

## **Italy begins naval mission to help Libya curb migrant flows**

03/08/2017 09:32 by admin

**Rome:** Italy began a limited naval mission on Wednesday to help Libya's coastguard curb migrant flows, which have become a source of political friction before national elections expected early next year.

### **Migrants ride in a boat after they were rescued by Libyan coastguard (Reuters Photo)**

An Italian patrol boat entered Libyan waters and headed towards the port of Tripoli within minutes of a vote in Italy's parliament authorising the deployment. A second vessel was expected to join it in the coming days.

Italy announced the operation last week, saying it had been requested by Libya's UN-backed government. It initially hoped to send six ships into Libyan territorial waters, but the plans had to be scaled back following protests from Tripoli.

"(We will) provide logistical, technical and operational support for Libyan naval vessels, helping them and supporting them in shared and coordinated actions," Defence Minister Roberta Pinotti said ahead of Wednesday's vote.

"There will be no harm done or slight given to Libyan sovereignty, because, if anything, our aim is to strengthen Libyan sovereignty," she told parliament, stressing that Italy had no intention of imposing a blockade on Libya's coast.

In Tripoli, a poster of resistance hero Omar al-Mukhtar, who battled Italian rule in Libya in the 1920s, was hung near the capital's main square with the inscription "No to a return to colonization".

The Italian move also triggered irate statements from factions in eastern Libya that oppose the UN-backed government.

An eastern-based parliament warned against "attempts by Italy ... to return tens of thousands of illegal immigrants to Libya". Khalifa Haftar, a military commander aligned with the chamber, ordered his forces to repel "any naval vessel that enters national waters without permission from the army", according to the Facebook page of Haftar's Libyan National Army.

Italy's lower house voted by 328 to 113 in favour of the mission, while the upper house voted by 191 to 47.

After a surge in migrant arrivals from Libya at the start of the year, the number of newcomers has slowed. The Interior Ministry said on Wednesday that 95,215 people had reached Italy so far in 2017, down 2.7 percent from the same period in 2016.

Some 2,230 migrants, most of them Africans fleeing poverty and violence at home, died in the first seven months of 2017 trying to make the sea crossing.

The Human Rights Watch group said Italy's move may endanger migrants. "After years of saving lives at sea, Italy is preparing to help Libyan forces who are known to detain people in conditions that expose them to a real risk of torture, sexual violence, and forced labour," HRW said in a statement.

### **Elections Ahead**

Almost 600,000 migrants have arrived in Italy over the past four years, putting Italy's network of reception centres under

huge strain and causing increasing political tensions.

Italy is due to hold national elections by next May, with voting widely expected in early 2018, and the migrant issue is expected to top the political agenda. Rightist parties accuse the centre-left government of doing nothing to halt the influx.

"The (migrant boats) will not be being pushed back to the Libyan shore, so we don't understand what we are going to be doing there," Giancarlo Giorgetti, deputy head of the opposition Northern League party, told reporters in parliament.

Italy hopes the Libyan coastguard can help prevent flimsy migrant boats from putting to sea and has been at the forefront of efforts to make the small force more effective, training its members and upgrading its fleet.

Rome has also put pressure on non-governmental organisations that have played an increasingly important role in picking up migrants off the Libyan coast and bringing them to Italy.

The government has introduced a code of conduct for the NGOs and has demanded that armed police travel on their boats to help root out people smugglers. Only three of eight humanitarian groups operating in the southern Mediterranean agreed this week to the Italian terms.

A boat operated by German NGO Jugend Rettet, one of the five groups that did not sign up, was seized by the Italian coastguard on Wednesday on the order of Sicilian magistrates on suspicion it had aided illegal immigration.

There was no immediate comment from Jugend Rettet.

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