

# EU Discord Stalls Action on Illegal Immigration

## Fight Over Who Hosts Refugees Halts Patrol Plan

By **CHARLES FORELLE**  
**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

*May 7, 2008; Page A15*

BRUSSELS -- The weather's getting warmer, and North Africans desperate to reach the European Union have already begun crossing the Mediterranean on rafts and rickety boats.

Meanwhile, an EU air-and-sea mission designed to stop them is stuck in port, waylaid by squabbles over which nation should take in people plucked from the sea. European officials say the mission, named Nautilus and intended to patrol the southern Mediterranean, is two weeks past its intended start date.

Illegal immigration is a hot issue in Europe, stoked by concerns over jobs and integration. But the EU is having a hard time working together to stem the flow.

Europe's Mediterranean border is vast and porous. Once migrants sneak in, they can disperse across 24 countries in the continent's "Schengen" zone without facing a border checkpoint. Even those who are captured often slip out again by applying for asylum.

France, which assumes the EU's rotating presidency in July, has vowed to move immigration to the top of the 27-nation bloc's agenda. It has called for a pact to toughen borders and track those who come in.

So far this year, migrant flows across the central Mediterranean are higher than in 2007, according to the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration. The group says it doesn't know how many Africans try to sneak into Europe each year, but two landing spots in Italy alone processed more than 16,000 people last year, and thousands more slip past or come in through other routes.

Two years ago, Frontex, the EU's border-control agency, set up the Nautilus mission to patrol the waters south of Sicily and Malta during the migration season. Last year, seven nations, including France and Germany, chipped in 15 boats, airplanes and helicopters. The nations agreed to take migrants stuck in international waters to the nearest land point, generally Malta or the Italian island of Lampedusa south of Sicily.

But Malta, which recently joined the Schengen zone, is balking at that formula this year. It says migrants should be distributed among EU member nations based on criteria such as size of population and territory. Malta's population is about 400,000 people, while

Germany's is over 80 million. Germany, France and other big countries are in no mood to take more migrants.

That and other disputes have snarled the Nautilus mission, two weeks after it was supposed to start. The EU doubled its budget for sea patrols this year to allow Nautilus to run for six months. A further meeting on the issue is set for Wednesday.

The migrants use old fishing boats and rubber dinghies. Popular routes include Morocco to southern Spain, Algeria to Sardinia, Tunisia to Sicily, and Libya to Malta or Lampedusa.

"There are laws of the sea that says people must be rescued," said Jemini Pandya, a spokeswoman for the International Organization for Migration. At the same time, states have a right to control access to their countries. "There is no obligation for them to accept these people," she said.

Malta argues that it already bears a burden by taking in some 2,000 migrants a year, either in its waters or picked up by its boats on the open sea. That is about half the annual birth rate of the country. Most, it says, have no interest in Malta, but are using the island as a stepping stone to Europe. "Malta has as much responsibility for those people as Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Finland," says Vanessa Frazier, the director of Malta's Defence Matters Directorate, which oversees the armed-forces units that conduct patrols.

Last summer, Europeans were shocked by images of migrants clinging to Maltese-owned tuna pens in the southern Mediterranean. Malta tried to get Libya to pick them up. Italy eventually did. Malta has also refused to let foreign boats carrying rescued migrants dock in its ports.

"There is a lot of hypocrisy going on," says Simon Busuttil, a Maltese member of the European Parliament. Countries voice outrage about the plight of migrants dying at sea, but "when it comes to putting their money where their mouth is, they are extremely reluctant."

A spokeswoman for the French mission to the EU says France would prefer dealing with rescued migrants on a "case-by-case" basis, instead of a prearranged distribution plan. Still, she says, "a better solution is needed."

For any migrants rescued by German forces, "in general we would look to see if the neighboring countries would take them in," said a German official. If that failed, Germany would be willing to accept them, he said.