

AFP - EU set to provide border guards for immigration crises

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BRUSSELS, April 11, 2007 (AFP) -

EU member states support moves to make an emergency force of border guards available to help out if any of them are confronted by a major influx of illegal immigrants, the European parliament heard Wednesday.

Belgian euro MP Gerard Deprez, championing the idea in the parliament, said the 27 member states foresee a force of "between 250 and 500" EU border guards provided from the national forces to help out the bloc's existing Frontex border agency.

This would be a "strategic reserve" available to Frontex and therefore to any EU country which finds itself under heavy pressure from incoming migrants.

The parliament will vote on the scheme at a plenary session in Strasbourg later this month and its backers hope that it will receive the necessary formal support from member states by June.

The planned force would be able to carry out identity controls and use appropriate force to tackle the problem while operating outside their own country.

Based in Warsaw, Frontex started operating in 2005 and has grown rapidly.

It was set up to coordinate the efforts of individual EU member states in securing the EU's 6,000 kilometres (3,600 miles) of external land borders and 85,000 kilometers of coastline.

The agency has been particularly active in the eastern Mediterranean and off the coast of western Africa, where it mounted Operation Hera after more than 7,500 illegal immigrants landed on the Canary Islands in the first six months of last year.

A new Hera operation was launched in February, with the help of air and sea resources from France, Italy, Luxembourg and Spain, in liaison with Senegalese authorities.