

Rome, 24th April 2018

Mediterranean Hope (MH) has not historically been directly involved in search and rescue (SAR) operations but the Council of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI) has formally resolved to provide concrete support for such missions through the MH project. Two MH operatives were involved in missions in March during which over 200 migrants were rescued and more such missions are envisaged.



However, all SAR activities by Proactiva, the Spanish NGO with which MH has been working, were halted when its boat, the “Open Arms” was impounded last month. Over the space of a single weekend, the boat picked up another 200 migrants, was chased and threatened at gunpoint by the Libyan coastguard and then prevented from mooring in any of the European territories to which requests were made for a safe harbour. After the migrants aboard were eventually permitted to disembark at Pozzallo, Sicily, the boat was impounded and three of the crew arrested. The boat lay uselessly at anchor for weeks whilst legal argument ensued. Although the boat was released last week, charges against crew members remain.

The *Open Arms* is by no means the first NGO boat to be impounded. Steady efforts to shut down SAR operations mean that, where the Italian Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre could previously call on twelve boats for assistance, only two other boats, Sea-Watch’s *Sea-Watch 3* and SOS Mediterannee’s *Aquarius*, currently operate. For those who believe that the migration flow will stop if humanitarian aid efforts are criminalised and SAR operations shut down, that is as it should be. Others consider that handing over migrants to the Libyan coastguard and certain detention in Libya is, in itself, criminal. An Amnesty International report published in December 2017 regarding the situation in Libya makes grim reading (see <https://bit.ly/2GzaMre>).



FCEI-MH is supporting Proactiva in its efforts to defend the allegations made and raise awareness of the issue at large. Several organisations and individuals have expressed solidarity via Twitter (#FreeOpenArms), and before the boat's release demonstrations were held in Sicily and in Rome, as well as in various cities in Spain. Twenty-nine legal academics have signed an open letter¹ calling on Italy to stop "promoting, directing and enforcing returns to Libya" and on the UN "to promote a co-ordinated approach to SAR in the Mediterranean Sea which does not involve exposing people to risk of human rights violations".

Despite that backdrop, Italy's highest court today upheld an earlier decision to impound the Iuventa, a boat belonging to German NGO Jugend Rettet. Today may therefore be an appropriate day to consider the question posed in a recent report by the Heinrich Boll Foundation: is saving lives at sea still a priority for the EU?²

It would be easy to consider this an Italian problem. Arguably, however, Italy has been driven to adopt this policy, at least in part, because other nations have been unwilling to share the burden of migrant flows or to act in a concerted fashion to tackle the issues which drive people out of their own land towards an often unwelcoming Europe.

The longer I am here, the more apparent it is to me that, like it or not, we are inter-connected. Our unwillingness to consider others' problems our own may not be malign but, like it or not, will always have repercussions.

Tags: Italy, Mediterranean, SAR, Proactiva, Open Arms, Libya Iuventa, Jugend Rettet

¹ <http://rwi.lu.se/app/uploads/2018/03/Open-Arms-statement-def.pdf>

² <https://eu.boell.org/en/2018/04/19/saving-lives-sea-still-priority-eu>