

Migrant crisis: EU summit leaders reach deal after marathon talks

European Union leaders have reached an agreement on migration after marathon talks at a summit in Brussels.

Italy – the entry point for thousands of migrants, mainly from Africa – had threatened to veto the conclusions of the entire agenda if it did not receive help on the issue.

In a compromise, new migrant centres are to be set up in EU countries on a “voluntary” basis.

They would determine who are “irregular migrants, who will be returned”.

The relocation and resettlement of genuine refugees would also take place on a voluntary basis, the agreement says.

However, it was unclear which countries would host the centres or receive refugees.

The joint communique also speaks of restricting the movement of asylum seekers between EU states.

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“After this European summit, Europe is more responsible and offers more solidarity,” said Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. “Today Italy is no longer alone.”

But German Chancellor Angela Merkel said more needed to be done to resolve disagreements.

What has been agreed?

In addition to the migrant processing centres, hosted by EU members on a voluntary basis, the 28 EU leaders also agreed several other measures:

- strengthening external border controls, and boosting financing for Turkey and countries in North Africa
- exploring the possibility of “regional disembarkation platforms”, which are aimed at breaking the business model of people-smuggling gangs by processing refugees and migrants outside the EU. However getting North African countries to host such centres could be very difficult and Morocco again on Thursday rejected the idea
- internal measures taken by member states to stop migrants moving within the EU, which the agreement said undermined asylum policy and the border-free Schengen travel area
- boosting efforts to “prevent the development of new sea or land routes” into Europe
- more investment in Africa to help the continent achieve a “substantial socio-economic transformation” so people no longer leave for a better life
- Further work to reform EU asylum policy, including changes to the so-called Dublin regulation under which migrants must be considered for asylum in the first safe country where they arrive

Whose needs does the deal meet?

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte had earlier taken the rare step of blocking the conclusions of the joint communique until the leaders had settled the migration issue. Both Italy and Greece want other countries to share the burden.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel had said that the migration issue could be a defining moment for the EU – but she also needed the summit to avert a political crisis at home that could bring down her government.

Interior Minister Horst Seehofer, from her Bavarian coalition partner, the CSU, had given her a deadline of this weekend. He has threatened to start turning away migrants who have already registered elsewhere from the border in his home state.

Without the CSU, Mrs Merkel would lose her parliamentary majority.

It is unclear whether the measures agreed will be enough, and speaking to reporters at 05:00 local time (03:00 GMT), she acknowledged the EU still had “a lot of work to do to bridge the different views”.

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The bloc is deeply divided over the migration issue, with several Central European states rejecting an EU scheme to relocate 160,000 refugees from overcrowded camps in Greece and Italy.

How many migrants are entering the EU?

The flows of people include refugees fleeing the Syrian war and other conflicts, urgently seeking asylum.

It is not a crisis on the scale of 2015, when thousands were coming ashore daily on the Greek islands. The European Council – the EU's strategic leadership – says the numbers illegally entering the EU have dropped 96% since their peak in October 2015.

Mediterranean migrant arrivals in 2018



But this month's tensions over migrant rescue ships barred from entry to Italian ports – most recently the German charity ship Lifeline – have put the issue firmly back in the EU spotlight.

The Lifeline was only allowed to dock in Malta after intense diplomacy among several EU states, who each agreed to take some of the migrants on board. Malta said that Norway had now also agreed to take a share.

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44652846>

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