

## Deployment in stormy times: Triage, Grief and Solidarity



*by Paula Gaess, crew member on the Nadir on mission 7/2023 (September):*

The seventh deployment of the Nadir this year was marked by Storm Daniel, which swept across the Mediterranean and delayed departures from the North African coastal regions. After the sea calmed down, many more people set off: On September 12, more than 6,000 people reached Lampedusa within a day. In the midst of this ambivalent time, the crew of the Nadir was able to assist around 534 people in distress on 12 boats in just a few days in the area of operation.

Due to important repairs on board the Nadir, our mission started a bit late. Full of enthusiasm, we completed our training and set off for the area of operation. From the first day on, the sea became rougher each day, the wind increased and we quickly realized that not many people embark in such weather conditions. But even in these times, the escape route remains visible. We saw close to a dozen empty boats within 24 hours. The missing rescue markings only give us an idea of what happened to the people inside - since the beginning of the year, at least 40,000 people have been illegally pulled back by the Tunisian coast guard.

### **Rescue in the last moment**

Nevertheless, on the third day at sea we met several boats. Early in the morning we encountered a boat with 46 people on board. We accompanied them for hours in the direction of Italy until the Italian coast guard came to rescue the people. Worried that no boat would make it through that night safely under increasing wind and waves, we continued to keep a lookout in the area of operations. A little later, three dots appeared on

the horizon - boats with refugees on board. We approached the first boat: 44 people, including six women, two babies and a toddler. They received life jackets from us, and we proceeded with the boat to the next distress case, just a few hundred meters away - another 41 people. The waves, which were getting higher and higher, were already entering the boat. We stabilized it and informed the authorities, who were already on their way. Fortunately, when another boat appeared on the horizon, the Mare\*Go of the NGO Zusammenland came to assist and took care of the third boat. Two ships of the Italian Coast Guard and Guardia di Finanza approached a little later - relief was greatly felt. But while the second boat with 41 people on board was rescued by the Coast Guard, the unstable metal boat sank within seconds and a dozen people were in the water. Fortunately, all of them had received life jackets from us beforehand and the Coast Guard managed to rescue them. The Coast Guard also took the people who had been assisted by the Mare\*Go to Lampedusa. For us, we now had to return to the island as well to seek shelter from the weather.



While storm Daniel was blowing over the Mediterranean, we took the opportunity on Lampedusa to exchange with our partner NGOs. We met the crew of Pilotes Volontaires, of Seabird and Aurora of the NGO Sea Watch, talked to Open-Arms and were able to share our experiences with Maldusa. We sheltered in the shadow of Lampedusa for four days until the storm moved further east.

When we set sail again at noon on September 9, we were delighted to hear the news that a new NGO ship - the Sea Punk 1 - would be in the field for the first time. The next day, in a joint operation, we were able to rescue 44 people and bring them safely aboard the Sea Punk 1, including 16 minors, six women and a baby. Shortly after, the people were taken on board by the Italian Coast Guard.

## 40 people missing

Not much later we came across another metal boat, 44 men and one woman on board. The people were very upset, they told us that they had seen a capsized boat hours before. All the people had been swimming in the water and calling for help. We tried to reconstruct where the accident should have taken place and informed the Sea Punk 1 as well as the responsible authorities about the boat. Besides the Sea Punk 1, the Frontex Osprey 2 aircraft also went to search - unfortunately without success.

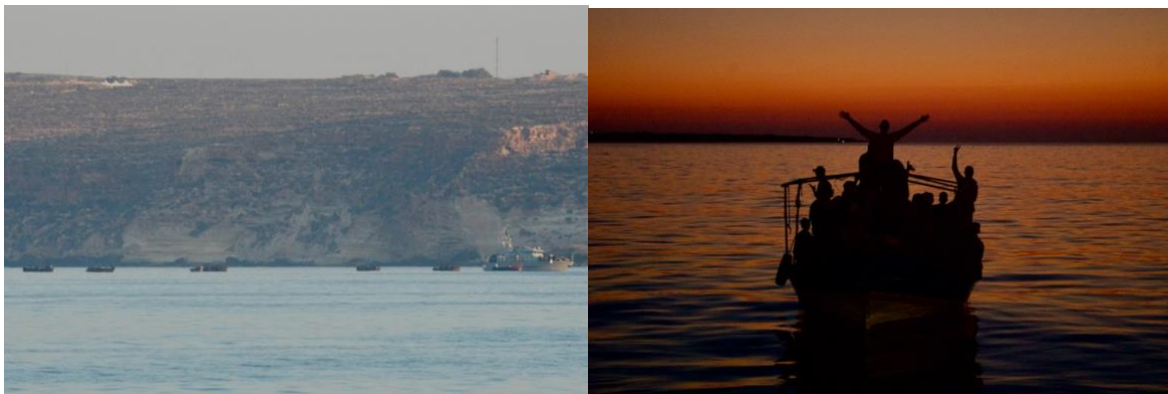
We accompanied the boat next to us until the pitch-black night forced us to take people on board. Quite a few people spoke to us about what they witnessed. Some knew the people who had been in the water, as the two boats had left Tunisia at about the same time.

We reached Lampedusa shortly after midnight, but our guests were not allowed to go ashore until early morning, as the survivors from the Coast Guard ships disembarked first. It was already the first signs of the next days: an unusually high number of boats arriving.



## **Triage, 239 people and one cargo ship**

With the aim of returning to the area of operation as quickly as possible, we left Lampedusa again the next night at around two o'clock. But we didn't get far: the island was still in sight when we encountered a boat with about 50 people on board. We accompanied it to the port of Lampedusa and left directly afterwards. But even the second time we didn't get a mile further - we found another boat with 36 people on board and no working engine. Together with the boat we watched as with sunrise dozens of boats became visible around us. Countless people were already outside the port of Lampedusa on the morning of September 12.



When a Guardia di Finanza ship took over the people, we decided not to take the usual route towards the area of operation, but to take a more southerly course, to an area where the Coast Guard would be less present, as it was outside the Italian search and rescue zone. The chances of encountering distress cases there were very high - this marked the beginning of a triage situation. Distress at sea was reported by radio by the minute: Aircraft and fishermen gave one position after another. Around noon, we found a boat sailing disoriented in the Maltese search and rescue zone, off course. Among the passengers were two small children and several women. We distributed life jackets and water and noticed two other boats on the horizon that were not moving - a total of 66 people. One of the boats had previously towed the other until the tow line got caught in the propeller, so they could not move forward. Only a short time after we reached the immobile boats the Nadir, accompanied by the first boat, a fourth boat approached with 53 people on board, including several children. We decided to bring all the children and their parents onto the Nadir, as our doctors suspected that several children were suffering from chemical burns caused by a toxic mixture of gasoline and salt water. Shortly after the evacuation, another boat arrived with over 70 people on board. At this point, a total of 239 people were gathered around and on the Nadir.



Since no help was to be expected from the Italian Coast Guard, especially since they themselves were handling over 40 maritime emergencies, we radioed the cargo ship BBC EDGE, which was located a few miles away from us. A short time later it appeared on the horizon. Over a period of hours, we brought people aboard the cargo ship, and eventually over 186 survivors aboard the BBC EDGE made their way to Salerno, which was assigned as their port of safety. While providing assistance in maritime emergencies is a legal requirement, merchant vessels often fail to comply with this duty and ignore emergencies. We are therefore particularly grateful to the BBC EDGE for having participated in the rescue of the 240 people.

We took 53 people on board the Nadir to take care of medical cases and especially the children. Around nine o'clock in the evening we set off and reached the island of Lampedusa again shortly after midnight.



## Lampedusa, 12 September

While we waited for hours for people to disembark from the Nadir, we later learned that at about 4:18 a.m., just a few meters away from us, an incoming boat had capsized in the harbor. The body of the one baby on board was recovered but all other passengers survived.

Within one day, more than 6,000 people arrived on the island - more people than inhabitants on the island. Lampedusa looked different on September 12. The refugees could not be hidden in the island's hotspot. They were visible, standing on the pontoons, waiting for buses, for ferries, new boats kept coming into the harbor. The Nadir anchored after deployment and we watched the events unfold. Across from us, arriving people were crowded together on a dock, threatened by police with truncheons, the sun was burning and people were desperately jumping into the water, swimming over to us, asking for water. NGOs were not allowed to help, not even the Red Cross was permitted to go to the survivors. Next door, summer tourists sunbathed or went out in small speedboats for refugee-seeing to take pictures of the arriving boats. Lampedusa's city council declared a state of emergency. It was a picture of powerlessness and disillusionment as survivors arrive here in Europe.



For us, the mission was over that day and we headed back to Malta. Through the media, we followed how the local citizens of Lampedusa opened their doors for the next few days to feed the people who had fled the completely overcrowded hotspot. Once again, we witnessed that solidarity is the strongest weapon against isolation and hatred. We also watched Meloni and Von der Leyen travel to Lampedusa for three hours to invoke the

strong hand of Europe. We perceived how in Germany the debate tipped and suddenly all government parties called for stronger deportation measures. We also saw the devastating consequences of Storm Daniel, the shocking images from Libya and the unbelievably high death toll.

The seventh deployment marks a climax that had escalated over the past months - a climax of political failure. That the small island of Lampedusa, of all places, has become the symbol of this failure is paradoxical in the sense that it is still one of the few places where state rescue at sea is attempted. But the funds from Rome as well as the political will are missing at all places, and so it is not at all surprising what happened in Lampedusa on September 12.