome.

Shortly before the authorities arrival, an iron boat almost as long as the Nadir itself comes alongside in the harbour, and a group of people excitedly try to climb onto the small sailing vessel. The agitation increases for us as well, as the small nutshell boats capsize far too easily. It takes a moment until everything is under control and the agitation is curbed. Thanks to the quick reaction of our crew and their ability to calm down both the people on our ship and the freshly arrived boat alongside, we just managed to prevent another tragedy – right in the port of Lampedusa.

ILLEGAL PUSHBACKS – NON-REFOULE..? - WHO CARES

After spending a lot of time on the Tunisian corridor, we headed south. In the morning, the emergency hotline Alarmphone reported a distress case in the Maltese search and rescue region, which was confirmed shortly afterwards by a Frontex aerial asset. Setting off, we quickly encountered a first boat and later another one on our way south. The occupants of the first iron boat told us that they had already spent four days at sea and kept lifting babies to emphasize their need for help. So we stopped again, distributed life jackets and water, and brought a mother with two children onto the Nadir as the two-year-old daughter had chemical burns. Children usually sit in the middle of the boat, where salt water and fuel form a toxic mix that causes painful burns on the skin. Five hours later, all 40 people, including the freshly showered children and two new stuffed animals, boarded an Italian Coast Guard CP.

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We collected our life jackets and continued south when a distress call reached us on the radio. A fisherman reported a small wooden boat, which quickly approached and soon revealed a rather

small group of 19 people, including 7 children. After a brief assessment, we decided to take everyone on board, not least because one baby was too exposed to the sun and we were concerned about its condition. Waiting to be assigned a port of safety, we continued toward the reported emergency. It wasn't long before we heard Sea-Watch Airborne's Seabird2 on the radio. They were addressing a Libyan vessel and outlining the legal institution around the 'non-refoulement' principle and the obligation to bring people to the next safe place.

Although people apparently jumped into the water out of fear of the Libyan militia, the boat was intercepted in the Maltese SAR (search and rescue region) and the people were illegally pulled back to Libya. Despite knowledge of NGO ships in the vicinity and the fact that the boat in distress was in Maltese jurisdiction for several hours could not prevent this boat from being intercepted – with the help of material support from EU Member States and the cooperation of Italy and Malta with the so-called Libyan Coast Guard. We were too late. Full of anger and sadness, we changed course and finally head with our patient Tunisian friends towards Lampedusa. Shortly after we were finally assigned a port of safety.

This short reflection is a collection of our impressions of 14 days at sea. With lasting admiration we look at the strength and courage of the survivors and acknowledge how much energy they give us for this work. We are full of rage and point with raised fingers at the European institutions and the border regime, which with externalization strategies and exploitation policies bear at least a share of responsibility for the ever-increasing deaths and human rights violations. We point out that the criminalization of people on the move and sabotage of civilian rescue efforts play a major part in the horrific reality we see every day in the Mediterranean. **Europe, you have blood on your hands.** We will never stop fighting until freedom of movement is guaranteed for all.