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Eyewitness about fugitives on the Strait of Gibraltar "After the storm they come again"

Strait of Gibraltar: Hundreds of people try to cross the Strait to Spain; tourists on the whale watching boats take pictures of the refugees. The church helps much too little, reports an eyewitness.

DOMRADIO.DE: From your home port Tarifa near Gibraltar you start daily into the Strait. Have you ever met refugees during your research trips?

Katharina Heyer (founder of the *firmm* foundation for the observation of Whales and Dolphins in the Strait of Gibraltar): Of course. Our captain is obliged to report immediately if he sees anything. Then we have to keep an eye on the small boats – usually until now two or three people have been in them. We are not allowed to leave, even if the ship is full of tourists who would like to watch whales and dolphins. Then we have to wait for the Coast Guard to come and pick them up. But we are not allowed to take any people on board. That is forbidden. We are only allowed to do that if people are in danger of their lives. But the coastguard is constantly on the move, bringing in the refugee boats.

DOMRADIO.DE: When there is an encounter, how do the tourists react?

Heyer: The tourists take of course pictures. But the crew knows what to do. We also see hundreds of refugees in the harbour and the refugee boats that are brought into our harbour by the lifeboats. The crew also wants to help, we are actually very positive about these refugees. But we are not allowed to take them on board.

DOMRADIO.DE: There are also sperm whales in the Strait of Gibraltar and orcas off the coast of Morocco. Is this a problem for the refugees in small boats?

Heyer: No, whales don't attack refugees. They don't pose any danger to the refugees.

DOMRADIO.DE: What about the weather? Today and in the coming days you are not sailing out due to the weather. In your experience, are refugees nevertheless on their way?

Heyer: Today we really have strong wind. There won't be any refugees either. But as soon as the wind calms down, they'll be on their way again. And then there will be a few hundred more. That's the tragedy.

DOMRADIO.DE: How do the Spanish deal with this growing number of refugees? Are there protests, aid programmes?

Heyer: Here in Tarifa the harbour has long been overcrowded. Large buses take the refugees to facilities. A sports hall was opened for 600 people. But it was quickly overcrowded. Since three days now the harbour of Tarifa is not allowed to be approached by the rescue ships anymore; simply because one no longer knows where to put the people.

DOMRADIO.DE: In Germany the churches are very committed to the refugees. Is that also the case in Tarifa?

Heyer: No, I have to say that the church actually does nothing but support Caritas. I asked my crew if the church was also active. They laughed and asked me if I had ever seen a church that donates money.

But there are many volunteers who help in these refugee camps. After their job they go out in the evening to help whenever they can. The people really help where they can. But there is a lack of clothes, of shelter, of food, there is simply a lack of everything. And that is why all the refugees are no longer allowed to come to Tarifa. They now arrive at the other places nearby until everything is overcrowded there as well. The tragedy is: I haven't seen these people for three days now, but of course I know the problem is just displaced and it hasn't stopped.

The interview was conducted by Heike Sicconi.