

We rescue people

Eyewitness in the Mediterranean

Alva White

Alva White spent summer 2016 on the MV Aquarius, a humanitarian search and rescue ship patrolling in the Mediterranean Sea, operated by SOS MEDITERRANEE and Médecins sans Frontières.

This is where we meet people: in international waters around 25 nautical miles from the Libyan coast. They are always in boats that have no capacity to make the voyage on which they are embarked.

Maria told us the day she was rescued was one of the most beautiful days of her life. We could not understand how she found such courage and strength. She confided in us about her horrific ordeal escaping Boko Haram after she was raped. She left Cameroon with three other friends. They crossed the Sahara Desert with smugglers. Only two survived the dangerous journey. On arrival in Libya, she and her friend were forced into prostitution. They were told if they had sex with a certain number of men they would earn places on the flimsy, overcrowded, unseaworthy boat where we met them. The men beat them, she told us. Only Maria made it safely to our rescue boat. Her friend suffered such aggressive rapes and beatings while in Libya that she died before she was able to escape.

Frank was a big Nigerian man. We rescued him from the Mediterranean Sea, too. When we docked in Italy, after three days sailing from the Libyan coast to Europe, his eyes were full of tears, he was standing back from the crowd, looking at the port as he sobbed, while everyone else prepared to disembark.

‘My brother should have been here – we were coming here together ... and now I am here, without him ... I have to call my family and tell them the good news that I survived, but that he (my younger brother) died.’

Frank’s brother was shot in Libya, in the street, because they didn’t have money to give to the men with guns.



Rescued men asleep on deck

Faith delivered her third son on our rescue ship. Baby Newman arrived 24 hours after we rescued his mum, dad, brother Rolres, who is five years old, and Victor, age seven, from a rubber boat, crammed full of men, women, children and babies. I remember looking over as we rescued them and seeing a mass of panicked eyes looking up at us over crying babies and shouting adults. If Faith had gone into labour while in that boat, where sea water and gasoline mixed to produce noxious fumes, the chances of survival would have been minuscule. Faith told us she was having



Baby Newman Otas

contractions when she boarded the dinghy.

It was Ibrahim's first birthday the night we rescued him after 20 hours on the water in pitch black. His boat was a little white flicker, found after three hours' search

Rachel showed me the marks on her back caused by beatings, after she followed a 'friend' who promised her a job singing in Lagos, but she eventually found herself compelled to work in a brothel in Tripoli.

Fakaba met a man in a bar in Mali who contracted him for work in Libya, where Fakaba found himself imprisoned and beaten while his captors called his family to demand money for his release.

Believe made the journey with her two young daughters when, one night, her husband didn't come back from work in Tripoli. She thought he must have been kidnapped, which happens to many black people in Libya.



Ibrahim brought on board the rescue ship after 20 hours at sea

One young man told me that risking life crossing the Mediterranean is almost a right of passage for young Eritreans: they must enter the military or risk the Mediterranean. The latter choice is the one parents dread to hear.

During six months on board the search and rescue ship *MV Aquarius*, we rescued about 3,500 people, which is less than the number recorded as dying in the central Mediterranean Sea in 2016 alone, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). This is the deadliest year yet, although less people crossed following the shameful deal between the EU and Turkey which stemmed the flow from Turkey to Greece. And these

are the estimated ‘known’ deaths. We don’t know how many died crossing the desert –people told us of seeing many bodies in the desert and that young children often didn’t survive. How many died whilst held captive in Libya, or on the road from their countries of origin in West or East Africa? How many were too sick to get into the boats? How many boats set off and no one saw them or rescued those aboard?



photo SOS Mediterranee

Alva White with rescued child

Most boats would never survive without a rescue. Smugglers lie to the people who board these boats, saying it takes three hours to reach Italy. People board because they cannot turn back. The circumstances that lead them into the boats vary, but they all share experiences of extortion at the hands of smugglers. For women rape and physical abuse are commonplace. Young Eritrean women told us they use injectable contraceptives before making the journey because they know the risk of rape is high. Other Eritreans flee compulsory military service, living in fear of government spies, abject poverty, insecurity, civil war, persecution, no future, unemployment; or they may have commenced this journey on a false promise of work or education.

Men told of being bought and sold by different people during the journey. Groups of young Eritreans told me that men came to detention centres in Libya and bought batches of 15 people to extort for smuggling.



Women look out the porthole after a rescue

Young Nigerian women displayed indications of being trafficked for sex as part of an established network that has been running for years. They say they are 20, but often were younger. Traffickers force them to say they are 20 so that they are held in less secure centres in Italy, from which they can disappear more easily.

The little lads haunt me: 88 per cent of those under 18 years old I met while on board were travelling alone. With no parent or guardian, some were as young as eight or ten years. One lad appeared so streetwise and confident: his family in West Africa had sent him, age 10, because they thought he was bright. They wanted him to have an education and send money home once he could work. He looked terrified when we arrived in Italy.

Another 12-year-old had seen his mother die in Libya. One 10-year-old from the Ivory Coast told me he wanted to reach his father in France but he did not have a number for him. Nor did his dad know that his son had made this journey.

One young Somali boy, age 13 and alone, sat broken in a chair as we tried to encourage him to eat some rice.

One 14-year-old had been tortured in Libya, having already suffered a violent childhood before his uncle sent him to make this journey. The kindness our medic showed him seemed totally alien to his experience.



Young boy looks out to Italy as the voyage draws to an end

We hear much misguided comment about what is happening in the Mediterranean Sea. Some call it a ‘refugee’ crisis, others prefer the word ‘migrants’. Teams on board the *MV Aquarius* considered how best to describe what we were doing, and how to describe those we rescued. We chose the word ‘people’. We rescue people. Some of those people are in a position to claim refugee status. Others are children (including lone children), families, mothers who all had reasons to be on the move. And, yes, some were making this journey because of economic motivations, attempting to escape poverty.

Now I have stepped back on land, I look back at what we are doing in the Mediterranean, scooping vulnerable people from unfathomable danger in the rough and merciless seas. It seems all the more incomprehensible. If there were thousands of people from countries in Europe who were put at risk of drowning, such a situation would not be allowed to continue. It would be stopped.

Photos: Alva White, MSF