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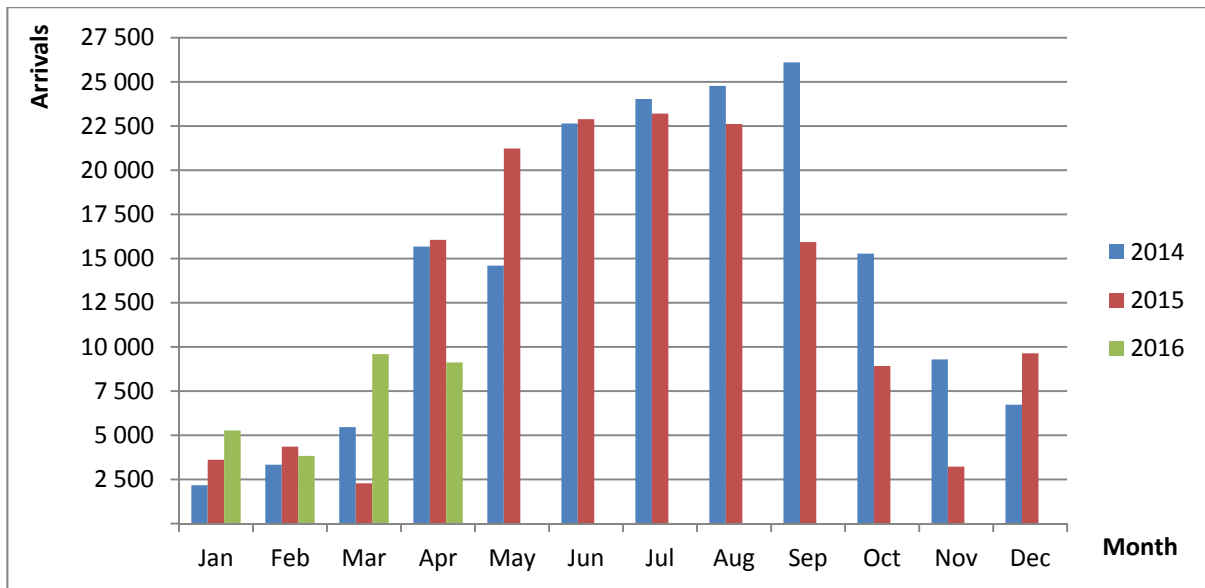
NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum/
Mixed Committee (EU-Iceland/Liechtenstein/Norway/Switzerland)
Subject: Central Mediterranean route

1. Introduction and background

Since the closure of the Western Balkans route and the implementation of the EU-Turkey statement, crossings along the Eastern Mediterranean route have drastically decreased. While the implementation of the EU-Turkey statement is being closely monitored and as weather improves, the Central Mediterranean route is re-emerging as the primary source of illegal entry into Europe. Focus should therefore be given to this route in order to prepare the necessary steps to manage migration flows along the route. Both for the short-term, where this paper focuses on the internal aspects. But also and for the medium- to long-term, where credible ways forward have been identified in Valletta and recent contributions by Member States, including Italy's 'migration compact'. The European Commission has announced it will come with an communication in June 2016.

2. Arrivals



In the first four months of 2016, 27.810 arrivals have taken place, which is in line with the approximate 26.000 in both 2014 and 2015 in the same period. While arrivals in April (9.116) are significantly lower compared to the same month in the last 2 years (respectively 15.679 and 16.061), this may be due to specific circumstances and does not necessarily represent a break in trend. A cautious analysis therefore suggests that it is reasonable to assume that the Central Mediterranean route could see a level of arrivals at least as high as in 2014. Much will depend on the evolution of the situation in Libya and the implementation of possible actions that could address the situation in Libya and along the Mediterranean.

On top of that and also for the longer term, developments on the African continent need to be acted upon. The relations with countries of origin in Africa will have to be intensified in line with the outcome of the EU Africa summit on migration in Valletta and the EU strategy for external action on migration. Recent valuable analyses and contributions, such as the Italian proposal for the migration compact, need proper follow-up.

At the IPCR Working Level Roundtable of 26 April participants largely agreed on several aspects. First, there is at this time no significant shift observed of Middle Eastern migrants changing their route from Turkey to the Central Mediterranean route. The majority of migrants rescued at sea on this route are sub-Saharan West Africans, who generally speaking are not eligible for relocation. Later in the season, it is likely that East Africans will join the flow in greater numbers. The chaos in Libya is both a deterrent as well as a pull factor for many migrants to try and cross the Central Mediterranean there.

A recent estimate on potential migrants in Libya of around one million, communicated by IOM, was dismissed by most participants. These numbers might be accurate for the total number of third country nationals in Libya, but by no means indicate migrants ready to make a crossing into Europe.

A new phenomenon that is being observed are smuggling ships departing from Egypt and traveling along the coast, picking up migrants along the way. This may be to avoid the very unruly areas in some parts of Libya. It also opens up a possible avenue for the EU to combat the crossings, also in cooperation with Egypt and other regional actors.

Numbers of migrants moving through Agadez (Niger) which is a hub for the migrant routes, are going up week by week, according to FRONTEX. The impact of the drought in the Horn of Africa, which is ongoing since around 6 months has been worsened by El Niño, but ECHO was unable to determine if this is a major push factor at this time.

The trends for the Central Mediterranean route are unclear. In February, 2016 was lower than 2015, in March 2016 was much higher, and April looks to be lower again, UNHCR said. Italy said numbers are all but stable compared to a year ago. So far this year, only 17 Syrians, 21 Iraqi and 9 Afghani have arrived via this route, confirming that at this point the Central Mediterranean route is not an alternative for the almost closed Eastern Mediterranean route. West and Central African countries represent 75% of the countries of origin in 2016, similar to previous years. Moreover, according to Frontex, less than half of those rescued and brought to Italy apply for asylum upon arrival and a large majority of these are rejected, indicating that the majority of arrivals seem to be economic migrants.

3. Departures

Smuggling networks are very reactive and able to adapt their tactics quickly. In Libya, the majority of departures originate from the Tripolitania area, where smuggling has become an important source of income. Egypt is also becoming more popular as departure point. In general, the boats they send to Europe are set off with a limited supply of food, water and fuel. It is not the intention that these boats make it to Europe. They are designed to reach the border of the territorial waters and high seas, to then trigger a search and rescue (SAR) operation. The average voyage lasts about 10 hours. Political, humanitarian and moral considerations have resulted in an EU increased activity in the Mediterranean, such as the Frontex operation Triton and the EUNAVFOR MED – Operation SOPHIA. However, our scope for action concerning rescued migrants will respect the international legal framework: the refugee and asylum law and the law of the sea. The requirement to bring rescued people to a 'place of safety' and the principle of *non-refoulement* must be respected at all times, and in the current situation it is evident that Libya does not fulfil these criteria.

4. Reception capacity

Italy has designated hotspots in Catania, Lampedusa, Trapani, Porto Empedocle/V Sikanìa, Pozzallo, Augusta and Taranto. At this point, four hotspots are fully operational: Pozzallo, Lampedusa, Trapani and Taranto, with a total capacity of 1.600 places. Additionally, while not declared fully operational, Porto Empedocle and Augusta each have a reception capacity of 300 people, bringing the total reception capacity up to 2.200. Furthermore, discussions are ongoing to officially open a fifth hotspot and the Ministry of Interior is examining the possibility to open further hotspots in Sicily and Sardinia in order to cope with the expected arrivals during the coming summer period. Italy has indicated that a total of 150.000 reception places can be made available when necessary.

The Commission in its latest ISAA report estimates that around 60% of arrivals were outside existing hotspots. However, we have to take into account that the disembarkation of rescued migrants in a hotspot is not always feasible due to sea conditions or logistical constraints. Moreover, a hotspot does not need to be 100% operational for fingerprinting and registration to take place. Additionally, mobile teams have been set up in other designated hotspots or elsewhere to cope with migrants arriving outside the hotspots. This has led to the fact that Italy can ensure more than 99% of all arriving migrants are fingerprinted and registered (with the exception of minors who cannot be fingerprinted).

In this respect, the possible establishment of a floating hotspot should also be highlighted. This vessel would serve as a staging ground where the different naval operations could transfer the rescued migrants in order to be identified, fingerprinted and registered. The planned floating hotspot would be able to host up to 1.000 migrants at sea and allow the smaller rescue vessels to quickly redeploy to their respective areas. Migrants would then be disembarked at a facility with available space in a planned and coordinated manner.

However, due to the limited reception capacity in the hotspots, migrants are being transferred to larger reception centres. Due to the large number of migrants not eligible for international protection, the anticipated increase in arrivals during the summer months and difficulties with enforcing effective return, the pool of migrants in Italy and possibly Malta and elsewhere may increase. Without agreements on return, this will create an additional burden on those countries to handle the situation. All EU Member States have a responsibility to assist in this matter. Additionally, for the relatively small number of migrants eligible for relocation, continued and urgent efforts are still required.

In light of these considerations, the Presidency invites delegations to comment on the following questions:

- 1. Taking into account the above-mentioned situation in the Central Mediterranean, what is your assessment of the migratory flows in the region?*
- 2. How can we support the countries along the Central Mediterranean route in coping with the pressure, and how can we address the challenges of the Central Mediterranean route?*