

EU unveils plans to further fortify Europe's borders

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Photo border controls

(*BRUSSELS*) - The European Commission forged ahead with efforts Wednesday to fortify Europe's borders to the outside world, including plans to collect fingerprints and photographs from foreigners entering the EU.

The steps, which Brussels claims are needed to guarantee the free movement of Europeans inside the Schengen no-borders area, could see EU funds used to develop surveillance equipment like cameras, sensors and pilot-less drones.

EU Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini, with Italy on a maritime frontline of clandestine immigration, has made a major push to tighten security since the Madrid and London transport bombings in 2004 and 2005.

Privacy, human rights and refugee groups say the measures taken since then, and those in the planning, infringe on civil liberties and stop potentially legitimate asylum seekers from conflict zones from ever lodging an application.

The commission describes the proposals as "further building blocks in the often stated aim of the European Union to build a space of free and secure travel through collective responsibility and solidarity."

They would help EU customs, police and justice authorities better manage the estimated 300 million external border crossings each year at Europe's 1,792 designated frontier check points.

But Frattini underlined that the measures would target the biggest category of illegal immigrants in Europe: people who over-stay their visas.

"The factor number one is over-stayers in Europe," he told reporters

If the 27 EU nations approve the plans, people travelling to Europe could be screened for security risks at new levels within the next seven years.

To get a short-term visa, they would have to provide biometric and other details to the consulate concerned in their country of residence, which would be entered into the visa information system database.

On arrival, this data would be checked with a new entry-exit register that would note the time and place of entry of any non-EU national. It would then send an alert once their visas expire and no exit has been recorded.

Outsiders deemed safe enough to enter could qualify for "registered traveller" status, which would fast-track border formalities as a machine, rather than a border agent, would check their documents.

To better combat those without valid travel papers, the commission would beef up surveillance and the operations of the EU's border agency Frontex.

A European Border Surveillance System (EUROSUR) would help EU nations to better detect the movement of people across frontiers and improve the ability of authorities to react to such movements.

It would link up existing national systems into a network, allowing nations to better exchange information and coordinate action against would-be illegals.

Better use would be made of surveillance equipment and EU research and development programmes would be employed to help improve border technologies like sensors, satellites and unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones.

"We cannot have mafia or traffickers or terrorists using better technology than our police, that's why we have to improve our capacity," Frattini said.

The European Council on Refugees in Exile (ECRE) said the new measures ignored the rights of asylum seekers as they would effectively stop such needy people from ever entering to lodge an application.

"Whilst Europe's borders are ever tighter and more secure, victims of persecution around the world are finding it ever harder to reach a safe haven," ECRE Secretary General Bjarte Vandvik said in a statement.

"The EU must implement protection-sensitive border control mechanisms to uphold Europe's human rights values and obligations."