

NSA guidelines for large scale SAR operations. (One-page check list)

In 2014, record numbers of refugees have attempted to reach Europe by sea, resulting in frequent SAR operations in the Mediterranean. The types of merchant ship involvement in SAR vary, but often involve large numbers of people (100 – 500). Ships may monitor and assist a small boat with refugees while waiting for assistance by a coast guard/navy vessel. Ships may embark refugees from small boats, assisting a few hours, then transfer refugees to a coast guard/navy vessel. Ships may embark, assist and transport refugees to a safe port for disembarkation – an effort which may last up to two days. SOLAS regulates your obligation to assist people in distress and your right to disembark them in a safe port. UN refugee conventions bar you from returning refugees to shore in a country deemed unsafe (like Libya). Seek advice if in doubt. NSA is ready to assist you if necessary.

Check list / summary of suggested guidelines:

- Make sure you company and crew is prepared. Discuss scenarios, roles, risks, solutions.
- Approach the refugees with a mob boat. Provide life vests, water/nutrition if possible.
- Establish trust. Assure the refugees that they are safe and will not be returned to shore.
- Calm down the refugees. Protect their boat from winds, waves, using you own ship.
- Keep in touch with the MRCC. Maintain good internal communication among the crew.

- If embarking refugees: Secure, prepare your ship. Lock the interior. Seal off dangerous areas.
- The transfer/embarkation phase is critical. Ensure safety and order to avoid accidents.
- Note the number of people. Specify gender, children, and nationality. Document events.
- Implement hygienic and infectious disease control measures for crew. Use protective gear.
- Keep refugees on deck in a 24/7 controlled environment. Wear uniforms, display authority.
- Control what the refugees bring on board. Body check/metal scan? Confiscate knives, etc.
- Show cultural and gender sensitivity. Identify and assist the most vulnerable.
- Ensure safety and supervision of children. Some may travel unaccompanied.
- Provide water and food/nutrition/shelter/medical aid as per your capabilities.
- Consider destroying the refugee boat –but note that the traffickers may try to interfere.

- After disembarking / transferring to a safe port:
- Search for stowaways. Hand over any remaining ID papers / belongings to the authorities.
- Disinfect decks / areas. Dispose of used personal protective equipment, properly.
- Debrief your crew after operation. Remember: some may need extra follow-up.