



Survivors and humanitarian crew under heavy fire

Libyan Coast Guard escalates violence amid sustained support and impunity

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On 24 August 2025, the humanitarian search and rescue vessel *Ocean Viking* (operated by SOS MEDITERRANEE in partnership with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, IFRC) came under sustained armed fire from a Libyan Coast Guard patrol vessel, the Corrubia-class *Houn 664*, in international waters.

At the time of the attack, *Ocean Viking* had 87 survivors rescued in two prior operations on board and, with authorization from the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Center, temporarily deviated course to her assigned disembarkation port to search for a third boat in distress **in international waters**.

The masked personnel onboard the Libyan patrol vessel *Houn 664*, with very limited capacity to communicate in English, aggressively approached the *Ocean Viking*, giving unlawful instructions to leave the area. Without any warning, they opened fire, even as the *Ocean Viking* was already changing course. The masked persons continued firing, insulting and threatening to kill the SOS MEDITERRANEE team while an Arabic speaking team member onboard *Ocean Viking* **pleaded with the attackers to let the ship leave the area**. The attack left four bridge windows shattered, multiple communication and navigation antennas destroyed, and all four fast-rescue boats (RHIBs) along with other SAR equipment severely damaged. The attack resulted in more than 100 bullet holes all over the *Ocean Viking*, some of them at head height inside the bridge. While no physical injuries were reported, both survivors and crew were placed in immediate mortal danger, suffering significant psychological impact. For the first time in SOS MEDITERRANEE's 10-year history, the highest level of security alert – a Stage 3 Security Incident – was declared.

This was an **unprecedented, deliberate, and targeted armed attack** against survivors, humanitarian workers, and life-saving assets in international waters. The 87 rescued survivors, as well as the *Ocean Viking*'s humanitarian crew, were placed in **immediate mortal danger**, despite the vessel's strict compliance with international maritime law and its ongoing coordination with the Italian authorities.

Far from being an isolated incident, this attack marks a **dangerous escalation in the long-standing pattern of violence at sea** by the Libyan Coast Guard. For years, humanitarian organizations, UN agencies, and other international actors have documented their repeated involvement in dangerous maneuvers during rescue operations, acts of intimidation, and systematic disregard for maritime safety rules and international law.

These behaviors clearly demonstrate the Libyan Coast Guard's **inability and unwillingness** to fulfill its lawful duties to safeguard life at sea.

Yet, despite this well-documented record, the EU and Italy continue to **equip, finance, and train the Libyan Coast Guard**. The patrol vessel *Houn 664*, from which shots were fired against the *Ocean Viking*, was one of the vessels donated by Italy in June 2023 under the EU-funded "Support to Integrated Border and Migration Management in Libya (SIBMMIL)" program. This clearly illustrates the **responsibility borne by European states** in enabling acts of violence and intimidation against humanitarian workers and people in distress at sea.

This was not the first violent encounter. In July 2023, the *Ocean Viking's* rescue teams came under live fire from what appears to be the same Libyan patrol vessel during a rescue operation. Despite public appeals at the time, **no investigation was ever opened**. The absence of accountability has created a **climate of impunity** in which such attacks are repeated, emboldened by the knowledge that there will be no consequences.

Finally, this incident must also be understood within the broader **context of criminalization and defamation of SAR NGOs**. Continuous misinformation campaigns have fostered a hostile environment in which attacks against humanitarian vessels are not only tolerated but indirectly facilitated. Survivors who have already endured life-threatening journeys are once again put in mortal danger – this time by actors equipped and supported with European resources.

This attack must serve as a wake-up call. Humanitarian workers and survivors cannot be left unprotected at sea while European states continue to outsource border control to a Libyan authority that has repeatedly demonstrated its contempt for international law.

Accountability is urgently needed, both for those who carried out this assault and for those who enabled it.

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urgently demands:

1. Independent investigation and accountability:

- Conduct a **full, independent, and transparent investigation**, under responsible oversight, into the armed attack against the *Ocean Viking*, to establish the facts and responsibilities.
- Suspend and review the recognition of the Libyan Search and Rescue Region by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) through an audit under the Member State Audit Scheme.
- Ensure that those directly responsible for firing – as well as their **chain of command within the Libyan Coast Guard** – are held to account under both national and international law.
- Urge EU and Italian authorities, as parties materially enabling the Libyan Coast Guard, to also examine their **own responsibility in supplying, training, and supporting** the vessel and personnel involved in the attack.

2. End EU and Italian collaboration with the Libyan Coast Guard:

- Immediately suspend all financial, material, and operational support to the Libyan Coast Guard, including vessels, training programs, and technical assistance, which have demonstrably contributed to violent and unlawful actions at sea.
- Abolish the 2017 Italy–Libya Memorandum of Understanding.
- Terminate the EU-funded Support to Integrated Border and Migration Management in Libya (SIBMMIL) program, under which the patrol boat used in this assault was donated.

3. Guarantee protection for humanitarian SAR actors:

- Officially **safeguard the role of NGOs** conducting life-saving search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean, in line with the fundamental obligation to rescue persons in distress at sea and recognize the seas as humanitarian spaces where the protection of life takes precedence over political or alleged security considerations.
- End the **criminalization, administrative harassment, and smear campaigns** against SAR NGOs, which have fostered a climate of hostility and impunity in which attacks against humanitarian actors can occur.
- Reaffirm the primacy of international maritime law and human rights law, ensuring that states coordinate rescue in good faith, rather than obstructing or outsourcing it to unsafe actors.