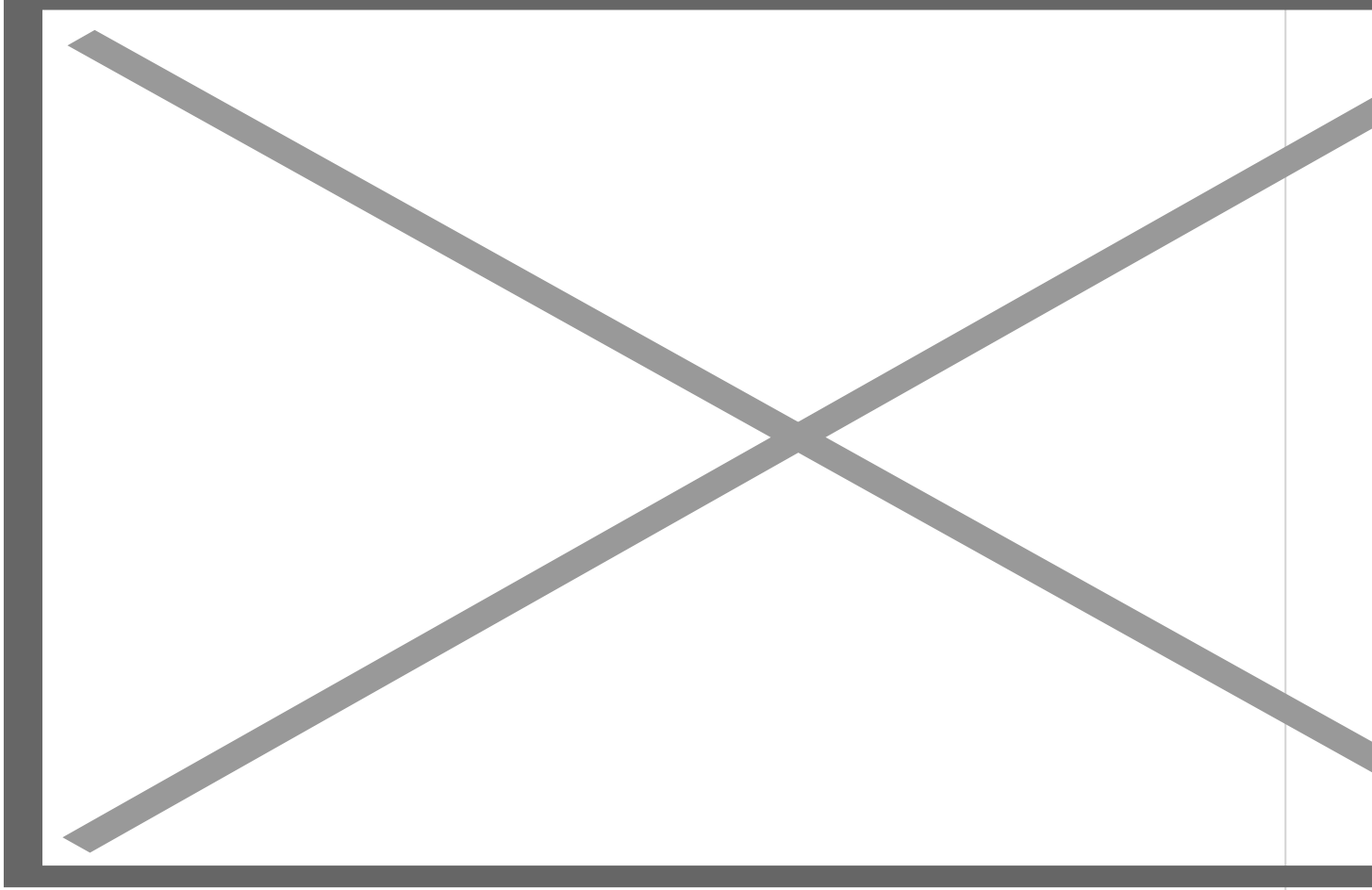


Court ruling is setback for Italy's plan to send asylum seekers to Albania

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Migrants and security officials walk at the port of Shengjin, northwestern Albania. Wednesday, Oct. 16, 2024 after disembarking from the Italian navy ship *Libra*, carrying the first group of 16 migrants intercepted in international waters. (AP Photo/Vlasov Sulaj)

Rome, November 13 (RHC)-- Seven asylum seekers have been sent back to Italy from Albania after a court in Rome refused a formal request to detain them in the Balkan nation, a setback for a contentious programme championed by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

The decision on Monday related to the case of seven people from Bangladesh and Egypt who were rescued in the Mediterranean Sea by the Italian navy while trying to make their way to Europe. They were brought to Italy overnight, a few days after their arrival in Albania.

According to a five-year deal agreed to by Meloni and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, Albania would allow Italy to run two processing centres on its territory with the capacity to screen up to 3,000 people a month to determine if they qualify for asylum or should be returned to their home countries.

Rights groups have criticised the agreement as a dangerous precedent and questioned whether it complies with international laws. The first 12 asylum seekers sent to Albania were returned to Italy after another court decision in October, shortly after the screening centres were opened.

In both cases, the Italian courts referred the cases to the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg to rule if the asylum seekers' countries of origin are considered safe for repatriation. The first 12 asylum seekers were also from Egypt and Bangladesh.

Meloni's government had issued a decree establishing a new list of 19 supposedly safe countries of origin, which includes Egypt and Bangladesh. But the European Union has not classified either as safe countries of origin.

The court rulings have raised the ire of Meloni's far-right government, which has been seeking strategies for easing the strain of refugee and migrant arrivals. In the latest decision, the court specified it was seeking clarification on which countries are designated as safe "only to identify which procedure to apply".

"The exclusion of a state from the list of safe countries of origin does not prevent the repatriation and/or expulsion of those migrants whose asylum applications have been rejected," the court said in its ruling.

Italy is the first country in the 27-nation EU to process asylum claims outside the bloc. The program is being closely watched by other European governments, several of which are considering harsher measures to stem migration.

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