
EU: ITALY'S CHOICE TO END OR CONTINUE OPERATION SOPHIA

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The European Commission says it is up to Italy to decide whether or not to suspend the EU's naval operation Sophia.

"If Italy decides, it is the country in command of operation Sophia, to stop it - it is up to Italy to make this decision," Dimitris Avramopoulos, the EU commissioner for migration, told reporters in Brussels on Wednesday (23 January).

The Italian-led naval operation was launched in 2015 and is tasked with cracking down on migrant smugglers and traffickers off the Libyan coast.

It has also saved some 50,000 people since 2015 but appears to have massively scaled back sea rescues, according to statements from Germany's defence minister.

German defence minister Ursula von der Leyen was cited by Reuters on Wednesday saying that the Italian command had been sending the Germany navy "to the most remote areas of the Mediterranean where there are no smuggling routes and no migrant flows so that the navy has not had any sensible role for months."

Germany had also announced it would not replace its naval asset for the operation, whose mandate is set to expire at the end of March.

But the commission says that Germany will continue to participate in the operation.

"There is no indication that it will not make another asset available in the future," said Avramopoulos.

A German spokesperson was also cited as confirming Germany wants the mission to continue beyond March.

The commission statements follow threats from Italy's far-right interior minister Matteo Salvini to scrap the naval mission over an on-going dispute on where to disembark rescued migrants.

Salvini was cited in Italian media complaining that people rescued are only offloaded in Italy.

The complaint is part of a long-outstanding dispute by Salvini, who last year insisted that people should be disembarked in other EU states.

The same issue was part of a broader debate in the lead up to a renewal of Sophia's mandate in

late December.

Kaynak/Source: