

AFRICA

Activists Fear Countries Will Fall Short on UN Migration Pact

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AFP



A view of the venue during the second and final day at the UN Migration Conference in Marrakech, Morocco, Dec.11, 2018.

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MARRAKESH, MOROCCO — As heads of state and government jettied out of Morocco on Tuesday after formally adopting a U.N. deal on migration, NGOs raised doubts about its implementation on the ground and the high seas.

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration — finalized at the U.N. in July after 18 months of talks — was formally approved in Marrakesh on Monday in a ceremony attended by representatives of 164 governments.

A host of European politicians including German Chancellor Angela Merkel have firmly endorsed the deal, even as the US and a string of other countries have shunned it amid a wave of anti-immigrant populism.

While welcoming the agreement, the medical charity MSF and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) pointed to policies by EU states that sit uneasily alongside the pact's commitments to save lives and "eradicate trafficking in persons."

"What we see right now is that months of government policies on migration are ... deepening the suffering of migrants by basically offering them on a plate to criminal organization networks," said Joanne Liu, international president of MSF.

Last week, her organization was forced to abandon its search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean — a key crossing for migrants and refugees traveling from Africa to Europe.

The charity's vessel Aquarius has been blocked at the French port of Marseilles since losing its Panamanian registration and flag in September, amid what it has called a smear campaign led by Italy.

Both Liu and the IFRC charged that European powers have facilitated the detention of migrants in Libya.

"We have been very vocal in saying Libya is not a safe place," Liu told AFP on the sidelines of the Marrakesh conference.

But "European governments have basically been using public money to ... finance detention centers in Libya."

IFRC president Francesco Rocca hit out at the EU for policies he said pushed migrants back to the highly unstable North African country, including the training of a nascent Libyan coastguard.

"Nobody should be sent back to Libya. This is unacceptable. You cannot send anyone back to a place that is not safe, and we know perfectly well that Libya is not safe," he told AFP.

'Feels like a balance'

Billed as the first international document on managing migration, the compact lays out 23 objectives to open up legal migration and discourage illegal border crossings.

Many NGOs have raised concerns that it is non-binding, raising further questions about whether its provisions will be implemented.

"States are not obliged to respect" the deal, said Michel Prieur of the International Center for Comparative Environmental Law.

Prieur was also disappointed that environmental factors feeding into migration — including climate change, natural catastrophes and industrial disasters — merited only three paragraphs in the 35 pages of the pact's text.

He and others said civil society could have been better consulted.

The agreement has been hit by a string of withdrawals by UN member states, with some claiming it infringes national sovereignty.

The U.S. disavowed the process late last year.

Australia, Austria, the Czech Republic, Dominican Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia all pulled out in the weeks and months ahead of the pact's adoption, while Chile withdrew the night before the conference and Brazil joined the defectors on Monday.

Rows over the accord have erupted in several EU nations, hobbling Belgium's coalition government and pushing Slovakia's foreign minister to tender his resignation.

Italy falls into a group of countries that U.N. migration chief Louise Arbour has said is still engaged in "internal deliberations" over the pact.

For Samantha Reynolds of Oxfam, the pact has been an achievement in a challenging global environment.

It was a case of "governments getting together at a time that is quite heated for migration policies... to ultimately find something that feels like a balance," said the charity's global head on displacement and migration.

"There are some places in the contents of the compact where for example we would have liked to have seen the principle of non-refoulement, which basically means that a person can't be returned to a country if they're going to be harmed," Reynolds said.

"But the global compact from Oxfam's perspective is a chance to push further and get governments to do better," she added.

The pact is due to be ratified by the U.N. General Assembly on December 19.

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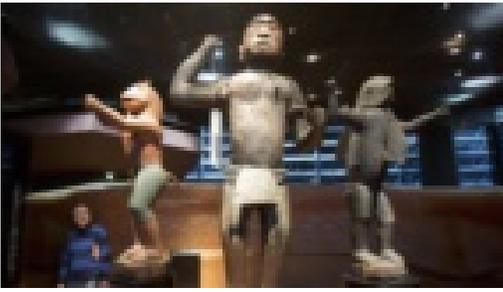


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