

EU states endorse controversial deal on return of illegal migrants

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Brussels - European Union diplomats Thursday endorsed a deal brokered with the European Parliament limiting to six months the period over which illegal immigrants can be detained within the EU. But while the agreement stresses that detention "will only be permitted where other less coercive measures cannot be applied," it has nevertheless been criticized by pressure groups because it includes provisions allowing officials to extend the detention period for a further 12 months, for instance if the immigrant refuses to cooperate.

The debate on the EU's Return 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.

This week, the conservative Italian government of Silvio Berlusconi said it would join other European countries such as France in making illegal immigration a criminal offence. The move has infuriated another Mediterranean country, Spain, which fears that it will induce would-be immigrants coming from Africa to try and reach its territory instead.

Brokered by the Slovenian presidency of the EU and clinched after years of disagreements, the deal on the Return Directive also regulates the deportation of illegal immigrants, re-admission to their country of origin and access by non-governmental organizations to EU detention centres.

The latest draft, as agreed by EU ambassadors on Thursday, does not force governments to pay for an illegal immigrant's legal aid, as some had wanted. Instead, it includes a non-binding invitation to governments to set aside the necessary funds needed to assist destitute migrants.

The package will next month be voted on by the European Parliament. But its passage is threatened by reservations voiced by the second-largest political bloc in the hemicycle, the Socialists.

This is the first time that the European Parliament has been given a decisive voice on immigration, an issue normally reserved to the competence of member states.