Onboard the Bourbon Argos: The Médecins Sans Frontières Search and Rescue Operation

PHOTO ESSAY BY ALESSANDRO PENSO

The Mediterranean Sea and, in particular, the crossing from North Africa has always been one of the most dangerous parts of the journey for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who risk everything in their desperate bid to reach Europe for a better life. After the Lampedusa boat tragedy of October 3, 2013 during which 366 people lost their lives, the Italian government established *Operation Mare Nostrum* to increase sea patrols and to help prevent further tragedies.[1] The operation ended in 2014 for economic reasons and was replaced by *Operation Triton,* which was conducted by Frontex (the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders) and jointly managed by the member states of the European Union.[2] Unfortunately, *Operation Triton* was more limited in its scope and budget than the one it replaced. Moreover, the end of *Mare Nostrum* coincided with an increase in the number of people trying to reach Europe and in the number of deaths on the Mediterranean. According to the International Organization for Migration, in April 2015 alone 1,244 migrants lost their lives while crossing the Mediterranean.

Frustrated by insufficient action by the EU, in May 2015 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, or "Doctors without Borders") launched a ship, the *Bourbon Argos,* as an additional search and rescue vessel for activities in the Mediterranean Sea. Adapted for search and rescue operations and able to maneuver quickly to respond to calls of distress, the boat is specially equipped and has the capacity to rescue 300–350 individuals at a time. The team on board includes a medical staff and an experienced search and rescue crew. "With the decision by the EU and Italy not to continue *Mare Nostrum* at the time more people than ever were reaching their shores, we could not wait to see thousands more people die," MSF declared.

These images were taken aboard the *Bourbon Argos* on November 13, 2015, close to the Libyan coast. During the operation 93 migrants of different nationalities, including 31 Nigerians, were rescued from their dinghy by the MSF.

ALESSANDRO PENSO is a photographer deeply committed to matters of social concern. In recent years he has focused on immigration across the Mediterranean. His work has won several international awards, including Project Launch Award (2011), Terry O' Neill TAG Award (2012), 1st General News of World Press Photo (2014), Magnum Foundation Emergency Fund (2014), and Burn Emerging Photographer Fund (2014). Alessandro is keenly aware that the difficult social and economic conditions in Mediterranean countries are providing an outlet for the phenomena of cultural closure, xenophobia, and violence; in turn, they represent an insurmountable obstacle to the migrants' enjoyment of even the most basic human rights. In 2012 he witnessed a brutal attack on a group of migrants in Corinth, Greece, during which one young man, Mostafa, was hit by a car. This experience has further motivated Alessandro to continue his work on immigration across the Mediterranean in an effort to raise awareness of xenophobia and to help combat racially-motivated violence. He hopes his work will also help fight the dehumanization and stereotyping of migrants that takes place in public discussion, often in order to score political gains. Alessandro's work has appeared in numerous publications, including *Stern Magazine*, *The Guardian*, *BBC*, *New York Times*, *Businessweek*, *Time Magazine*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Human Rights Watch*, *L'Espresso*, *Internazionale*, *Repubblica*, *Vanity Fair Italia*, and *El Periodico*.

1. http://www.marina.difesa.it/EN/operations/Pagine/MareNostrum.aspx.

2. http://frontex.europa.eu/news/frontex-launches-joint-operation-triton-JSYpL7. stigmas that have come to traumatize Thessaloniki and its inhabitants.