

IRREGULAR MIGRANTS EU leaders agree tougher rules

AFP, Brussels

EU leaders have agreed tougher rules aimed at making it easier to expel asylum seekers whose refugee applications are denied, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said yesterday.

The measures are a response to increasing European concern over rising irregular immigration that has become a hot-button issue in several member countries.

That problem is "a European challenge that requires a European response," EU leaders said in a final document at the end of a 16-hour summit looking at that and other topics.

The low numbers of failed asylum-seekers being returned to their home countries is a central preoccupation for the European Union.

The bloc is already hosting millions of refugees from conflicts in Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan, while facing asylum claims from citizens of safer countries such as Bangladesh, Turkey and Tunisia, many of whom end up being deemed economic migrants ineligible for asylum.

Von der Leyen said "pilot projects" relying on the EU's border patrol, asylum and police cooperation agencies would look to instil "fast and fair asylum procedures" at the bloc's external borders.



The EU leaders called on the commission "to immediately mobilise substantial EU funds" to reinforce that external border with "protection capabilities and infrastructure, means of surveillance, including aerial surveillance, and equipment," according to the summit document.

That decision came after some EU countries, notably Austria, had pushed the commission to pay for reinforced fences designed to keep irregular migrants crossing from neighbouring non-EU nations such as Turkey.

Von der Leyen has repeatedly said EU funds would not pay for fences. But EU officials and diplomats pointed out that, if Brussels paid for cameras, watch towers and other infrastructure along the external border, that would free up countries to pour their national budgets into paying for fences.

The summit also reached agreement on a "principle" under which one EU country can use a court decision in another EU member state to return an irregular migrant to their home country. That would try to prevent "asylum shopping" whereby migrants go to a different country to apply to stay after being turned down in an initial one.

The EU leaders also agreed "to increase the use of the safe-country concepts" that will open the way to the bloc formulating a common list, von der Leyen said.



Rescuers carry 27-year-old survivor Rabia Ofkeli in the aftermath of a deadly earthquake in Hatay, Turkey, yesterday, more than 100 hours after the disaster hit the region.

PHOTO: STAR

No deal as IMF leaves crisis-hit Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

An IMF team left Pakistan yesterday after crisis talks with the government failed to deliver a deal on financial aid that would help the South Asian country avert economic collapse.

After months of deadlock, the International Monetary Fund delegation arrived last week for last-ditch negotiations with a government fearing the political consequences of enforcing bailout conditions in an election year.

Pakistan's economy is in dire straits, stricken by a balance-of-payments crisis as it attempts to service high levels of external debt amid political chaos and deteriorating security.

Inflation has rocketed, the rupee has plummeted and the country can no longer afford imports, causing a

severe decline in industry.

"Considerable progress was made during the mission on policy measures to address domestic and external imbalances," the IMF said in a statement. "Virtual discussions will continue in the coming days to finalise the implementation details of these policies."

The IMF is demanding that the nuclear-armed nation boost its pitifully low tax base, end tax exemptions for the export sector, and raise artificially low petrol, electricity and gas prices meant to help low-income families.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif previously called the conditions for the \$1.2 billion loan instalment "beyond imagination".

Finance Minister Ishaq Dar addressed the nation after the IMF team left the country yesterday

morning, saying talks had "concluded successfully" and that a draft memorandum on broadly agreed policies had been shared by the lender with the government.

He said petrol prices would rise by roughly four percent and additional taxes would be imposed, without giving further details.

Years of financial mismanagement and political instability have damaged Pakistan's economy — exacerbated by a global energy crisis and devastating floods.

After months of holding out in search of alternatives, the government began to bow to IMF pressure in mid-January, loosening controls on the rupee to rein in a rampant black market in US dollars — a step that caused the currency to plunge to a record low.

Car ramming kills 2 in east Jerusalem

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Two people including a child were killed and several injured when a driver rammed his car into a group of people at a bus stop on the outskirts of Jerusalem yesterday, Israeli emergency services said. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described the incident as a terrorist attack and ordered security forces to be reinforced. Police said the driver had been "neutralized" but it was not immediately confirmed that he had been killed. The incident occurred during a period of high tension following an attack in which a lone Palestinian gunman shot seven people outside a synagogue last month.

ADANI CONTROVERSY Modi's popularity intact: survey

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's enormous popularity remains intact despite the biggest political attack on him in years as rivals accuse his government of giving undue favours to the Adani Group, approval ratings showed yesterday. Data from polling agency C-Voter, shared with Reuters, showed almost half of those surveyed until Feb. 5 were "very much satisfied" with Modi's work as prime minister and a further 30% said they were "satisfied to some extent". Both ratings have hovered around the same levels since Nov. 2022, the data showed.

Macron mulls stripping Putin of France's top honour

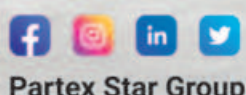
AFP, Brussels

French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday said he might strip his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin of France's top honour, but is waiting for the "right moment" to do so. Putin received the Grand-Croix de la Legion d'Honneur, the top rank in France's honours system, in 2006 at a time when Moscow enjoyed better relations with Paris and the West. But since Putin ordered last year's all-out invasion of Ukraine, ties have all but broken down and the European Union has imposed a range of tough economic sanctions.

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