

Rescue ship says Spain is blocking its bid to aid refugees in Greece

Wednesday 1 May 2019, by [MARTÍN María](#) (Date first published: 16 April 2019).

A vessel operated by an NGO is trying to deliver humanitarian relief to Lesbos, but Spanish authorities say it needs a new permit despite having one from Portugal.

A Basque fishing vessel converted into a migrant rescue boat called the *Aita Mari* is having problems going to [the Greek island of Lesbos, where it aims to deliver humanitarian aid](#) to the thousands of refugees concentrated there.

“The restrictions for rescue missions cannot affect the ship’s other humanitarian tasks.”

- HUMANITARIAN MARITIME RESCUE

On its way through the Strait of Gibraltar this past Saturday, the Spanish Maritime Authority warned the crew, first over the radio and then by email, that it had to return to a Spanish port: “You do not have permission to cross the Mediterranean. Before leaving Spanish territorial waters... you must request a dispatch indicating the port and destination area, and detailing the activity you plan to carry out.”

Since January, the Spanish Maritime Authority, which answers to the the Public Works Ministry, [has been stopping this vessel from going into Libyan waters to rescue migrants and refugees](#) in distress. The non-profit organization which owns the *Aita Mari*, Humanitarian Maritime Rescue, accepted the order, and instead of rescuing migrants, decided to head toward the Greek island of Lesbos to deliver more than 40 crates of medical supplies, diapers and infant formula. The boat got authorization for this mission at a port in Lisbon, Portugal.

However, the Spanish maritime authority has [demanded that the boat return to a Spanish port to obtain new authorization](#). A ministry spokesperson said that the permission granted in Portugal is not valid. “As an NGO vessel dedicated to rescue missions it needs to apply for a dispatch at a Spanish port specifying its exact destination and the activity it plans to carry out.”

The organization fears the permission will not be granted. “With this message, Spain is going against the decision of the Portuguese Maritime Authority,” they explain. “The restrictions on rescue missions cannot affect the ship’s other humanitarian tasks.” The Humanitarian Maritime Rescue is registered as a humanitarian organization in Greece and has been collaborating with the country’s authorities in assisting migrants and refugees since 2015.

Spain’s position on Spanish migrant rescue vessels did a U-turn at the beginning of last year. The decision to block the *Aita Mari* in January followed the same rationale that had immobilized [the NGO vessel Open Arms](#) in Barcelona 10 days before. The Spanish government halted humanitarian missions in the Central Mediterranean after Italy and Malta closed their ports, which [forced Spain to accept an influx of migrants](#).

After first opening its ports to around 450 migrants assisted by the *Open Arms* in the second half of

2018, maritime authorities decided to block the *Aita Mari*'s mission on the grounds that the vessels do not meet the security requirements needed to undertake long journeys with large numbers of people on board.

English version by [Asia London Palomba](#).

María Martín

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

El País

https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/04/15/inenglish/1555321756_764415.html