

Can Africa thwart the next great migration crisis? European leaders hope so

Under a new system, African leaders have agreed to register 'vulnerable' would-be migrants before they can seek asylum in Europe.

More than 1.5 million migrants have surged into Europe since 2015. Now European leaders and their African counterparts are working to stop the next mass migration before it starts.

In Paris on Monday, the leaders of France, Germany, Italy and Spain met with the presidents of Niger and Chad - as well as Fayed al-Sarraj, the head of Libya's unity government. They agreed on a new policy of registering "vulnerable" migrants at reception centres in Africa before they can seek asylum in Europe.

The war in Syria and conflict and poverty across Africa have caused a surge in migration over the past several years, prompting migrants and asylum seekers to pour into Europe, including along the deadly central Mediterranean route. To curb the flow, European leaders like Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have long called for increased screening in Africa. In return, they have promised their African partners significant developmental aid.

Monday's summit was a victory of sorts for European leaders, who pushed for guarantees on tightened African border checks, increased Libyan patrols in the Mediterranean, and a crackdown on aid groups that carry out water rescues, which governments say enable traffickers to continue dangerous smuggling practices.

But migration advocates were quick to reiterate the problems with what they consider a deeply flawed bargain. The developmental aid Europe has promised, they say, can amount to funneling money to repressive regimes.

"It's out of sight, out of mind," Sophia Wirsching, a migration consultant for Bread for the World, a Protestant aid organisation in Germany. "Europe is

attempting to shift its duty to countries that are not capable or willing to take on the responsibility for refugees.”

The migration issue continues to inflame domestic politics across the continent – and perhaps nowhere more so than Germany.

There, finding ways to address forced migration beyond Europe’s borders has taken on new urgency several weeks before a federal election that is serving as a referendum on Merkel and her decision two years ago not to close Germany’s borders to about a million migrants fleeing the Syrian war. Polls show the long-serving, centre-right leader with a comfortable advantage as she works to assure voters that the rapid influx of asylum seekers was a one-time deal.

Earlier in the summer, Macron proposed a network of “hotspots” in Libya, where migrants would be evaluated for asylum before making the journey. Those deemed to be economic migrants would be turned back. The notion was harpooned by Human Rights Watch and prominent European humanitarian groups.

But some political analysts insist that implementing refugee processing on the African side of the Mediterranean is a necessary step.

“You can be critical of hotspots because it’s not entirely clear how they would work, but the reality is the idea is not all that different from what we decided with Turkey last year,” said Pierre Vimont, a former French ambassador to the European Union, referring to the deal between the EU and Turkey to stem the flow of migrants into Greece.

Monday’s summit also addressed a proposed code of conduct for aid groups, some of which have been accused of performing rescues that enable smugglers to continue dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean.

Many aid groups reject those charges.

“Basically, the accusations we’ve heard about NGOs, that we are somehow helping the traffickers, are vastly ill-conceived,” said Bruno Jochum, director general of Doctors Without Borders.

“It’s part of a general strategy to stop the coming flow at whatever cost,” he said. “Today, European states are accommodating themselves and pushing people back

into situations of generalized mistreatment.”

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