

**Mitteilung für die Presse
Press Release
Communiqué de presse**

Luxemburg, 20. April 2007

Interior Ministers strengthen European Border Management Agency Frontex in the fight against illegal migration

Against the background of recurring migration flows via the Mediterranean and the Atlantic towards Europe, the Council and the Commission consider it a priority to give Frontex the necessary means and competences for supporting the Member States under particular strain to tackle this challenge.

Federal Interior Minister Dr. Schäuble said in Luxembourg that

“the citizens expect Europe to provide effective protection of its common external borders. Therefore it is the declared aim of our Presidency to further develop the operability of the European Border Management Agency Frontex in order to improve the protection of the external borders of the European Union and intensify border police cooperation. This is why I am pleased to see that we have today succeeded in achieving agreement in the Council on the “Regulation establishing a mechanism for the creation of Rapid Border Intervention Teams”. Together with the Commission we have been able to complete negotiations on the regulation in the past few weeks amongst the Council working groups and the EP Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs rapidly. The Committee approved the regulation as early as on 11 April. I expect the European Parliament to adopt it by late April so that the Council can officially decide on the regulation still under German Presidency. This means that we have succeeded in finalising this important regulation to protect our common external frontiers within less than 12 months in the co-decision procedure involving the Council and the European Parliament.”

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The Rapid Border Intervention Teams created by the regulation will be composed of experts from Member States and be made available by Frontex at short notice to any Member State whose borders are under a particular threat and strain by illegal migration. Basically, all Member States are requested to contribute to the human resources pool to be set up by Frontex. The targeted initial personnel strength will be some 450 officers; this is a number already envisaged by the Frontex Management Board.

Furthermore, the draft regulation contains provisions on the tasks and competences of guest officers involved in Frontex operations. This will make joint operations coordinated by Frontex even more effective. Throughout Europe, Germany is the only country to have comparable provisions for vesting guest officers with executive powers. “The Federal Police has had very positive experience with giving executive powers to guest officers on the occasion of the FIFA World Cup 2006,” Schäuble underlined.

Another important point of the Ministers’ discussion was the setting up of a centralised technical record– the so-called toolbox - by Frontex. This record lists all technical equipment for external border control and surveillance Member States are ready to make available for temporary use at the request of another Member State. Member States have meanwhile made major contributions to the toolbox; for instance, they have offered over 20 airplanes, almost 30 helicopters and far more than 100 vessels as well as a variety of other technical equipment. Today Frontex Executive Director Ilkka Laitinen gave the ministers a detailed report. At the last Council meeting, the German Presidency had made an urgent appeal to Member States to support the Agency in setting up the centralised record.

Furthermore the Council dealt with the development of a European Patrols Network for the southern sea borders. This patrols network defines surveillance areas at flashpoints of illegal migration which will in future be regularly controlled by surveillance vessels. “Minister Schäuble said that “today we have succeeded in making another important step to protect the common external sea frontiers in the south. The Frontex Executive Director has reported that a permanent coast patrols network of the Member States will take up operation in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic in late May under the coordination of the Agency. This mechanism is a vital measure to counter illegal migration at the external sea borders jointly and in a coordinated manner.”

Another subject discussed at the Council meeting was the envisaged establishment of a European Surveillance System – initially at the external sea borders. It is planned inter alia to set up satellite surveillance later on.

“All in all, I am greatly satisfied to see that in the first six months of this year we have succeeded in clearly reinforcing the European Border Management Agency. This means that we have achieved one important aim of our Presidency,” was Minister Schäuble’s balance of today’s meeting.