

## EU under pressure over migrant rescue operations in the Mediterranean

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European states have come under renewed pressure from human rights and refugee organisations to mount large-scale search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean after the latest migrant boat disaster led to the drowning of an estimated 400 people.

Critics say that the cancellation last year of an Italian-run sea rescue mission, Mare Nostrum, and the launch in November of Triton, a much smaller border surveillance operation by the EU, created the conditions for the higher death toll. They point to the figure of 900 dead so far this year, far greater than in the same period in 2014, as proof that the end of Mare Nostrum failed to deter migrants while leaving far fewer safeguards in place to rescue victims of frequent shipwrecks.

Michael Diedring, the secretary general of the European council on refugees and exiles said: “Our calls for EU search-and-rescue efforts in the Mediterranean have fallen on deaf ears. Apart from the outstanding efforts of the Italian navy, the EU continues to fail to act.”

The Triton operation is run by Frontex, the EU’s border management agency, with a monthly budget of €2.9m (£2.1m), less than a third of what was spent on Mare Nostrum.

“Operation Triton and Mare Nostrum are two very different operations: the first was ran by the Italian navy and was taking place close to Libya. Operation Triton is run by Frontex – European border agency - whose mandate focuses on border control. This is why our operation takes place closer to the Italian coasts,” said Izabella Cooper, spokeswoman for Frontex.

“Since the beginning of 2015 about 18 000 migrants arrived in Italy of which 16 000 were rescued in search-and-rescue operations. Out of these over 5000 – a third of the total – were rescued by Frontex vessels in Triton.”

She said the vast majority of Triton search-and-rescue operations actually took place far from the Italian coastal area and very close to Libya.

By comparison, the Italian Mare Nostrum operation rescued 100,000 shipwrecked migrants over its year-long existence.

The European commission has drawn up a broad policy document, the European Agenda on Migration, due to be presented to member states next month. It is aimed at establishing a concerted European asylum policy and more clearly defining conditions for legal migration, while formulating “a clear plan to fight smuggling and trafficking of migrants and an effective return policy”.

Human Rights Watch warned that some of the proposals being circulated, including the possible establishment of offshore processing centres in North African countries, as well as outsourcing border control and rescue operations in order to prevent departures, raised human rights concerns.

“It’s hard not to see these proposals as cynical bids to limit the numbers of migrants and asylum seekers making it to EU shores,” said Judith Sunderland, HRW’s acting deputy Europe and Central Asia director. “Whatever longer term initiatives may come forth, the immediate humanitarian imperative for the EU is to get out there and save lives.”

The British charity Save the Children said it would launch a campaign on Thursday calling on British political parties to press for search-and-rescue operations to be included in the European agenda on migration, and “develop a long-term plan to tackle the drivers of children on the move and ensure these children are protected.”

“Our political leaders cannot ignore the fact that without search and rescue we are allowing thousands of innocent children and their families to drown off the coast of Europe,” Justin Forsyth, the head of the charity, said.

“Whoever makes the up the next government has a moral obligation to work with the EU to restart the rescue. Every migrant child’s death is a stain on Europe’s conscience. How many thousands must die this summer before Europe acts?”