

EU ministers discuss immigration, travel

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Luxembourg - European Union interior ministers meeting in Luxembourg were expected to reach a consensus Thursday on a common set of rules governing the expulsion of illegal immigrants. "I think the council (of ministers) will accept the directive as has been proposed," said Slovenian Interior Minister Dragutin Mate, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the EU.

His colleagues were being asked to endorse a deal on the so-called Returns Directive that was agreed by EU ambassadors earlier this week.

The directive regulates the deportation of illegal immigrants and limits to six months the period over which they can be detained by the authorities of member states.

But it has been criticized by pressure groups because it includes provisions allowing the maximum detention period to be extended by a further 12 months, for instance if the immigrant refuses to cooperate.

Another contentious issues concerns calls for legal aid to be granted free of charge to all illegal immigrants.

Some member states are against this because they worry that it could cost them too much. Ministers were therefore expected to accept a compromise solution stating that the granting of free legal aid should follow existing national rules.

"Thanks to this directive, returning those we want to get rid of will be easier in the future," German Secretary of State Peter Altmaier said.

The debate on the Returns Directive comes at a sensitive time for Europe, with some governments seeking to crack down on the seemingly unstoppable flow of Africans and Asians who continue to enter their territories illegally.

In Italy, for instance, where an estimated 100,000 people enter the country illegally each year, the conservative government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi wants to make illegal immigration a criminal offence.

Once approved by ministers, the directive will have to be voted by the European Parliament.

This is the first time that Europe's lawmakers have been given such a strong say in issues relating to immigration.

During their council meeting in Luxembourg, ministers were also expected to discuss a US proposal for a new Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA).

Applicable to EU citizens who currently do not require a visa to visit the US, the ESTA proposal has prompted the European Commission to threaten retaliatory measures against US citizens visiting Europe.

Mate on Thursday denied that the ESTA was comparable to a new form of visa, saying it was merely a different form of collecting information that is already being provided to the US authorities.