
EU NAVAL MISSION ████████ TO STOP PEOPLE SMUGGLING, SAYS UK PARLIAMENTARY REPORT

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The European Unions maritime mission to combat people trafficking off the Libyan coast is failing and has only succeeded in forcing smugglers to change their tactics, a British parliamentary report said Friday (13 May).

Operation Sophia, as the mission is known, does not in any meaningful way deter the flow of migrants, disrupt the smugglers networks or impede the business of people smuggling on the central Mediterranean route, it said.

The report by the House of Lords sub-committee on EU External Affairs noted that arrests so far have been of low-level targets, and the destruction of vessels has caused smugglers to shift from using wooden boats to rubber dinghies, which are even more unsafe.

The committee said there was little prospect of Operation Sophia overturning the business model of people smuggling.

Committee chairman Lord Tugendhat said the mission to patrol areas six times larger than Italy was always going to present an enormous challenge.

Our report stresses that the operation is succeeding in carrying out its separate search and rescue obligations, which is to be commended, he said.

However, a naval mission cannot disrupt the business model of people smuggling, and in this sense it is failing.

The smuggling networks operate from Libya, and they extend through Africa. Without support from a stable Libyan government, the operation is unable to gather the intelligence it needs or tackle the smugglers onshore.

European Commission First Vice-President Frans Timmermans is understood to be preparing a communication that is in line with some of the Lords recommendations.

Following the recent focus on the Turkish-Greek route, EurActiv.com understands that the next focus of the Commissions efforts will be the Central Mediterranean route.

Recent meetings of EU foreign affairs ministers have ended with strong signals of support for the new Libyan Government of National Accord.

Ministers hope to eventually secure permission from the government to up their ability to tackle smugglers onshore.

How that will be achieved, either by EU forces, or Libyan, or a combination of both, is still a long way from being decided.

Yesterday (12 May) EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini said she was very proud of Operation Sophia because it was saving lives and bringing smugglers to justice.

Speaking after the Foreign Affairs Council, she said, The real key here is to dismantle the traffickers networks, and give them to justice. The number of suspect smugglers we have given to the justice system in Italy and the number of vessels we have destroyed is already considerable.

As of 10 May, Operation Sophia had saved 13,746 lives, according to EU figures. A further 30,663 were saved thanks to the initiatives aero-naval support.

In six months on the high seas, 69 suspected people traffickers were arrested and handed over to the Italian authorities.

Operation Sophia has destroyed 114 vessels and helped neutralise another 206, EurActiv was told.

90% drop after Turkey deal

Meanwhile, the number of migrants arriving in Greece dropped 90% in April, EU border agency Frontex said, in a sign that a deal with Turkey to send back those who make the sea journey between the two countries is working.

Frontex said 2,700 people arrived in Greece from Turkey in April, most of them from Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq, a 90% fall from March.

Under the deal with Turkey, all migrants and refugees, including Syrians, who cross to Greece illegally across the sea are sent back.

In return, the EU takes in thousands of Syrian refugees directly from Turkey and rewards it with more money, early visa-free travel and faster progress in EU membership talks.

In Italy, 8,370 migrants arrived through the longer and more dangerous route from northern Africa, Frontex added, with nationals of Eritrea, Egypt and Nigeria accounting for the largest share on this route.

Frontex said there was no sign of migrants shifting from the route via Greece to the central Mediterranean route.

The number of people arriving in Italy in April was 13% lower than in March and half of that of April 2015, Frontex added.

Greece has since last June seen far more arrivals than Italy, driven mainly by refugees fleeing conflicts in war-ravaged Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, but the balance has shifted since 1 April, the UN refugee agency said.

For the first time last month there were more arrivals in Italy than in Greece, UNHCR spokesman William Spindler told reporters Friday.

About 1,000 people of various nationalities, including refugee families and unaccompanied children, were rescued yesterday in operations coordinated by Frontex.

In one operation, some 500 people travelling in two fishing boats that had departed several days earlier from Egypt were rescued off Sicily, south east of Cape Passero.

According to the Italian Coastguard, among this group there are some Syrians and Iraqis, as well as people from other nationalities.

Apart from the two fishing boats that sailed from Egypt, it is believed that there were other smaller boats that came from Libya.

BACKGROUND

Operation Sophia is the EU's maritime mission off the Libyan coast, part of its response to the refugee crisis.

Kaynak/Source: