Press Kit SOS Humanity 2026



The crew distributes life jackets to people in distress on unseaworthy, overcrowded boats. Photo: Lukas Kaldenhoff / SOS Humanity

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Eleven Years of Search and Rescue

Nearly 27,000 deaths in the Central Mediterranean since 2014 show that there has been and still is a lack of rescue ships in that area. 11 years after SOS Humanity was founded (as SOS Mediterranee Germany), the Central Mediterranean Sea is still one of the deadliest migration routes in the world. Until October 2026, more than 1,000 people have died or gone missing trying to reach Europe, roughly the same number as last year – while the number of arrivals in Italy has dropped dramatically. As a result, the death rate is higher, the route becoming even more dangerous than in previous years. SOS Humanity started operating a second ship in the Central Mediterranean in the summer of 2026 in order to save more lives (*more on p. 4*)
Summary of the previous year: Annual Review of SAR events 2024

More Humanity at Sea!

For more than 10 years, SOS Humanity has been rescuing people who are in distress at sea, providing professional care and support to survivors on board their rescue ships, all the while documenting their fates. In addition to rescuing people in distress at sea and providing care onboard the vessels, SOS Humanity aims at increasing public awareness of the situation in the Mediterranean, document abuses and legal violations, and ultimately drive change in European migration policy.

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 through individual donations and the support of largely humanitarian organisations. Both ships are supported by the United4Rescue alliance with more than 1,000 member organisations and initiatives of the civil society, initiated by the Protestant Church in Germany. They equally belong to the alliance Justice Fleet, founded in autumn 2025 *(more below).*

Conditions for NGO ships in the Mediterranean Sea – obstruction and violence

Soon after the large rescue ship Humanity 1 started operating in August 2022, a new, far-right Italian government led by Giorgia Meloni was elected and intensified the obstruction of the activities of non-governmental search and rescue organisations. Since December 2022, the Italian authorities have been assigning rescue ships disembarkation ports 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. The court's decision is still pending.

Based on the 'Piantedosi Decree' introduced in January 2023, NGO rescue ships are instructed to proceed to the assigned port immediately and without detour after a rescue. In the event of non-compliance, i.e. deviating from their course to rescue other people in urgent distress at sea, rescue ships are detained for between 15 and 60 days. Eventually, the vessels might be seized permanently. Humanity 1 has been detained 3 times since then, the last blockade in port early this year was imposed for 60 days, while Humanity 2 was detained right after its first mission in August 2026. In all, rescue ships have been **detained for more than 3 years** in sum – while their presence would have saved lives on the migration route.

In addition, **the so-called Libyan Coast Guard** has been more active in pull-backs of people fleeing across the Mediterranean, with 27,116 people having been illegally forced back to Libya in 2025,

compared to over 21,762 in 2024. A milestone was passing the threshold of 200.000 documented interceptions by Libyan actors this summer (period between 01.01.2016 and 11.07.2026). Dangerous and violent interferences by these actors with people in distress as well as rescuers have also increased, culminating in the shooting with 100 bullet of live-ammunition on the rescue ship Ocean Viking in August 2025. However, this is far of being a single case. Since 2016, various Libyan actors have attacked people fleeing from the war-torn country as well as rescue teams at sea in more than 107 reported violent incidents. The latest attack against a humanitarian vessel occurred in May with the shooting of Sea-Watch 5 (German flag) by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard in international waters, after the crew had rescued 90 people in distress. The only reaction of the German government was that it increased the security required for ships flying the German flag such as Humanity 1 to level 2 for the Libyan search and rescue zone (international waters).

New alliance Justice Fleet: 13 non-governmental search and rescue organisations active in the Central Mediterranean formed the alliance "Justice Fleet" in autumn 2025 in order to protect international law by challenging the unlawful detentions of rescue vessels in Italy and Europe's outsourcing of search and rescue to illegitimate and violent actors in Libya. (*See also: Justice Fleet*)

(Official documents regarding our three detentions and the courts cases are published here. See also the more detailed chapter below: Obstruction of Non-Governmental Search and Rescue at Sea.)

Our Ships



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

The Large Rescue Ship Humanity 1

- 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 operation: 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 rescue equipment for mass rescues
- Kitchen: Spacious cooking area for the cook on board to prepare large amounts of fresh vegan 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 / external media professional
- Survivors are accommodated on three decks
- Shelter for women and children with bunk beds for more than 12 women with their children, integrated women shower and sink
- Covered, weather-protected and heatable area on deck for the men’s accommodation
- Mobile ultrasound probe and 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

A crewing team on land takes care of hiring both volunteers and regular crew members, a total of 28 crew for each mission at sea. In addition to the 13 permanent members on each crew, there are around 5 short-term employees. The remaining 10 crew members are volunteers who are usually only on board for one mission, such as the medical doctor, paramedic, midwife, and human rights observer. However, these volunteers often come back for another mission later.

The new Sailing Ship Humanity 2

In 2025, with a strong support by institutional partners like the GLS Bank, SOS Humanity bought a sailing ship to add a flexible and less costly ship to the SOS Humanity assets. Humanity 2 performed its first mission in the summer of 2026, after nine months of converting the former sailing yacht in the shipyard with the help of 101 volunteers. E.g., the luxurious captain's cabin was converted into a board clinic. The naming ceremony took place on 25 June 2026 in Licata, Sicily, with its godfather David Yambio, Executive Director of Refugees in Libya. Setting sails in August, Humanity 2 was detained on 7 September 2026 by the Italian authorities in the port of Lampedusa, right after having rescued a total of 71 persons from distress at sea in two rescue operations (on 28 and 29 August 2026). The detention was imposed on illegitimate grounds, as the rescues had been conducted in full accordance with international law.

Ship

- Former steel ketch 'Esmeralda of Southampton', built in 1985 (Kempers/ARCO shipyard, Netherlands), refitted 2023–25
- Length: 23.89 m; beam: approx. 5.96 m; draft: 2.7 m; displacement: 95 t
- Speed: up to 11 knots
- Propulsion: sail + main engine (320 hp MAN)
- Construction: 8 mm steel hull, built to Lloyd's standard
- Flag: Germany
- Operational profile: search & rescue in the Central Mediterranean
- Operational base: Syracuse, Sicily

Crew

- A total of 10 people across:
- Ship Operations & Technical (Nautical/Engine)
- Search & Rescue (Operations Team)
- Care & Medical (care and emergency medical first response)
- Communications/Human Rights Monitoring & Documentation
- The crew area includes up to 10 berths across 4 cabins, each with an adjacent bathroom. In addition, there is a large common area, a spacious galley, and the bridge.

Equipment

- Navigation equipment includes radar, AIS, VHF, GPS, and a chart plotter.
- Two generators ensure the power supply.
- A watermaker and large freshwater tanks with a total capacity of 3,500l provide an independent freshwater supply.
- Generous storage areas on top of the deckhouse offer space for rescue equipment and gear.

Support for Survivors

- The available deck space allows for the accommodation of more than 100 rescued people.
- The master cabin was converted into a 15 m^2 clinic with an adjacent toilet and shower.
- A covered, weather-protected seating area provides a safe space for women and children.

Migration Route: Central Mediterranean

Every year, the European migration policy causes thousands of avoidable deaths of people on the move. This is particularly evident in the Central Mediterranean: According to IOM (Missing Migrants Project) by October 2026, more than 1,000 people died or went missing between Libya, Tunisia, Italy and Malta while fleeing in unseaworthy boats to seek protection in Europe. In 2025, at least 1,340 people had died. The number of unreported cases is far higher.[1] 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 have been filling this gap as best as they can since 2015. In the first ten years of non-governmental SAR, the civil fleet has been rescuing 175,000 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.[2] All vessels in the vicinity of an emergency at sea have to rescue people in distress, provided that they are able to do so. Coastal states are obliged to coordinate rescue at sea. 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, maritime rescue coordination centres ignore distress calls and often do not alert NGO rescue ships of emergencies. They hereby delay rescues and put human lives at risk. Until June 2018, Italy had taken over the coordination of maritime emergencies in the Central Mediterranean. Since the establishment of an EU-supported Libyan search and rescue region that year, the coordination of rescue operations in the most southern part of the Central Mediterranean has officially been the responsibility of the Libyan authorities. SOS Humanity has been witnessing for years that Libyan actors are not performing according to international law. In 2024, Italian courts have stated that these actors cannot be considered legitimate SAR entities. As a consequence of Libyan actors not performing according to the law, 13 search and rescue organisations in autumn 2025 founded the alliance 'Justice Fleet' and stopped communicating to the Maritime Coordination Centre in Tripoli, Libya.
In June 2024, a Tunisian search and rescue region was established under EU support, replicating the Libyan model and leading to more human rights violations.

Externalisation of Border Management

Since 2017, the so-called Libyan Coast Guard has been supported 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.[3] The support

[1] Mediterranean | Missing Migrants Project (iom.int), 01.02.2025
[2] 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)

[3] European Parliament - Parliamentary Request | Answer for question E-000027/21

with additional millions of Euros is still ongoing despite massive human rights violations. Thus, while circumventing its international obligations, the EU specifically finances the interception of refugee boats in international waters and the illegal and forcible return ("pull-backs") of refugees to Libya. Most refugees and migrants are indefinitely detained in detention centres in Libya.[4] Torture and rape are systematically used as a means of intimidation, humiliation, or exploitation. The final report of the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission in 2023 found that these human rights violations amount to crimes against humanity and showed that state authorities such as the so-called Libyan Coast Guard are also involved.[5] In 2025, at least 27,116 people were intercepted and pulled back to Libya, where they face arbitrary detention, forced labour, systematic torture, abuse, death, or other inhumane treatment. In addition, since 2016, there have been repeated incidents in international waters of vessels posing as Libyan Coast Guard which severely endangered the safety of refugees and civil rescuers.[6]

In June 2024, a new Tunisian search and rescue region was established despite massive human rights violations, following an EU-Tunisia deal in 2023, promising a transfer of 150 million euros to the country.

More on the Externalisation policy: SOS Humanity's Position Paper "Rescue Refugees Instead of Outsourcing Protection to Third Countries" and on the Italy-Albania protocol.

Obstruction of Non-Governmental Search and Rescue at Sea

Since 2016, non-governmental rescuers have repeatedly been criminalised and their lifesaving work at sea increasingly obstructed.

The far-right political alliance under neo-fascist leader Giorgia Meloni, which has been in power in Italy since autumn 2022, instructs NGO ships to head for a port immediately after the first rescue. Any delay is prohibited by a decree issued in January 2023, which has since been converted into law ("Piantedosi law"). Since 2023, additional rescues of nearby boats in distress after these first rescues – as required by maritime law – were punished in numerous cases by detentions of NGO ships combined with fines.[7] **This penalty of detaining rescue ships on the basis of this "Piantedosi Law" was imposed 41 times from January 2023 to June 2026**. As a result, NGO ships were detained in port for a total of 1,075 days, instead of being able to sail and rescue lives. Many of the more than 6,440 people who drowned in the Central Mediterranean in this period could probably have been rescued without these blockages.

In addition, since January 2023, the Italian authorities have **adopted the practice to assign ports to NGO rescue ships for the disembarkation of survivors 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

[4] InfoMigrants: Human rights commissioner urges Malta to do more to protect migrants
[5] OHCHR | Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya
[6] Libyan coast guard fired shots over rescue ship, migrants, NGOs say - InfoMigrants
[7] OFFICIAL GAZETTE OF THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC, 02.03.2023; press release SAR-Organisations

kept away from the search and rescue area, while people in distress get no assistance. From **2023 to the end of 2025, NGO rescue ships lost around 1,000 extra travelling days and unnecessary journeys to distant ports added to over 400,000 extra kilometres done, the equivalent to over 9 times around the world** – a lot of time, energy and additional costs which could have been invested in the urgently needed search and rescue in the Central Mediterranean.
Because this unnecessary additional burden which violates the rights of those seeking protection, SOS Humanity filed a **lawsuit against this practice of distant ports in April 2023** (decision still pending). In addition, the additional fuel consumption for the long journeys is placing a financial burden on NGOs.

Another particularly alarming development is the approval in the Senate of Decree Law 145/2024, also known as the 'Flussi Decree', which allows for a "provisional detention" of up to 10 days plus increases the risk for a permanent seizure of rescue ships. It also foresees sanctions such as flight bans for civilian reconnaissance aircraft by Italy, even though airborne support is crucial to finding boats in distress.

More on the practice of the assignment of distant ports in our position paper: "No Delay in the Disembarkation of Survivors!". More on the Flows Decree in the joint statement by SAR NGOs of 4 Dec. 2024.

Our Demands

As a 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 Demands to the EU and its Member States:

- Compliance with applicable international law in the Central Mediterranean, including:
  - the obligation to rescue people in distress at sea;
  - effective state-led coordination of search and rescue by coastal states of the EU by involving all ships in the vicinity in the coordination and provision of information on emergencies
  - prompt assignment of a nearby place of safety in the EU for persons rescued at sea which can be reached quickly
- An EU-funded and coordinated search and rescue programme in the Central Mediterranean
- An end to the criminalisation of refugees and humanitarian helpers
- An end to the systematic obstruction of non-governmental search and rescue
- An end to the 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 the Tunisian Coast Guards.
- An end to externalisation of EU-border management to third countries which violate human rights and the rights of refugees.

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 politically caused humanitarian catastrophe in the Mediterranean has become even worse. Desperate people continue to flee arbitrary imprisonment, exploitation and violence in Libya and more recently also Tunisia via the dangerous Mediterranean route. However, instead of ensuring safe migration routes and finally setting up a state-run European search and rescue programme, the EU is investing millions of taxpayers' money in Libya and Tunisia to externalise border management - regardless of the shocking human rights violations in those countries. Although it costs the lives of children, women and men, rescue operations by NGOs are increasingly obstructed by EU Member States like Italy. Humanitarian ships are regularly detained and unnecessarily kept away from the Central Mediterranean rescue region by assigning distant ports for survivors. This is specifically inhumane, as the start of the year 2026 was the deadliest since 2014. However, despite all the challenges and the political pressure, the civil rescue fleet is growing. Despite the shrinking humanitarian space, SOS Humanity will continue its lifesaving work at sea and advocate for refugees' rights on land. It is our vision that no one has 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 eleven years after the founding of SOS Humanity shocks me deeply. Hundreds of people could have been rescued every year. The intended political ignorance is an incredible scandal. Many things have worsened since 2015. We must not accept that civil rescuers are criminalised and their rescue missions blocked and obstructed. As long as people on the move are in danger of their lives, we as civil society must actively stand up for these people and make the states fulfil their responsibility. As a captain, I want to remind Europe: saving lives is a duty!"

Heike Makatsch, Actress, Ambassador for SOS Humanity:

"For me, humanity means the opposite of 'survival of the fittest'. Humanity recognises 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."

Quotes From Survivors

Fatim (name changed), from Nigeria, rescued by the crew of Humanity 1 in 2026

"In Libya, sexual abuse of women is so widespread. Men go around with guns, and they kidnap as many girls as they want. After raping them, they sell the girls to people who then force them into prostitution. So many girls in Libya are crying for help. So many are missing and dying."

Fidaa (name changed), from Syria, rescued by the crew of Humanity 1 in 2024

“When the Libyan Coast Guard arrived, they started beating all the young men. Three of them jumped into the sea due to the severe beating they endured. The Libyan Coast Guard left them to die before our eyes, even cursing them as they drowned, saying to each other, 'Let them die; it’s easier for us and for them'.”

Ashar (name changed), from Eritrea, rescued by the crew of Humanity 1 in 2024

"[In Libya], for the men, they beat you every day – 'pay, pay!' They beat you with metal, with sticks, with everything they have on them. They call your mother, your family, and scare them: 'We are going to kill him'."

You can find more testimonies of survivors and stories by our team here.

Press contact SOS Humanity:

For interviews with crew members/staff, statements, background information on the organisation or the situation on the Mediterranean, photos and video footage or similar content, please contact:

For German and international media: Petra Krischok or Wasil Schauseil, press@sos-humanity.org, +49 176 552 506 54

For Italian media: Flore Murard, stampa@sos-humanity.org, + 49 176 87731615

More information also at: *Our mission - SOS HUMANITY (sos-humanity.org)*

Please note: We have one place reserved onboard Humanity 1 for journalists.

Please contact our Press Team for more information!