
MALTESE NAVY SEIZES TANKER HIJACKED BY MIGRANTS

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Migrants reportedly hijacked a cargo ship in Libyan waters and forced the crew to redirect the vessel toward Europe. Maltese armed forces have now escorted it to port.

Malta's navy said that a special operations team had taken control of a tanker that was hijacked by migrants off the coast of Libya. The ship arrived at a Maltese port on Thursday morning.

The migrants had taken control of the vessel on Wednesday, and directed it north toward Europe, according to Italian and Maltese authorities.

The Armed Forces of Malta (AFM) said in a statement that a unit "was dispatched to board and secure the vessel in order to hand over control of the ship back to the captain."

The navy said the ship would be redirected to Malta where it would be boarded by police.

The Palau-flagged tanker El Hiblu I rescued the migrants in the Mediterranean Sea on Tuesday and sailed the ship toward the Libyan capital, Tripoli. But six nautical miles from port, it reversed course.

"The captain repeatedly stated that he was not in control of the vessel and that he and his crew were being forced and threatened by a number of migrants to proceed to Malta," the Maltese navy said.

Italy's Interior Minister Matteo Salvini called the migrants "pirates," and said they would not be allowed to set foot in Italy.

Migrants who are intercepted at sea are usually not happy to be returned to Libya, where they are often subject to serious abuse such as rape, torture and slave labor.

Hard-line stance

The vessel is believed to have picked up 108 migrants, including 77 men and 31 women, according to Maltese authorities.

Overwhelmed by the large number of migrant arrivals in recent years, Italy has taken a hard-line stance. Boats that rescue migrants in the Mediterranean are increasingly taking them back to Libya.

cw,rc/cm (AFP, AP)

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