

Italy sends first asylum seekers to Albania under controversial deal



A navy boat carrying migrants intercepted in Italian waters docked at Shengjin port in Albania on October 16 [Adnan Beci / AFP]

Rome, October 17 (RHC)-- An Italian navy ship has docked in Albania to deliver refugees and migrants, the first such mission under a controversial deal between the two countries that sends asylum seekers outside the European Union while their claims are processed.

The ship, carrying 16 men who were picked up in Italian waters, arrived at Shengjin port on Wednesday. The arrangement has been heralded by Italy's right-wing government as unprecedented and eyed by other EU states seeking to tighten immigration policies, but rights groups have slammed it as undermining human rights.

Ten men from Bangladesh and six from Egypt disembarked from the ship. They are the first arrivals under the deal, which was agreed by Italy and Albania in November.

The naval ship *Libra* left the port of Lampedusa on Monday. The refugees were rescued at sea after departing from Libya last week, according to officials.

On arrival in Albania, they were escorted towards the gates of a processing centre a few metres from the vessel. Their cases will be heard at a nearby airbase in Gjader, which can hold 3,000 people.

Italy has opened two centres in Albania, where it plans to process up to 36,000 asylum seekers per year. The centres will be operated under Italian law with Italian security and staff and judges hearing cases by video from Rome.

According to the deal, agreed for an initial five years by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her Albanian counterpart, Edi Rama, people will be screened initially on board the ships that rescue them before being sent to Albania for further screening.

Refugees intercepted in Italian waters who are deemed the most vulnerable, including women and children, will be taken to Italy. The deal is being implemented while other EU states are seeking to adopt harsher immigration stances amid pressure from the far right, which made significant headway in EU elections in the summer.

Albania has said it will work exclusively with Italy.

A small group of activists gathered at the entrance of the port to protest the arrival of the refugees, holding a banner saying, "The European dream ends here." Rights groups have questioned whether the deal complies with international law.

Amnesty International has called the centres a "cruel experiment [that] is a stain on the Italian government." Doctors Without Borders said the new strategy "raises serious human rights concerns."

Meloni brushed aside the criticism in comments on Tuesday. "It is a new, courageous, unprecedented path but one that perfectly reflects the European spirit and has everything it takes to be followed also with other non-EU nations," she said.

The first mission under the deal comes before an EU summit in Brussels this week, at which migration is set to be a major topic. In a letter to member states before the talks, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said the bloc would "be able to draw lessons from this experience in practice".

Critics have declared that given the high cost of the operation, the limited capacity of the processing centres and the fact that Italy is unlikely to be able to eventually deport most of the refugees, the deal won't have the desired effect of "deterrence".

Migration researcher Matteo Villa of Datalab Europe said: "The more migrants decide to undertake the journey, the higher the probability of being brought to Italy because the capacity of the Albanian centre is fixed."

"No matter how you look at it, not only will the idea of opening a centre in Albania not be part of the solution, but it will become part of the problem," he argued.

The number of people reaching Italy along the central Mediterranean migration route from North Africa fell by 61 percent in the first nine months of 2024 compared with the same period of 2023.

According to the Italian Ministry of the Interior, as of Tuesday, 54,129 refugees had arrived in Italy by sea so far this year, compared with 138,947 by the same date last year. The two centers in Albania will cost Italy 670 million euros (\$730m) over five years.

[SOURCE: AL JAZEERA and NEWS AGENCIES]

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