

Remarks by Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos on the solution found with regards to the disembarkation of NGO vessels and progress under the European Agenda on Migration

Dear friends,

I wish you all a happy, healthy and successful new year. A year that I am sure will be promising and interesting for you as journalists covering European Affairs! The Christmas break was again marked by migrant arrivals and Search and Rescue activities.

Let us be frank: the past weeks have not been Europe's finest hour.

Having 49 people on boats at sea, for almost 3 weeks, is not what the European Union stands for. The European Union is about human values and solidarity. And if human values and solidarity are not upheld it is not Europe.

At the Commission, we spared no efforts to coordinate relocation pledges among Member States and make the disembarkation possible. Believe me it was not easy but it worked. I was myself in direct contact with a number of Ministers. I have also called publicly on all Member States to show more solidarity. This is a message I will never tire of repeating.

I am very glad that our efforts have shown results in the end and that all those on board are being disembarked right now.

Let me commend Malta, our smallest Member State displaying biggest solidarity.

I want to thank Prime Minister Joseph Muscat for allowing the disembarkation of the two NGO vessels. These migrants come in addition to the 249 rescued persons that Malta had already welcomed last week. I understand how difficult it is for such a small island to manage such a challenging situation.

I would also like to commend the Member States that agreed to receive the migrants disembarked in Malta. Germany, France, Portugal, Malta, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Italy, Romania, and Ireland have shown European solidarity in the most concrete way possible. What needs to follow now is a swift transfer and rapid processing of each case.

Our EU Agencies are at the full disposal of Malta and the other Member States to provide swift support. EASO stands ready to support Member States to determine rapidly whether these migrants are entitled to protection. The European Border and Coast Guard will support Member States to organise the

swift return of those that have no right to stay.

I also take this opportunity to commend other Member States for their continuous efforts to manage migration. I am thinking of Spain for example that has carried out a number of Search and Rescue activities during the Christmas break.

With these events, it has become very clear again that all actors, including NGOs, have to respect the rules and act responsibly in order not to perpetuate the business model used by traffickers to exploit human misery.

In June, the European Council was unanimous on this point, underlining in particular that all vessels operating in the Mediterranean must respect the applicable laws.

Moreover, the European Union cannot continue to rely on unorganised, ad-hoc solutions when it comes to disembarkation.

While we are determined and we will continue reducing irregular migratory flows towards Europe, we have to be honest, and be prepared that some migrants will be arriving by boats or by crossing land borders.

It is for exactly this reason that we need predictable and sustainable mechanisms in place.

Europe needs to uphold its moral and human duty. That is why the Commission is ready to work with Member States to set up temporary arrangements.

They will allow us to ensure solidarity with the most exposed EU countries while avoiding creating a pull factor. They will serve as a bridge until the new Dublin Regulation becomes applicable. I have said this in December and I will not stop making this point until we succeed:

Now is the time to finalise the reform of the EU's asylum rules.

The Commission is fully committed, together with the Romanian Presidency, to continue working with the European Parliament and the Council to achieve this important goal.

Completing the EU asylum reform is indispensable to curb irregular migration, to prevent secondary movements, to reduce abuse and to ensure that asylum applications are processed quickly across Europe.

Looking back at 2018, we can see that our joint and comprehensive European approach is delivering results on all fronts.

For the first time in years, the number of irregular border crossings is down to pre-crisis levels. Around 150,000 crossings, to be precise. This is the lowest figure since 2013.

In addition, the European Union's action on saving lives at sea has been resolute and delivers results.

It is thanks to EU operations in the Mediterranean that the EU has helped rescue over 690,000 people at sea since 2015, and reduce the loss of life at sea by 36% compared to four years ago.

It is through this comprehensive European approach that we can and have to consolidate this progress in 2019 – internally, at our external borders, and in our relations with partner countries.

Cooperation with third countries is key to preventing irregular departures to Europe in the first place and to eliminate once and for all the cruel business run by traffickers and smugglers.

We do so by helping to develop the capacities of our partner countries to protect their borders, but also to assist vulnerable migrants and those in need of protection, and to address, in the long run, the drivers of migration.

A crucial element is also our work on return, both with countries of origin and within the EU. We have concluded a number of new readmission arrangements in the past months and we will continue our work to conclude others.

Last but not least, we need to continue our actions to strengthen our external borders. Our proposal for a standing corps of 10,000 European border guards is on the table. This is what our Member States have asked for, and we have delivered.

Now is the time to put words in to action.

One should never forget that, in the area of migration, all our actions are interconnected and that all the pieces have to fit together.

In this electoral New Year, I want to reiterate the message that Europe will be judged on what it delivers for our citizens.

And as far as the Commission and myself are concerned, we are determined to deliver.

Thank you.