

EU gears up border security ahead of Schengen expansion

Warsaw (dpa) - The European Union's external border agency Frontex will this year coordinate 30 joint operations among EU member states with a focus on stemming the influx of illegal migrants, Frontex Executive Director Ilkka Laitinen told reporters in Warsaw Tuesday.

The flurry of border security activity comes as ten Eastern and Central European states, which joined the EU in May 2004, plan to implement Schengen Agreement measures that will eliminate internal border checks by December 2007.

All 27 EU members and non-members Iceland, Norway and Switzerland are party to the Schengen Agreement. However, so far internal border controls have been dropped only among the core of older EU states.

"I would just highlight here the very difficult and sensitive area of combating increased maritime illegal migration to the EU where I believe Frontex has played a key role during 2006 and continues to do so," Laitinen told reporters.

"Although I regret we will continue to see needless tragedies as a result of desperate people crossing the seas in unseaworthy vessels, were it not for the work of the Agency in co-ordinating maritime operations, I believe more lives would have been lost at sea," he said referring the growing influx of migrants from West Africa to the Canary Islands.

Frontex has launched the Hera I, II and III operations with EU member Spain to tackle the tide of migrants risking their lives to reach the Canary Islands. Measures include sea patrols designed to intercept migrant ships and interviews with migrants who made it to the islands.

The border agency also plans to introduce Rapid Border Intervention Teams, designed to aid the national border guard services of EU members in implementing Schengen border regulations.

German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schauble and European Commission Vice President Franco Frattini attended the opening of Frontex's swish new headquarters in downtown Warsaw Tuesday.

"Safeguarding the integrity and promoting the expansion of the Schengen area is crucial to the success of the EU's integrated border management," Frattini told reporters. "And Frontex is a vital component of this policy measure."

Established by the EU in May 2005 in the Polish capital Warsaw, Frontex is charged with tackling pressing EU and Schengen-area border security issues at a time of the Schengen regime's massive eastward expansion.

As a border security trouble-shooter, Frontex conducts risk analysis aimed at stemming the tide of illegal migrants and goods by creating and co-ordinating the implementation of best practise border policies and joint operations among the EU member states. EUX-TV (Netherlands) - 11 April 2007