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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION

**TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE
COUNCIL**

**Fourth Progress Report on the Partnership Framework with third countries under the
European Agenda on Migration**

1. Introduction

The Partnership Framework under the European Agenda for Migration was launched one year ago¹ as the EU's comprehensive approach to address the challenges of irregular migration and its root causes as part of the broader cooperation with our partners.

One year on, the Partnership Framework has brought better coordination of the positions and efforts of the EU and Member States towards third countries. The cooperation has moved to a new stage with the five priority countries identified last June², but also with a broader range of countries of origin and transit, in both Africa and Asia.

In the space of one year³, several partner countries have adopted or reviewed migration management strategies and legislation, in cooperation with the EU. European migration liaison officers are now present in 12 partner countries. Cooperation to tackle smuggling has intensified, also with the support of the European Border and Coast Guard and Europol. Steps have been taken to facilitate returns including through negotiations on readmission agreements or other forms of standard operating procedures with several countries. Under the EU's initiative, new formats for regional cooperation between countries of origin and transit have been launched. There is now an established partnership with the International Organisation for Migration to organise Assisted Voluntary Returns and reintegration in Sub-Saharan Africa, and a closer cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The EU Trust Fund for Africa⁴ has backed up this political engagement with 118 projects approved, for a total amount of almost EUR 1.9 billion.

In most of the cases, this has allowed to build on the joint interest and shared responsibility of EU Member States and partners to address irregular migration, often overcoming deep-seated differences. However, there have been setbacks, and in some instances long-standing resistance to cooperation has re-emerged.

This Fourth Progress Report presents the key developments and progress achieved since March 2017. It includes the steps taken with regard to the Central Mediterranean Route – where the EU has increased its efforts significantly, notably with Libya, in line with the Malta Declaration⁵ and the Joint Communication of 25 January⁶. Furthermore, after one year of implementation of the Partnership Framework, the Report also provides the lessons learned, the key remaining challenges, and how this can be driven forward in order to achieve all objectives set out by the Partnership Framework as confirmed by the European Council.⁷

¹ Communication on establishing a new Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration, COM (2016)385 final of 7.6.2016.

² Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali and Ethiopia.

³ COM (2016) 700, 18.10.2016; COM (2016) 960, 14.12.2016; and COM (2017) 205, 2.3.2017 respectively.

⁴ Commission Decision C(2015) 7293 final; The EU emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of migration and displaced persons in Africa (the EU Trust Fund for Africa).

⁵ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/01/03-malta-declaration/>

⁶ JOIN (2017) 4 final of 25.1.2017; joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: "Migration on the Central Mediterranean Route – Managing flows, saving lives".

⁷ In its conclusions of 28 June 2016, 20 October 2016 and 15 December 2016.

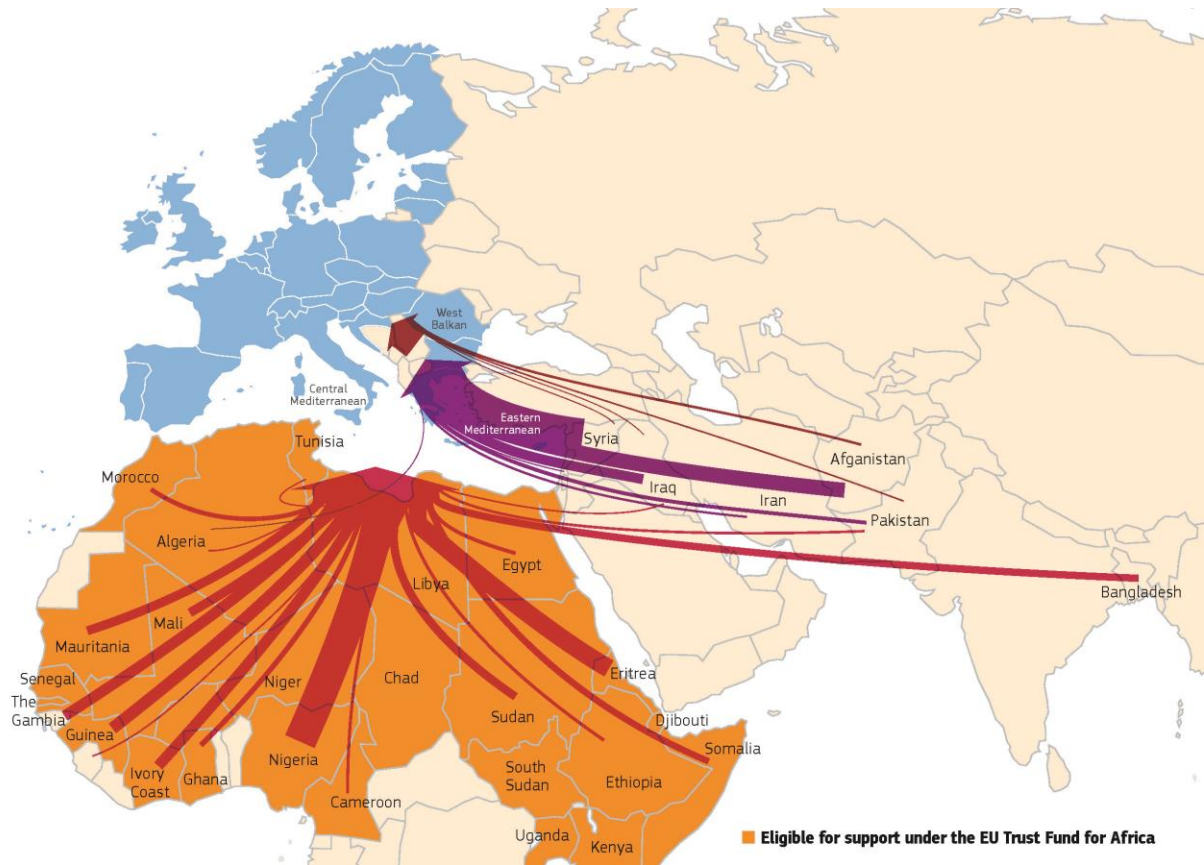


Figure: Main countries of origin for irregular migration from Africa and Asia (Source: European Border and Coast Guard Agency)⁸

2. Progress and results

2.1 priority countries

Niger

Cooperation with Niger is emblematic of what can be achieved with a transit country through the Partnership Framework. From the outset, the Government of Niger has been a proactive and constructive partner. The EU and Member States have closely coordinated their action, with a clear division of labour and mutually reinforcing support to help Niger meet its objectives. Strengthened border management, a more strategic approach to irregular migration including a tougher fight against smuggling, assistance to migrants and creation of alternative economic opportunities for the local communities on the transit routes have been the focal areas of common work within the Partnership.

The Government of Niger has put in place a coherent migration policy, with a clear strategic framework which facilitates cooperation with EU and Member States. The implementation of the short term action plan to counter migrant smugglers' networks in the region of Agadez is on track and fully financed, including support from Member States' bilateral programmes.⁹ This combines with work to tackle trafficking in human beings, where traffickers use the

⁸ The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

⁹ Such as Germany's support for equipment, and Italy's help to creating a common data sharing platform.

same routes to take their victims to Libya. The Government has also finalised a long-term National Migration Strategy, which should be adopted in July with its Action Plan.

This strategic cooperation has relied on a joint discussion of priorities and operational actions. On 1 June, the second meeting of the "Cadre de Concertation"¹⁰ agreed a combination of steps to put the common EU-Niger work on a stronger footing, accelerate the delivery of projects and ensure effective communication actions. A Joint Investigation Team, supported by the EU Trust Fund for Africa, has been operational since March 2017 to promote actions to counter smuggling networks. Its first activities have focused on capacity building, notably training in investigative techniques, and it had its first success in dismantling a network of migrant smugglers operating in Tchin-Tabaraden.

The Nigerien authorities have also stepped up border control and enforcement action against trafficking in human beings, with 18 operations in 2017 so far, leading to the arrest of more than 30 people, around 20 convictions and the confiscation of vehicles used for smuggling. There is clear evidence that control measures had some success in hindering migrant smuggling on the main migratory routes. Monitoring by the International Organisation for Migration of the two main migrant transit routes shows a steady decrease of the number of migrants leaving these border points towards Libya since May 2016. The number of incoming migrants in the first four months of 2017 (over 51 000) outnumbers outgoing migrants (over 22 000)¹¹. However, the decrease registered does not necessarily translate into a one on one reduction of the overall flow reaching Libya, as new routes by-passing the reinforced border controls are being exploited. These new routes are more difficult to use and riskier, leading to higher prices demanded by the smugglers for transport, and higher risks for the migrants.

The need for more analysis of alternative routes led to the launch in May 2017 of a joint information platform headed by the Niger authorities, bringing together the EU, interested Member States and the International Organisation for Migration. This platform will exchange statistical data, identify trends, develop risk analyses, and propose operational solutions. The first session of the Platform took place on 16 May. This work will be supported by a liaison officer from the European Border and Coast Guard Agency to be deployed to Niamey in July.

Success in the fight against smuggling and trafficking has increased the need to support viable economic alternatives for the population in the Agadez region, to offset decreased revenues from illegal activities. The creation of the EU antenna and office in Agadez is bringing a more rapid assessment of the needs in the field and increased visibility for EU action.

Assisted Voluntary Returns from Niger have picked up, with concerted EU support¹². By 9 June 2017, more than 2 640 migrants had been assisted (including 175 Nigeriens). The EU will continue to support this work. An additional project of EUR 15 million was contracted in April 2017 under the EU Trust Fund, as part of a broader regional initiative.

¹⁰ This meeting is co-chaired by the Minister of Interior and the Head of the EU Delegation and brings together relevant Ministries, the EU civilian capacity-building mission in Niger EUCAP Sahel Niger, Member States in the field, EU implementation agencies, and actors involved in the migration sector such as the International Organisation for Migration. The regional council of Agadez also now takes part in the meetings.

¹¹ This compares to almost 334 000 outgoing and 111 000 incoming migrants in 2016.

¹² In 2015, the International Organisation for Migration assisted 1 595 migrants of third countries and 126 Nigeriens to return to their communities, this number more than doubled in 2016, with 4 788 Assisted Voluntary Returns of third country nationals and 301 Nigeriens.

Next steps:

- Support the implementation of the National Migration Strategy.
- Improve the monitoring of migratory flows; support Niger to put in place adequate response to new migratory routes.
- Support Niger's capacity to investigate and prosecute migrant smugglers including by facilitating cooperation with Europol and Eurojust.
- Continue fostering Assisted Voluntary Returns.
- Deploy the European Border and Coast Guard Agency liaison officer in Niamey.
- Implement the approved projects to address the economic needs of communities losing revenues from the smuggling economy.

Nigeria

Nigeria is central to any attempt at managing migratory flows into Europe as a leading country of origin. Nigerians have been the main nationality of arrivals since 2016, when a total of 37 809 irregular entries were recorded. In the first four months of 2017, 5 253 Nigerians have already entered the EU irregularly, the first nationality overall. Nigeria remains the main non-EU country of origin for victims of trafficking in human beings registered in the EU¹³, predominantly women and girls trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Cooperation on readmission is relatively positive, compared to other countries in the region, through various bilateral cooperation channels with a number of Member States and with the EU. In 2016, Nigeria was the main destination of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency joint return operations (14 were organised in 2016, and 6 in 2017 so far). Nigerian liaison officers are deployed in Italy to facilitate the identification of irregular migrants. However, the outcome of this cooperation remains limited, with an average return rate of 26,4% in 2016, which varies widely across Member States. The Nigerian authorities have also yet to issue travel documents for the irregular migrants whose Nigerian nationality was confirmed by an identification mission to several Member States in late 2016. On the other hand, Nigeria is cooperating closely with the International Organisation for Migration to facilitate the Assisted Voluntary Return of its own nationals from Niger and Libya with 1 786 safely returned so far in 2017.

To set mutual cooperation on return on a firmer footing and provide a framework available to all Member States, Nigeria has agreed with the EU to open negotiations on a readmission agreement with the EU. After the first round of negotiations in October 2016, the second round was planned for December 2016, but was cancelled and a second date still needs to be set.

Cooperation with Nigeria should also be stepped up in view of the growing activity of criminal organisations in trafficking Nigerian women and girls for sexual exploitation as well as to strengthen further border management and the fight against smuggling. As of March 2017, six projects which address, inter alia, resilience, return, reintegration and stability in Nigeria have been launched through the EU Trust Fund. First results achieved include rehabilitated water supply infrastructures for 5 000 people and enrolment of 6 000 adolescent girls to safe spaces in Gombe and Borno.

¹³ Africa – Frontex Intelligence Community Report 2016.

The EU and Member States should continue to pursue the engagement to bring partnership with Nigeria to the next level. Nigeria is a strategic partner in Africa for investment and security as well as for migration, and the conclusion of an effective readmission agreement would represent a clear sign of commitment to this broad and strategic partnership. To resume engagement and advance the negotiations within a broader framework for cooperation on all aspects of migration management, a joint EU and Member States high level mission will travel to Nigeria in July. The next Ministerial dialogue, planned for September 2017, represents an opportunity to bring together all the different work strands and mainstream migration into a broad cooperation with the EU.

Next steps:

- Step up further bilateral cooperation on readmission.
- Resume negotiations on the readmission agreement
- Ensure the involvement of Europol and Eurojust in cross-border cases of trafficking in human beings, including support to financial investigations, by the end of 2017.
- Bring together all different work strands on investment, security and migration in view of the EU-Ministerial meeting.

Senegal

Senegal is a major country of origin for irregular migrants, with 3 410 already arrived in Italy in the first five months of 2017, in addition to 10 300 registered in 2016.

The well-established political dialogue with Senegal on migration continued at high level in April and June 2017, when deepened cooperation on migration were discussed focusing on four key strands – addressing root causes, improving border management and civil registries, increasing returns from other African countries (including Libya) and facilitating returns, notably of new arrivals on the Central Mediterranean route.

The efforts of the Senegalese authorities to improve migration management have included the reorganisation of the border police service and measures to improve the availability of reliable migration data. It is expected that the action plan of the national migration strategy will be adopted in the coming weeks. The extension of the central fingerprints database is progressing, with 6.5 million out of 10 million registered citizens covered. In the medium term consulates should have direct access to this database, which would speed up identification. Senegal also plays a significant role in the Steering Committee of the Rabat Process.

Senegal has recently opened an Embassy in Niger and has assisted migrants wishing to return to Senegal, with support from the International Organisation for Migration project funded by the EU. The number of Assisted Voluntary Returns of Senegalese nationals is rising, reaching 823 from Niger and 528 from Libya until 9 June 2017.

However, operational cooperation on returns from Europe remains minimal. 2016 saw a substantial increase in return decisions (5 445 against 4 695 in 2015) but the return rate fell, from an already very low 12.5%, to 9%. The number of requests for consular travel documents which received a positive response also decreased. Whilst Senegalese officials have undertaken missions to EU Member States, the follow-up to these missions in terms of returns remains disappointing, with slow processing on the Senegalese side and administrative difficulties in EU Member States.

Limited progress is also recorded on the establishment of a risk analysis cell of the Africa Frontex Intelligence Community that will allow strengthening the joint fight against smuggling and trafficking in human beings. Negotiations of a working arrangement between the European Border and Coast Guard Agency and the Senegalese authorities have been concluded, and the arrangement should now be signed as soon as possible.

Next steps:

- Establish an Africa Frontex Intelligence Community Risk Analysis Cell in Senegal.
- Sign as soon as possible the Memorandum of Understanding with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency.
- Establish effective cooperation on readmission, based on the respect of best practices, focusing on migrants arrived through the Central Mediterranean Route.

Mali

Mali continues to be one of the main countries of origin and transit of migrants on the way to Europe. With 10 270 irregular entries to the EU in 2016 (and 1 879 during the first five months of 2017), Mali remains in the top 10 countries of origin of irregular migrants reaching the EU while being at an important crossroads for migratory flows towards Algeria and Niger.

Taking into account the sensitive political and security context of the country, the high level dialogue with Mali has continued including through the participation of the High Representative/Vice President in the EU-G5 Ministerial Meeting on 5-6 June, where the EU support for the new cross border force across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad to counter illegal activities and terrorism was announced. EU Trust Fund projects have also been launched to support the redeployment of Malian internal security forces and reinforce border control in central Mali. Two EU Common Security and Defence Policy missions are actively supporting stabilisation efforts through training, advice and mentoring. This has a positive knock-on to action against smuggling networks.

An EU mission to Mali gathered data on the possible diversion of flows, given the decrease of transit through Agadez. Work is ongoing to implement an EU Trust Fund project which includes action to raise awareness to prevent irregular migration and to give the Malian authorities further technical and operational support for law enforcement against migrant smuggling and for the monitoring of transit routes.

Cooperation on readmission with Mali has shown no sign of progress. In 2016, 3 695 return decisions were issued by Member States to Malian nationals, and only 180 returns to Mali effectively took place – the return rate of 4,8% is one of the lowest for any third country. Partial data for 2017 suggests a further decline this year. The missions that took place in 2016 have not yet led any returns, and cooperation with some Member States seems frozen since the end of 2016.

The Malian authorities have deployed efforts to facilitate the voluntary return of Malian citizens stranded in Niger and in Libya with 448 assisted until 9 June 2017. Enhancing further the capabilities in Malian consular services would allow more migrants to be assisted to return.

A national consultation process on migration will take place in June, to develop the Malian National Strategy on Migration adopted in 2015. It will include closer contacts with the

Malian diaspora. The National Strategy on Borders developed with EU support was adopted in May, and its Action Plan should become immediately operational.

Next steps:

- Continue engagement to enhance the work on smuggling and trafficking.
- Further facilitate Assisted Voluntary Returns from other African countries.
- Ensure the effective return of irregular migrants identified through ad hoc missions.
- Put in place efficient working methods with Malian authorities on identification and documentation of undocumented irregular migrants.

Ethiopia

In 2016, the number of irregular migrants from Ethiopia increased to 3 660, 33% higher than in 2015 (2 735). Cooperation on return was very limited, with a return rate of 9.8% with 1 475 return decisions, and 145 effective returns, all voluntary. Ethiopia also remains a major host country for refugees, now hosting almost 843 000 refugees.¹⁴

High level discussions have continued, notably with the visit of the High Representative/Vice President to Addis Ababa in March and in the margins of the Somali conference on 11 May.

A Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP) project, which includes specific action for the protection of children, aims to target over 100 000 refugees, as well as their host communities. The EU is also supporting Ethiopia with EUR 90 million mobilised under the EU Trust Fund, making Ethiopia one of the main beneficiaries of EU support. Funding has allowed to target over one million farmers, as well as the development of a comprehensive project on improved collection and maintenance of national data on migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees in Ethiopia.

Following continued renewed political engagement to cooperate on return, the EU proposed a limited number of pilot cases for identification and return. However, the operational progress has been very slow, and without results after 17 months.

An EU high level mission visited Ethiopia on 6-7 June to discuss the lessons learned from the pilot cases. Both parties agreed that they could be translated into more structured cooperation. Following a discussion on achieving this, it is now necessary to start implementing as soon as possible.

Next steps:

- Ensure a rapid delivery of travel documents by the Ethiopian consulates and effective return of the migrants concerned by the pilot project.
- To establish as soon as possible an effective structured cooperation for identification and returns.

2.2 *Central Mediterranean Route*

Arrivals via the Central Mediterranean route up to 10 June 2017 amount to 61 285 people, an increase of around 25% over the same period in 2016. By the end of May, the International Organisation for Migration had recorded 1 562 lives lost at sea this year.

¹⁴ UNHCR data as of 31 March 2017.

To respond to this ongoing crisis, a stronger focus has been placed on cooperation with North African partners and Libya in particular, following the adoption of the Malta Declaration and in line with the joint Communication on the Central Mediterranean Route¹⁵ of January.

Libya - by far the largest source of departures – is a key partner for managing flows on the Central Mediterranean route. It is a country of transit and destination for thousands of migrants, many of which are victims of trafficking in human beings, belong to vulnerable categories or are in need of protection.

In line with the Joint Communication and the Malta Declaration of 3 February 2017, the EU has deepened its work to support the Libyan authorities and enhance their migration management capabilities. This is part of the broader EU commitment to supporting the stabilisation of Libya in line with the political process led by the UN. Diplomatic efforts continue and on 23 May, the EU hosted the second meeting of the Libya Quartet¹⁶ following up on the first meeting in Cairo on 18 March. All these efforts take place in the challenging context of an unstable political and security situation in large areas of Libya.

A comprehensive EUR 90 million package was adopted under the EU Trust Fund in April to reinforce the protection of migrants and refugees, support the cohesion and social and economic development of host communities in Libya, and improve migration management throughout the country. Implementation is organised through a variety of partners¹⁷ and all contracts have been signed.

This has already allowed the International Organisation for Migration to step up its assistance to voluntary return. Until 9 June 2017, 4 582 migrants returned to their countries of origin, against 2 775 for the whole of 2016.

The three Common Security and Defence Policy activities – EUNAVFORMED Operation Sophia ("Operation Sophia"), the EU Border Assistance Mission Libya (EUBAM) and the EU Liaison and Planning Cell – continue to operate and engage actively with the Libyan authorities.

Operation Sophia continues its efforts to help break the smugglers' business model. It is having a deterrent effect with regards to the arms embargo, and is improving broader maritime security and knowledge about how smuggling networks operate. The Operation, alongside the Seahorse Programme and work by the Italian authorities, is also continuing the training, equipping and capacity building of the Libyan coastguard including on human rights and international humanitarian law. Around 130 persons have been trained so far in 2017, though identifying a sufficient number of candidates for future training remains a challenge for Libya. Out of a total number of 10 vessels, Italy has already returned four to the Libyan authorities. The training and return of vessels means that the Libyan Coast Guard should progressively and effectively manage search and rescue activities to prevent migrant smuggling in Libya's territorial waters. These efforts will continue to be accompanied with measures to strengthen respect of human rights and to monitor the use of these Coast Guard assets. The Council is also considering options to control the export or supply to Libya of certain goods which can be used for people smuggling and human trafficking.

¹⁵ JOIN (2017) 4 final of 25.1.2017; Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: "Migration on the Central Mediterranean Route – Managing flows, saving lives".

¹⁶ EU, African Union, United Nations and League of Arab States.

¹⁷ Contracts with International Organisation for Migration, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations' Children's Fund, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, and the German Development Agency (GIZ).

In terms of border management, the EU Border Assistance Mission is in the process of establishing a light permanent presence in Tripoli. Cooperation with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency and Europol will be further enhanced, in terms of training and participation in activities of the Africa Frontex Intelligence Community. A liaison officer was deployed to the EU Border Assistance Mission in May.

To further strengthen the fight against smuggling and enhance Libyan border management capacities, the Commission services and the European External Action Service are working with the Italian authorities to develop a complementary multi-annual project in cooperation with Libyan authorities. This should allow a renewed focus on the Southern Border of Libya with dedicated attention being given to the ongoing processes of reconciliation and to foster community development, thus providing alternatives to the smuggling economy. To help to streamline and coordinate all these initiatives, the EU is working towards the creation of a Libya-EU Platform to discuss cooperation in a number of fields.

In addition, the EU is increasing its interaction with the *Sub-Saharan neighbours of Libya*, to address the northbound irregular migration pressure. Several actions are already being implemented, with regionalisation of the Common Security and Defence Policy missions in the Sahel, and implementation of EU Trust Fund projects with a cross-border dimension . This regional approach also builds on cooperation within the G5 Sahel.¹⁸ The G5 Joint Force for securing sensitive border regions was at the heart of the third EU-G5 Sahel Ministerial Meeting in Bamako on 6 June, where the EU announced its intention to support its development and operationalisation with a contribution of up to EUR 50 million. The objectives of the Joint Force are to fight against terrorism, organised cross-border crime and trafficking in human beings.

Next steps:

- Continue the training of the Libyan coast guard in close coordination with Italian authorities with a view to building capacity and completing the restitution of vessels.
- Continue implementing the projects offering relief and protection to migrants stranded in Libya and Assisted Voluntary Return opportunities.
- Finalise with Italian authorities the ongoing preparatory work for the submission to the EU Trust Fund of a multi-annual project on border management.
- Continue process towards establishing a light EU Border Assistance Mission permanent presence in Tripoli.
- Organise a fact-finding mission in Southern Libya in view of additional support.
- Promote cooperation between Libya and its southern neighbours.

2.3 Progress/results with other countries

North Africa

Increased efforts by the Egyptian authorities to control their maritime borders put in place since September 2016 have resulted in the halt of departures from *Egypt*. The support already provided by the EU has helped the Egyptian law enforcement and judicial authorities to implement the 2016 anti-smuggling legislation, with a detailed work plan agreed in March. The Egyptian authorities are also exploring future cooperation with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. The establishment of a formal EU-Egypt Migration Dialogue was agreed in January 2017, but the dialogue has not yet taken place. A EUR 60 million programme was approved under the North Africa Window of the EU Trust Fund in May

¹⁸ Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

2017, to enhance Egypt's migration management, address the root causes of irregular migration, and support Egyptian communities hosting migrants.

While broad cooperation within the framework of the Mobility Partnership with **Tunisia** is progressing, negotiations on visa facilitation and readmission agreements have been facing delays. Tunisia re-confirmed its engagement to cooperate with the EU on all aspects related to migration, including migration governance, and the fight against irregular migration, with a particular focus on tackling the root causes of migration, at the EU-Tunisia Association Council in May 2017. Tunisia has now expressed interest in future training under the Seahorse programme.

Cooperation with **Algeria** is important in terms of irregular migration flows towards Europe. At the Association Council in Brussels in March, the EU and Algeria adopted the Partnership Priorities in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Because Algeria has not accepted a formal dialogue on migration, the EU and Algeria continue to discuss migration through informal dialogues, most recently in May, with a narrow focus on addressing the root causes of migration.

In recent weeks, irregular migration flows from **Morocco** to the EU have increased. This trend is being closely monitored and the possibility to discuss the matter with Morocco will need to be explored. The negotiations on a visa facilitation and readmission agreements have been facing delays.

West Africa

While the European Union has continued to concentrate efforts on the five priority countries identified by the Partnership Framework, it has also adapted to the evolving reality of the composition of flows through the Central Mediterranean route.

Europe has seen an important increase in the number of irregular migrants from **Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Guinea**. High level missions to those countries have shown a willingness to engage further with some steps already taken by developing shared actions and joint strategies including to tackle returns. On the EU side, the extension of the EU Trust Fund for Africa to the three countries is a demonstration of commitment towards the region. This engagement, with further dialogues and identification missions, should pave the way to a more systematic approach on migration management, returns and cooperation against smuggling. In the coming months work with these countries – as well as with the Gambia – will continue.

Jordan and Lebanon

At the EU-hosted Brussels Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region in April 2017, the EU reconfirmed its support to **Jordan** and **Lebanon**, for humanitarian protection, sustainable economic growth, and the education and livelihood needs of refugees and their host communities. The EU reiterated its commitment to have similar levels of support for 2018 as for 2016-17, and to maintain the same level of engagement also in 2019.

Asia

The EU-**Afghanistan** Joint Way Forward and the bilateral agreements concluded by several Member States have started to translate into first results on returns, both voluntary and non-voluntary in full respect of human rights and the principle of non-refoulement. The second Joint Working Group on the implementation of the Joint Way Forward in March 2017 reaffirmed the commitment of both sides and tackled concrete issues such as facilitating contacts between Member States and Afghan consulates. The regional dimension of Afghan

refugees was also raised in political dialogues with partners. Coordinated efforts and financial assistance to humanitarian partners continue to support the immediate needs of vulnerable Afghan refugees in *Iran*, and longer term actions are being explored in order to complement the work by Iranian authorities on the issue.

An agreement to set up an electronic platform aimed at facilitating the readmission process with *Pakistan* was signed in April. A pilot phase involving four Member States (Greece, France, Germany, and Belgium) in the autumn should be the first step to swift implementation. Visits by the Pakistani authorities have paved the way for further exchanges with Europol and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. At the same time, the EU is supporting migrant centres in Pakistan and information campaigns to spread awareness on the realities of migration. The organisation of a third EU-Pakistan Summit is linked, among other points, to progress made in cooperation on migration, including readmission.

Bangladesh has become the second largest nationality for irregular migrants arriving in the EU. Political and operational engagement has been stepped up over the past year, especially on readmission of irregular migrants and preventing irregular migration. Bangladesh needs to intensify efforts to translate its commitment to readmit nationals irregularly staying in the EU into concrete actions, including through agreeing on standard operating procedures for their identification, documentation and return .

3. One year on: lessons learned, challenges and way forward

Cooperation with Member States

The Partnership Framework has brought an unprecedented level of cooperation between the EU and Member States with close bilateral relations with partner countries. An example has been Niger, where the support to the authorities has come with a combination of EU and Member States' instruments. Cooperation has also been valuable in the form of information exchange, most recently on the work on better tracking of alternative routes.

The benefits of a coordinated approach have been further demonstrated in the preparation of joint EU/Member States high level and technical missions to the priority countries and the preparation of common EU briefing for Member States' bilateral visits. This allows more effective alignment of positions among EU capitals and their Embassies in partner countries. At EU level, this has also meant national bilateral relations and cooperation sometimes taking the lead, with the EU actively complementing Member States' engagement through a true inter-institutional partnership grounded on results.

However, a coordinated and coherent EU/Member State approach has not materialised in all cases. More needs to be done to avoid lack of coordination and ensure full transparency and information exchange between the EU and Member States on actions being prepared. Positions need to be better aligned, common messaging used, and EU-level efforts and bilateral cooperation need to mutually reinforce each other. The Partnership Framework could also benefit further from the privileged bilateral relations of some Member States with specific partner countries to offer added value for the EU level strategic approach. This could be particularly valuable where the EU has no specific mandate or only a shared competence. So far only a limited number of Member States have been engaging proactively. In the next months it should be possible to extend the number of Member States contributing to this shared effort. A consistent and coordinated support by all Member States, in particular, would

be key to mobilise and use in an efficient and effective manner all the available leverages which could be relevant to ensure cooperation on migration management.

Another important aspect of coordination is ensuring consistency with other international processes. At EU level, strong coordination is in place to ensure consistent positions between the Partnership Framework, the Valletta follow-up, regional migration processes in Africa and the EU position in global processes such as G20, G7 and the preparation of the UN Global Compact on Migration. This should be maintained and further strengthened.

Since its inception, the Partnership Framework has focused on five priority countries. Calls have been made by several Member States to extend the approach and test it also in other geographical areas. A *geographically flexible approach* has been developed to respond to evolving migration flows and new needs – also taking into account that working with countries of transit has often been easier than with countries of origin. This has led for instance to stepping up the work with Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Bangladesh.

Cooperation on the ground

Presence on the ground is essential to enhance information on migratory flows and achieve clear operational results. EU Delegations and Member State Embassies have both made migration a priority issue since the Partnership Framework. The deployment of twelve European Migration Liaison Officers to priority third countries of origin and transit¹⁹ has been instrumental in strengthening the EU's engagement. They contribute to closer connections with all local stakeholders and authorities.

The expertise of EU Agencies should be used to the full. The Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community already offers a framework for regular exchange of information and knowledge in relation to border security²⁰. The deployment of the first liaison officer of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in Africa in July will be another step forward. Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations, aimed at developing capabilities of partner countries, have also proved useful in transit countries to improve border management and the fight against organised crime.

Return and readmission

Improving return and readmission has been a key objective of the Partnership Framework, to allow the full chain of migration management to work and to dissuade people from embarking on hazardous journeys. To strengthen cooperation with third countries in this area, a variety of approaches and tools was explored. With some partners the EU engaged in formal dialogues or negotiations on legally binding instruments while with others more informal tools were tested, such as standard operating procedures, technical missions, or identification missions.

Experience with identification missions confirmed they represent a helpful tool, but the process of identification on the side of partner countries has been lengthy and heavy, with

¹⁹ EMLOs have been deployed in Ethiopia, Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, Serbia, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey.

²⁰ Its current membership includes the following African countries: Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cap Verde, Chad, Congo DRC, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Morocco, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Togo, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan with observers: Algeria, Egypt, Eritrea, Libya, Sudan. A EUR 4 million project is now being launched to further support the Community.

only a fraction of the persons identified effectively returned. In the future, the missions should be used in particular when identification cannot be done through alternative means or as trust building measures to achieve structured cooperation. On a normal basis, the identification and documentation should be done by the consular offices of the origin countries or by permanent liaison officers deployed by them to places of arrivals.

Since the start of the Partnership Framework, formal negotiations on a readmission agreement have been opened with Nigeria, Tunisia and Jordan, in addition to those already ongoing with Morocco. As a rule these negotiations have a number of challenges, e.g. the inclusion of a third country national clause or the acceptance by the partner country of EU travel documents for return (EU laissez passer). With other countries, more informal tools of cooperation on return are being tested, such as the standard operating procedures,. In both cases, there continue to be difficulties with most countries of origin to accept the readmission of their nationals, although this is an established international obligation.

Efforts need to be stepped up to help partners communicate to their citizens that cooperating on readmission is part of a comprehensive and balanced relationship with the EU and its Member States and is key to discourage further the irregular departures which put at risk the life of many of their compatriots.

In this context, partner countries have signalled a greater willingness to cooperate on return of newly arrived irregular migrants in particular those who are not yet part of the diaspora contributing with remittances to the livelihoods of their own communities. While the focus of the Partnership Framework remains on all irregular migrants in the EU, operational solutions prioritising newly arrived irregular migrants are being tested with partner countries, in particular in Member States of first entry.

Internal efforts also need to continuously increase to make returns more efficient and effective. The revised EU Action Plan on returns and the recommendation²¹ set out steps Member States should take to improve the effectiveness of returns, addressing issues such as the risk of absconding after people receive return decisions. This is also an important element in ensuring real results on return under the Partnership Framework. Member States can also contribute by improved information-gathering on returns, to support better analysis²². The existence of coordinated and adequate reintegration packages to ensure dignified return to countries of origin represents an important incentive to facilitate returns.

Overcoming resistances in the field of returns and readmission will require a more coordinated and wider use of the levers offered by all relevant EU policies to achieve results. For instance, one specific area to explore is the coordinated use of visa or legal migration policies²³. Based on the response of 23 Member States²⁴ to the ad hoc query on ongoing legal migration initiatives between Member States and Partnership Framework priority countries, it appears that 16 countries have no specific initiative on legal migration taking place, other than those ongoing as part of the Erasmus+ programme for students mobility. Only two reported to have ongoing bilateral initiatives facilitating the mobility and circulation of young graduates and professionals, with Senegal and Mali.

²¹ COM(2017) 200 final of 2.3.2017 and C(2017) 1600 final of 7.3.2017.

²² The Commission's Integrated Return Management Application allows sharing of data on returns.

²³ The use of, for example, visa leverage has proven to be effective, as illustrated by the experience of certain Member States but also the United States or Canada vis-à-vis partner countries.

²⁴ Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, United Kingdom.

In order to ensure enhanced cooperation, and taking into consideration the willingness of the third country, broader packages of incentives should be offered.

An area where good results have been possible is the Assisted Voluntary Return of migrants stranded along the route towards Europe. In the case of Libya and Niger, the reinforced partnership between the EU and the International Organisation for Migration led to tangible results: from January to 9 June 2017, more than 7 200 vulnerable migrants stranded in Niger and Libya received support to return home. In the case of Libya, the numbers for 2017 have already surpassed those for 2016.

EU and Member States' efforts should be stepped up in the field of communication and awareness on dangers of irregular migration journeys. While there are initiatives in countries of origin and transit warning potential migrants against the risk of the journey, more communication about returns and successful reintegration, and awareness-raising among the diaspora could also facilitate more returns .

Financial support

The EU Trust Fund for Africa has allowed accelerated and flexible decision-making on projects targeting migration policy and management, and on addressing the root causes of migration. The EU has substantially increased the level of resources available across the three regions of the Fund, moving from almost EUR 1.8 billion in November 2015 to around EUR 2.8 billion²⁵. The extension of the Trust Fund to include Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana has further increased its reach.

While the Trust Fund has demonstrated that it is able to quickly prepare actions of common interest to the EU and its Member States as well as to partner countries, such speed has not always been maintained in subsequent steps of the process. A number of implementing partners (including development agencies of EU Member States) were not ready to quickly deploy and start activities on the ground. Since the beginning of 2017, processes leading to the signature of contracts with implementers have become leaner and faster. Over the past five months, the amount of signed contracts across the three regions has increased from almost EUR 500 million to over EUR 1 billion.

The Trust Fund has also received some direct support from Member States' budgets²⁶, and –in addition – some Member States have also contributed directly to specific projects or initiatives. This avenue will need to be pursued in the coming months in order to increase the resources available for the work on migration on the basis of common interests with Member States. While on the Sub-Saharan windows of the Trust Fund the focus will be on the effective use of resources to foster partnerships and cooperation, the measures required to follow up to the Malta Declaration are placing an increasing pressure on the North Africa window of the Trust Fund. A clear commitment and financial support by Member States is therefore crucial to ensure that the North Africa window can count on an adequate amount of resources in the coming years.

²⁵ To date, 118 programmes across the three regions have been approved for a total amount of EUR 1889.3 million.

²⁶ Including EUR 202.4 million pledged by the EU Member States and other donors such as Switzerland and Norway: EUR 72 million of this has been already contributed as of 31 May 2017.

Last but not least, the *External Investment Plan* will help address the economic root causes of irregular migration by boosting investment and job creation, notably in Africa and the EU's neighbourhood. It is of priority importance that the proposal for a European Fund for Sustainable Development is approved by the EU co-legislators as soon as possible and that the Fund starts its operations without delay.

4. Conclusion

One year of implementation of the Partnership Framework has allowed the EU and its Member States to bring the cooperation in the field of migration with third countries to a new level, through tailor-made packages of short and medium term actions. Positive results have been obtained so far in the areas of the fight against smuggling and trafficking as well as Assisted Voluntary Returns. Some initial steps can be witnessed also in the field of return and readmission, but this is still unsatisfactory. Given that the push factors for migration to Europe remain, delivering on all objectives of the Partnership Framework remains a key priority in the coming months and will require a continued and increased effort from all stakeholders involved.

The unprecedented level of coordination both across EU services and policies and with Member States needs to be consolidated by expanding the available instruments, increasing the number of Member States engaged in the common effort, and improved information exchange would further facilitate this. A more consistent common position vis-à-vis partner countries will be important to maintain the momentum and capitalise on the results, work and efforts made. If necessary, the geographical scope of the Partnership Framework will continue adapting to address new realities, with a particular focus on the Central Mediterranean route.

In the field of return, while the importance of implementing international obligations should be stressed consistently with partners, the lessons learned should be applied pragmatically, exploring all practical solutions that would lead to better results in returns with the help of enhanced cooperation and improved coordination inside the EU as well. The EU will in particular step up efforts to agree on stable arrangements for return with partner countries, ensure the swift returns of newly arrived irregular migrants and seek support from the Member States for a better coordination of relevant leverages and incentives. Efforts to increase Assisted Voluntary Return to Sub-Saharan countries of origin before irregular migrants reach Europe need to be further stepped up.

In terms of resources, adequate and sustainable funding is essential to underpin an enhanced political dialogue. This might require additional funding also from the Member States, possibly to be channelled through the EU Trust Fund, in particular its North Africa window, to ensure that the actions undertaken so far can continue delivering results. The opportunities offered by the External Investment Plan will need to be exploited to the full.

By its very nature, migration is a long term challenge for the EU, one that requires a policy beyond the immediate crisis response. The Partnership Framework is offering the platform to implement this policy in close cooperation with our partners, finding shared solutions and establishing sound and fair dialogues. In the coming months, the EU and Member States will need to better exploit all opportunities and all relevant policies and instruments available with a constant focus on results and with the flexibility to adapt to evolving realities.