



**Doc. 13764**  
21 April 2015

## **The human tragedy in the Mediterranean: immediate action needed**

### **Report<sup>1</sup>**

Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons

Rapporteur: Mr Thierry MARIANI, France, Group of the European People's Party

### *Summary*

Numbers of irregular migrants crossing the Mediterranean have been growing steadily over recent years, before they suddenly exploded from the second half of 2014. Regrettably, the number of deaths has increased proportionally. In 2012, 500 people were reported missing, in 2013, the number grew to 600. There was a dramatic increase to 3 500 in 2014. This year, it is already 1 500 and each day brings new dramatic reports. The most recent in the series of deadly incidents has taken the lives of 800 people.

The situation is not likely to settle down in the near future. Armed conflicts and instability, persecution based on ethnic or religious grounds and extreme poverty in Africa and the Middle East will continue to generate large numbers of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Estimated figures refer to 70 000 people waiting for boats on the Libyan coast and tens of thousands are on their way to Libya and Egypt.

The Parliamentary Assembly therefore calls on the member States of the European Union to adopt a comprehensive approach to deal with mixed migratory flows across the Mediterranean with a view to carrying out urgent and concerted action.

---

1. Reference to committee: Reference 4117 of 20 April 2015 (debate under urgent procedure).

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
A. Draft resolution .....	3
B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Mariani, rapporteur .....	5
1. Introduction .....	5
2. Short overview of irregular migration across the Mediterranean Sea .....	6
3. Possible ways to address these challenges .....	7

## A. Draft resolution<sup>2</sup>

1. The Parliamentary Assembly expresses its utmost concern about the ongoing humanitarian plight of irregular migrants in the Mediterranean Sea. The dramatic increase in the death toll over the last weeks has become a matter of urgency which should be addressed without further delay.
2. In 2014, the total number of irregular migrants who crossed the Mediterranean Sea amounted to over 210 000, including 170 000 arrivals in Italy. At the same time, 3 500 people perished at sea. Over the first three months of 2015, respective figures amount to over 30 000 arrivals and 1 500 drowned at sea. Regrettably, each day brings new dramatic reports.
3. Much of the loss of life in the Mediterranean is due to the methods used by the smugglers who organise maritime transport: to minimise costs, the boats used are often unseaworthy, and to maximise profit, they are always severely overcrowded; basic safety equipment is inadequate or completely lacking; there is insufficient food and water available for passengers; and often the smugglers abandon the boat on the high seas, leaving the migrants to rely on their own minimal ability to navigate and the hope of being rescued by the public authorities.
4. It has to be recognised that the present increased death toll is partly a consequence of the termination of the Italian search and rescue Mare Nostrum operation due to the lack of solidarity from countries of the European Union, which has not been living up to its responsibilities, and its replacement with the European Union Triton operation with a narrower mandate and much smaller human, budgetary and logistical resources. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the side effects of the Mare Nostrum operation which for many observers is thought to have contributed to the increased flows of seaborne migrants setting out from North Africa.
5. The sharp increase in the number of arrivals once again puts into question the Dublin Regulation according to which the whole responsibility for receiving and processing irregular migrants and asylum seekers is laid upon a limited number of receiving countries, Italy in particular, but also Malta, Spain and Greece, as well as raising questions about the relevance of the present asylum law and procedures.
6. The situation is not likely to settle down in the near future. Armed conflicts and instability, persecution based on ethnic or religious grounds and extreme poverty in Africa and the Middle East will continue to generate large numbers of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Estimated figures refer to 70 000 people waiting for boats on the Libyan coast. Turkey alone has received some 2 million people fleeing the war in Syria and Iraq.
7. The recent declarations of the leaders of the terrorist organisation known as “Islamic State” announcing their intention to smuggle their own people in amongst the flows of refugees, tasked with committing terrorist attacks in Europe, have raised legitimate questions about security.
8. The recent tragic incident when, as a result of a fight which broke out on one of the boats, nine migrants of Christian origin were thrown overboard by passengers of Muslim confession, coupled with recent reports about the killing of 27 Christian migrants by the so-called “Islamic State” on the Libyan coast, raises very serious concerns about the threat of transposing religious and ethnic conflicts onto European soil.
9. The Assembly is of the opinion that the key challenge is to reduce the number of people setting off on a dangerous sea journey. It is crucial to identify and address ways to decrease migratory pressures in the countries of origin and transit.
10. The Assembly therefore calls on the member States of the European Union to adopt a comprehensive approach to deal with mixed migratory flows across the Mediterranean, with a view to carrying out an urgent and concerted action, and in particular to:
  - 10.1. strengthen, as a matter of urgency, search and rescue operations at sea, with increased contributions from all member States;
  - 10.2. adopt effective measures and co-ordinate common action at European level in the combat against human traffickers and smugglers;
  - 10.3. to review the Dublin Regulation with a view to sharing responsibility for receiving and processing irregular migrants and asylum seekers;

---

2. Draft resolution adopted by the committee on 21 April 2015.

10.4. increase legal alternative migration channels, including resettlement, facilitated access to family reunification and other protection entry mechanisms advocated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR);

10.5. step up humanitarian aid and development projects in the countries of transit and origin with a view to improving standards of living in these countries and help to develop capacity and institution building in countries of transit and of first asylum with a view to alleviating migration pressure;

10.6. enhance co-operation, including administrative, judicial and investigative co-operation with the countries of origin and transit, in particular on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea;

10.7. ensure access to asylum for those in need of international protection by introducing the possibility of external application processing and, to this end, thoroughly review, if necessary, asylum policies.

11. The Assembly welcomes the 10-point conclusions of the European Union Council of Ministers of 20 April 2015 introducing short-term measures aimed at handling some of the challenges with regard to irregular migration in the Mediterranean and the decision to convene an extraordinary European Union summit today. However, the Assembly considers that the measures announced are utterly insufficient and expects the comprehensive European Union Agenda on Migration, due to be announced in May, to address the issues mentioned in the previous paragraph.

## B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Mariani, rapporteur

### 1. Introduction

1. Up to 1 500 migrants are feared to have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea since the beginning of 2015. This figure is fifty times greater than at the same point in 2014. The last week in particular has marked an unprecedented increase in the death toll, and the most recent in the series of deadly incidents took place on 18 April 2015, beating the previous tragic record: as many as 700 men, women and children are feared to have drowned in a single shipwreck. Up till now, the most tragic incident involved an estimated 500 people who drowned off the coast of Malta last autumn. At the very moment of drafting the present report, on 20 April 2015, a new shipwreck has been reported and, if confirmed, 400 new victims are to be expected.

2. What is particularly worrying is the growing ruthlessness of unscrupulous traffickers, who, in the chase for ever greater profits, do not hesitate to commit the most serious crimes resulting in severe human rights violations: there are reports of them allegedly locking migrants in the hold, shooting at coast guards in order to recuperate vessels, thus preventing them from rescuing victims, or else abandoning drifting, overladen and decrepit “ghost vessels”, at an extremely high risk for passengers’ lives.

3. The situation is not likely to settle down in the near future. Armed conflicts and instability, persecution based on ethnic or religious grounds and economic poverty in Africa and the Middle East will continue to generate increasingly growing numbers of migrants and asylum seekers. Estimated figures refer to 70 000 people waiting for boats at the Libyan coast, which is a starting point for about 90% of sea migrants. Tens of thousands more are on their way to southern Mediterranean shores. Once arrived, they remain in appalling conditions and are reportedly ill-treated by traffickers before embarking. Extreme violence is common in these temporary accommodation. Traffickers operate with relative impunity, particularly in Libya, where the State institutions are totally inefficient.

4. The mass arrival of refugees on European, mainly Italian shores, puts the host countries under extreme pressure. Since the beginning of the year, as many as 31 500 migrants have crossed the sea and arrived in Italy. However, in one week alone, between 10 and 17 April 2015, as many as 13 500 migrants were rescued by the Italian coast guards.

5. The recent declarations of the leaders of the terrorist organisation known as “Islamic State” announcing their intention to smuggle their own people mixed with the flows of refugees and tasked with committing terrorist attacks in Europe have raised legitimate questions about security.

6. Furthermore, the tragic incident reported last week when, as a result of a fight which broke out on one of the boats, nine migrants of Christian origin were thrown overboard by passengers of Muslim confession, coupled with recent reports about the killing of 27 Christian migrants by the so-called “Islamic State” on the Libyan coast, raises utmost concern about the threat of transposing religious and ethnic conflicts onto the European soil.

7. All of these interlinked problems have been dealt with and continue to be on the agenda of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population.<sup>3</sup> The present report, prepared under urgent procedure, results from the utmost concern caused by the sudden surge in deaths and deepening migrant crisis. In my

---

3. Indeed, the committee has initiated the following texts adopted by the Assembly: [Resolution 2047 \(2015\)](#) on the humanitarian consequences of the actions of the terrorist group known as “Islamic State”, [Resolution 1805 \(2011\)](#) on the large-scale arrival of irregular migrants, asylum seekers and refugees on Europe’s southern shores, [Resolution 1872 \(2012\)](#) “Lives lost in the Mediterranean Sea: who is responsible”, [Resolution 2000 \(2014\)](#) on the large-scale arrival of mixed migratory flows on Italian shores and [Resolution 1999 \(2014\)](#) “The ‘left-to-die’ boat: actions and reactions”. I refer all of those interested to consult these texts. At present, the committee has a number of relevant reports under preparation: “The Mediterranean Sea: a front door to irregular migration” (rapporteur: Ms Dumery, Belgium, NR); “Organised crime and migrants” (rapporteur: Mr Chikovani); “Countries of transit: meeting new migration and asylum challenges” (rapporteur: Ms Strik); “Assessing the need for a comprehensive review of the Dublin regulation and its implementation” (rapporteur: Mr Nicoletti); “Criminalisation of irregular migrants” (rapporteur: Mr Stroe). Furthermore, the committee’s Sub-Committee on Co-operation with non-European countries of origin and transit organised two conferences, in Rabat last October and in Lagos (Portugal) in March 2015 in the framework of the South–North Dialogue on Migration, providing an opportunity for an exchange of information, experience and best practices between countries of origin, transit and host countries.

opinion, the problem of lives lost in the Mediterranean goes beyond the migration issue and has a much broader political dimension. While it involves a humanitarian dimension, it has become a political issue and it requires an urgent political response at the European level.

8. Given tight deadlines, the present report cannot provide an exhaustive analysis of the situation and it does not aspire to constitute a thorough overview of irregular migration across the Mediterranean. Similarly, it does not want to substitute for other relevant reports under preparation in the Migration Committee (see footnote 3). It comes up, however, with a political assessment and based on it some concrete proposals aimed at identifying possible remedies to this dramatic situation which cannot continue.

## **2. Short overview of irregular migration across the Mediterranean Sea**

9. Numbers of irregular migrants crossing the Mediterranean have been growing steadily over recent years, before they suddenly exploded from the second half of 2014. In 2012, a total of 12 000 irregular migrants managed to cross the sea, in 2013, almost 60 000 landed on European shores (out of these, 43 000 arrived in Italy). In 2014, the total number increased to over 210 000 including 170 000 arrivals in Italy. Based on the data provided by the Italian Ministry of Interior, by 30 April 2014, the total number of those arriving was 26 644. In 2015, the respective figure was higher by 5 000. We can expect that the whole of 2015 will mark record numbers if no action is taken.

10. Regrettably the number of deaths has increased proportionally. In 2012, 500 people were reported missing, in 2013, the number grew to 600. There was a dramatic increase to 3 500 in 2014. This year, it is already 1 500 and each day brings new dramatic reports.

11. There are several routes, which change very rapidly in order to respond to external circumstances, including migration control measures in specific countries. At present, the Central Mediterranean Route is privileged with the main departure points being Libya (90%) and Egypt, with the main arrival points being Italy and Malta. Mixed migratory flows into Europe include refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants. The majority appear to be from Sub-Saharan Africa, Eritrea (23%), Somalia, Afghanistan and Syria (17%) of whom most were rescued in international waters.

12. The passage across the Mediterranean is facilitated by migrant smugglers. These groups adapt their routes and methods in response to changes in circumstances, such as the actions of European authorities. Much of the loss of life in the Mediterranean is due to the methods used by the smugglers who organise maritime transport: to minimise costs, the boats used are often unseaworthy and to maximise profit, they are always severely overcrowded; these boats often embark in dangerous weather; basic safety equipment is inadequate or completely lacking; there is insufficient food and water available for passengers; and often the smugglers themselves abandon the boat on the high seas, leaving the migrants to rely on their own minimal ability to navigate and the hope of being rescued by public authorities. As I mentioned in the introduction, their callous disregard for human life seems to have grown over recent weeks.

13. When 366 people died in a wreckage off the Italian island of Lampedusa in October 2013, the Italian authorities, solely among all European countries, took concrete steps to avoid further deaths in the sea. They launched Operation Mare Nostrum, which deployed a significant proportion of its maritime forces with the task of rescuing migrants in international waters. This humanitarian Operation put on hold long-standing disputes between Italy and Malta over the extent of their respective search and rescue operations which had undermined their effectiveness. Between October 2013 and September 2014, the Italian Navy rescued over 100 000 people.

14. For months, Italian authorities lobbied the European Union to take over the Mare Nostrum Operation or at least to contribute to it in a substantial way. Finally, in November 2014, the Italian authorities decided to terminate the Operation. Financial reasons certainly played an important role in this decision, but it has to be pointed out that the present EU Dublin Regulation disincentives any effective search and rescue operations by the southern European countries as they all face responsibility, post rescue, of receiving asylum seekers, processing asylum applications and, possibly, returning rejected applicants. The Migration Committee is preparing a specific report on the need for a revision of the Dublin Regulation and a fairer repartition of responsibilities among the European countries.

15. In August 2014, the European Commission launched its own operation named Triton, to be implemented by Frontex (the European Agency for the Management of Operational Co-operation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union). However, Frontex's capacity to respond to search and rescue needs in the Mediterranean is not of a level comparable to that of Mare Nostrum in terms of material and operational means. Moreover, its area of action is much smaller.

16. It has to be recognised that the present increased death toll is partly as a consequence of the termination of the Mare Nostrum Operation. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the counter-effects of this humanitarian rescue operation which by many observers is thought to have contributed to the increased flows of seaborne migrants setting out from North Africa.

17. Tens of thousands of migrants are currently trapped in Libya and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is deeply concerned for their safety. The same is true for Egypt.

18. The sharp increase in the number of arrivals once again puts into question the Dublin Regulation according to which the whole responsibility for receiving and processing irregular migrants and asylum seekers is laid upon a limited number of receiving countries, Italy in particular. It also raises questions about the relevance of the present asylum procedure and asylum law.

### **3. Possible ways to address these challenges**

19. It is clear that this unbearable humanitarian situation cannot continue and Europe has to undertake swift action in order to save further loss of lives. Life-saving operations have to be reinforced and contributions should be better balanced between the European countries. A strengthened collective European Union search and rescue system should be introduced. However, life-saving and rescue operations cannot be considered as the main remedy to the multifaceted problem and have to be accompanied by other measures. More particularly, they must not encourage irregular migrants to take to the seas.

20. Adequate measures should be taken in order to prevent criminal networks of smugglers from operating. It has to be recognised that the fight against trafficking of migrants is far from being efficient and European co-operation in this respect leaves a lot of room for improvement. The success of Task Force 120 that efficiently eradicated Somali piracy could be seen as an example to follow in both saving lives and combating traffickers. I hope that Mr Chikovani, who is currently preparing a report on organised crime and migrants on behalf of the Migration Committee, will look further into the possible action to be recommended to Council of Europe member States in this respect.

21. Sharing responsibility for receiving and processing irregular migrants and asylum seekers is another issue which requires political reassessment. The Dublin Regulation should be reviewed. I am confident that Mr Nicoletti, the Migration Committee's rapporteur on this issue, will closely examine this question.

22. However, the key challenge is to reduce the number of people setting off on a dangerous sea journey. It is crucial to identify and address the ways to decrease migratory pressures in the countries of origin and transit. Tackling the network of traffickers exploiting and mistreating migrants is necessary but it will not, in itself, be a solution to the problem.

23. Legal alternative migration channels (resettlement, facilitated access to family reunification and other protection entry mechanisms) advocated by human rights organisations and already in place (although on a small scale) are to be recommended but they will not solve the whole problem either. As long as economic differences and hardship exist people will migrate in search of a better life. The only way to truly change the reality is to address the situation at its roots.

24. Hence, the importance of humanitarian aid and development projects in the countries of transit and origin. Improving standards of living in these countries would certainly help to alleviate migration pressure. Helping to develop capacity and institution building in countries of transit and of first asylum would be beneficial for all those concerned.

25. European countries should enhance their co-operation, including judicial and investigative co-operation with the countries of origin and transit.

26. In order to ensure access to asylum for those in need of international protection, the possibility of external application processing should be given consideration. Such a solution would require a thorough review of asylum policies, but it would be instrumental in addressing the challenge of mixed migration flows.

27. The tragedies which we witness now on an almost daily basis illustrate that existing mechanisms and arrangements are not sufficient to prevent a dramatic loss of lives at sea. A comprehensive approach is needed to address more effectively this situation. Urgent and concerted action is needed.

28. In reaction to the most recent tragedy in the Mediterranean on 20 April 2015, European Union ministers held an emergency meeting in Luxembourg and proposed a 10-point plan to help address the crisis. It will be submitted to a European Summit convened on 23 April 2015. The proposed measures include the reinforcement of EU border control operations (Triton and Poseidon) in the Mediterranean with more money and equipment and an extension of its operation area. It proposes a “systematic effort to capture and destroy vessels used by smugglers” and to set up a new programme for the rapid return of migrants, as some other measures aimed at reinforcing the fight against smugglers. Support for Italy and Greece in the processing of asylum applications and fingerprinting of all migrants are among other proposals. A pilot project for resettlement of those in need of protection will be elaborated.

29. While these short-term emergency measures addressing some of the concerns are welcome, they are nevertheless utterly insufficient and I expect the comprehensive European Union Agenda on Migration, due to be announced in May, to address other outstanding issues mentioned in the previous paragraphs.