

# Frontex Moves **FRONT AND CENTER**



# The EU's multinational border-control agency assumes a larger role in confronting illegal immigration

The Italian Coast Guard brings sub-Saharan African migrants to the Italian island of Lampedusa. The Arab Spring ignited a temporary migration crisis as people fled countries such as Libya in 2011.



EPA

By *per Concordiam* Staff

**T**housands of migrants from North Africa, mostly refugees from disruptions caused by the Arab Spring, poured into Europe in 2011. They crammed into rickety boats and braved the waves with sights set on Spain's Canary Islands or Italy's Lampedusa Island. The largest number, however, took their chances on the Greek border with Turkey, where the European Union's external borders have been under pressure not just from North African refugees, but from economic migrants from all over Asia and Africa. In 2012, fewer North Africans made the trek, but Syrians fleeing conflict at home have multiplied. Wherever their origin, Greece remains the illegal migrant's favored entry point into Europe.

Recognizing the problem in late 2011, the EU Parliament authorized creation of the European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR) and European Border Guard Teams (EBGT) and is considering strengthening the EU's external borders through Frontex, Europe's joint border-control organization. But some European policy analysts suggest the EU needs to go further in creating a common European border-control policy, with member states ceding authority to a Frontex better able to protect the continent from transnational crime, including terrorism, illegal immigration and trafficking in human beings.

## EUROPE'S BORDERS

Frontex estimates that as many as 90 percent of attempted illegal European border crossings happen in Greece. Since 2006, Greek officials have registered roughly 100,000 illegal immigrant asylum seekers per year, *Der Spiegel* said, noting that "Greece has not been able to cope with the onslaught." As a result, Frontex has a major presence in Greece with the inauguration of Operation Poseidon, a joint venture involving border guards from 23 countries. Contributing countries provide not only expert personnel but also trained sniffing dogs, infrared cameras, helicopters and all-terrain vehicles. And because Greece is a hot spot for migrants and human smugglers, Frontex chose the Greek port city of Piraeus as the location for its first regional office.

Influxes of migrants caused by instability in North Africa and the Middle East raised awareness of the need for coordinated European border protection policy. "On a continent struggling to weather an economic crisis and assimilate immigrant communities already within its borders," the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting said, "many Europeans see strict, unified border enforcement as the continent's first line of defense."

There is no way of knowing how many irregular migrants are in Europe, but Frontex estimates there are 3 million to 8 million, 50 percent of whom entered illegally. Previous EU standards made border

security the responsibility of perimeter countries such as Greece or Italy, causing them to be overwhelmed at times due to limited human and technical resources. The new measures spread the burden more evenly and fairly, given that the intended destinations of many migrants are often countries in the EU interior where jobs are more plentiful. France, a popular end destination for North African migrants during the 2011 crises in that region, temporarily closed its border with Italy to stop migrants from crossing. Frontex implemented Operation Hermes to help Italy, on the front line, to control the refugee situation.

### FRONTEX'S EXPANDING ROLE

Frontex's role, which is primarily to coordinate EU border-control policy and operations and provide technical assistance and training to EU member state border agencies, has been expanding since it opened in Warsaw, Poland, in October 2005. Coordination and training national border guards to meet uniform EU standards were among Frontex's original mandates. According to Frontex, there are now more than 130 national border-guard training academies in the EU that establish high standards as well as lay the groundwork for cooperation and joint operations among member states.

Not long after it opened, Frontex conducted its first operation, designed to detect illegal workers and visa overstayers by using surprise document examinations at EU borders. The results exceeded expectations by uncovering forged documents and signs of human trafficking and smuggling.

The new EUROSUR is aimed at improving surveillance of borders and coastlines through an integrated information-sharing network, with Frontex acting as facilitator. The system, the European Commission says, "allows all relevant data from national surveillance, new surveillance tools, European and international reporting systems and intelligence sources to be gathered, analyzed,

and disseminated in a structured manner between the relevant national authorities."

Creation of the EBGTT is an enhancement of the Rapid Border Intervention Teams first deployed to Greece in 2010. They provide member states with multinational teams of border control experts, available temporarily for joint operations and rapid border interventions in emergencies. EBGTT should improve efficiency, thanks to their ability to buy their own specialized equipment rather than rely on contributions from member states. The teams were first deployed to the Polish-Ukrainian border during the Eurocup 2012 to assist with the wave of additional border crossings. New measures also obligate EU members to staff and fund Frontex.

### AVOIDING ABUSES

With the increased funding and authority, the European Parliament also required Frontex to establish a "fundamental rights officer" to ensure adherence to international law and the highest human rights standards in handling illegal migrants. Particular attention is paid to the principle of "non-refoulement," meaning refugees cannot be returned to a country where their rights are likely to be compromised. Human rights activists have expressed concern with Frontex's expanded powers and its approach to upholding the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. In July 2012, European Human Rights Ombudsman P. Nikiforos Diamandouros criticized Frontex's handling of arrested illegal migrants. "These are often people fleeing persecution," he said. "But there is no evidence that Frontex operations identify such persons."

Additional reforms have been proposed. In October 2011, the European Commission released its "Smart Borders" concept for a comprehensive new border control system. The goal of Smart Borders is to strike a balance between security and freedom at the EU's external borders, easing passage for legitimate travelers while identifying traffickers, smugglers and illegal migrants.



A Frontex border control unit monitors a security fence along a 12.5-kilometer stretch of Turkish border near Evos, Greece, in 2012.



Greek and Frontex border police collaborate on patrolling near the city of Orestiada to help stop illegal migrants using Turkey as a corridor.



A Slovenian customs officer, left, and his Polish counterpart check a passport as part of a Frontex team on the Croatian border with Slovenia in 2011.

The Smart Borders concept includes EUROSUR, a registered travelers program to expedite the movement of pre-vetted, regular border-crossers and an automated border-crossing system for EU citizens. The adoption of what the EU calls an “entry/exit system” promises to regulate overstaying by tracking travelers’ movements more successfully within Europe.

### EU BORDER GUARDS

Reflecting the importance the EU places on securing borders, the European Parliament endowed Frontex with much greater resources. Frontex’s 2011 budget was 118 million euros, a more than sixfold increase from 19 million euros in 2006. But even considering all the money spent, some experts support greater integration of border control and immigration. Josef Janning, director of studies at the European Policy Centre in Brussels, would like to see Frontex transformed into a common border-patrol agency with the same authority over the EU external border that national border agencies have today. Swedish or Belgian guards could patrol the Greek islands, for example, and Italian or Slovenian guards could guard Lithuania’s border with Belarus.

Janning’s conviction that European security is a “common good” whose burden should be shared

across member states still meets with resistance. Border control remains a main element of national sovereignty, and many nations won’t cede that authority lightly. While the EU was expanding Frontex’s powers, it also changed rules to allow Schengen Agreement members more freedom to block passport-free travel in cases of terrorist attack and serious threats to internal security, including persistent problems with illegal migration.

While Frontex agents still defer actual border enforcement to host nation border guards, they have initiated many operations along Europe’s borders. “The countries on the external border are really active,” Jozsef Bali, head of Frontex’s Land Border Sector, said in a 2010 Frontex report. “I have never met during these five years with a refusal from a member state saying, ‘We won’t take part in this operation.’ They really are partners.”

In a short time, Frontex has grown from a new agency with a mandate to help train border guards and coordinate European border agencies into a common border force with dedicated teams ready to deploy to trouble spots, cutting-edge technical support and integrated intelligence capabilities. Frontex has achieved many of its goals but awaits further political integration if it’s to become Europe’s own border police. □