

European Parliament approves new rules on illegal immigrants

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Strasbourg, France - The European Parliament on Wednesday approved long-awaited rules governing the detention and deportation of illegal immigrants. The European Union's Return Directive received 369 votes in favour and 197 against in the Strasbourg assembly.

Parliamentary approval was essential for the directive to come into force in all 27 member states in two years' time.

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

But it has been criticized by civil rights groups because it allows them to extend the maximum detention period by a further 12 months in special cases. Current detention rules vary widely within the EU, from a maximum of 30 days in France to indefinite periods in Britain.

The directive also regulates the deportation of illegal migrants to their country of origin and clarifies rules on the access by non-governmental organizations to EU detention centres.

Once expelled, illegal immigrants will not be allowed back into the EU for five years. Such rules do not affect asylum seekers.

"We now have binding rights established with a balance between deportation and minimum humanitarian standards," said parliamentary rapporteur Manfred Weber.

According to European Parliament figures, about 10 million illegal immigrants live in the EU. Many of them entered the bloc legally but then overstayed their visas.

Wednesday's vote was criticized by human rights advocate Amnesty International, which said the text "does not guarantee the return of irregular migrants in safety and dignity."

"On the contrary, an excessive period of detention of up to 1.5 years, as well as an EU-wide re-entry ban for those forcibly returned, risks lowering existing standards in the member states and sets an extremely bad example to other regions in the world," the pressure group said in a statement.