

EU presses tough migration stance with more Turkey money, stricter visa rules

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FILE PHOTO: Migrants disembark from a Turkish coastguard boat after a failed attempt at crossing to the Greek island of Lesbos, in the Turkish coastal town of Dikili, Turkey April 6, 2016.

Brussels: The European Union on Wednesday said it would chip in another three billion euros (\$3.7 billion) for Syrian refugees in Turkey, and restrict travel for countries refusing to take back their citizens who fail to obtain asylum in Europe.

The latest measures to curb immigration from the Middle East and Africa, which overwhelmed the bloc when it surged in 2015-16, were announced by the EU's top migration official, Dimitris Avramopoulos.

Some 1.8 million refugees and migrants have reached Europe across the Mediterranean since 2014, according to U.N. figures, causing friction among member states at odds over how to handle them and lifting support for nationalist and populist parties.

The EU has since been tightening its external borders and asylum laws, as well as offering money and other help to third countries in exchange for preventing people from trekking north.

A 2016 deal with Turkey, though criticized by rights groups for restricting the chance to claim asylum by those in need, has cut to a trickle arrivals through its soil to EU member Greece.

The EU on Wednesday announced a second tranche of three billion euros for projects benefiting Syrian refugees in Turkey, though the bloc's executive European Commission and the member states must yet agree on the exact financing.

"Our cooperation with Turkey is key to address common challenges," Avramopoulos told a news conference, referring to the many rifts between Ankara and the EU, which sees President Tayyip Erdogan as increasingly autocratic.

"Unnecessary escalations can and should be avoided," he said, hoping for a swift return of two Greek soldiers held in detention in Turkey.

Despite heavy criticism of Erdogan's track record on human rights, the bloc's top officials will host him for high-level talks next week, a reminder that many in the EU may dread Ankara but cannot do without it.

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Though the number of people who reached Europe on smugglers' boats since 2014 is small compared to the bloc's population of 500 million, higher immigration caught the EU by surprise and caused political chaos.

It still reverberates, as last seen in the resounding defeat of Italy's center-left in elections this month.

As EU states struggle to become more effective in deporting failed asylum seekers or people who overstay the time allowed, the bloc agreed last June to restrict visas for foreign countries that refuse to take back their nationals.

The Commission proposed on Wednesday to regularly monitor how third countries cooperate on returns and, if it deemed it poor, could recommend the bloc gets tougher on visas for that country in the hope of encouraging a change in policy.

Currently, citizens of 105 countries in the world - from Russia to Congo to Bolivia - need a visa to get into Europe's Schengen zone of free travel and Avramopoulos said 15 million such entry permits had been issued in 2016.

With some African and Asian countries topping the EU's list of problematic returns, the Commission said the bloc was still short of one billion euros for projects to improve life for people in Africa. The bloc hopes such projects would weaken people's resolve to try get to Europe.

- Reuters