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(sent by email only)

The Netherlands, November 19, 2020

Dear President von der Leyen,

The European Police Union (EPU) would draw urgent attention to the increased risk and considerable consequences of affecting the health, safety and protection of Spanish police personnel who are managing the arrival of illegal immigrants from North African countries.

Spain is not only the southern border of the European Union, but also shares a physical border with Morocco in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla. The migratory pressure this year is turning to the arrival of boats in the territorial waters, especially in the Canary Islands (a Spanish archipelago halfway between Africa and the Iberian Peninsula). Statistics as of 15 November, 2020 indicate that the number of legal immigrants arriving in the Canary Islands has increased by 1.019,6% compared to last year, rising from 1.497 to 16.760. The number of boats used this year has increased by 494,6% with respect to 2019, rising from 93 to 553. Although the overall figures for the arrival at the Spanish coast have not suffered this increase, the truth is that the case of the Canary Islands is exceeding any forecast made by the Government and the European Union.

The preliminary forecasts pointed to a drop in the number of illegal immigrants coming to Spain from Morocco due to the Covid-19 health crisis. The closure of the physical borders with that country and the application of strict confinement measures decreed by its governments pointed in that direction. However, the figures for the arrival of boats with immigrants in the Canary Islands show that this irregular leg has not been halted but has moved towards the Atlantic route. And the illegal immigrants arrive to the Canaries by sea leaving from the coast of Western Sahara (the leg of Dakhla and the islands of Tarfaya and El Aaiun), although some boats also come from Mauritania.

Most of the people intercepted by sea rescue patrols come from Mali, Guinea Conakry, the Ivory Coast, Senegal and Morocco. In the case of Mali, moreover, we must take into account the instability that affects that country both because of terrorism and because of extreme poverty, causing massive population movements both within the country and beyond its borders. This migratory pressure has been increasing, moreover, once the restrictive measures imposed by the Covid-19 health crisis in African countries have been lifted.

All this flood of immigrants rescued in Spanish territorial waters had overwhelmed the capacities of the Canary Islands police services. Spanish police officers stationed there have had to receive all these thousands of migrants, isolate them, identify by fingerprints, guard them so that they can comply with the necessary quarantine to rule out the presence of the Covid-19 virus, draw up administrative files on foreigners for their internment in specific centers and future return to their countries, and deal with disturbances of public order caused by these people in the reception camp installed in the Arguineguin port, in the province of Las Palmas.

But what really concerns the European Police Union (EPU) is the precarious conditions in which the Spanish police officers are working. Despite the high health risk, the Ministry of Interior does not provide immediate access to Covid-19 tests and the procedure for requesting this medical test is slow so that to avoid contagion among their families, the police officers are paying for it themselves. There is also no access to special means of protection, such as safety glasses, and the others that are used (mask, nitrile gloves, protective coveralls) have to be included in a daily report that officers are obliged to make after 12 and 14 hour working days. On the other hand, the identification functions and the drafting of the administrative file on foreigners are being carried out without material means, on improvised tables in the open air and without having public toilets exclusively for the Spanish police officers.

The chaos in deployment that is triggered when a boat with legal immigrants arrives is disappointing. Infected immigrants are mixed with healthy ones, those who have been medically tested with those who have not yet arrived, those who have just arrived in the Canaries with those who were already interned in the structure installed in the port. This represents a very high health risk. Moreover, the immigrants cause public order incidents due to the high number of them (about 2.000 on average in the port) that forces the Spanish police officers to intervene in a small space, causing physical contact that does not comply with the health rules of social distancing to avoid contagion. Although this is a responsibility of all departments of the Spanish government. The effort in receiving legal immigrants falls on the Spanish National Police and the Spanish Red Cross Services.

The Spanish Police Union CEP affiliated with the European Police Union (EPU) has already written to the Director General of the Spanish National Police to demand more health protection for Spanish police officers, more material resources, the reinforcement of human resources with an extraordinary call for colleagues from other Spanish regions, the establishment of a clear protocol, the construction of a decent detention center for immigrants so that Spanish police officers can do their job properly and, above all, the request for help from the European Institutions, starting with FRONTEX.

The numbers of arrivals of illegal immigrants this year are exceeding all forecasts and are not decreasing despite the persistence of the Covid-19 pandemic. On the contrary, there are days when up to 600/700 illegal immigrants arrive, in some cases even boats with 100 occupants.

This is a situation that clearly affects the entire European Union and requires special budgets and means to help Spain and the Spanish National Police to better withstand this migratory avalanche. Because although the Spanish government, faster or slower, allocates the necessary human and material resources thanks to the pressure of Police Union CEP, we are facing a European challenge caused by legal human trafficking mafias that take advantage of the poverty and anguish of African citizens who flee from violence and hunger in their countries. Orderly and legal immigration cannot give in to the criminal activity of these groups.

It is no secret that "Europe's Migration Crisis in 2015 was not been handled properly and adequately. For instance, there were serious shortcomings in European screening and admission policy for refugees, which involves a general absence of funding, capacity and resources. With major consequences, including a number of bloody and terrifying terrorist attacks in European countries.

Police officers were and still are under-staffed, under-funded and under-equipped to process large flows of refugees. The European Police Union (EPU) has shared this alarming conclusions several times with European Institutions and bodies. This has not improved much over the past five years given the poignant examples we have given above regarding the recent situation in the Canary Islands.

Once again, EPU emphasize that it should absolutely not be a discussion that police officers in Spain who risk their lives for others in emergency situations incur an unnecessary high health or/and safety risk in the performance of their duties because of the shortage of manpower, (protection) resources and equipment. (With references to the council Directive 89/391/EEC on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health workers at work).

We therefore believe that the European Union has a moral duty to translate its full responsibility into decisiveness and, where necessary, assist Spain in its battle against the migration crisis in an coordinated, adequate, safe and human way. Our urgent advice is to immediately ensure that sufficient manpower, personal protective equipment, test materials, hygiene facilities for the Spanish police officers is sufficiently in order and remain in order. Prioritize the safety of police officers to the highest possible level.

Given the seriousness of the situation in Spain, we would appreciate a quick response from the European Institutions with a reference to the measures and initiatives being taken, under your supervision, with regard to ensuring the health, safety and protection of Spanish police officers - in assisting the migration crisis on the Canary Islands – with immediate effect.

Sincerely,



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