Mediterranean crisis: EU leaders blasted over 'war on smugglers'

Written by Desmond Hinton-Beales on 24 April 2015 in News

MEPs have reacted angrily to EU leaders' response to the rising migrant death toll in the Mediterranean.

European council president Donald Tusk, speaking after the extraordinary council in Brussels on Thursday, said, "Saving the lives of innocent people is the number one priority. But saving lives is not just about rescuing people at sea. It is also about stopping the smugglers and addressing irregular migration."

The Polish official outlined four priority areas for action, including the destruction of smugglers' vessels before they can be put into use, tripling the Triton mission's resources, limiting irregular migration flows and doing more to protect refugees.

Tusk stressed that EU leaders had been under "no illusions that we would solve this international human emergency today". "We have tasked the commission, the council and [EU foreign affairs chief
Federica Mogherini to step up their work based on what we have now agreed. This issue remains our priority and the European council will come back to it in June.

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Migration, home affairs and citizenship commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos, speaking in Malta, said the EU's response was "clear and unequivocal". "Europe is declaring war on smugglers," said the Greek official, who added, "even one more life lost is one too many. So, the situation in the Mediterranean has to change now. We have to take action now. We will take action now."

"First," he said, "we want to strengthen the Triton and the Poseidon operations managed by Frontex to control the border and save lives. On both sides of the Mediterranean, Europe should also step up its initiatives in the fight against the smugglers.

"European agencies operating in the field (the European asylum support office here in Malta, Frontex, Europol, Eurojust) are ready to work closely in order to support member states.

"Looking beyond our most immediate operational response, we need to be very clear and recognise that the migratory flows are not going to disappear anytime soon. The arc of instability that surrounds Europe is generating them and the perspectives for stabilisation are only for the long-term."

Reaction from parliament was less than positive, however, with ALDE group president Guy Verhofstadt criticising the outcome as "the lowest common denominator".

"Everybody in the room knew that tripling the budget of Triton will not prevent new disasters, if nothing is done about the root causes of this crisis. Our lack of action is a recipe for a new disaster.

"We have to take away the incentives for people to step in a boat in the first place. This will only happen if we introduce a revised asylum system which gives people the possibility to apply for a humanitarian visa at home and an equivalent to the US green card: a well-functioning European blue card."

Co-chairs of the Greens/EFA group Rebecca Harms and Philippe Lamberts were equally scathing, saying, "nobody should be convinced" by EU leaders' expressions of "horror at the tragic losses of life in the Mediterranean", which they branded as "hypocrisy".

"The summit's conclusions reveal that, as before, the focus will remain on deterrence. They want to destroy boats, tackle smugglers and reinforce borders in North Africa. That will not solve the ongoing refugee crisis in the Mediterranean and will leave us waiting for the inevitable next tragedy.

"We need a permanent EU-funded programme for search and rescue of refugees. Giving more funds to the Triton mission of the EU's Frontex border agency is not sufficient."

Lamberts and Harms accused the commission of "sitting on its hands" as Frontex only has a mandate for border protection and instead called for "a designated programme for sea search and rescue, with
EU funding

"The political groups in the European parliament [...] called for more resources for sea search and rescue and a more coherent EU migration policy but it seems their member parties in national governments are ignoring them.

"We call on the other political groups to support proposals to amend the EU budget for 2015 to provide a clear and dedicated budget line for a permanent sea search and rescue programme."

GUE/NGL MEPs joined in the condemnation of the summit outcomes, with German deputy Cornelia Ernst saying, "What we need is a European Mare Nostrum and not a war against smugglers that are exploiting the lack of safe and legal access to Europe."

Mare Nostrum was Italy's 12-month naval and air operation designed to tackle increased immigration from the Middle East and Africa into Europe through the Mediterranean that the international organisation for migration praised for its work in rescuing thousands of people attempting the crossing.

Ernst called on Europe to react to the tragedies taking place in the Mediterranean by "immediately putting in place a cross-country search and rescue operation as this issue is not just an Italian problem, it is a European one.

"All member states should help and show solidarity. We strongly oppose setting up any cooperation with third countries to outsource asylum and search and rescue."

Parliament president Martin Schulz also criticised the "lack of a truly European asylum and migration policy", saying that this shortcoming was now "turning the Mediterranean into a graveyard".

Schulz called for a stepping up of search and rescue operations, urging common European action and solidarity among the member states, as well as measures to ensure the fair treatment of refugees.

"Our immediate priority must be to save lives at sea," he said.

About the author

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