

From European Voice: Frontex chief warns of difficult year ahead for Mediterranean

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With thousands of asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean since the beginning of the year, the first months in the job have been a baptism by fire for Fabrice Leggeri, the executive director of the EU's border management agency.

For the new head of Europe's often criticised border management agency, Frontex, 2015 is shaping up to be a particularly demanding year.

The agency may have been granted an extra €20 million in its quest to patrol the external borders of the European Union's member states, but with the crisis in the Mediterranean set to worsen, Frontex's resources could still be overstretched.

"If the situation remains as it is, we would have ... a very difficult year," Fabrice Leggeri told European Voice. "But there might be other emergencies. There has been a switch towards the eastern Mediterranean route – the so-called ghost ships – and we will have to invest some means in that. We also have a surge of migration from the western Balkans."

Then, of course, there is Ukraine. Leggeri, a Frenchman who has been Frontex's executive director since 16 January, admits that the possibility of a humanitarian crisis in the war-torn country leading to asylum-seekers crossing into the EU is now something that EU agencies are being asked to countenance.

It all adds up to pressure on resources that could put Frontex's Joint Operation Triton, the EU-backed patrol operation in the Mediterranean, under some strain. A worsening of the asylum-seeker crisis will also renew the debate about whether Triton, which was launched in November with a limited border management and surveillance mandate, is up to the task.

"Border management and surveillance is the core business of Frontex," Leggeri said from Frontex headquarters in Warsaw. "I hear voices saying that it should become a search and rescue mandate, but the EU has no legal competence for that. Technically speaking, it would not be possible. This is a matter for national governments."

The problem for Frontex is now one of public perception. There is little doubt that Mare Nostrum, the Italian naval operation that Triton replaced, was broader in its scope and – with some EU backing – was able to put the emphasis on search and rescue, having a real impact on the number of lives saved. But with border patrols still a sovereign prerogative of national governments, the EU argues any mission creep on Triton's part would not be legally possible.

Yet the numbers of arrivals in the Mediterranean is startling and all indications are that they are set to continue throughout the spring. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) puts the number of asylum-seeker arrivals on the coasts of Italy at 4,300 since the beginning of the year – of these, 3,800 arrived over the course of five days in mid-February. While many of these have arrived on boats from Libya, as a result of the worsening security situation in the country, Italy has also had

to confront the new phenomenon of 'ghost ships' – vessels from the Middle East, crammed with mainly Syrian refugees, which are found speeding towards the Italian coast after being abandoned by their crew.

Yet Leggeri says that while the political debate continues over what future role the EU should play in managing the crisis, in practice Triton is saving lives just as Mare Nostrum had done before it. "Triton operations provide operational means – boats, staff, aircraft – that contribute to search and rescue operations," he said.

The way Triton gets around its limited surveillance mandate is that when it receives numerous distress calls, it places the manpower and equipment it has received from 20 participating countries under the Italian chain of command for the search and rescue operation. "Some people are focused on the mandate...but in everyday life, Triton assets contribute to search and rescue operations," Leggeri said.

Triton has been extended until the end of 2015 and Frontex claims the operation has saved the lives of almost 23,000 asylum-seekers through its surveillance role – 7,000 of those with the direct participation of member states' vessels and aircraft coordinated by Frontex. An Icelandic patrol vessel – an example of a non-EU participant in Frontex – has led the charge in the Mediterranean.

Leggeri, a 46-year-old lawyer who worked for France's interior ministry, is the person the EU has chosen to manage one of its most demanding operational tasks. On the one hand, Mediterranean countries look to the EU for help – arguing that the scale of what is happening demands a regional, rather than a national, response. But the EU's limited legal authority with search and rescue means the expectations are not always met.

What's more, while Frontex is now the EU agency that finds itself at the centre of what is a humanitarian crisis, the agency itself is equipped to foster co-operation on broader issues of border control. It develops training standards for border guards, it undertakes risk analysis for all EU external borders while also examining what technology can be deployed to make external borders more secure.

Frontex's critics, many of them in the European Parliament, argue that the agency's technical role leaves it ill-equipped to deal with humanitarian crises such as the one unfolding in the Mediterranean. Yet the response to the asylum-seeker challenge on the part of Dimitris Avramopoulos, the European commissioner for migration, home affairs and citizenship, places Triton at centre-stage – which means Leggeri has to tread carefully around the political debate.

Yet he does not shy away from one hot topic – that of the passenger name record (PNR) proposal, a system that would gather data from all air travellers in a bid to identify movements linked to terrorism. The member states want to move fast on PNR but Parliament has in the past voted against the proposal on the grounds of privacy concerns and remains cautious.

"If PNR is implemented in the future it will have a positive impact on the security of the borders," Leggeri said. "It may not affect the field of migration, because [PNR] is not related to migration... but

for sure, the general outcome of PNR and other deployments to the external borders can enhance the overall result of border protection.”

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