

MALTA'S ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION CHALLENGE

In the past few years a dramatic increase of illegal immigration activity across the Mediterranean has taken place. All indicators point towards a future of even more migratory flows from north to south in the decade ahead. Such an increase in human trafficking is already having a major negative impact on the countries of origin, transit and destination of such activity.

Located in the centre of the Mediterranean, Malta finds itself in the precarious position of largely being a country of transit in the ever-increasing flow of human beings moving from the southern shores of the Mediterranean to Europe.

Realising that such a dramatic increase in illegal immigration is quickly becoming a major source of instability in international relations Malta has been implementing a comprehensive foreign policy strategy to raise awareness and also take the necessary action to deal more effectively with this new form of human slavery that dominates contemporary Euro-Mediterranean relations.

In a recent op-ed feature entitled "Small Country, Big Problem" in the International Herald Tribune (July 17th 2006, p.6) penned by Malta's Foreign Minister, Michael Frendo, the overwhelming security challenge that Malta's is confronting in terms of illegal immigration was clearly illustrated: "If 75,000 illegal immigrants suddenly arrived in France or 50,000 illegal immigrants landed on Spain's shores, would that hit the news? This is the equivalent, in terms of population density, of what Malta has experienced at the start of July 2006."

Malta's Foreign Minister's feature which also appeared in the Frankfurter Allgemeine and Le Figaro, further underlines that the message that Malta has been consistently and persistently trying to communicate in recent years to the international community of states about the necessity to deal with illegal immigration in the Euro-Med area in a more concerted manner is certainly gaining major traction. The feature also helped to concentrate strategic thinker's minds on what policy actions need to be introduced to better manage this growing source of insecurity

Malta's strategic decision to focus on illegal immigration as a number one foreign policy priority has resulted in this so-called soft security issue becoming a top priority on the international agenda of Europe's main security institutions. On a continuous basis the Government of Malta has been seeking to further advance strategic thinking on this phenomenon by identifying four main themes that need to be taken into consideration when tackling the problem.

First, immediate action is necessary to deal with the humanitarian catastrophe that is unfolding on Europe's doorstep. While tens of thousands of people are going through harrowing humanitarian experiences in an effort to reach mainland Europe, hundreds are losing their lives in the Mediterranean Sea. A crisis-management mechanism therefore needs to set up to prevent the further loss of life on the high seas. This could take the form of a Euro-Med Coastguard Agency that would be mandated to carry out search and rescue missions and be open to any of the Euro-Mediterranean states willing to participate.

Second, the only way to deal with such a transnational security challenge as illegal immigration is to ensure that all the countries concerned are included in such a process. Malta's emphatic call for African states to join the international debate on illegal immigration at the conference in Morocco in July 2006 is the only logical way forward. Unless countries of origin, transit and destination are around the table no effective international mechanism can be introduced to stem the tide of illegal immigration across the Mediterranean. The EU- African Union conference scheduled to take place in Tripoli is thus of utmost importance and should be held as soon as possible.

Third, human trafficking needs to be regarded as a major component in the equation of organised crime. Transportation of illegal immigrants worldwide is a billion dollar annual business and thus needs to be tackled as such. As one of the main sea lines of communication, the Mediterranean is a major highway for such trafficking. Joint patrolling of the Mediterranean, west, central and east, is thus a must if criminal organisations' activities are to stand any chance of being seriously curtailed.

Fourth, all short and medium term efforts to better manage illegal immigration need to be supplemented by a more long-term strategy that focuses on the north-south socio-economic dimension of this problem. International development assistance needs to be better distributed so that people in developing countries start seeing a future in their own homeland.

By taking full advantage of its membership in different international organisations, especially the "soap box" that EU membership has provided since 2004, Malta has succeeded in focusing international attention on a major security challenge in the Mediterranean. The EU decision to launch joint patrols in the Mediterranean and the more recent plan unveiled by the European Commission to consider dispatching "rapid reaction" teams of border guards, interpreters and medics to help frontline states such as Malta cope with the influx of illegal immigrants is further evidence of just how much has been achieved in this respect.

The next step in Malta's illegal immigration strategy must now be to ensure that the EU's fledgling border control agency, FRONTEX, lives up to its commitment to implement a multilateral mechanism that has all the necessary resources to monitor, manage and channel the flow of illegal migrants in the Euro-Med area. Malta's foreign policy track record to date when it comes to moving the illegal immigration debate to a higher level augurs well for further progress to be registered in the near future.

Dr Stephen C. Calleya
Director
Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies
University of Malta

Summer 2006