

African leaders agree to European demands for tough anti-immigration measures

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African leaders have agreed to demands to strengthen immigration controls after European Union leaders promised to give more aid. Efforts to strengthen “Fortress Europe” were at the centre of discussions last month when 57 European and African countries took part in the first Euro-African Ministerial Conference on Migration and Development in the Moroccan capital Rabat.

The conference ended with the participants agreeing a raft of repressive measures that go a considerable way to satisfying a key European Union (EU) objective—the shifting of migration controls outside Europe (“externalisation”). The EU is trying to force foreign countries to stop undocumented workers getting into Europe and repatriate workers in transit back to their countries of origin.

Amongst the measures decided are ones to conclude agreements to repatriate undocumented workers, set up joint Europe-African border patrols and bring about closer police and intelligence cooperation to track people’s movements.

In return European leaders promised a miserly €18 billion (\$22.7 billion) worth of economic aid over the next seven years to help with “new entrepreneurial activities” to encourage young African people to stay in their home countries and “promoting incentives” to get more Africans to go to university.

Spain, France and Morocco proposed the conference last year professing concern for the 17 desperate African workers who died trying to climb the razor-wire fences around the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the northern Moroccan coast. At least three more died this month when a small group of 70 undocumented workers made a similar futile attempt.

The conference took place amidst growing hysteria over the attempts of small numbers of boat people to

cross the perilous sea-lanes to Europe. Because land routes have been systematically shut down, West African workers, mainly from Mali and Senegal, have attempted to reach the Spanish Canary Islands or sail from Libya to Malta or the Italian island of Lampedusa in the Mediterranean Sea. Angel Llanos, a spokesman for the right-wing Spanish Popular Party, complained, “The Canary Islands have become the most attractive European territory for illegal immigration and currently hold third place in the world ranking after the US/Mexico border and North and South Korea.”

Some 10,000 people have arrived in the Canary Islands since the beginning of 2006, but officials say many thousands more have drowned. UN Office on Drugs and Crime Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa told the conference, “For every person who reaches Europe, several others have never made it... Europe will never see the untold numbers who die in the Sahara, who are left penniless in transit countries far from home, who drown when their dilapidated boats capsize, or who waste their lives in North African prisons.”

In a message to the conference, President Jacques Chirac of France reminded the delegates of his 2006 Bastille Day address in which he said, “Africans will flood the world” unless the continent is developed. “We have an immense problem, which is that of development,” he added. Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy declared, “The fates of Africa and Europe are linked. A failure of Africa today will be disaster in Europe tomorrow.”

Such professions of concern for Africa’s economic development count for little, but France certainly intends to do something about immigration. A few weeks before the conference Sarkozy’s Immigration Bill was passed by the French parliament. It includes a

selective system of quotas, a crackdown on undocumented workers and further restrictions on the rights of families of immigrants to enter France.

The EU's external relations commissioner and a leader of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), Benita Ferrero-Waldner, lectured the delegates, saying they had "to see the linkage, between poverty, insecurity and the prospects we have to create—and that the African countries are the first [who should be] responsible, for their own citizens and young people."

"We, the Europeans, are the ones who really have been giving so much," she complained. "Now I think the Africans also have to show that they have a great responsibility."

Senegalese Foreign Minister Cheikh Tidiane Gadio said the EU's refusal to issue visas was a major cause of the current problem. Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Mohamed Benaissa warned, "You can't limit the problem of immigration to a security approach. Societies that are comfortable cannot abandon poor societies."

But, in general, the reaction of the African delegates was suitably compliant.

Morocco already has security agreements with Europe as a result of which it has created an 11,000-strong patrol force along its borders. Despite these disagreements they joined with their European counterparts in agreeing a Rabat Action Plan. Benaissa painted a glowing picture of Europe's intentions, claiming, "Europeans had believed in the security approach but now it seems that, through the Rabat Declaration and the concrete action plan, everyone agrees that security measures are just part of the solution."

Nothing concrete was said about the African development plans. Indeed, Switzerland indicated that it was unlikely to provide additional money since its development aid budget for Africa was fixed for this year and any increase could only come at the expense of other projects. But within days of the conference the EU issued a communication that took the repressive measures agreed at Rabat a step further.

EU Vice President Franco Frattini, the commissioner responsible for Freedom, Security and Justice, said:

"We need a reinforced and more efficient fight against illegal immigration, fundamental for the credibility and coherence of our immigration and

asylum policies. This communication is fully in line with the Rabat Action Plan on Immigration and Development that countries of origin, transit and destination agreed upon only last week."

Frattini said the return of undocumented workers remained "a cornerstone of EU migration policy."

He announced the introduction of a new automated entry-exit system using biometric technology to register all non-EU nationals and prevent "overstaying," for example after expiry of a visa. He said the EU will create a number of Rapid Border Intervention Teams to fly to crisis areas and heralded them as "a major step forward in the development of an integrated border management system at European level." Greater use will be made of existing police computers, such as ICONet, which holds information about "illegal migratory movements."

Sanctions will be introduced against so-called "rogue" employers—mainly in construction, catering and textile industries—that employ undocumented workers. And because there have been "expressions of concern" by a number of EU countries about the amnesties given to these workers in Spain and Italy, Frattini said a common policy would have to be thrashed out.

The Rabat agreement, with its illusory promises of aid and development, will do nothing to help the impoverished masses of Africa whilst allowing the European powers to develop ever more sophisticated techniques of surveillance and repression. It will also enable the former colonial masters in North and West Africa, primarily Spain and France, to extend their neo-colonial ambitions on the continent, securing their control over the energy sources and profit from any "new entrepreneurial activities."



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