



# IN SEARCH OF SAFE HAVEN: THE SEA AS THE ONLY OPTION CROSSING THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN SEA

DECEMBER 2021

Human rights apply at sea, as they do on land.



HUMAN RIGHTS AT SEA

in Partnership with

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## Foreword

### Content Warning

This is a collection of personal narratives. The content of these narratives will be distressing to many. It is important though that they are read, and that the people who shared their stories have their voices heard. We cannot be deaf and blind to the realities of peoples lives. What is happening in the Mediterranean concerns us all.

All names have been changed to protect the identities of the individuals concerned and their families.

### About Human Rights at Sea

Human Rights at Sea is a registered charity based in the United Kingdom and operating globally. The organisation was set up with the principle that human rights apply at sea, as they do on land. All too often the rights of people at sea are not upheld or protected, and are ultimately violated. Human Rights at Sea exists to detect, prevent, remedy, and ultimately end human rights abuses at sea. They do this by undertaking research, advocacy, investigations, and lobbying to bring about change in legislation, policy, and practice.

### About SOS MEDITERRANEE

SOS MEDITERRANEE is a European humanitarian and maritime search and rescue organisation operating in the Mediterranean. It was founded by citizens in May 2015 in response to the end of Operation Mare Nostrum, a military-humanitarian operation launched following the shipwreck of 3 October 2013 off Lampedusa. With the end of Operation Mare Nostrum, efficient State-led search and rescue operations were lacking and European citizens self-organised to step in to prevent more deaths in the central Mediterranean.

SOS MEDITERRANEE works as a European association with teams in Germany, France, Italy and Switzerland in a European network, jointly financing and operating a rescue ship. From February 2016 to December 2018, SOS MEDITERRANEE chartered and operated the rescue ship Aquarius. Since August 2019, SOS MEDITERRANEE charters and operates the Ocean Viking. The medical care onboard the Ocean Viking was provided by Médecins Sans Frontières until April 2020. In September 2021, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) joined the SOS MEDITERRANEE teams on board to provide medical care and protection and assistance to survivors on board.

The mission of SOS MEDITERRANEE is threefold:

- 1** To save lives by rescuing people from distress at sea and providing emergency medical treatment on board.
- 2** To protect and assist by providing medical care and first psychological support to the rescued people on board.
- 3** To bear witness to the situation at sea. To make sure the voices of rescued people are heard, to show the many faces of migration and to inform the public about the situation for people in distress in the Mediterranean as well as to commemorate those who lost their lives in the attempt to cross.

## Acknowledgements

Human Rights at Sea and SOS MEDITERRANEE thank the Sata Foundation for the funding that made this project possible and for continuing to donate to the important humanitarian work of SOS MEDITERRANEE.

Human Rights at Sea sincerely thanks SOS MEDITERRANEE and in particular the crew of the Ocean Viking for their tireless humanitarian work. They operate in harsh conditions and are faced with tragedy on a regular basis.

Mostly we thank the people who shared their testimonies. The bravery, determination, and strength that they have shown both amazes and inspires us.

## The Central Mediterranean Sea

Since launching operations with the Aquarius, the humanitarian space has slowly but steadily closed down. After the European Union started funding, equipping and training the Libyan coastguard in 2017, the formal transfer of responsibility for coordinating rescues to the Libyan authorities in June 2018 by codifying a Libyan search and rescue region was a major shift. Until then, and in the absence of a designated Libyan search and rescue region, search and rescue operations were de facto coordinated by the Italian and Maltese Rescue Coordination Centres. Instating a Libyan Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) ultimately left a large part of the central Mediterranean off Libya with no effective coordination capacity.

The JRCC hardly ever responds to calls from ships, rarely has an English-speaking contact person available and does not assign a place of safety for ships to disembark after a rescue.

The nearest able-to-assist maritime coordination centres in Malta and Italy, which should take over responsibility for rescues when the Libyan JRCC cannot be reached and systematically refer any requests for coordination to the same JRCC. This leads to long delays, in some cases makes finding and rescuing boats in distress impossible. A horrific example is that of Easter weekend 2020, when 12 people lost their lives and 40 were forcibly returned to Libya four days after dispatching a distress alert to the maritime authorities and even though the distress case was in the Maltese search and rescue region.

# The Human Rights Situation in Libya

According to international maritime law, a rescue only ends when the survivors are disembarked in a place of safety, meaning a place where their fundamental rights are respected and their basic needs are met. There is widespread consensus throughout international human rights organisations, the United Nations, including the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees<sup>1</sup> (UNHCR) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights<sup>2</sup> (OHCHR) that Libyan ports do not meet those criteria. Libya cannot be considered a place of safety for the disembarkation of survivors. The situation for migrants and refugees in the country is dire and well-reported. These vulnerable groups are subject to serious human rights violations on a widespread and systematic level: from abduction, detention, violence – including sexual violence – and extortion to human trafficking and forced labour. Disembarking in Libya leads to the systematic detention of men, women and children in appalling conditions.

The aforementioned Libyan coastguard, which the EU continues to fund, equip and train, has intercepted and forcibly brought back to Libya more than 27,500 people trying to flee those human rights violations and inhumane conditions just this year only.<sup>3</sup> Last year, 11,891 people were intercepted at sea and forcibly returned to what has been described by many international organisations and independent reporters as a cycle of exploitation and abuse.

## Criminalising Civil Society Humanitarian Search & Rescue

Despite the dire need for more rescue capacity and more effective coordination of search and rescue operations, both commercial and civilian rescue ships face numerous obstacles in rescuing and bringing survivors to safety. Oftentimes, ships are forced to wait at sea for extended periods of time before being assigned a port to disembark survivors rescued from distress at sea. Additionally, in 2020 and 2021, humanitarian rescue vessels have been systematically detained following inspections in Italian ports. This was the fate of seven such rescue ships in 2020, among them the Ocean Viking, which remained blocked from July until December last year.

Many survivors have explained the difficulty of escaping Libya to the SOS MEDITERRANEE team onboard the Ocean Viking. Often stripped of their passports and left at the mercy of gangs and militias, migrants and refugees report being trapped in Libya with no other escape than to attempt the dangerous crossing of the central Mediterranean which to this day, remains the deadliest migration route in the world. In 2021 so far, 1,225 people are reported dead and missing by the International Organisation for Migration. 999 people lost their lives trying to cross the central Mediterranean in 2020. Since 2014, more than 18,000 lives have perished in the 300 - 400 kilometres of sea that separate Libya from Italy and Malta.

1 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNHCR Position on the Designations of Libya as a Safe Third Country and as a Place of Safety for the Purpose of Disembarkation Following Rescue at Sea, September 2020, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5f1edee24.html> [accessed 4 November 2021]

2 UN rights chief urges Libya, EU, to protect migrants crossing the central Mediterranean, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/05/1092752>

3 As of 29 October 2021

# TESTIMONIES



**“ I told them that we would throw ourselves in the water if they tried to take us back in Libya. We have already seen death many times in Libya and at sea, we couldn’t go back. ”**

Zentani and Salwa are from Yefren in Libya. They are parents of four children, one girl and three boys, among them one with disabilities. They were rescued by the SOS MEDITERRANEE team on board the Ocean Viking rescue ship on July 1, 2021, from a wooden boat in distress in international waters in the Maltese Search and Rescue Region. Three other Libyan families and two persons from Egypt were among the survivors. During the rescue, a Libyan coastguard patrol boat approached twice. Their presence sparked fear among the thirty people in distress, including the small children. The fear and panic complicated the rescue and made the operation more dangerous for everyone involved. Once safely onboard, Zentani and Salwa wanted to testify about the situation in Libya.

Zentani used to warn people wanting to cross the Mediterranean Sea by boat: “It is too dangerous, don’t go there, the chances are too slim,” he would say. However, the situation in Libya became unbearable for the family. Zentani and Salwa were both employees of small shops in Libya, but they explain to our team they often had to wait months before getting paid. They say when they finally received a wage, they were often paid only two out of the seven months they worked, earning less than 100 US\$ per month, not nearly enough to sustain their family.

“There is no health or any functioning system in the country, violence is everywhere. Even if we hear in the media that there is an on-going peace process, the reality is different: militias are everywhere, fighting against each other to take control, they fight even for electricity,” Salwa says. She explains that a militia bombed the electric system of her city, cutting the power supply for everyone for four days while

the temperatures reached up to 49 degrees. “It was unbearable. My son has a disability, he cannot walk or talk, he needs care but in Libya they do not recognize his disabilities. The authorities think that he only needs to sleep and eat. There is no specialised care there. I left for my son,” says Salwa.

“We could not take it anymore in Libya, we had to take our chance even if we knew how risky it was. We saw death in our eyes in Libya and in the Mediterranean. The waves were high, water started to come into the boat, the children were crying,” says Zentani. The Ocean Viking searched for the small wooden boat in distress for two hours while Zentani, Salwa, their four children and 24 other people started to lose hope. They had left Zuwara two days before. Once the Ocean Viking arrived on scene, a Libyan coastguard patrol vessel passed by closely at high speed. The patrol vessel Fezzan called the Ocean Viking on the radio, asking the team on the bridge to change course so that they could proceed to intercept the boat in distress. The Search and Rescue Coordinator insisted that the distress case was in the Maltese search and rescue region and that the Ocean Viking was able to assist in accordance with maritime law, and to provide medical care to the survivors.

The Libyan patrol vessel eventually left the area but reappeared on the scene as the SOS MEDITERRANEE teams were getting ready to perform the rescue operation. The Ocean Viking called the Maltese authorities to seek instructions from the rescue coordination centre responsible for this area, but none were provided.

Zentani says that when he saw the Libyan coastguard vessel, he was horrified. “I told them that we would throw ourselves in the water if they tried to take us back to Libya. We already have seen death many times in Libya and at sea, we couldn’t go back to our country.”

The Libyan coastguard eventually did not intercept the wooden boat and the SOS MEDITERRANEE team performed the rescue. “We were very anxious because the Libyan vessel stayed close to us during the entire rescue operation, we didn’t know if they would come back,” Salwa adds.

Their family was among the 572 people rescued by the Ocean Viking in July 2021, after six rescues performed in three days. “I want to thank the SOS MEDITERRANEE team for treating us as human beings, which we did not feel for a long time,” Zentani concludes.

*Testimony collected by Claire Juchat, SOS MEDITERRANEE Communications Officer on the Ocean Viking, in July 2021.*



Photo Credit: Flavio Gasperini / SOS MEDITERRANEE

# Mouna

“ *I had to cross the sea because I want to see my grandchildren grow up.* ”

*Mouna is 53 years old, she was born in Damascus. She was rescued from a small wooden boat in distress by the team of the Ocean Viking on July 31st. She stood out from the time she set foot on the deck of the ship through the calm kindness that radiated from her. Mouna had to be evacuated from the Ocean Viking on August 5 because she needed urgent medical care that could only be provided in a hospital on land. Mouna was sick, she needed a liver transplant. Before she was transferred to an Italian Coastguard vessel and brought to Lampedusa, she shared her story onboard the Ocean Viking.*

“I didn’t want to leave Damascus. Two of my sons left Syria because of the war, they fled to Libya. In 2014, someone took a photo of my 17-year-old daughter at a peaceful demonstration, they wanted to arrest her. I can’t describe how important my daughter is to me. So I took her and my youngest son, who was 16, and left to Egypt on a plane. From Egypt, we were smuggled to Libya. We were in Libya when everything happened there, the unrest, the war.

My husband stayed behind in Syria. One day, a rocket destroyed our house in Damascus. Luckily, they were warned in time and my husband was not inside. After the rocket strike, we decided my husband should come to Libya as well. We all stayed in Libya, my daughter got married to a Syrian man there. One day, my son-in-law was robbed while he was working, the men were armed like militias. They shot him in the back.

Soon after, my husband and my younger son were kidnapped. The kidnappers asked for ransom. They brought my son and husband back to us, but you should have seen the state they were in. They were covered in blood. We got scared and left for Tripoli, we were hiding in the heart of the capital.

If I go back to Syria, I will be arrested at the airport because my sons are running away from military service. They would arrest me to pressure my children into coming back.

My children in Libya have young children, they shouldn’t cross the sea. But I am sick, if I don’t go, I will die anyway. So I decided to leave. I gave the smuggler 2,500 dollars for my first attempt to cross, but the



Libyan Coastguard stopped us. Then they put me into jail. That jail, I cannot describe it. They wanted 200 dollars to let me out. That jail...

My children got me out of there, but I was so weak. My kids are miserable, it's hard for them to see me this way and not be able to help, but they don't have enough money to pay for real medical treatment, they can't do anything to get me help.

I decided to go to the sea again. My kids said no, they didn't want me to go, but I made up my mind. **I don't want to die in Libya.** There is no healthcare there, there are no services. We have nothing there, no school for the kids, no education, no safety. They beat everyone there. One day, we had a big rock thrown on our car, they stole our money, our phones, our car, they beat us up and just left us lying on the ground.

**I told myself 'enough', I will go to the sea.** I paid 1,500 dollars this time, and I told them that I'm sick, that I need to leave soon. They said we'd leave the next day, but they kept me waiting for 16 days with no information, nothing. Then they came out of nowhere and took us to the beach. When the boat arrived and we were still on the beach, the engine of the boat exploded. We had to wait another day.

The smugglers had promised us there would be two engines, a satellite phone, GPS, lifejackets. There was nothing there. They promised they would give us everything once we were at sea, they just kept pushing us, they all had guns. Someone must have been too slow or made them angry somehow, because one of them just threw the water on the ground and said 'no water for you!'

After four hours at sea, the engine just started burning, it caught fire, my leg got burnt. We managed to put it out and one man on the boat got the engine to work for a little while, but we were just going around in circles. The boat was taking water, it was mixed with fuel. After 10 hours, we could see oil platforms. We were just screaming and waving. And then you (the SOS MEDITERRANEE Ocean Viking) came up behind us. We thought you were the Libyan Coastguard, but we said, 'we are dying anyway, we have no water. If they come, let them come.' But it was you.

**I had to cross the sea because I want to live. I want to see my grandchildren grow up. They call me their 'lovely granny'.**

**I tell them when you see your mother, make sure you hug her and give her a kiss."**

*Testimony collected by Julia Schaefermeyer, Communications Officer on the Ocean Viking, in July 2021.*



Photo Credit: Flavio Gasperini / SOS MEDITERRANEE

*Sabtou is 15 years old, from Somalia. He was rescued by the Ocean Viking from a large wooden boat in distress during the night between July 4 and July 5, 2021, with 368 other people fleeing Libya.*

“I left Somalia when I was 12, by myself, because there are just too many problems in my country. There are no schools, no hospitals, my family has no means to survive,” Sabtou explained.

He first went to Sudan, before continuing to Libya. He was kidnapped as soon as he arrived in the country. Sabtou was held in a detention centre for one year and five months with only one meal per day, dried pasta. “We had to pay 15,000 US dollars to be freed. I couldn’t pay. Instead of letting us go, they gave us salty water to drink. Every morning, they beat us. **Look at my arms, my scars, they used melted plastic and heated metal bars.**” They would call Sabtou’s mother while he was tortured to get a ransom.

When she gave everything she had in her possession, Sabtou was transferred to another detention centre. “They treated us like animals,” he recalled. After spending eight months in this second detention centre, Sabtou managed to escape to Tripoli.

“ **Every morning, they beat us. Look at my arms, my scars.** ”

During all this time, he was not able to call his mother or have any contact with his family in Somalia. Eventually, his mother managed to send some money to pay for his crossing. The first time he tried to cross the Mediterranean, he paid 1,500 US dollars, but he was intercepted by “militias or Libyan coastguard,” Sabtou said. “I don’t know the difference, they put me back in jail”.

Once again, they ransomed Sabtou’s mother, but she had nothing left. “You can even kill my son now, I cannot do anything, I am lost,” she told his son’s captors. The guards released Sabtou. The second time he attempted to reach safety, he paid 800 US Dollars to embark on a large wooden boat. Sabtou remembers the crossing: “We were in the bilge of the boat, we stayed more than a day without food or water. It was incredibly hot, with no air. We were choking because of the fuel. If we would have stayed a couple hours more, we would have died. I suffered too much in the past 3 years, too much. **My dream now is to find a job to send some money to my Mum for her to live with dignity. And I want everyone to know what is happening in Libya.**” Sabtou was only 12 when he arrived in Libya. Only a child.

*Testimony collected by Claire Juchat, SOS MEDITERRANEE Communications Officer on the Ocean Viking, in July 2021.*



Photo Credit: Anthony Jean / SOS MEDITERRANEE

“ *This is the third time I tried to flee Libya by the sea. It’s a risk but we have no choice.* ”

*Mubarak was rescued by the Ocean Viking in international waters off Libya on 20 March 2021, along with 105 other children, women and men. One of the sponsons [editor's note: an air chamber along a watercraft to increase stability and buoyancy] of the rubber boat was pierced and the dinghy was taking water when our teams arrived. The weather was also deteriorating. Just two hours after the completion of the rescue operation, a strong gust of wind swept across the central Mediterranean. If the Ocean Viking teams had not intervened, the weather conditions would likely have been fatal for all those on board the unseaworthy boat, without life jackets.*

At just 17 years old, Mubarak has already experienced and survived many tragedies, including a shipwreck off the coast of Libya. A few hours before he disembarked in Augusta, Sicily, on 23 March, the young Guinean wanted to tell the SOS MEDITERRANEE team part of his story.

**“This is the third time I tried to flee Libya by the sea. It’s a risk but we have no choice. Staying in Libya means risking more. There is no life in Libya. It’s hell.** The first time I went to the sea, we left the Libyan coast at around 11pm in June 2020. We were at sea for four days. We got lost, the weather was bad. The storm, the rain... we were soaked and exhausted. Some people threw up, others lost consciousness. Thank God there were no deaths. We circled a ship for three days. It was an oil tanker. In those days, there were no humanitarian ships. We wanted to go directly to Lampedusa, Italy but it didn’t work. After 4 days, we decided to turn back to Zawiya, Libya. We had no choice.

**“Three people died that day.”**

The second time, in December 2020, we shipwrecked. We were launched at 11pm. We were 130 and some people. There were children, pregnant women, babies too, 2 or 3 years old. We were very, very overloaded. At the outset, we said that the zodiac was no good. But we were told that we had no choice, and that if we stayed behind, we would lose our money. You cannot turn back.

We were shipwrecked at around 9am. One of the boat's hulls was pierced. The people on that side of the boat fell into the water. There was still an inflated sponson on the other side, but we had to be careful not to overload that side, otherwise everyone would have fallen into the water. Three people died that day. But God saved some of us. The phone didn't fall into the water and we were able to call Alarm Phone [editor's note: civilian hotline in the Mediterranean] to give our position. The Libyan coast guard came and picked us up there. They told us they would give us food and let us go back. But suddenly they changed their mind. We were sent to a detention centre. There, you have to pay to get out. If you don't have the money, you stay there. There is no repatriation.

God helped me, I was able to leave the detention centre after 14 days. I found people who stayed there for more than six months, it was very difficult. As soon as I got out, I told myself that I had to try again. Of course, I knew the risk. I knew it well. It is very dangerous. Many people have lost their lives at sea. But even if you hate the idea of dying, you can't prevent it. It's better to leave Libya by sea than to stay there. They treat you like a slave in Libya. In 2017, they did things in plain sight, then the world woke up. Now things are done in secret. But the authorities know.

Most people have phone numbers written on their clothes. I myself had one in case of need. Because when they launch the boat, either you make it across, or you get shipwrecked, or they catch you. And if they catch you, it's prison [editor's note: detention centre], for sure. And if you end up in prison, the only way to get out is to pay. For that, you have to be able to call relatives. That's why people have their emergency number on their clothes and if they need to, they can give the number to the people who do their business in the prisons. Prison guards call the number and say that they have to send money to get us out of prison. This is a country that has no order. Everyone is armed. The population is armed. And foreigners are always victims.

Not everyone has the strength to cope with what happens in prison. You eat once a day, at 6pm. They give you a small plate with some rice and spaghetti for five people. Can you imagine? They hit people too. Completely. The other day, the prison guards hit everyone because some young people, between 13 and 15 years old on average, were complaining about not having enough to eat. They needed to eat. We can put up with some things, but the children can't. They broke some people's feet with sticks. They don't even look where you are going to be hit. They hit you on your head, on your feet... Anywhere.

### **“The best memory of my life is today.”**

I spent six months in Libya and four years in Algeria. I left my country, Guinea-Conakry, when I was 13 because my father died. He was the one taking care of everything back then. As the first son of the family, I had to take responsibility. You have to know how to sacrifice yourself.

I suffered a lot. Years of suffering. But today I am very happy. Words fail me. The best memory of my life is today. You must never give up. But you must not only follow your dreams, you must also think, learn and understand how the world works around you. Having a dream is not enough.”

*Testimony collected by Laurence Bondard, SOS MEDITERRANEE Communications Officer on the Ocean Viking, in March 2021.*



When the Ocean Viking reached port in Sicily to disembark the survivors in January 2021, police officers, officials from the Italian health authorities and Red Cross personnel were waiting on the pier, ready to facilitate the disembarkation. While the sight could have been intimidating to many, 25-year-old Rita\* from Cameroon was moved to tears: “All these people have come just for us” she said, holding her sister. A day before, she had shared her memories of the struggles she faced after finding herself forced to leave her home country.

“I had to leave Cameroon for family reasons and because of the poverty that plagues our country.

We just decided to go, so at first we didn’t know how to start. But people guided us to the Niger desert.

“ **To make us get on the boat, they whipped us. They had weapons too.** ”

From Niger, we spent ten days in the desert. On the eighth day, the water was already finished. And there we were attacked by the gangs, the gangs who always wanted to abuse us. They hit us with sticks. And from time to time but they would separate the women and men, so that they could abuse the women and girls. If you didn’t want to go with them, they would start whipping you.

When you get into the car [in the desert], if you have a child, you have to lift up your child, otherwise your child can suffocate in the car. We were loaded like merchandise. They don’t care who screams and who doesn’t. When you scream, they whip you. When you scream, they whip you even with your baby who is crying. If you have a phone or money, they take it all away. They leave you penniless. It was really difficult. Very difficult.

When we left our country, we didn’t have enough money. We made it up to Oran, Algeria. In Oran we worked for a lady. She didn’t pay us either. There are circles among Cameroonians and other nationalities, we sell clothes, juice, food, that’s how we work. And it was this money that helped us to continue our trip to Libya.

Then I spent a month in Libya. A month in Libya is like an eternity. It was hell. We were in a basement. We couldn’t get out. There were so many of us, we didn’t count. With children. And when a man wanted to make himself comfortable, he would take a girl and do whatever he wanted with you.

**To make us get on the boat, they whipped us. They had weapons too. One woman was pregnant, they whipped her until she aborted.** My child escaped when we were being whipped there on the beach. He was scared, he escaped and they didn’t even let me pursue my child. I hope he is with my sister in Libya.”

*Testimony collected by Julia Schaefermeyer, Communications Officer on the Ocean Viking, in January 2021.*



Photo Credit: Flavio Gasperini / SOS MEDITERRANEE

“ **We prefer to die at sea than to live in Libya.  
Because there is no other way out.** ”

*20-year-old Hassan fled from Liberia to Libya via Guinea, Mali and Algeria. He was intercepted by the Libyan Coastguard and sent to detention twice before he was rescued by the Ocean Viking in July 2021.*

“**This was my third attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea.** I was intercepted twice, the first time was on October 10th, 2020. I was arrested on the 11th and sent to detention in Zliten. I spent three months and three weeks in detention that time, I was beaten massively, I had everything taken from me. We got only half pieces of bread to eat. Humanitarian organisations came to the detention center twice a week, they gave us phones so that we could talk to our parents, but they can't release people, it is not in their authority.

From Zliten, I was transferred to a detention center in Zawiyah. To be honest with you, I escaped. I fled along with 150 others, it was a mass escape.

Then I tried crossing the sea for the second time. I was intercepted on February 4th this year and taken to detention on the 5th. Back to Zawiyah again. I spent 3 weeks there until I escaped again, together with three others.

So, this is my third attempt. I paid 700 US dollars for the first attempt, 800 US dollars for the second one, and 1,200 US Dollars for the third one. I already paid 1,500 US dollars to be smuggled from Mali to Libya across the desert. Since you can't really make money in Libya, you have to borrow, borrow, borrow.

That's why we prefer to die at sea than to live in Libya. Because there is no other way out. My parents don't know that I'm alive.”

*Testimony collected by Julia Schaefermeyer, Communications Officer on the Ocean Viking, in July 2021.*



Photo Credit: Flavio Gasperini / SOS MEDITERRANEE

“ *I never wanted to cross the sea, but I had to learn that in Libya, there is no freedom.* ”

*Favour, from Nigeria, was 23 years old when he was rescued from distress at sea by the team of the Ocean Viking on 31 July 2021. Before disembarking in the port of Pozzallo, Sicily, he shared the story of how he was tricked into travelling to Libya with false promises, just to discover that he had been sold into a form of modern slavery. Favour wanted his story to be shared to caution others. For him, a political solution is the only way to break the cycle of exploitation and abuse that he fell prey to in Libya. With the disembarkation just hours away, Favour was most looking forward to contacting his mother. “Maybe she thinks I’m dead,” he said, “but I will find a way to reach her and tell her I’m alive.”*

“At home, my life was at stake. My grandfather gave me a piece of land, and I was using it to support my family while working as a fashion designer. There was a man in my area who wanted to have this land and he started threatening me and threatening to wipe out my whole family if we didn’t leave that land. He murdered my grandfather. I went to the police, but they didn’t do anything. This man was very influential, and the Nigerian police only work for those who have money.

I came to Libya after being deceived by someone I thought was a friend. Being a fashion designer, he told me there was a lot of work in the fashion industry in Libya. What I didn’t know was that in reality, he had sold me. I spent two years in Libya in total. When I escaped from the people I had been sold to, I started working as a brickmaker. But when you finish your work with Libyans, they don’t like to pay you. I never wanted to cross the sea, but I had to learn that in Libya, there is no freedom. Just oppression everywhere.”

**“After being intercepted at sea, a lot of the women don’t have anyone to pay for them, so they are sold. That’s human trafficking.”**

“The first time I tried to cross the sea, I was intercepted by the Libyan coastguard and sent to Tarik

Al Sikka detention centre in Tripoli. It's 3000 Dinars to get out, 5000 Dinars for women. Men are beaten every single day at that prison, and the girls are raped. Many Nigerian women fall victim to human trafficking. Every time I see them, I cry for them. After being intercepted at sea, a lot of the women don't have anyone to pay for them, so they are sold. That's human trafficking.

To get out, you ask a friend outside of the prison to pay the police. Or you try to escape. I know people who tried to escape from Abu Salim detention centre. They were shot at with machine guns. Ten of them were killed. My friend was hit by a bullet. To me, it seems like the international organisations are also afraid. Sometimes when they came to us in the prison, the Libyans just threw them out. Even when you're very sick, the Libyans don't allow them to take you out."

**"I want the man who deceived me to be judged. Because (...) I know he will keep doing this."**

"The police also do the business of launching people to cross the sea. Some people pay to be released from prison, and at the same time they pay for the police to put them on another boat. When the police organises a departure, they put a sticker on the boat, so that the coastguard knows it was launched by them and lets it through.

This sea should not be used for business. People lose their lives there every day.

In my opinion, as long as Libya doesn't have a real government, people will continue to die at sea. Because people are being oppressed there. Everybody has guns in Libya, including children.

I wish I had not left. I wish the police in my country was working like it should. First, the citizens must be protected, and then Nigeria's border must be controlled. There are so many Nigerians in Libya because they are not protected at home, and because the border is not controlled.

I want the man who deceived me to be judged. Because I know that I am not the only one he has done this to. And because I know he will keep doing this."

*Testimony collected by Julia Schaefermeyer, Communications Officer on the Ocean Viking, in July 2021.*

## Disclaimer

These first-hand testimonies have been collected by SOS MEDITERRANEE with the consent of the survivors on board the OCEAN VIKING and all names have been changed to protect the people and their families. The testimonies do not reflect the views of Human Rights at Sea, SOS MEDITERRANEE and SATA Foundation. Human Rights at Sea is not liable in anyway, whatsoever, in any jurisdiction for the contents of this Publication which has been published in good faith in support of the Charity's Objectives. All text and images have been acknowledged where able. Any stated opinions, perspectives and comments are solely those of the author quoted. Any omissions or factual inaccuracies should be immediately alerted to HRAS by writing to: [enquiries@humanrightsatsea.org](mailto:enquiries@humanrightsatsea.org).



# Who We Are

## BACKGROUND

Human Rights at Sea was established in April 2014. It was founded as an initiative to explore issues of maritime human rights development, review associated policies and legislation, and to undertake independent investigation of abuses at sea. It rapidly grew beyond all expectations and for reasons of governance it became a registered charity under the UK Charity Commission in 2015.

Today, the charity is an established, regulated and independent registered non-profit organisation based on the south coast of the United Kingdom. It undertakes **R**esearch, **A**dvocacy, **I**nvestigation and **L**obbying specifically for human rights issues in the maritime environment, including contributing to support for the human element that underpins the global maritime and fishing industries.

The charity works internationally with all individuals, commercial and maritime community organisations that have similar objectives as ourselves, including all the principal maritime welfare organisations.

## OUR MISSION

To explicitly raise awareness, implementation and accountability of human rights provisions throughout the maritime environment, especially where they are currently absent, ignored or being abused.



## STAY IN CONTACT



We welcome any questions, comments or suggestions. Please send your feedback to:  
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THE ONLY OPTION**

**CROSSING THE CENTRAL  
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Flavio Gasperini / SOS MEDITERRANEE








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Human Rights at Sea is a Registered Charity in England and Wales No. 1161673. The organisation has been independently developed for the benefit of the international community for matters and issues concerning human rights in the maritime environment.

Its aim is to explicitly raise awareness, implementation and accountability of human rights provisions throughout the maritime environment, especially where they are currently absent, ignored or being abused.

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