

EU plans to take 50,000 refugees from Africa, Middle East

BRUSSELS (AFP) – The EU unveiled plans on Wednesday (Sept 27) to take at least 50,000 refugees directly from Africa, the Middle East and Turkey to discourage migrant boats from making the risky Mediterranean crossing.

The proposal involves admitting refugees to European Union countries over the next two years under the bloc's resettlement programme, which was introduced during the migration crisis that hit the continent in 2015.

"We need to open real alternatives to taking perilous irregular journeys," European Union Migration Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos told a news conference in Brussels.

The European Commission said in a statement that it was "recommending a new EU resettlement scheme to bring at least 50,000 of the most vulnerable persons in need of international protection to Europe over the next two years".

The EU has already resettled 23,000 people from refugee camps in countries outside the EU under the scheme, particularly Turkey and Jordan, which were overwhelmed with people fleeing the war in Syria.

Resettlement would continue from those areas but there would be "increased focus" on North Africa and the Horn of Africa – particularly Libya, Egypt, Niger, Sudan, Chad and Ethiopia, the commission said.

"This will contribute to further stabilizing migration flows along the Central Mediterranean route," which mainly involves people making the dangerous crossing from Libya to Italy, it said.

The resettlement programme is different from the EU's controversial refugee quotas, which involved moving asylum-seekers who had already reached Italy and Greece to other EU countries, under compulsory quotas.

The latter scheme, which ended on Wednesday, saw just 29,000 people out of a planned 160,000 shared out around EU states to ease the pressure on the overstretched Greek and Italian authorities.

SCHENGEN CONTROLS EXTENDED

Brussels separately released plans on Wednesday to allow countries in the passport-free Schengen area to reintroduce border controls for security reasons for up to three years.

Countries in the 26-country Schengen travel area can currently reintroduce frontier checks for six months for security reasons, and two years if that is combined with a threat to borders such as Europe's migration crisis.

"Under today's proposals, member states will also be able to exceptionally prolong controls if the same threat persists," the European Commission, the executive arm of the EU, said in a statement.

Avramopoulos however said this should be a "last resort", and that keeping the Schengen area open for travel should be a priority.

Several countries including France and Germany have called for the extension after a series of terror attacks. France reinstated the checks after the November 2015 Paris attacks.

Border checks introduced by Germany, Denmark, Austria, Sweden and Norway in May 2016 to deal with a huge influx of migrants into Europe from Syria and North Africa are set to expire in November.

The reintroduction of so many checks raised concerns about the collapse of the Schengen zone, seen by many in Europe as a symbol of unity and freedom.

Source: <http://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/eu-plans-to-take-50000-refugees-from-africa-mideast>

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