

Ioannis Michelakis
Minister for Interior

Nikolaos Dendias
Minister for Public Order and Citizen Protection

Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Brussels, 23 May 2014

Dear Ministers,

EUROPEAN STATES MUST ACT TOGETHER TO SAVE LIVES OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

On 5 and 6 June, European Union (EU) Ministers will meet at the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council to discuss next steps for the measures agreed by the Task Force for the Mediterranean (TFM). The TFM was set up in response to two tragedies in the central Mediterranean where more than 400 people lost their lives. Many of these people – including children – were escaping from conflict-torn countries like Syria and Eritrea. Despite statements of anguish and solidarity from EU leaders, and the creation of a dedicated Task Force, there has been little concerted action by the EU to put an end to the death toll. Decisive action was taken unilaterally by Italy, which has been carrying out extensive search and rescue, and interception on humanitarian grounds in the central Mediterranean under the “Mare Nostrum” operation (OMN) since 18 October. Tens of thousands of refugees and migrants have been rescued and brought to Italy since then. Through a significant deployment of assets, covering a wide stretch of the Mediterranean Sea, and by considering any overcrowded migrant boat in distress, Italy has ensured timely rescue of those concerned. With the exception of Slovenia, which took part in the operation with a battleship between 15 December 2013 and 31 January 2014, no other member state has supported Italy’s OMN, nor has there been any sharing of responsibility for those rescued and disembarked to Italian shores.

In the first five months of 2014, over 200 more individuals lost their lives in the Aegean and Mediterranean seas trying to reach Europe, with hundreds believed missing. As summer approaches (the peak season for boat crossings), search and rescue activities in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas must urgently be strengthened to prevent further tragedies and loss of life. This can only be achieved through a joined effort by all EU member states. The EU must stop focusing concerted action solely on preventing arrivals to Europe. This will only force people, who are desperate to escape conflict and poverty, to take increasingly hazardous journeys in search of refuge.

In addition to rescuing those who are forced on perilous journeys, preventing deaths at sea also requires the opening of legal and safer channels for refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants to arrive in Europe. EU states are making it virtually impossible for people to use safer routes to Europe. Restrictive policies regarding visas, family reunifications and resettlement quotas are contributing to deaths at sea. It is simply shameful that as the number of Syrian refugees in the region has exceeded 2.7 million, EU member states have only pledged to take 15,948 Syrian refugees.

Amnesty International urges European Ministers at this meeting to commit to the following:

- Increase search and rescue capacity in a concerted way, with a view to covering migratory routes to Europe both through the Mediterranean and Aegean Sea. This may be done either by supporting Italy’s Operation Mare Nostrum, or through the establishment of a different cooperation framework. Search and rescue efforts must operate under the assumption that any boat with refugees and migrants on board is in a situation of distress requiring prompt rescue
- Make effective arrangements on disembarkation of rescued people consistent with international human rights and refugee law. Legal and administrative procedures applicable to rescued persons should seek to reunite unaccompanied minors with relatives in European states, in accordance with

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the Dublin Regulation, and allow other asylum seekers to join families and support communities elsewhere in Europe, to avoid irregular secondary movements within the EU

- Ensure that disembarkation occurs in a place of safety in all instances – this is understood as a place where fundamental rights are protected and the principle of non-refoulement is respected, in accordance with the Regulation establishing rules for the surveillance of external sea borders in the context of Frontex operations. This would rule out disembarkation, or any reception arrangements being made, in countries such as Libya
- Make human rights the cornerstone of any cooperation in the sphere of migration control with third countries; agreements must be transparent, enshrine adequate protection standards, and fully respect the rights of asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants
- Open safe routes for refugees to Europe by firmly committing to significantly expand resettlement quotas and humanitarian admission programmes, and facilitate family reunification for refugees with families in Europe.

We strongly urge you to support these measures during your discussions.

Yours sincerely,



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