

Address by Mr Francis AGIUS (EPP) Malta

on the report : "The large-scale arrival of irregular migrants, asylum seekers and refugees on Europe's Southern shores." Presented by Ms Tineke STRIK, The Netherlands, Socialist Group on behalf of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population

Thank you Mr President,

In the past three months we have witnessed history unfold in a fast forward mode. While we sighed with relief as Tunisia and Egypt avoided what looked at one stage like a possible bloodbath, we are now witnessing our own worst fears coming true in the Libyan revolt.

From the beginning of this crisis, Malta found itself at the forefront as 16 000 individuals were evacuated from Libya through Malta. Many workers were dispersed all over a large territory. I wish to acknowledge the efforts of a large number of Maltese officials. They worked day and night to ensure that these evacuees were handled in an efficient, professional and above all humane manner. It is this image of the Nurse of the Mediterranean that is the real image of Malta, very much unlike the portrayal by certain recent media reports.

Mr. President,

Following these developments, it became evident that Europe would eventually face a large-scale influx of migrants. With this in mind my government turned its full attention to drawing up a contingency plan following the evacuation of international workers.

This drew on the experience we have gained during the past decade. In recent years Malta has saved thousands from death by drowning. Only two days ago, the armed forces of Malta rescued 116 migrants who were in a very bad state of health, most of them dehydrated to the extent that one 29-year old woman was brought ashore dead.

With few exceptions all migrants who arrive in Malta in an irregular manner apply for international protection and in 68% of the cases this is granted. Malta has the second highest per capita asylum application rate in the EU.

In the last two weeks more than 1100 men, women and children have arrived in Malta. These absolute numbers may not be impressive but, just to put everything in perspective, relative to the population, 1000 migrants in Malta are equivalent to 200 000 in Germany.

Malta has been criticized for the way in which it has handled the situation. Regrettably, very often there was little understanding for the great difficulties that we were facing. Recommendations were often naïve and impractical and not enough emphasis was placed on solidarity and responsibility sharing in spite of the fact that they are an indispensable part of the solution. Malta continues to insist with the European Union to immediately introduce a burden sharing mechanism

Mr President,

The scale of the phenomenon goes beyond the capabilities of individual countries. It is a collective responsibility that requires a collective response. Europe cannot continue to turn a blind eye and conveniently rely solely on the de facto buffer states like Malta and Italy.

I would like to thank the Committee for accepting a number of amendments and I also wish to thank all those Council of Europe Member states that have already shown concrete solidarity with us and encourage others to do the same.