

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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The logo for Human Rights Watch, consisting of the words "HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font, arranged in three lines and centered within a solid blue square.

HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

Brussels, April 22, 2015

Dear European Union Heads of State and Government,

Human Rights Watch welcomes your decision to hold an extraordinary Council Summit to address the crisis in the Mediterranean Sea. At least 1,600 migrants and asylum seekers have died attempting to reach EU shores so far this year. It is high time that the EU faces up to the humanitarian disaster at its southern shores, and for member states to agree on bold and principled steps to save lives and ensure safe and legal alternatives for thousands of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who see no other alternative than embarking on the dangerous and all too often deadly boat journey to reach Europe.

The most urgent imperative is to ensure a robust search-and-rescue operation in the Mediterranean. The end of Mare Nostrum, Italy's massive humanitarian operation, and its replacement with Frontex's far more limited operation Triton did not, as some argued it would, deter boat migration. Indeed, the number of people making this dangerous journey virtually doubled in the first four months of 2015 compared to the same period last year. And deaths at sea have skyrocketed. People are not fleeing to European shores because they trust they will be rescued. They are fleeing war, persecution and poverty and are so desperate that they are willing to risk their lives.

The ten-point plan put forward by the European Commission and endorsed by EU foreign and interior ministers on Monday proposes to strengthen Frontex operations in the Mediterranean with more assets, a larger budget, and a wider geographical scope, but still not to the level of Italy's Mare Nostrum operation. These added resources will not alter Frontex's basic border enforcement mission. This is not an adequate response. What is required is a multinational operation with a clear mandate to actively seek out and rescue migrants and asylum seekers in distress at sea, and bring them to safe EU ports, where their claims can be processed in an orderly manner with all their rights respected and protected.

The EU should also work quickly to set up safe and orderly methods for people to seek asylum in the EU without having to put their lives in the hands of unscrupulous smugglers. Some 50 percent of the people arriving by boats are fleeing Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Somalia—all countries with severe violence and repression. It is time to recognize that these people are going to come regardless, and prepare adequately to receive them in a humane way that respects their rights, be they economic migrants or asylum seekers.

The ten-point plan on Monday includes some positive, if modest, steps towards alleviating the unbalanced responsibility on countries at the EU's external borders, and increasing voluntary resettlement of refugees. More should be done on both fronts. All EU member states can and should respond more generously to calls from the United Nations to resettle refugees from Syria, as well as other protracted refugee crisis situations around the world.

Proposals under consideration, including offshore camps to process asylum claims in third countries, financial and technical assistance to countries neighboring Libya to strengthen their sea patrol capabilities, and increasing financial assistance to sending countries such as Eritrea, must be designed carefully to ensure they do not engender or entrench human rights abuses. We encourage assistance to build the capacity of regional host countries to provide refugee protection, but caution that simply bolstering immigration enforcement capacity through building more detention centers and higher border fences is no solution, and may only result in further human rights violations.

This is an occasion for the EU as a whole to reaffirm the core importance of respect for human rights—including the most fundamental of rights, the right to life—as a guiding and non-negotiable principle underpinning migration and asylum policy.

Thank you for your consideration and I stand ready to discuss this with you at any time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ken Roth". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Ken Roth
Executive Director
Human Rights Watch