



Lampedusa breathes a sigh of relief as people on the move wait for a departure window

By Linda Rochlitzer, Crew-member on the Nadir

EU funding for the president of Tunisia are causing a shift in the migration route with increased departures from Libya. Even though this extended the distance the Nadir had to travel, during our rotation we were able to assist around 330 people on the move and ensure that they arrived safely to Europe.

Political situation Lampedusa and bad weather period

A spell of bad weather followed after Lampedusa had declared a state of emergency when over 7.000 refugees were present in a hotspot designed for 400 people and We spent this period on standby, sheltering in a bay in Lampedusa to decrease our exposure to the wind and waves. We kept in mind that with such high waves and strong winds, fewer people would be making the already dangerous journey across the central Mediterranean.

The consequences of the extreme situation of the preceding weeks were still clearly felt on the island. We were told about the solidarity of NGOs and great cohesion of the population:

Restaurants opened their kitchens to feed the influx of people; NGOs joined forces to cope with the situation in the best possible way with the available resources. Banners denouncing the right-wing government still hung in the church square. When the wind calmed down after a week, we started to patrol off the coast of Tunisia.



Assignment of Porto Empedocle as Place of Safety (POS), a political farce

A day after the conditions calmed down, we spotted a wooden boat with 41 people on the horizon in the afternoon. The people, including three children, had departed from Libya two days earlier. We provided them with life jackets and accompanied them until an Italian Coast Guard ship took them onboard and brought them safely to Lampedusa.

Zuweisung des sicheren Hafens Porto Empedocle als eine politische Farce

Einen Tag nachdem sich der Wind gelegt und die See sich beruhigt hatte, entdeckten wir nachmittags ein Holzboot mit 41 Menschen am Horizont. Die Menschen, darunter drei Kinder, waren zwei Tage zuvor von Libyen aus gestartet. Wir versorgten sie mit Rettungswesten und begleiteten sie, bis ein Schiff der italienischen Küstenwache sie an Bord nahm und sicher nach Lampedusa brachte.



Only a few hours later, we were informed by Frontex aircraft Eagle 2 about the position of another wooden boat in distress. When we arrived there, we encountered a boat unable to maneuver with 22 people, including 3 women, 19 men and 8 minors. After initial stabilization, it quickly became clear that continuing their journey on the boat would be highly dangerous as wind and waves were increasing. We therefore took them onboard and proceeded with them towards Italy. The Nadir pounded against the increasing waves and water kept pouring onto our foredeck. Shortly before reaching the coast of Lampedusa, we were assigned Porto Empedocle as a safe port. Proceeding towards the assigned port would have meant another 115 nautical miles of navigation, equating to 40 hours of sailing in consistently adverse weather conditions and thus a heavy burden for our guests onboard. We then decided to seek shelter behind Lampedusa for the time being. On the Nadir, an 18-meter sailing ship, guests can only sit on the open deck, where they are barely protected from wind and waves. In calm seas off the coast of Lampedusa, crew and guests were able to start recovering their strength for the first time. We were able to cook for the people onboard and offer them a shower and fresh, dry clothes. This decision was necessary to ensure the safety of our guests on board. The next day the Italian authorities, eventually allowed us to enter Lampedusa. There, everyone could go onshore and not be subjected to further unnecessary suffering at sea.

Shifting migration routes makes crossing even more dangerous

Back in the area of operation, we first discovered 12 and then another 20 people in distress at sea and we were able to assist them in their journey across the Mediterranean until they were rescued by the Italian authorities and brought safely to Lampedusa.



That same afternoon, we received coordinates from the civilian aircraft Colibri 2 ([Pilotes Volontaires](#)), which had spotted two boats. When we arrived at the position shortly after, we met the two boats with a total of 113 people from Syria and Bangladesh. Our crew provided everyone with life jackets, water and crackers until the Italian Guardia di Finanza took the people on board shortly after sunset.



In the following two days, we met three more boats with a total of 132 people at intervals of a few hours. All of them had departed from Libya and had already spent several days at sea. None of the people in any of the boats were equipped with life jackets. What surprised us most was the sighting of a steel boat, a dangerous construction made of metal sheets welded together with sharp edges. So far could these have only been observed on the Tunisian route. If these type of boats become commonplace for departures from Libya, which is much farther away, it could lead to significantly more emergencies. This type of boat often has a very low freeboard (distance from the edge of the board to the waterline), and sinks within seconds when water enters. With this new possible development, it is all the more important that a civilian fleet maintains a presence in the Mediterranean.





During our last operation, a speedboat of the Swedish Coast Guard was also already on its way to the approximately 30 people in distress. We offered to stay in stand by with the Nadir and our tender for possible incidents during the embarkation of the people, and our offer was well accepted.



The EU responsibility

It is noticeable that the majority of the boats we encountered had departed from Libya. The money given by the EU to Tunisian President Saied as a result of the agreement signed between Tunisia and the EU in July may have led to a (partial) closure of the route from Tunisia to Lampedusa. However, this does not mean that fewer people are making the journey across the Mediterranean Sea, but merely causes migration flows to shift and forcing people to take more dangerous and unsafe routes. Moreover, people who departed from Libya take a longer route along the coast to escape the atrocities of the so-called Libyan coast guard. It is imperative that the EU establish safe routes into the EU.

We observed the Italian Coast Guard vessel CP941 on the horizon a few times, but it did not assist any of our cases. The fact that such a ship has now been made available by the Italian authorities is evidence of a higher awareness about the many people fleeing across the Mediterranean but not of any concrete assistance.



All these developments are in clear contrast to human rights and the right to asylum, which every person is entitled to. The allocation of safe ports far away as well as the deliberately created absence of rescue assets in the Mediterranean Sea are Europe's attempt to further seal itself off. We strongly denounce these policies and therefore stand even closer together with other civil actors in the Mediterranean Sea to rescue people in distress and to hold Europe accountable. We thank all other actors who collaborated with us during our rotation and continuously show solidarity and fight with us this unacceptable situation! #civilfleet