
RIGHTS GROUPS LAMBAST OPERATION SOPHIA □ THE EU NAVAL MISSION WITHOUT SHIPS

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Human rights advocates criticised the European Union on Wednesday (27 March) for abdicating its humanitarian responsibilities after the bloc agreed to withdraw ships patrolling the Mediterranean for migrants attempting the perilous voyage.

After much wrangling, the EU agreed this week to extend its Mediterranean naval mission called Operation Sophia for six months beyond the end of March □ but only for air patrols and training of the Libyan coast guard.

EU to end ship patrols in scaled down Operation Sophia

The European Union will cease the maritime patrols that have rescued thousands of migrants making the perilous Mediterranean Sea crossing from North Africa to Europe, but it will extend air missions, two diplomats said on Tuesday (26 March).

This is an outrageous abdication of EU governments responsibilities, said Amnesty International.

This shameful decision has nothing to do with the needs of people who risk their lives at sea, but everything to do with the inability of European governments to agree on a way to share responsibility for them, it said in a statement.

The human rights commissioner for the Council of Europe, a European watchdog bigger than the EU, called on the bloc to step up sea rescues. Group Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) said the EU move was irresponsible and reckless.

EU states have been at loggerheads over migration since a spike in Mediterranean arrivals caught the bloc by surprise in 2015, stretching social and security services and fuelling support for far-right, nationalist and populist groups.

Sea arrivals have fallen from more than a million in the peak year to some 140,000 people last year, according to UN data. But political tensions around migration run high in the EU, especially ahead of European Parliament election in May.

Italy, under the influence of anti-immigration hardline deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini, moved to shut Italian ports for people saved in the sea by Sophia ships, demanding that other EU states also host the new arrivals.

Otherwise, Rome has threatened to pull the plug on the operation in the Mediterranean, where the United Nations says nearly 2,300 people perished last year trying to reach Europe.

Smugglers

But none wanted to, from major economies like Germany and France that already host many of the people who reached Europe from the Middle East and Africa since 2015, to nationalists ruling in the post-communist east Europe averse to Muslims.

The Italian coast guards website says the last time Sophia ships rescued people in the Mediterranean was last July.

But Berlin and others have wanted to continue the mission to fight smugglers. The awkward compromise this week is another step in the EUs increasingly restrictive approach to migration.

The EU considers it acceptable to let people die at sea as a deterrence for migration, the MSF said in a statement.

From now on, EU air patrols would only report emergencies to the Libyan coast guard, which can turn the people back to the country where rights abuses are rife.

A spokeswoman for the EUs executive European Commission on Wednesday acknowledged the diminished mission would play a much smaller role in saving lives: Its clear that without naval assets, Operation Sophia will not be able to effectively implement its mandate, Maja Kocijancic told a news briefing.

The EU has been funding UN agencies to help improve conditions in migrant camps in Libya gripped by lawlessness since the 2011 the ousting of veteran ruler Muammar Gaddafi.

UN aid agencies have long decried abuse of human rights in the camps such as rape, lack of medical care and forced labour.

MSF accuses EU of fuelling migrant abuses in Libya

EU aid to Libya to stop migrants entering Europe is fuelling a Libyan detention network that thrives on kidnapping, torture and extortion, a leading medical charity charged yesterday (7 September).

They sound the alarm at refugees and migrants being sent back to Libya in violation of international humanitarian law, which forbids returning people to where their lives are at risk.