

Out of Africa

EU fighting wave of illegal immigrants

With 15 of the world's 20 most developed countries located in Europe, and all 20 of the world's poorest countries located in Africa, it is no surprise that many Africans head for Europe.

These people are searching for a better future, even if it costs them their lives — which often happens. Many fall victim to extreme weather when crossing the Sahara or the Mediterranean Sea. More than 10,000 people have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe since 1996, the Kenyan newspaper *The Daily Nation* reported. In the first half of 2009 alone, more than 500 died.

Young Africans are desperate to leave their homelands because of poverty, unemployment, crime and violence, according to the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime. Of those 20 poorest countries noted by the U.N. Development Programme, many are close to Europe, making it a handy escape.

Most of the people who survive the passage end up in detention centers in Italy, Spain's Canary Islands, Malta and Greece — the closest entry points into the Continent. The countries are now on the front lines of the war to curb illegal migration and human trafficking and smuggling into Europe. A big European Union concern is that terrorists are part of the wave of immigrants.

"The scale of illegal immigration into Europe and the difficulties that many European states face in integrating new arrivals can create ethnically or religiously defined underclass communities that serve as incubators of terrorist activity," stated a 2009 NATO report on migration in the Mediterranean region. "Although the vast majority of undocumented migrants are simply seeking employment, some may be associated with criminal and terrorist networks."

However, those who smuggle or traffic migrants do not care about the affiliations of those they transport. Their main concern is delivering "the goods" and getting paid.

"Don't take anything with you! We will provide you with water, food and cigarettes. In particular don't bring any documents. Don't let the Italians identify your nationality." These are the instructions many migrants get from smugglers before leaving Libya for the Italian island of Lampedusa, the International Organization for

Migration reported. Thousands of African migrants have landed in Lampedusa, located between Tunisia and Sicily. Having no documents makes it very difficult for EU authorities to deport them, because officials don't know where to send them.

Powerful criminal organizations run by Nigerians and North Africans with strong networks in Europe often traffic or smuggle migrants. These networks make about \$300 million annually for their clandestine operations, the U.N. estimated, although they have to pay expenses such as bribing officials, forging documents, purchasing boats and fitting them with GPS systems for navigation.

Spain and Italy are doing a better job of policing the western Mediterranean, the British newspaper *The Observer* reported. Though this is a welcome development in the two countries, it has had unintended consequences elsewhere: a shift in migrant traffic to the east, and more headaches for Greece.

"The main effect of more efficient patrols in the western Mediterranean is that we now have more people coming through the eastern Mediterranean," Martin Baldwin-Edwards, head of the Mediterranean Migration Observatory at Athens' Panteion University, told *The Observer* in September 2009.

Forced to cope with the country's porous land borders and some 11,433 miles of rugged coastline, Greek immigration officials are overstretched. The surge of migrants has left their detention centers overflowing.

To staunch the human tide, the Hellenic Coast Guard patrols have been equipped with high-speed boats and



The Italian Coast Guard intercepted this inflatable boat packed with 48 Somalis 56 miles off Lampedusa Island in August 2007.



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infrared tracking devices. France and Spain have dispatched helicopters to the area to help.

The Greek island of Samos has become a new favorite entry point into the EU because of its location about one kilometer off the coast of Turkey. "They're coming in by the boatload from Turkey at all hours of the night and day," Nikoloas Zacharis, vice prefect of Samos, told *The Observer*. "It's uncontrollable."

About 150 people a week make the journey to Samos, the BBC reported. Some try to reach the EU on Jet Ski-type watercraft. Traffickers race across the water from Turkey and drop the migrants close to a beach. Others attempt to swim the straits, not understanding the currents.

Most, however, set off in overcrowded inflatable dinghies. As soon as they see the Coast

growing challenge, the BBC reported.

The EU is seeking solutions. Some proposed measures include strengthening border security and a directive to make it easier to return migrants to their homes. There are also motions to discourage mass amnesties for illegal migrants. Another potential solution is issuing a "blue card," similar to the U.S. green card, to attract more skilled workers to the EU.

Overwhelmed by the influx of immigrants and the strain on their governments, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain are asking other EU nations for help. The union is considering voluntary initiatives that would spread the migrants to the rest of the Continent and alleviate the disproportionate burden placed on the four southern European countries.

While protecting their own countries from illegal migration, the EU's southern front nations serve the interests of the entire union. Recognizing that these nations incur more costs, and as a sign of solidarity, the EU set up a budget of more than \$6 billion to help offset such costs through 2013.

The flow of illegal immigrants in the EU continues, but measures by European nations have slowed the flood. Because if left unchecked, illegal migration leads to a host of problems.

If they make it to the EU, fear of detection forces most illegal migrants into

an underground existence that keeps most of them living in poverty on the fringes of society. As their numbers swell, undocumented migrants become a burden on the local economy and the social welfare, education and health care systems. Some of them turn to crime and may become susceptible to extremism.

Italy and France, destinations for many illegal migrants, also want the EU to take decisive action to help North African nations stem the flow of illegal migrants. A story posted on the *neurope.eu* Web site stated, "Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and French President Nicolas Sarkozy made the appeal in a joint letter in which they also called for a strengthening of the EU's border patrol agency, Frontex, and a greater sharing of responsibility, on immigration between EU member states." □



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Most Africans who survive their sea journey to the European Union end up in detention centers such as this one in Malta or others along Europe's front line against illegal immigration.

Guard, they puncture the dinghy. With that, they are no longer illegal immigrants, but drowning people the Coast Guard must rescue. One young couple had their baby with them as they tried to make the journey. When they sank their dinghy, it put the infant at risk. Fortunately, the baby survived. But the case illustrates the desperation of the migrants and the risks they are willing to take to reach Europe.

"The situation has reached crisis proportions, partly because detention centers are now so overcrowded," Nikos Koplak, a lawyer working with refugees seeking asylum, told *The Observer*. "Locking them up is not the way forward. The answer lies with the EU."

But with 22 million people already out of work in Europe because of the economic downturn, the influx of new immigrants is becoming a