

UNHCR welcomes end to latest Mediterranean standoff, but says predictable approach to rescue still urgently needed

19 July 2018 | [Français](#)



Asylum-seekers and migrants aboard a dinghy in international waters off the coast of Libya in November 2016. © UNHCR/Giuseppe Carotenuto



UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, welcomes the actions of the past days by several European countries to collectively end a standoff on the Mediterranean involving some 450 refugees and migrants who had been stranded at sea amid a battle over disembarkation.

Since Saturday the governments of France, Germany, Italy, Malta, Spain and Portugal, have agreed to land and together share processing of the 450 people, including any asylum claims that might be lodged.

“We hope that these arrangements will now be quickly and effectively implemented,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi. “As well as ending an ordeal for these individuals, this sets a positive example of how, by working together, countries can uphold sea rescue and manage borders while simultaneously meeting international asylum obligations.”

“However, solutions are needed that go beyond piecemeal or “ship-by-ship” arrangements,” Grandi added. “At the EU summit in late June, European governments committed to a more sustained collaborative, predictable and well-managed approach to dealing with all people rescued at sea. Until this is in place, arrangements for Mediterranean arrivals will continue to be short-term and unsustainable, the interests of a common approach by Europe will be undermined, and lives will be at risk with each new attempted boat journey.”

As of today, wider Mediterranean arrangements for managing rescue, disembarkation and the follow up processing are far from adequate. Recent actions to refuse disembarkation of rescued people by NGO vessels, and other restrictions on NGO operations, are deeply worrying, and do not address the root causes that drive refugee outflows and irregular migration, nor the desperation that drives people to flee by sea in dangerous boats. This means that people continue to cross and lives are being lost.

At the same time, while States have obligations to save lives and afford protection to refugees, people who are rescued do not have the unfettered right to choose where they wish to go. Disembarkation needs to occur in a place of genuine safety, including for those who may be in need of international protection; but not necessarily in a place of their preference.

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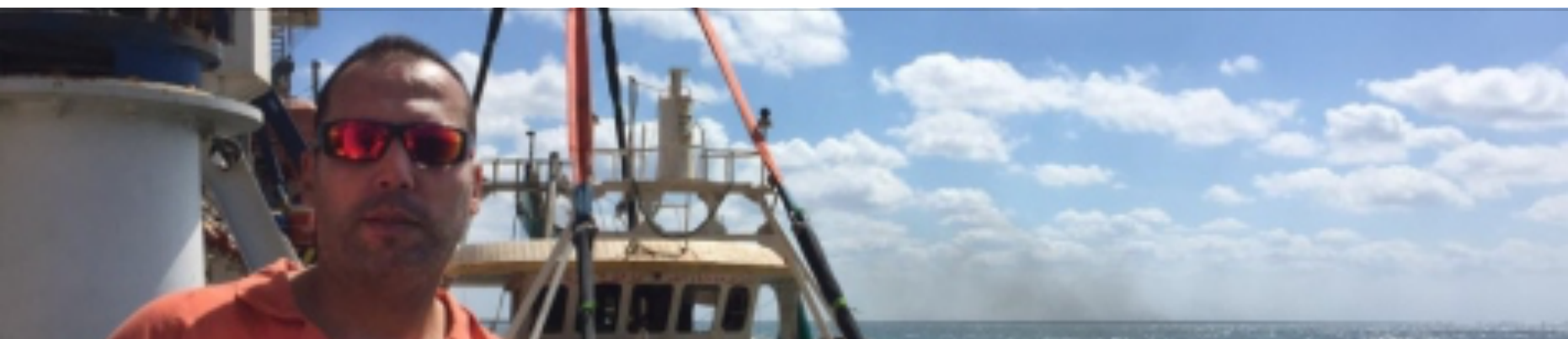
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