

Report about Rotation 10/2023

Rough Seas on the Tunisian Corridor: Nadir support 234 people”

Text and pictures by Emma Zucchelli, translation and picture Nr. 1 by Piet Wübker, crew members of rotation 10/2023 (November)

During the tenth and last rotation of the year, the Nadir crew witnessed a boost in activity on the Tunisian route, which had been nearly completely inactive for weeks. This also meant an increasing amount of iron boats. The danger that comes with their instability and unsuitability at sea tragically unfolded in a shipwreck that took place off the coast of Lampedusa on the 20th of November, costing the life of one two year-old girl and leaving eight people missing. In a month with many reported pullbacks and dense with arrivals on Lampedusa, civil actors did their best to keep supporting people on the move and trying to ensure that they reach a place of safety.

When collaboration, cooperation and solidarity make a difference at sea

Already the very first day of operations proved to be a challenge for the Nadir crew and other actors at sea. Early in the morning our crew spotted a fiberglass boat with approximately 50 people on board. This was just the first of three boats we were able to support that day. Overall, more than 1200 people would arrive on Lampedusa that day - some autonomously but many with assistance provided by authorities and civil actors.

In the early afternoon we received an order from the Italian authorities to start searching for a second boat with yet another 50 people, which we managed to find just before nightfall. We provided lights and made sure the people could arrive to Lampedusa safely. For hours, notifications of distress cases kept coming through and alerts of boats needing assistance echoed through the VHF channels, with fishing vessels, authorities, and civil actors - such as *Watch the Med Alarm Phone* - in frequent communication with one another. Just as the long day seemed to be coming to an end, we found ourselves next to an unstable and overcrowded iron boat with approximately 40 people on board. In the darkness, we only spotted them thanks to the reflection of our spotlight on the rusty hull of the boat. Adrift, with water starting to enter the boat and a pitch-black night, we decided to take the people on board the Nadir. We arrived to our assigned port, Lampedusa, at around 2:40h in the morning, with the disembarkation process finishing at 04:30h. We were relieved to have supported 140 people on the move in the first 24 hours of operation, but we had a heavy heart, as we knew that there were still many boats in distress that needed assistance during that night.



Help from the air and the sea to guarantee a safe arrival to land

After a quick turnaround in Lampedusa to complete all mandatory procedures, we set back out towards the area of operation. We spent an entire day on the lookout, scanning the horizon of the Tunisian corridor from sunrise to sunset. Just as the day was coming to an end and we were getting ready to head back to Lampedusa to shelter from incoming bad weather, we received an alert from the aircraft *Colibri2* of *Pilotes Volontaires*, notifying us about a drifting iron boat 8 nautical miles from us.



We set towards it at full speed and arrived just after the sun had set; in a matter of minutes, it was pitch black. The situation we encountered was very critical, with people scooping water out of the boat with a bucket to prevent it from sinking. Two people fell in the water and had to be recovered by our crew members on the tender, while other people had to be transported from the unseaworthy iron boat to the Nadir to stabilize it.

Confronted with such critical conditions we called for immediate assistance and within 30 minutes saw the Italian Coast Guard on the horizon. We supported their rescue operation with our tender by transporting people from the iron boat to the coastguard vessel. Thanks to a collective effort by all the people present during the operation, all 45 people were safely transported to Lampedusa. Our crew was especially thankful for the timeliness of intervention by parts of the authorities and the reciprocal respect shown. On Nadir's way back to Lampedusa we reflected on the challenging situations encountered at sea and admired the people we had met who had endured and successfully overcome them.



La legge del mare: fishermen know what solidarity at sea means

After arriving in Lampedusa at dawn, we took the day to rest and to get the Nadir ready for the last sail of the year. On the 19th of November we set out towards the Tunisian corridor once again. Early the next morning we heard a fishing vessel alerting about an iron boat in distress via VHF radio, saying there were many women and children on board. We noted down the position and made our way towards it. When we arrived, we could immediately see that the health conditions of the people on board were significantly affected. They later told us they had spent four days at sea, three of which without a running engine and in very rough weather conditions. They also said that the fishermen had spent more than 10 hours alongside their boat, calling for help and pressuring the competent authorities to provide assistance.

Given the immediate danger, we decided to take the people on board. The 49 people who embarked Nadir were exhausted, many presenting extremely painful fuel burns and cuts in their feet and hands which were infected. Our four-member medic team made sure people had showers, changed clothes, and got basic medication and wound care. During the 10-hour journey to Lampedusa, we learnt that this group of people had travelled together from Guinea Conakry, and walked through the Sahara together. It was obvious that it was a very united group of people. We can imagine how they drew strength and courage from this on the way.



We finally arrived in Lampedusa at around 22:00h and it became obvious during the disembarkation process how exhausted and physically weak the people were, due to the long time at sea. Many struggled to make the big step from Nadir to the pier, and some had to be accompanied by the Red Cross staff. One woman nearly collapsed, and we had to lift her out of Nadir with the help of the land authorities.

Once again, today we had witnessed how solidarity at sea can make a difference. The fishermen's perseverance and continuous calls on the radio likely saved 49 lives. As a crew we are grateful to have arrived when we did and admire the resilience of the people we met, who spent and overcame four days on the water. We are thankful that we managed to provide the survivors with the immediate emergency support they much needed.



While we were busy giving assistance to the survivors on board during the long navigation towards Lampedusa, we were well unaware of what was happening just off the coast. We couldn't imagine that while we were taking care of the survivors, yet another tragedy was taking place just a few miles off Lampedusa. We later received the devastating news that there had been a shipwreck of an iron boat which caused the death of a two-year-old girl and left eight people missing. 43 people were rescued by the Coast Guard, while two boys were rescued by local fishermen.

A strong act of solidarity from fishermen of the area. This also comes just one month after many stories emerged of locals opening their doors and kitchens to survivors, as well as videos of people dancing together in the main squares, following the thousands of people reaching the island in a matter of days.



This is the kind of solidarity that inspires us. We will continue to sail for as long as it is needed, hoping that one day there is no longer the need for us to be out there testifying, monitoring, supporting people on the move, because this will be done by the relevant authorities and legal and safe flight routes will have been established. Until then, we will temporarily put down Nadir's sails for the winter – reassured by the fact that other civil fleets will be operational –and make sure we are ready and prepared to set out again in the spring.