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Hamburg, 23 January 2019

Refugees in the Mediterranean Sea: EU urgently needs to find a solution now

Germany's withdrawal from "Sophia" mission extremely unfortunate

In view of Germany's announcement that it would no longer take part with naval vessels in the Mediterranean Sea mission "Sophia" organised by the European Union (EU) until further notice, the German Shipowners' Association (VDR) calls upon the EU to find a solution to the protracted dispute on how to cope with boat refugees.

Ralf Nagel, Chief Executive Officer of the German Shipowners' Association: "We greatly regret the decision taken by the federal government. On the one hand, it is understandable that the German navy wants to withdraw for the time being in view of the deployment situation. On the other, however, if naval vessels no longer carry out any rescue missions because they cannot safely discharge the refugees rescued, how on earth are crews and vessels of the merchant navy expected to cope?"

"The EU must finally take action now. Europe must not be allowed to remain paralysed by such an important issue in humane and political terms, otherwise we will fall back to the clearly untenable conditions for refugees and seafarers that prevailed in previous years. After all, the extremely dangerous migration across the Mediterranean Sea will not cease simply because of the dispute raging in Europe."

The rescue activities of the EU and the national coast guards and naval vessels extended since the year 2015 had recently made the situation less unbearable for merchant vessels and their crews. Only rarely have they been directly involved in rescue missions. "Since the European states reached a consensus on operations of this kind, the German maritime sector has been considerably relieved because, as a rule, state-owned vessels have assumed the task of picking up the refugees," said Ralf Nagel. "This does not rule out the fact that, as always, German shipowners continue to be called upon to take part in rescue missions, however."

He said that the maritime shipping sector was obviously ready, now and in future, to help persons in distress. "This is not part of the political solution, however, and must not become part of it either," Nagel emphasised: "German shipowners do justice to their responsibility and comply with the parameters laid down by international maritime law to rescue people in distress on the Mediterranean Sea or if the shipowners are requested for assistance by the responsible bodies. However, the European community of states should by no means increase pressure on the maritime sector again simply by abandoning this task and responsibility. The crews are not trained and freight vessels are not equipped for picking up dozens (let alone hundreds) of persons."



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Just how urgent the problem has become is reflected in the relevant figures: according to media reports almost 50,000 boat refugees have been rescued so far as part of the EU mission; evidently German naval sailors have rescued some 22,500 persons in distress in the Mediterranean Sea since May 2015.

Ralf Nagel: "In almost all cases, these were not normal sea rescue missions launched for shipwrecked persons. What the crews find here on arrival is an absolute human disaster: a hundred or more persons, pregnant women, children, sick people – most of them completely exhausted, dehydrated and frequently traumatised. The crews are not prepared for this, especially since they cannot take care of the people on board properly, and this applies particularly to ill and injured persons. These are traumatic experiences, also for seafarers."

About the German Shipowners' Association (VDR)

The German Shipowners' Association (*Verband Deutscher Reeder, VDR*) is responsible for representing the common business and social policy interests of German shipping companies at federal and state government level as well as in relation to European and international bodies. The VDR was established in 1907, and in 1994 it merged with the Association of German Coastal Shipowners. With a membership of around 220, the VDR represents the bulk of Germany's merchant fleet. Further particulars are available at www.reederverband.de.

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Printable photographs of Ralf Nagel: www.reederverband.de/presse/pressebilder.html