



## Recent human smuggling incidents in the Mediterranean

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**Dimitris Avramopoulos, Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship**

*European Parliament Plenary Debate*

I am standing here before you today because the European Commission is determined to take action. We all heard on what happened over Christmas and New Year. The lives of around 1,200 migrants, mostly Syrians, were saved when the Italian Coast Guard and Frontex, in the framework of Joint Operation Triton, rescued two cargo vessels: the *Ezadeen* and the *Blue Sky M*. These are just two examples of the more than 12 cargo ships that arrived in Europe since September. Of course, many more people have risked their lives coming in numerous small boats or difficult journeys via land borders.

This is unacceptable. Why?

- Because we cannot allow ruthless smugglers to make a fortune through criminal acts, exploiting migrants looking for a safe passage to Europe.
- Because people in need of protection should not be risking their lives to obtain this protection.

We all know the facts: Conflicts in our neighbourhood generate a constant influx of refugees towards Europe. This will not go away. On the contrary, if decisive and coordinated EU-wide action is not taken, the flows will continue.

In 2014, more than 276 000 migrants arrived in the EU representing an increase of 155% compared to the previous year. The recent events also show that smugglers are finding new routes to Europe and are employing new methods in order to exploit desperate people who are trying to escape conflict and war.

In order to respond to the constantly evolving strategies of smugglers, the European Union, its agencies and the Member States have to step-up their cooperation and common action in a spirit of solidarity and responsibility. Better coordination and a more comprehensive approach will help to address the roots of the current flows of irregular migrants and of smuggling.

Let me first elaborate on the fight against smuggling and the rescue of migrants at sea.

The recent events show that the joint operation Triton, which started on 1 November 2014 and is coordinated by Frontex, has saved the lives of thousands of migrants. Since the launch of the Triton operation, and together with the Italian navy, almost 16,000 asylum seekers and irregular migrants were rescued or intercepted and 57 facilitators were arrested. In addition, other European Agencies have undertaken many important initiatives to tackle smuggling:

- At The Hague, Europol's team in intelligence sharing and cross-border investigations of smugglers' networks has been reinforced resulting in the arrest of hundreds of facilitators.
- In Malta, the European Asylum Support office (EASO) launched a pilot project to gather information from asylum applicants about the routes taken during their journeys.

The Commission will support its agencies in order to intensify their efforts but we also count on the financial and operational support of the Member States. We need to intervene and inform prospective migrants about the risks of entering Europe illegally. Reinforcing intelligence gathering and sharing and promoting practical cooperation between the Member States and EU Agencies is also crucial in order to prosecute more smugglers, undermine criminal networks and deprive them from profit making. Smuggling is a criminal offence but we need to make our legal instruments more effective. In this respect, the Commission is currently assessing the existing EU criminal framework in an effort to improve its practical implementation.

Cooperation with countries of origin and transit is also a cornerstone of the Commission's strategy to fight smuggling.

Given that Turkey has become one of the alternative routes for smugglers to reach the EU, we are in close contact with the Turkish authorities to quickly adapt our strategy.

Of course, the cooperation with third countries cannot be limited to the fight against smuggling. We will cooperate with them in an integrated approach, encompassing

- broader foreign policy considerations,
- development assistance and
- humanitarian actions.

One clear example of our integrated approach is the cooperation with many African countries. For the Horn of Africa countries, we have made available almost 6 million euros, not only to support and facilitate the fight against smugglers and traffickers, but also to improve the provision for direct assistance to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. In the context of the Syrian crisis, the EU and the Member States combined, is the largest donor with more than 3 billion euros available for humanitarian and other aid in Syria and in the neighbouring countries.

It also is vital that EU Member States fully implement the Common European Asylum System as soon as possible. Moreover, the EU and the Member States must work together to establish a truly European programme for the resettlement of refugees. Following a recent pledging conference, Member States have so far offered over a total of 36.000 places to Syrian refugees, making it the largest pledge in the history of EU resettlement efforts. However, overall 207 000 people have crossed the Mediterranean irregularly, and more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees have fled to countries neighbouring Syria. So Europe needs to do more. We have to increase the number of refugees resettled in EU countries.

In order to ensure that Member States share this responsibility, the Commission has set up a resettlement and relocation forum to develop, in cooperation with Member States, a fair distribution key. In this critical hour, where Europe is facing a growing number of challenges, the EU and the Member States, together, have to take credible and effective action on migration.

Europe has to take charge. We have no time to spare. Together, we will move forward with commitment and resolve.

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