

WAVE AFTER WAVE

At the height of the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, commercial ships rushed to the rescue, often traumatizing sailors and revealing the ripple effect of this unprecedented global crisis

This story was originally published by Street Roots' sister paper Hinz & Kunzt in Hamburg, Germany. Street Roots is a member of the International Network of Street Newspapers, composed of 120 independent newspapers around the world.

BY BIRGIT MÜLLER
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Hamburg, Germany –

It was a full-blown distress call that the German Shipowners' Association issued to politicians. Between 2014 and 2016, more and more commercial ships were rescuing drowning refugees in the Mediterranean Sea – and it was leaving the German Shipowners' Association feeling overwhelmed.

One ship owner from Hamburg was – and continues to be – particularly hard hit. Christopher E.O. Opielok supplies oil and gas rigs off the Libyan coast. “Our crew members are seeing people die; they are drowning in front of our eyes,” he told German TV channel n-tv in 2015. His crews succeeded in saving the lives of 1,500 refugees during this period. A lot has happened since the height of the crisis. The ship owners' SOS was heard, and both the EU and German Navy have since sent ships to help – periodically, at least. They are supposed to put a stop to people smuggling, “but they have also saved the lives of refugees,” says Ralf Nagel, chief executive officer of the German Shipowners' Association. There are a number of aid organizations who go out on special ships to rescue refugees, he adds: “That has been a big help for commercial shipping.”

It is a good thing because, unlike aid organizations' ships, most commercial ships are not suited to rescuing dozens, let alone hundreds, of people at sea.

“Cargo ships are built for the quick transportation of goods, so they normally have high sides,” one captain told Hinz&Kunzt in Hamburg, Germany. This means that rescuing people at sea is a major technical challenge, he added. Using a pilot ladder is only a possibility for a few, strong people and life boats can usually only take a few people. In addition, there is often too little food, water and life-saving equipment,



Above, helpers from Sea-Watch spotted an overloaded dingy at the end of May in the middle of the Mediterranean. The refugees were able to be saved and brought ashore.

PHOTO BY CHRIS GRODOTZKI / SEA-WATCH.ORG

including blankets, on board – let alone facilities for adequately accommodating cold and dehydrated people and providing medical care.

“Some refugees freeze to death within minutes (of being brought) on board after we have pulled them out of the water,” ship owner Opielok told n-tv. The psychological strain on the crew members was – and is – huge as a result. “Many crews are traumatized,” Opielok continued, “and many people are looking for another job.”

For ship owners, such rescue operations are also commercially disadvantageous. “But insurance covers many of the costs,” says Nagel, the German Shipowners' Association CEO. It reimburses the costs for fuel, supplies and life-saving equipment. “The biggest burden is borne by people working at sea,” he said.

Every shipping company and captain would, of course, pick up refugees if they were asked for help. “Rescuing people at sea goes without saying,” Nagel said. “Every sailor knows how dangerous it can be at sea. And an overloaded dingy with 150 people on board is always an emergency situation.”

Rescuing people at sea is not just a matter of honor for sailors: it is also governed by international law.

“The only time when it's a matter of discretion is when the rescue would put the lives of the crew at risk,” Nagel said. For example, if a ship needed to approach a

burning oil platform to help people. “Then the captain can decide to keep a (safe) distance because the risk of explosion,” Nagel explained. “But if I see a sinking dinghy, fundamentally, there's no room for discretion.”

In practice, ships are ordered to the scene of an accident by the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC), which knows where every ship is at any given time. Captains must obey the orders of the MRCC, whether or not they can then continue on their delayed journey.

“We can't evade our responsibility or simply pass by,” Nagel said. “Any captain who doesn't follow an order can face criminal prosecution, including retrospective prosecution.”

Those saving lives can also face problems. In June, Italy refused the Danish container ship Alexander Maersk permission to enter an Italian port. This was not despite, but because, of the fact that the ship had 100 rescued migrants on board. “If a German ship had been affected, we would have put pressure on politicians,” Nagel says. And that is what the Danish government and the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) did: Italy eventually allowed the Alexander Maersk to enter the port of Pozzallo, after days of waiting.

*Translated from German by Holly Bickerton
Courtesy of Hinz&Kunzt / INSP.ngo*



Unlike commercial ships, rescue ships have low sides for rescuing people.

PHOTO BY RUBEN NEUGEBAUER / SEA-WATCH.ORG

from the fish market. As a pastor, he talks to the sailors on a regular basis. Here, he speaks about his experiences and explains why sea rescue operations are essential:

“A sailor once told me how he saw a child and mother drown right before his eyes. He was aboard a fairly large container ship. Life vests were floating in the water. Some people had clearly already died. Using their last ounce of strength, the mother and child drew near to a rescue ladder. But the ship was still moving a little and the sea was rough. Both were dragged under the water and weren't seen again.

“The sailor saw everything and had no way of helping. It shook him up very badly and it took months before he could go out on the Mediterranean. He still doesn't dare go out on the Mediterranean.”

“Other sailors try to repress what they've gone through. I can understand why. You need to be able to function at sea. It's a tough job – 300 hours' work per month – and sometimes you're away for nine months at a time, far from home. Only when sailors stay at in port for a longer period, perhaps because they're ill, for example, do they have the time to talk to a pastor such as myself.

“Three years ago, a sailor confided in a colleague of mine that he no longer dares sail in the Mediterranean. He remembers sailing over children's rucksacks drifting in the sea. Many people are still using this route to flee hunger and war. I know sailors who are unable to sleep at night in the summer months before a trip to the Mediterranean.”

“The fear that a rescue could fail is always there. Unlike rescue organizations' boats, cargo ships are not equipped to enable people to easily come on board from the water. The side of the ship can sometimes be 30 metres above the surface of the water and there are no hatches to simply pull people through. Even in calm seas there can be a suction effect in the water.

“When they use a rope ladder to climb down to the shipwrecked, the sailors put their own lives at risk. The mere thought that something like this could happen at any time off the Libyan coast is

enough to make the sailors anxious.

“Many of them would like to turn a blind eye, but they don't. The law requires them to provide a rescue service to those in distress at sea. However, they don't provide help just because the law says so: if you're at sea, then you offer your help. It's a guiding principle. It's also got nothing to do with their morals. I've spoken with sailors who vote for right-wing parties and think that too many refugees are coming to Europe. But there's no question that they would help refugees in distress, regardless of the fact that it's dangerous and irrespective of their personal feelings towards the people. At that moment they're not refugees, but castaways floating in the water.”

“Now that captains are facing charges for offering assistance – as happened with the boat Lifeline – it means that these fundamental practices are being destroyed. Saving lives at sea goes without saying. That principle can never be shaken.

“Anyone who goes a step further and says that the expectation of receiving help in distress is contributing to migration is confusing cause and effect. The people who died came first. If that weren't the case, then the rescuers and their lifeboats would never have gone out in the first place. Now people are saying that if there were no rescuers, then people wouldn't dare make the dangerous flight across the sea. But there are plenty of studies that say this is not the case. People will continue to flee. And they will continue to do so across the sea, over and over again.”

*Translated from German by Hazel Davies
Courtesy of Hinz&Kunzt / INSP.ngo*

MARITIME DEACON

‘Many of them would like to turn a blind eye, but they don't.’

BY JONAS FÜLLNER
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Fleeing across the Mediterranean has always been dangerous. The International Organization for Migration has recorded over 13,500 deaths in the past three and half years alone. Aid organizations such as Sea Watch, Sea Eye and Lifeline have been deploying lifeboats to prevent this number from rising further, but now their vessels have been blockaded in Malta. While sea rescue operations are being obstructed, the dying continues. Italy won't even allow entry to vessels carrying rescued refugees.

It is not only lifeboats but also large cargo ships that have been taking in the shipwrecked. The international Law of the Sea obliges ships' captains to help people in danger on the high seas if they are able to do so. To not do so would also deeply offend the sailors' sense of honor. This is something that maritime deacon Fiete Sturm is certain of. The 36-year-old is the leader of the German Seamen's Mission in Altona, Hamburg, which is located not far

“Three years ago, a sailor confided in a colleague of mine that he no longer dares sail in the Mediterranean. He remembers sailing over children's rucksacks drifting in the sea.”

– Fiete Sturm
maritime deacon, Hamburg
Germany