



PRESS RELEASE

Marseille, 9 March 2026

**STILL AT SEA: SOS MEDITERRANEE MARKS TEN YEARS OF
HUMANITARIAN RESCUE**

AND

**RELEASES A REPORT AND MANIFESTO CALLING TO RESTORE
PROACTIVE SEARCH AND RESCUE AS EUROPE RESHAPES MIGRATION
POLICY**

Marseille, 9 March 2026 – SOS MEDITERRANEE marks ten years of civilian search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean. From 2016 to 2025, the organization assisted 43,078 people in distress through 457 rescue operations, first with the *Aquarius* and later with the *Ocean Viking*.

This anniversary comes at a critical moment. As the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum reshapes migration governance, and new measures in Italy could introduce crisis frameworks that threaten access to territorial waters, the Central Mediterranean route continues to claim lives. In 2026 alone, more than 658 people are estimated to have died attempting the crossing.

"Deaths in the Central Mediterranean are the foreseeable result of policies that priorities deterrence over protection and replace rescue with interception" explains **Bianca Benvenuti, Head of International Advocacy and Public Positioning** at SOS MEDITERRANEE. *"Delegating rescue responsibilities to countries such as Libya and Tunisia undermines non-refoulement and exposes people to serious harm. Rescue ends only with disembarkation in a place of safety. EU measures must not erode the duty to rescue."*

To mark ten years of operations, SOS MEDITERRANEE is releasing a ten-year report examining how a preventable humanitarian catastrophe has unfolded in the Central Mediterranean - and the consequences of a decade marked by shrinking state-led rescue, expanding border externalization and obstruction of humanitarian presence at sea. SOS MEDITERRANEE is also publishing a manifesto setting out its calls to restore proactive search and rescue and protect the duty to rescue at sea.

*"In the past ten years, the operational environment in the Central Mediterranean has deteriorated sharply," declares **Soazic Dupuy, Director of Operations at SOS MEDITERRANEE**. "Growing administrative restrictions, stand-offs at sea, assigned distant ports and detentions have cost us 591 operational days, more than a year and seven months during which our ships could not operate. Rescue coordination has become increasingly unpredictable, leaving people at risk for prolonged periods. "*

The operational environment has also become increasingly volatile and dangerous. On 24 August 2025, the Ocean Viking was deliberately targeted by gunfire from a Libyan Coast Guard patrol boat. No one was physically injured, but those on board feared for their lives, and the vessel and critical rescue equipment sustained significant damage.

Since 2016, at least 19,655 people are known to have died or gone missing on this route, while 192,788 have been intercepted at sea and returned to Libya, a country not considered a place of safety and where UN bodies have documented systematic human rights violations.

Given the urgency to strengthen its overall response in the Central Mediterranean, in 2025, SOS MEDITERRANEE launched the civilian humanitarian aerial monitoring mission ALBATROSS with Humanitarian Pilots Initiative, operated with the aircraft ALBATROSS UNO. The mission is not a search and rescue operation but supports early detection of distress cases and alerts competent authorities in line with international standards.

As it enters its second decade of operations, SOS MEDITERRANEE reaffirms its commitment to rescue, protect and bear witness, and calls for proactive state-led search and rescue, protection of humanitarian space at sea, and full respect for international maritime law, including disembarkation in a place of safety.

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