



Press Kit SOS Humanity 2024



Life vests are distributed to people in distress by crew members of Humanity 1. Photo: Camilla Kranzusch / SOS Humanity

Content

Nine years of search and rescue at sea	2
Sailing for solidarity - Nine years of search and rescue	
Our rescue ship – the Humanity 1	3
Ship - Crew - Equipment - Accommodation & supplies	
Crew and operation	4
Special features of our work on board - The first year of rescue missions	
Migration route central Mediterranean	5
The duty for rescue and to respect human rights at sea- Establishment of the so-called Libyan Coast Guard - Obstruction of search and rescue, distant ports	
Our demands	7
SOS Humanity's demands to Germany and the EU & its member states	
Statements and quotes	9

Statements – Quotes from staff, supporters, survivors and crew members

Nine Years of Search and Rescue at Sea

More than 22,700 deaths in the central Mediterranean since 2014 show that there has been and still is a lack of rescue ships in that area. The central Mediterranean Sea is the deadliest migration route in the world. In 2021, the civil search and rescue organisation SOS Humanity, founded 2015 as SOS Mediterranee Germany, thus decided to strengthen the rescue capacities in the central Mediterranean with another rescue ship. In January 2022, the German branch of the organisation separated from the European network it had founded and started working independently under the name SOS Humanity. With its new rescue vessel Humanity 1 and its eight years of experience, it continued saving lives as of August 2022. The goal: rescue more people in distress at sea on the deadly migration route between North Africa, Malta and Italy, and bring them to a place of safety. Until the end of 2023, a total of 1,956 people were rescued with Humanity 1.

Humanity for All!

For nearly nine years, SOS Humanity has been rescuing people who are in distress at sea, providing professional care and support to survivors on board their rescue ship, all the while documenting their fates. “As SOS Humanity, we have set another goal for ourselves,” says Laura Gorriahn, the chair of the organisation’s board. “We want to increase public awareness of the situation in the Mediterranean, document abuses and legal violations, and ultimately drive change in European migration policy. We are putting more emphasis on informing the public, because we are convinced that people are not only saved at sea, but also by political decisions on land. We call for more humanity at sea!”

SOS Humanity’s work depends on social engagement. Volunteer groups get involved on land and professional volunteers lend their skills to us on board. SOS Humanity is a member of the German Donations Council and is financed primarily through individual donations, but also through the support of largely humanitarian organisations. There are also some public contributions from municipalities and, for the first time in 2023, the German Foreign Office. They all help to ensure that people in need of protection can be rescued at sea, regardless of their origin, ethnicity, or political convictions. Our rescue ship Humanity 1, one of the ships supported by the United4Rescue alliance, and the many years of experience of our crew and those involved on land, all help save lives and stand up for humanity for all.

Nine Years of Search and Rescue

With the founding of SOS Mediterranee on May 4, 2015, in Berlin, German captain and historian Klaus Vogel and a group of supporters wanted to help put an end to the deaths in the Mediterranean. They could no longer stand by and watch as thousands of people drown in the Mediterranean due to the lack of state-run rescue ships. From early 2016 until the end of 2021, the European civil search and rescue association SOS Mediterranee with branches in Germany, France, Italy and Switzerland was able to save 34,631 people from drowning, first with the Aquarius, then with the Ocean Viking, and bring them to safety. In the second half of 2022, SOS Humanity rescued a total of 855 people over three rescue missions with our new ship Humanity 1 and brought them to a port of safety – in spite of the political hurdles imposed by the new Italian government from November 2022 onwards.

Until the end of 2022, non-governmental rescue ships had to wait many days or weeks to be assigned a safe place by the Italian authorities to disembark survivors. The Italian government's strategy of obstructing the activities of non-governmental search and rescue organisations and delaying the disembarkation of survivors changed in December 2022 with a new law, the 'Piantedosi Decree'. Since then, the Italian authorities have assigned rescue ships, including Humanity 1, a place of safety immediately after the first rescue – but in almost all cases, these ports were unnecessarily far away from the position of the rescue, usually between 1,000 and 1,600 km. On April 21, 2023, SOS Humanity filed a lawsuit in the civil court in Rome against the systematic assignment of distant ports by the Italian authorities. This is because the additional 3 – 5 days on board ship violates the rights of the rescued people in need of protection (see also "Obstruction of Search and Rescue" below). The first hearing will take place in mid-January 2024.

Under a new national law, NGO rescue ships are instructed to proceed to the assigned port immediately, thereby contradicting the duty to rescue other boats in distress and decreasing the presence of rescue ships at sea. In the event of non-compliance, i.e. deviating from their course to rescue other people in urgent distress at sea, rescue ships are usually detained for 20 days. In December 2023, the Italian authorities imposed a detention of this kind on the Humanity 1, based entirely on false allegations. SOS Humanity's appeal against this punishment is pending.

With increasing departures in 2023, especially from Tunisia, this unjustified obstruction of NGO rescue ships has become even more fatal. In June/July, Humanity 1 operated in the area between Tunisia and Lampedusa for the first time, coordinated by the MRCC Rome. More than 400 children, women and men were rescued from 9 boats in distress in two patrols of search and rescue Rotation 06 between 30 June and 11 July. A larger number of survivors were interviewed by our crew on board, they told their stories and reported violence experienced in Tunisia.

Our Rescue Ship, the Humanity 1



The Humanity 1 on its way to the search & rescue area. Photo: Maria Giulia Trombini / SOS Humanity

The Ship

- Former German research vessel “Poseidon” (home port: Kiel in northern Germany) operated as a search and rescue ship for Sea-Watch (as Sea-Watch 4 and one of the United4Rescue alliance ships) from 2020-2022 Thanks to its size and equipment, it is suitable for the rescue and medical care of large numbers of people.
- Year of construction: 1976
- Length: 60.8 m // width: 11.4 m // weight: 1,460 t
- Maximum speed: 10 knots (fuel consumption: 6,000 l/day)
- Ship owner: SOS Humanity gGmbH
- Flag state: Germany

Crew

- In total: 28 people in the following teams:
- Ship operations: 12 people in the marine crew
- Search and rescue operations: 7 people in the rescue team
- Care of survivors: 6 people in the care & medical team
- Communications & documentation: 3 people

Equipment

- Technical equipment: 2 high-speed boats (“RHIBs”), 2 radars on the mast

- Life-saving equipment: 620 life jackets available for rescue operations, another 500 on board for emergencies, as well as life rafts and other buoyancy aids
- Kitchen: Spacious cooking area for the cook on board to prepare large amounts of fresh food. Storage rooms and walk-in fridges for food storage

Accommodation & Supplies

- Space for hundreds of survivors
- 29 beds for the crew and 1 journalist
- Survivors are accommodated on three decks
- Shelter for women and children with bunk beds for more than 12 women with their children, separate shower and sink
- Covered, weather-protected and heatable area on deck for the men's accommodation
- Gynecological chair and mobile ultrasound probe, assorted equipment for examinations by the midwife in a protected area only accessible to women
- Clinic with two stretchers, 2 mobile defibrillators and one fixed, which can be used for electrocardiograms (ECGs) EKG, ventilators with oxygen cylinders, surgical instruments, etc.
- Sanitary facilities: 7 multi-use sanitary cabins (combined shower and toilet), including one exclusively for women and one on the upper deck. Additional external shower near the entrance for rapid cleaning, in case of skin burns from the gasoline/salt-water mixture found on board the rubber boats.

Crew and Operation

In early 2022, SOS Humanity established its own new operations department. A crewing team takes care of hiring both volunteers and crew members a total of 28 crew members. From 2023 onwards, established crew members receive a salaried contract, including the captain, the cook, the chief engineer, the second officer, an able seafarer, the care coordinator and the two (as of spring 2024 three) communications coordinators who alternate on board.

To involve civil society not only through donations, but also through operations on board, nearly half of the SOS Humanity crew is made up of volunteers. Key positions for ship and rescue operations, such as the captain, the first and second officers, and the search and rescue coordinator (SARCo) are filled by salaried crew. Other professionals who can more easily be found in civil society are very welcome as volunteers, for example our doctors, paramedics, speedboat drivers or mental health officers.

Special Features of Our Work on Board

New on board since August 2022 is the job position of Human Rights Observer, who documents legal violations at sea. Their work will help to better inform the public about the situation of people on the move and the human rights violations in the Mediterranean. They will be able to collect and analyse more data, especially about those rescued.

Another new position is the mental health expert on board, unusual among SAR NGOs. This position was created to take better care of the survivors, who are often suffering due to their experiences during their journey and especially in Libyan detention camps. Experience from the

missions in 2022 and 2023 has shown that there is a high demand for psychological consultations for survivors on board. The crewing team works hard to ensure the greatest possible diversity. This means bringing together people from a wide range of countries, continents and backgrounds as well as a high proportion of women in the crew. In August 2023, for the first time, Humanity 1 departed with a predominantly female crew. One of the two RHIBS had an all-female crew. The working language on board is English. On the Humanity 1, all meals are vegan and prepared fresh every day by the cook, with the help of crew members. Crew and survivors eat the same meals.

Refugee Route: Central Mediterranean

Every year, European migration policy causes thousands of avoidable deaths. This is particularly evident in the central Mediterranean, currently the world's deadliest migration route. Since 2014, more than 22,700 people have died while fleeing in unseaworthy boats between Libya, Tunisia, Italy and Malta. The number of unreported cases is far higher.¹ In 2023 alone, at least 2,498 people seeking protection died in the central Mediterranean on their way to Europe – it has been the deadliest year since 2017.² Since the Italian search and rescue operation ‘Mare Nostrum’ was suspended at the end of October 2014, there has been no European state-led search and rescue programme in the central Mediterranean. While EU states have evaded their responsibilities, civil society actors such as SOS Humanity - originally founded as SOS Mediterranean Germany - have been filling this gap as best as they can since 2015. Between 2016 and the end of 2021, the crews of the two non-governmental rescue ships Aquarius and Ocean Viking alone rescued 34,631 people from distress at sea.

Duty to Rescue and Respect Human Rights

The duty to assist people in distress at sea is enshrined in international maritime law. All people must be rescued, regardless of their origin, status, religion, or gender.³ All vessels in the vicinity of an emergency at sea have to rescue people in distress, provided that they are able to do so. States, for their part, are obliged to coordinate rescue at sea. At sea and on land, however, SOS Humanity repeatedly witnesses state actors circumventing their obligations under international law and systematically ignoring human rights. Contrary to their obligations under international law, state rescue coordination centres often do not alert other ships about emergencies. They hereby delay rescues and put human lives at risk. Until June 2018, Italy took over the coordination of maritime emergencies in the central Mediterranean. Since the establishment of an EU-supported Libyan search and rescue zone, the coordination of rescue operations in the most southern part of the central Mediterranean is officially the responsibility of the Libyan authorities. The Libyan rescue coordination centre, however, is mostly unreachable, emergency calls often remain unanswered, and state-led coordination of all nearby ships does not take place.

¹ [Mediterranean | Missing Migrants Project \(iom.int\)](#), 11 January 2024

² Ibid.

³ Relevant provisions of international maritime law:

- Obligation to rescue at sea for all shipmasters (SOLAS 1974, SAR 1979, UNCLOS 1982).
- The duty of rescue at sea applies irrespective of nationality, status or circumstances (SOLAS 1974).
- States have the responsibility to coordinate maritime emergencies (SOLAS 1974)
- Those rescued are to be disembarked as soon as possible to a "place of safety" (SOLAS 1974, IMO 2004)

Establishment of the So-Called Libyan Coast Guard

A sea rescue is only completed when the rescued persons go ashore at a place of safety. According to the Geneva Refugee Convention, it is prohibited to bring refugees to a country where their life or freedom may be threatened (non-refoulement principle). Libya and other North African states do not meet the criteria for a place of safety. In Libya, people are facing arbitrary detention, forced labour, systematic torture, death, or other inhumane treatment.

In 2016, the so-called Libyan Coast Guard was first established by the EU and individual member states through the provision of training and equipment. For this purpose, the EU alone provided 57 million Euros from the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) by the end of 2021.⁴ The support is still ongoing. Thus, while circumventing its international obligations, the EU specifically finances the interception of refugee boats in international waters and the forcible return (“pull-backs”) of refugees to Libya.

Back in Libya, as a rule, refugees and migrants are indefinitely detained in detention centres.⁵ As of 7 May 2023, 5,554 people are estimated to be in official detention centres (DCs) across Libya.⁶ (Many more are detained in unofficial camps to which the UN has no access). Torture and rape are systematically used as a means of intimidation, punishment, humiliation, or exploitation. The final report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission shows that state authorities such as the so-called Libyan Coast Guard are also involved in human rights violations.⁷

With a record of 32,425 people, 2021 saw the highest amount of pull-backs since the start of repatriations by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard and almost three times as many as in 2020.⁸ In 2022, more than 24,000 people⁹ were intercepted by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard or the SSA (Stabilisation Support Authority)¹⁰ or other brutal militia about which the *German magazine SPIEGEL reported* in December 2023, and returned to Libya. In 2023, the number of pull-backs were more than 17.000. In addition, since 2016, there have been repeated incidents in international waters of vessels posing as Libyan coastguards which have severely endangered the safety of refugees and civil rescuers.¹¹

Obstruction of Non-Governmental Search and Rescue at Sea – Distant Ports

Since 2016, non-governmental sea rescuers have been repeatedly criminalised and obstructed, their ships detained according to frequently imposed port state controls. The legitimacy of search and rescue at sea was strengthened by a decision of the European Court of Justice in summer 2022: according to the court, authorities are only allowed to inspect rescue ships if there are specific indications of non-compliance with safety regulations.¹²

The right-wing political alliance under neo-fascist leader Giorgia Meloni, which has been in power in Italy since autumn 2022, issued a decree at the beginning of January 2023 that instructs NGO ships to head for a port immediately after the first rescue. Any delay is prohibited by this decree, which has since been converted into a law. In 2023, additional rescues of nearby boats in distress after these first rescues – as required by maritime law – were punished in numerous cases by

⁴ [European Parliament - Parliamentary Request | Answer for question E-000027/21](#)

⁵ [InfoMigrants: Human rights commissioner urges Malta to do more to protect migrants](#)

⁶ [UNHCR Update Libya, 4 April 2023](#)

⁷ [OHCHR | Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya](#)

⁸ [InfoMigrants: Numbers of migrants intercepted by Libyan coast guard 'almost tripled' in 2021](#) und [IOM Libya](#)

⁹ [UNHCR Update Libya \(9 May 2023\) \[EN/AR\] - Libya | ReliefWeb](#)

¹⁰ [AP News: A new Libyan force emerges, accused of abusing migrants](#)

¹¹ [Libyan coast guard fired shots over rescue ship, migrants, NGOs say - InfoMigrants](#)

¹² [Overcrowding not a reason to detain migrant rescue ships, says ECJ | Euronews](#)

detentions of NGO ships combined with fines.¹³ **This penalty of detaining rescue ships was imposed 14 times in 2023.** As a result, ships ready for rescues were detained in port for a total of 261 days instead of being able to sail. Many of the at least 2,498 people who drowned in the central Mediterranean in 2023 could probably have been rescued without these restrictions. Nevertheless, the Italian state is still bound by international law.

Also, since January, **the Italian authorities have adopted the practice to assign ports for disembarkation of survivors to NGO rescue ships which are far away in the north of Italy. It takes ships three to five days to travel up there, and the same amount of time for the return.** During this unnecessary long journey, vulnerable survivors' health is at risk, and ships are kept away from the search and rescue area, while people in distress get no assistance. Because this unnecessary additional burden violates the rights of those seeking protection, SOS Humanity filed a lawsuit against this practice of distant ports in April 2023. In addition, the sharp rise in fuel consumption is placing a financial burden on NGOs. Furthermore, the German Federal government wants to make the work of smaller search and rescue ships more difficult by significantly increasing administrative requirements with the new 'Ship Safety Ordinance' (Schiffssicherheitsverordnung).¹⁴

More on the practice of the assignment of distant ports in our position paper: ["No Delay in the Disembarkation of Survivors!"](#)

Our Demands

As a non-governmental search and rescue organisation, SOS Humanity strives for a world where nobody must drown while fleeing and where everyone is treated with dignity. To end the deaths in the Mediterranean, the EU and its member states must stick to their fundamental values and resolutely stand up for compliance with international obligations and humanitarian principles in the Mediterranean.

SOS Humanity Calls on the German Federal Government to Implement the 'Coalition Promise on Search and Rescue'

In its coalition agreement, the German government commits to the "civilisational and legal obligation not to let people drown."¹⁵ As the largest EU member state, Germany must act decisively to ensure that no more people die at Europe's external borders and that people seeking protection are no longer subjected to serious infringements on their most basic rights. Germany must not pass the responsibility for search and rescue and the reception of people rescued from distress at sea solely to coastal states. To honour the coalition agreement that the German government intends to "strive for state-coordinated and European-supported search and rescue at sea in the Mediterranean", it must push for a search and rescue programme in the central Mediterranean that is financed and coordinated by EU member states.

To emphasise this demand, SOS Humanity launched a petition on 19 August 2022, the day of the christening of the Humanity 1. The petition ['SOS in the Mediterranean: Europe must coordinate](#)

¹³ OFFICIAL GAZETTE OF THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC, 02.03.2023; press release SAR-Organisations

¹⁴ [SchSV \(Schiffssicherheitsverordnung\)](#)

¹⁵ Coalition Treaty between the three governing parties SPD, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen and FDP (2021) p. 142

search and rescue!' was addressed to the Federal Minister of the Interior, Nancy Faeser, on behalf of the German Government. The petition called upon Ms. Faeser to advocate for compliance with international law and a coordinated European search and rescue programme at the European level. In early June 2023, SOS Humanity handed over more than 62,500 signatures to the Ministry of the Interior.

SOS Humanity Demands from the EU and its Member States:

- Compliance with applicable international law in the central Mediterranean, including:
 - the duty to render assistance
 - effective state-led coordination of search and rescue by coastal states of the EU
 - prompt assignment of a place of safety in the EU for persons rescued at sea which can be reached quickly
- An EU-led search and rescue programme in the central Mediterranean
- An end to the criminalisation of refugees and humanitarian helpers
- An end to the obstruction and criminalisation of the work of search and rescue NGOs
- An end to cooperation with Libya and Tunisia on search and rescue, including to stop the funding for the training and equipment of the so-called Libyan Coast Guard and Tunisian Coast Guard

On our website you can find [more about our demands](#) as well as our detailed position paper on the issue [Compliance with international maritime and refugee law in the Central Mediterranean!](#)

QUOTATIONS AND STATEMENTS

Till Rummenhohl, General Director of SOS Humanity:

"Since the start of our search and rescue operations with Humanity 1 end of August 2022, the emergency situation in the Mediterranean has become even worse. While people continue to flee arbitrary imprisonment, exploitation and violence in Libya, more and more migrants are now venturing from Tunisia on unseaworthy boats. They too are trying to escape the violence directed at them. However, instead of ensuring safe escape routes and finally setting up a state-run European search and rescue programme, the EU is investing millions of taxpayers' money in Libya and, most recently, also Tunisia (among others) for sealing off Europe - regardless of the increasing human rights violations in those countries. Although it costs the lives of children, women and men, rescue operations by NGOs continue to be blocked by the policy of EU member states like Italy. For example, humanitarian ships are unnecessarily kept away from the central Mediterranean rescue region for many days by the practice of assigning distant ports for survivors. This is inhumane, as ten people a day drown there on average in the summer of 2023.

Due to the massive increase in fuel consumption and higher prices, the financing of our operations is at risk. Despite all the challenges, we will continue our rescues. It is our goal that no more people have to drown while fleeing and that everyone is treated with dignity."

Klaus Vogel, Captain and Historian, Founder of the Organisation:

"The fact that the humanitarian situation for refugees in the Mediterranean continues to be so catastrophic nearly nine years after the founding of SOS Humanity shocks me deeply. More than 2,400 people have died in the central Mediterranean in 2023. These people could have been

rescued. This is an incredible scandal. Many things have worsened since 2015. It cannot be that civilian rescuers are now criminalised and their rescue missions blocked and obstructed. As long as people on the run are in danger of their lives, we as civil society must actively stand up for these people and make the states take their responsibility. As a captain, I keep reminding: saving people's lives is a duty!"

Heike Makatsch, Actress, Ambassador for SOS Humanity:

"For me, humanity means the opposite of 'survival of the fittest'. Humanity recognizes the equal value in every human being. We are all one and should not let our brothers and sisters drown in the sea on their perilous journey."

Hadnet Tesfai, Journalist & Presenter, 'Godmother' of the Humanity 1:

"As a person with a history of flight, I am very moved by the fate of the people seeking a way to reach Europe via the Mediterranean. I know their dreams and understand what they leave behind, as well as what they go through on the way. Europe is not only abandoning these people from a humanitarian perspective, but is also circumventing international law, if not indeed violating it. I am happy and grateful for every organisation which fills this gap."

Quotes From Survivors

Celine, (name changed), from Ivory Coast, rescued by the crew of Humanity 1 in July 2023

"In Tunisia, they chase away Black people. They hit Black people. Tunisia is very complicated, even now. There is violence. I was taken out of a house with my little baby. I had no place to go, no place to sleep. The young people in Tunisia, they attack you, they take your phone, your money. They took the little money I had, they took out knives, they wanted to grab me. They made us leave the house, they took stones to throw at us."

Aisha (name changed), 25 years old, from Cameroon, rescued by the crew of Humanity 1 in December 2022

"I was kidnapped the first time in Benghazi [Libya] when I was 20 years. I stayed in prison for one month, there was no food, no water and no light. They beat me every day. They asked for 5,000 Libyan dinar, but I didn't have money. One day the kidnapper came and started shooting everyone around. I was lucky they didn't kill me. I ran and escaped. The girls that stayed were sold for prostitution. [...] The fourth time I tried to escape I was rescued by Humanity 1. The father of my baby is still in a prison in Libya."

Buba (name changed), 18 years old, from The Gambia, rescued by the crew of Humanity 1 in October 2022

"I was aware of how dangerous it is to cross the sea, but you know, it's better to die in the Mediterranean than to die on land in Libya. Because there, you are valued less. If you die in the Mediterranean, your body will sink perhaps. But if you die as a foreigner in Libya, no one knows where your dead body is. They will take it and who knows whether they throw it away. So it's better you die in a place that everybody knows than in Libya, where even your dead body is not safe."

Statements by Crew Members

Camilla, Communications Coordinator on Board:

“People are dying right on our European borders and I have the means to help them. Why should I do anything else? For me as a human being, helping each other and standing up against human rights violations in the Mediterranean is simply the right thing to do.”

Rocco, Search and Rescue Coordinator:

“What initially brought me to search and rescue were the media reports: I saw how many people were dying in the Mediterranean Sea. I asked myself why – and why this was happening in the Mediterranean. So I decided to engage in search and rescue to save as many people as possible. My desire is to bear witness and share my first-hand knowledge of the human rights situation at sea with European citizens. I am proud and happy to be part of the SOS Humanity team, saving lives at sea.”!

Issis, Electrician:

“As a Mexican, I live near a deadly wall where people die every day trying to cross the border. People are forced to risk their lives to get to a safer place where they can live in freedom and are treated as human beings. A place where they aren’t persecuted and where they can at least rest peacefully at night. I don’t see a single valid reason or excuse not to help a person who had to leave her/his home in order to survive and for the dream/hope of a better life.”

You can find more testimonies of survivors and stories by our team [here](#).

Press contact SOS Humanity:

For interview requests with crew members/staff, statements, background information on the organisation or the situation on the Mediterranean, photo and video material or similar content, please contact:

Barbara Hohl, Petra Krischok and Wasil Schauseil, press@sos-humanity.org, +49 176 552 506 54

More information also at: [Our mission - SOS HUMANITY \(sos-humanity.org\)](https://www.sos-humanity.org)

**Please note: We have one slot reserved onboard Humanity 1
for [journalists](#).**

Please contact our Press Team for more information!