

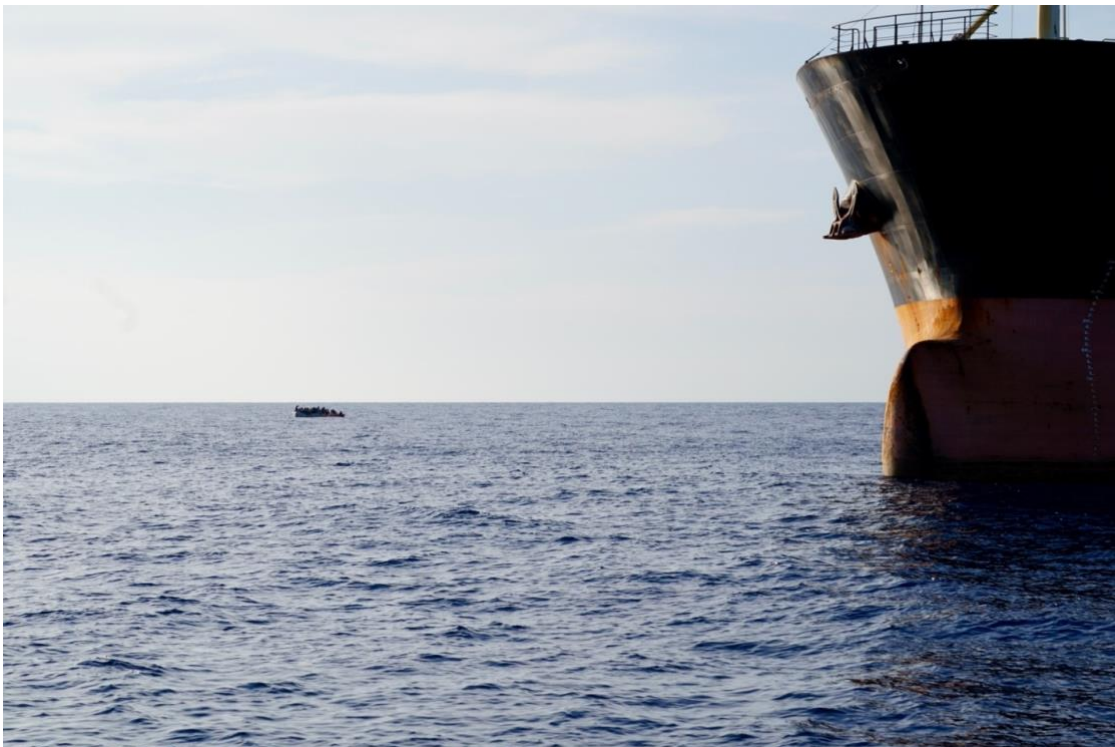
In the Face of Barriers: Rescues, Repression and Solidarity

Taking place between 19 August and 6 September, the beginning of Nadir's seventh rotation for the year 2024 was marked by good weather and a lack of strong winds, making conditions difficult for sailing but highly favorable for migrant departures from the Libyan and Tunisian coasts.

The challenges faced by the crew of the Nadir, however, were of a political nature rather than a nautical one. Italy's Piantadosi Decree Law, introduced in January 2023, continues to create administrative obstacles and risks for civilian ships operating in the Mediterranean. This law, which forces NGO-ships to disembark on distant mainland ports and brings them away from the area of operation for long periods of time, resulted in lengthy detentions for Médecins Sans Frontières' Geo Barents and the SeaWatch 5. Coupled with overlapping crew change periods and technical maintenance for other Search and Rescue actors, the Nadir was left as one of the very few ships able to operate in the Central Mediterranean during that period.

First rescues: dehydration and heatstroke under the scorching August sun

Shortly after reaching the operation area on 24 August, we supported two boats with respectively 21 and 50 people in the Maltese search and rescue zone. Many passengers had been at sea for days, and many were weak and dehydrated. The boats had started from Libya two days prior. In both cases, we provided first aid assistance until the Italian coast guard arrived and brought them to Lampedusa.

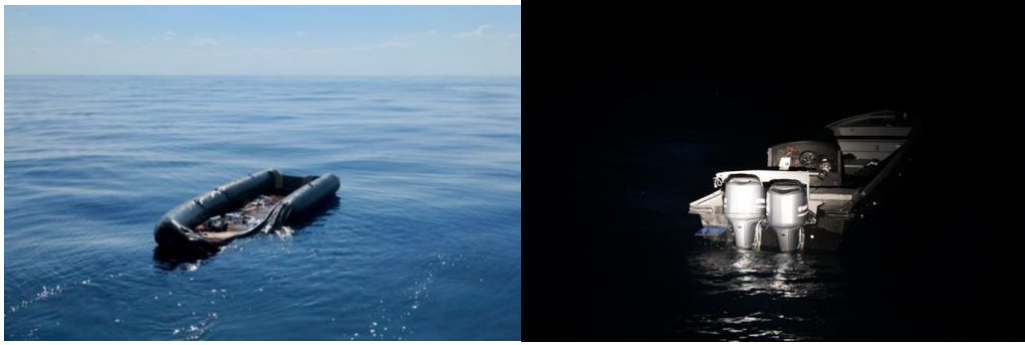


A couple of days later, after receiving a distress call from Seabird, the aircraft of Sea-Watch, we rushed to support 43 people - including women and small children - on a white rubber boat. The boat had been reported in distress several hours earlier and was unable to maneuver. According to the reports of the airplane, one tube of the rubber boat was deflated and 12 people were in the water. The cargo ship Sider Atlantic was already on scene and stabilized the boat. When we arrived on scene, we rapidly took over the coordination of the rescue. The people on the rubber boat were extremely agitated and scared; four people required urgent medical assistance due to fuel burns, heatstroke, and untreated pre-existing medical conditions. Our tender crew evacuated the 43 people onto the Nadir while our doctors treated the medical cases. Heading to the assigned Port of Safety (POS) Lampedusa with 43 guests on board all hands were needed for calming the passengers and taking care of them.



Shortly thereafter, we were alerted by AlarmPhone of another boat in dire conditions close to Nadir's course towards Lampedusa. In accordance with the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre Rome (MRCC), we searched and found the 19 people drifting on an unseaworthy boat at 1:30 in the morning. Due to the difficulty of providing support in the extreme darkness, we took the people on board of the Nadir as well. By the next afternoon, all 62 rescued individuals were safely disembarked in Lampedusa.

Empty boats and the dark reality of push-back practices



During the following days, we spotted at least 10 empty boats at sea - many of which had not been marked, in a likely indication of the illegal pushback practices employed by the so-called Libyan and Tunisian coast guards who play the watchdogs at the European external borders, generously funded by the EU. In such cases, boats of people on the move are intercepted at sea, forcibly returned to the north African shore and taken directly to torture camps. These practices violate international maritime and human rights laws and highlight the ongoing dangers faced by people attempting to flee toward safety.

Alerted via alarmphone, we searched for hours in the middle of the night of the 29th of August. It must have been hours, maybe minutes before our arrival, that the Tunisian Authorities illegally pushed back the approx. 70 people on this boat. The boat carried two massive outboard engines and probably ran out of gas. The distinctive smell of gasoline and urine was still fresh in the air.

(In)visible Scars from the hell of Libya

In the night from the 30st to the 31st of August, we encountered a fiberglass boat lost at sea carrying 14 people onboard, including minors. The group, which had lost its direction, was provided with life-vests and escorted until a Guardia di Finanza asset came to the scene to take the people on board.



A few hours later, we were informed of a wooden boat with 31 people by the Organization Pilotes Volontaires. We quickly headed in their direction to discover that more than half of the people onboard were unaccompanied minors – the youngest being just 14 years old. They had left Libya one day earlier, but when we reached them, the boat was unable to maneuver. With the so-called Libyan coast guards visible on the horizon, we decided to take the people on board to protect them from a possible illegal pushback. On board, the young men shared their stories of Libya, the torture camps, and the scars they carry. "The authorities exploited us, beat us, imprisoned us and killed us," in the words of a 16-year-old survivor who has been in Libyan prisons three times. His last escape was still recent: he managed to flee the prison only two weeks before making his way across the Mediterranean. It leaves us speechless and angry that these young people had to go through such traumatic and brutal experiences. The lack of safe and legal pathways leaves them with no other options.

40 people overboard: A tense rescue operation in the darkness



On 1 September, we came across a small, overcrowded wooden boat with 61 people onboard who had been drifting for two days. Dehydrated and seasick, the passengers were provided with lifejackets and water and assisted until the Italian coast guard arrived to bring them to safety.

Right after that, while the sun set, Seabird alerted us about a distress case in the Maltese Search and Rescue Zone. We changed course and started to search. Around

midnight on the 4. September, we found the overcrowded double-decker fiberglass boat with a broken engine and roughly 120 people aboard. An assessment of the boat's real conditions was made particularly difficult by the sheer darkness, high waves, and roughly 30 people in the lower deck - likely already suffering from a lack of oxygen. Communication turned out to be difficult due to the passengers being anxious and agitated.

Our tender crew quickly provided life vests and evacuated some 50 people from the fiberglass boat's upper deck onto the Nadir, to make sufficient space for the lower-deck passengers to come outside. Among those transferred towards the Nadir were extremely weak persons who had been exposed to the Mediterranean heat for days with little to nothing to drink or room to move; some of them required treatment by the Nadir's medical staff.

The Italian coast guard arrived at roughly 3:15am, after we had cared for the most urgent cases and ensured nobody was left in the lower deck. As the coast guard began taking the remaining people from the nearby fiberglass boat on board, more than 40 ended up in the water.



Our tender crew reacted quickly and provided lifesaving and inflatable equipment. Within seconds, people were scattered over a wide area as the high waves pushed them apart. While our tender crew pulled most of the people out of the water, some swam directly to the Nadir and were pulled aboard by our crew. For over an hour we worked in the dark to rescue everyone. The people we had previously taken on board also pitched in, picking up the survivors, making room for the weakened and helping where they could. Quite a few of the survivors collapsed on board, shaken by the shock and fear.

Even after the coast guards had left to take all the people to Lampedusa, we continued searching the area several times to ensure nobody had been left behind. We can only hope that we found everyone in that night – which shows us again, that seconds can

make all the difference. Seeking refuge across the Mediterranean is deadly, that is no secret; yet every day, EU countries opt for a policy of isolation that makes these routes ever more dangerous.

Working together with supportive partners

During the sixth operation, we received invaluable support from our partners. Most boats in distress would not have been found without the support of the AlarmPhone hotline or the airborne teams of Pilotes Volontaires and Seabird, visualizing larger spaces from the air. Lampedusa-based associations Maldusa and Mediterranean Hope provided assistance to people reaching the Italian ground.

During the time on sea, we also made use of a drone developed by the nonprofit organization SearchWing equipped with an AI-based software capable of recognizing boat-like objects in the sea. Flying 550 meters above the sea and covering an area of up to 160 square kilometers, the drone extends the Nadir's search capacity beyond the limited range which can be monitored from the ship bridge.

We stay here!



As the operation came to an end, the broader context of the Mediterranean crisis remained in sharp focus. The agreements between the European Union and Libya, Tunisia and Egypt, along with the detentions of SAR vessels, are part of a larger political landscape that systematically puts people's lives at risk.

According to the Missing Migrant Project, the Mediterranean mass grave reached its 30,000th victim a few weeks ago. Sadly, many more remain unaccounted for. In a world where borders seem to matter more than people, the Nadir will continue to stand as a lifeline for those fleeing danger and persecution. Humanity must prevail.