

EiTB (SPAIN) -EU agrees rapid force of border guards to stop illegal migrants

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More than 31,000 illegal migrants reached Spain's Canary Islands last year - six times more than in 2005. The European Union is to set up a rapidly deployable force of border guards to help states such as Spain and Malta cope with sudden influxes of illegal migrants after EU lawmakers backed the plan on Wednesday.

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"The Rapid Border Intervention Teams will constitute a strategic reserve of skilled staff from the different member states to help states who cannot cope ... in emergency situations," EU lawmaker Gerard Deprez said after the assembly's civil liberties committee approved the proposal.

According to the draft law, border guards from several EU countries, wearing EU-flagged armbands, would be deployed within 10 days of a member state requesting help, provided the EU border agency's director gives his green light to the request.

The text does not specify how big the pool of border guards available on call should be. That is to be decided by the agency's board, made of representatives of EU governments. Deprez said previous versions of the legislation mentioned figures of between 250 and 500 staff.

The plan, backed by diplomats from the 27 EU states, will go to the full European Parliament for formal approval later this month and to EU interior ministers in June.

Fleeing poverty, migrants risk voyages of up to 2,000 km (1,250 miles) from the African coast in the hope of reaching the wealthy 27-nation bloc. Some 6,000 died en route to the Spanish archipelago last year alone, Spanish officials have said.

At least 60 people died last month after a boat carrying around 120 passengers capsized off the coast of Guinea, state television in the West African country said.

The EU border agency Frontex struggled last year to gather a handful of boats, helicopters and experts for the bloc's first joint operations near the Canaries and in the Mediterranean.