

EU adopts plan to keep out refugees

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A summit of European Union heads of government concluded in the early morning hours of Thursday, with no details of the hours-long discussions or decisions reached given out to the press or public. The Associated Press cited a draft text as saying EU leaders had discussed long-term means to end “the dramatic situation at our external borders and strengthen controls at those borders.”

The AP reported that proposals under discussion included deploying more personnel to seal off EU borders and donating at least €1 billion to international aid agencies to keep refugees in camps near conflict zones such as Syria, while boosting support to Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, which are housing millions of people fleeing the fighting in Syria.

The heads of government meeting followed a meeting of EU interior ministers on Tuesday, at which, after 10 hours of talks, the ministers agreed on a new quota system for distributing refugees to individual member states. The quotas have been the subject of heated disputes.

Contrary to the customary procedure by which such policy matters require unanimous agreement, the interior ministers came to a majority decision. The Polish government, which had originally opposed the quota plan, agreed to support it in the course of the meeting in exchange for certain concessions.

Contrary to the initial proposal put forward by the EU Commission, there will be no fixed quotas determined on the basis of population, economic power and unemployment levels. Instead, every government will adopt an admission allotment on a voluntary basis. In addition, individual states will be able to choose which refugees they agree to accept.

The meeting centered on the distribution of a total of 120,000 refugees out of the hundreds of thousands already seeking to enter Europe. Within the next two years, 15,600 refugees currently in Italy and 50,400 currently in Greece are supposed to be taken in by other countries.

Some 54,000 refugees originally designated for resettlement in Hungary will instead be resettled in Italy, Greece and other countries, since most of the refugees registered in Hungary have already left the country and the Hungarian government refuses to either accept more or abide by a redistribution scheme.

Given that the EU expects at least 1 million refugees this year alone, the number of 120,000 to be resettled over two years is a token figure. With an average influx of 6,000 refugees a day,

the two-year maximum will be reached in just 20 days.

Contrary to official claims, the purpose of the quota system is not to “justly distribute” the burden across Europe. Rather, a new mechanism is being put in place to bring the flow of refugees under control, expedite their deportation and seal off the EU’s external borders.

The interior ministers of Germany and Austria were most insistent on the quotas. Although Berlin and Vienna are committed to taking in additional refugees, they hope the regulations will lead to a dramatic decrease in refugee numbers.

After the meeting, Austrian Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner made clear that the new rules were intended to have a deterrent effect. “The quite decisive thing today was that we brought about the beginning of the end,” she told the television channel ORF. “Because if 120,000 are evenly distributed, including to so-called ‘unattractive countries,’ that is a double strike and a signal in two respects. First, it is an easing of the burden along the route through the Balkans and an easing of the burden on Austria. Second, the refugees will no longer be able to decide where they seek asylum.”

Mikl-Leitner indicated that the quota system was only a first step in bringing the influx of refugees to a halt. She emphasized that “control over the external borders and the setting up of hotspots are quite decisive in diminishing the flow of refugees.”

German Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière made similar comments. “What we need is an end to the influx,” he said. He added in a press release that the purpose of the measures was the “protection of the external borders of the EU, the consistent repatriation of immigrants who are not in need of protection, and attention to and use of the rules of the Common European Asylum System by all member states.”

Contrary to the claims of several refugee organizations, the quota rules do not invalidate the Dublin agreement. According to that agreement, the first European country that a refugee enters is responsible for taking the refugee in and initiating asylum proceedings. The EU decision is quite explicit that the distribution mechanism of the Dublin rule has not been replaced, but only expanded to deal with an emergency.

Furthermore, the 42-page EU document bluntly and in minute detail lists the repressive measures refugees will face. The refugees will have no right to determine where they are sent. Moreover, only refugees from countries with an average

recognition rate of 75 percent will be distributed. At the moment, primarily refugees from Syria and Eritrea meet these criteria.

In addition, the affected refugees will receive no internationally valid travel documents. This, in practice, means an expansion of the residence requirements in Germany to all of Europe. In effect, refugees will be kept captive in their assigned country. They must report regularly and will receive only non-cash benefits.

The central component of the agreement is the rapid establishment of so-called “hotspots” in EU border states. This is a synonym for concentration camps where arriving refugees will be registered in an accelerated procedure and their asylum applications subjected to a preliminary review.

The registration of the refugees will be carried out by the border protection agency Frontex, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and the European police authority Europol. In addition to a medical checkup, the primary purpose of these procedures is to determine the country of origin, the escape route and the identities of those who helped the refugee escape. All refugees will be fingerprinted.

Anyone who falls through the cracks in the “hotspots” will be deported. Frontex, whose mandate is being broadened, will be responsible for this task. The budget for Frontex will be increased by 54 percent to €176 million, and the EU wants to make an additional €500 million available for the deportations.

The first camp is currently being built in Catania in Sicily. The plans for a second camp in the Greek city of Piraeus are far advanced.

The Dublin rule that places responsibility on Greece and Italy for the asylum proceedings of refugees arriving in those countries has virtually collapsed due to the dramatic surge of refugees. This year alone, 442,400 refugees have already traveled across the Mediterranean to the EU, including 319,000 through Greece, according to a report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Since August alone, the Greek authorities have registered 192,000 refugees.

The Greek and Italian authorities were neither willing nor able to carry out asylum proceedings on their own and sent the refugees on their way with temporary travel documents. This is what started the refugee trek through the Balkans, which reached as far as Germany, where the government now expects about 800,000 refugees this year.

The quota rules and the establishment of “hotspots” are aimed at regaining control over the flow of refugees and facilitating the complete implementation of the Dublin rule, whose primary purpose is to keep refugees out of the wealthy EU countries such as Germany, France, Great Britain and the Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg). The opposition of the Eastern European states to the distribution quotas is based, in part, on their fear that in the future, masses of refugees from the richer countries in the West will be sent back to Eastern Europe in accordance with the

Dublin rule.

Along with the effort to keep refugees in the EU border countries, the EU is seeking to deploy military reinforcements to the external borders. In an invitation letter for Wednesday’s EU summit of government heads, EU Council President Donald Tusk declared that keeping out refugees was the most urgent task. “We as Europeans are currently not able to manage our common external borders,” Tusk wrote, “hence some states decided to protect themselves by closing their national ones. The protection of the European community is our first duty and obligation and we have failed on this front.”

Along with erecting barbed wire fences in Bulgaria, Greece and Hungary with financial support from the EU, the border protection police will be massively armed with the help of Frontex, and the military will be stationed at the external borders in order to prevent refugees from entering the EU. Following the example of the Hungarian government, the Bulgarian government has now announced that it will station up to 1,000 soldiers on the border with Turkey.

Hungarian Minister President Victor Orban has behaved in a particularly bellicose manner, calling the flow of refugees a “brutal danger” and declaring, “They are overrunning us. They are not just banging on the door, they are kicking it down.”

Orban is by no means the only one with this outlook. The Bavarian Christian Social Union, which is part of the German federal coalition government, invited Orban to a closed-door meeting, where he was permitted to repeat these remarks and received enthusiastic applause. This demonstrates all too clearly that Orban is not a pariah. Rather, he speaks for the mainstream of European politics. This is in sharp contrast with the attitude of broad layers of the population, who have responded to the refugee crisis with demonstrations of solidarity and a readiness to help the desperate migrants.



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