

UNHCR deeply concerned over returns from Italy to Libya



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GENEVA – UNHCR expressed deep concern Thursday over the fate of some 230 people who were rescued Wednesday by Italian patrol boats in the Maltese Search and Rescue Region (SAR) of responsibility and sent back to Libya without proper assessment of their possible protection needs. The rescue took place about 35 nautical miles south-east of the Italian island of Lampedusa, but within the Maltese SAR zone.

The diversion to Libya followed a day of heated discussions between Maltese and Italian authorities about who was responsible for the rescue and disembarkation of the people on the three boats, which were in distress. Although closer to Lampedusa, the vessels were in the Maltese search and rescue area of responsibility.

While no information is available on the nationalities of those aboard the vessels, it is likely that among them are people in need of international protection. In 2008, an estimated 75 percent of sea arrivals in Italy applied for asylum and 50 percent of them were granted some form of protection.

"I appeal to the Italian and Maltese authorities to continue to ensure that people rescued at sea and in need of international protection receive full access to territory and asylum procedures," UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres said.

The incident marks a significant shift in policies by the Italian government and is a source of very serious concern. UNHCR deeply regrets the lack of transparency which surrounded the event.

"We have been working closely with the Italian authorities in Lampedusa and elsewhere to ensure that people fleeing war and persecution are protected in line with the 1951 Geneva Convention," said Laurens Jolles, UNHCR's Rome-based representative. "It is of fundamental importance that the international principle of non-refoulement continues to be fully respected."

In addition, Libya has not signed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, and does not have a functioning national asylum system. UNHCR urges Italian authorities to reconsider their decision and to avoid repeating such measures.