
ITALY THREATENS TO TURN AWAY FOREIGN SHIPS WITH RESCUED MIGRANTS

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Italy's envoy to the EU has said it is unsustainable for all migrant rescue ships in the Mediterranean to land on his country's shores. Over 10,000 asylum-seekers have arrived in Italy over the last few days.

Italy's ambassador to the EU, Maurizio Massari, was given a formal mandate by his government to raise the issue with European Migration and Home Affairs Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos on Wednesday. According to Italian officials, the move represented "a formal diplomatic gesture" representing Rome's discontent with the current situation.

Discussed with Italian Ambassador our support after increasing numbers of arrivals in Italy. MS must deliver after #EUCO on Central Med.

Avramopoulos responded via Twitter that he had discussed with the Italian envoy "our support after increasing numbers of arrivals in Italy."

It is unsustainable, Italian diplomatic sources said, that all rescue ships should land in Italy.

"The ambassador highlighted that Italy's efforts have been enormous and well beyond international obligations, and under the current circumstances it is difficult for our authorities to allow further disembarkations of migrants," an Italian diplomat cited by German news agency dpa said.

"In everything we do, we all have a humanitarian obligation to save lives," EU commissioner Avramopolous said on Wednesday. "Of course, we cannot leave a handful of EU countries on their own to deal with this," he added.

Unsustainable pressure on Italy

According to Italian diplomatic sources, if the situation does not change, Italy may be forced to deny non-Italian-flagged ships or vessels that are not part of European missions permission to dock at its ports.

This would endanger the work of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and possibly prevent non-Italian merchant vessels carrying out rescue operations in the Mediterranean from bringing people to Italian ports. It is a legal obligation for all vessels, including commercial ships, to rescue people in distress on the high seas.

Rome's message is that Italy is facing a serious situation and Europe cannot look the other way. At

last week's EU summit, Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni failed to convince his EU partners to take in more asylum-seekers.

Rescued migrants on their way to Italy on board the Golfo Azurro

According to data from the Italian Interior Ministry, as of Wednesday of last week, 76,873 migrants had landed on Italian shores since the start of the year. The figure represents a 13 percent increase over the same period in 2016 and does not include the roughly 10,000 migrants saved in the Mediterranean Sea in recent days who are still in transit towards Italian shores. The number of arrivals is expected to increase further during the warm summer months.

NGOs under pressure

Among the NGOs rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean is Doctors without Borders (MSF). On Wednesday it reported its ship Aquarius had 1,032 rescued people on board.

MSF reported that a quarter of all those fleeing Libya are women and children:

Any change for migrant landings could affect several German vessels operated by German sea rescue charities, such as Jugend Rettet and Sea Watch.

Operation Sophia

Following the migrant shipwrecks in April 2015 off the coast of Libya, the EU began a military operation known as European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR Med), also called Operation Sophia. It was renewed in 2016 to run until July 27 this year. Its aim is to neutralize refugee smuggling routes in the Mediterranean Sea.

Among other European nations sending ships to take part in Operation Sophia are Germany, Belgium and most recently Spain, whose frigate Victoria left Rota last week to join the EU operation:

Fabrice Leggeri, the executive director of the EU's border agency Frontex, said on Wednesday the arrival of high numbers of boats from Libya was "extremely worrying."

"This year we are witnessing levels never registered before in short periods of time," Leggeri added.

Domestic agenda

Italy's ruling, center-left Democratic party has come under pressure over the migrant issue. In municipal elections earlier in June, center-right opposition parties made substantial gains with a number of politicians taking a tough stand on immigration.

The head of the conservative Northern League, Matteo Salvini, resorted to a slogan "stop the invasion" as he spoke out against migrant arrivals in Italy.

The populist Five Star Movement has also called for a halt to new migrant arrivals in Rome.

On Wednesday, the opposition Forza Italia party of former premier Silvio Berlusconi said the government had responded to its urgings for a tougher line on migration.

Kaynak/Source: