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Remarks

Operation IRINI: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell following the launch of the operation

Check against delivery!

Good afternoon,

I would like to start this unusual press conference by honouring all those people around the world who have lost their lives due to the coronavirus. I also want to pay tribute and convey my thanks to all health workers who are putting their lives at risk in fighting the pandemic. Finally, I also want to honour all those who are keeping our societies running and working despite difficult circumstances. Without their work, the lives of tens of millions of people would be much more difficult.

We are doing everything we can to tackle this pandemic, employing all efforts at the EU's disposal. At the same time, we should not forget that none of the problems we were dealing with before the virus' outbreak has disappeared. The world continues turning around and many of these problems are becoming worse. Some of them are becoming bigger and worse and we have to continue paying attention to them.

Take a look, for example, at our direct neighbourhood. Libya has to be a priority for the European Union and it is going to be a priority for my mandate. In January, we held the Berlin conference that created an important opportunity, but unfortunately, the situation in the country continues to be very critical and calls for urgent action. It is calling for urgent action since a long time ago.

Six weeks ago, the Member States made the political agreement at the February Foreign Affairs Council to turn our statements into action and launch Operation Irini. Six weeks later, today, one hour ago, the Member States have finally approved by written procedure the formal [launching of this operation](#) with all technical details arranged.

This is good news and I want to thank all people who have made this possible, through six weeks of intense, difficult and complex negotiations about how this mission should be implemented with the Member States. I want to thank especially the civil servants of all bodies of the European Union, for

the hard work they have done in order to reach an agreement which has not been easy. But one hour ago, finally, I am happy to say that the Member States agreed on details in order to launch the Operation Irini.

This is an important contribution by the European Union to support the political process, the so-called Berlin process, aimed at ending the conflict in Libya. Second, it also shows that in times of coronavirus, we continue to be aware of our responsibility and try to play an important role in promoting peace in our immediate neighborhood.

We have been saying repeatedly that only political solutions and respect of the UN arms embargo is the solution to the Libyan crisis. But diplomacy cannot succeed unless it is backed by action. I think this operation will be essential. It is not the only solution, but it is an important part of the solution, to contribute to a permanent ceasefire.

The main aim of Operation Irini is to enforce the UN arms embargo and it will be acting according to the UN Security Council resolution. The goal is to stop the flow of arms to Libya and contribute to a sustainable ceasefire. The operation will deploy naval, aerial and satellite assets. This will allow the European Union to provide the United Nations with a broader picture of possible trafficking of weapons to Libya.

This operation is very different from the one it is replacing - Operation Sophia. Operation Sophia was launched in 2015, five years ago, and its main aim was to fight organised crime responsible for migrant trafficking. Other tasks were also attached to Sophia in order to control the situation in the central Mediterranean, but they were complementary tasks.

In this case Operation Irini is being launched with the primary task of contributing and supporting the implementation of the arms embargo. It is the other way around. The objective is to contribute to the control of arms embargo. It will also retain some secondary tasks, including preventing oil smuggling and other organised crime activities, and also to continue training Libyan coast guards. But the main objective, the aim that has been pushing for the launching of this operation, is arms embargo.

There will be a Force Generation Conference this afternoon, in which Member States will decide their commitment to provide the assets to the Operation. The Headquarters will continue to be in Rome.

To finish this statement, I want to stress my regret that the fighting in Libya has increased over the last days, despite the international calls for truce to help contain the coronavirus pandemic done by the Secretary General of the United Nations.

Nobody can afford waging two wars at the same time. It is therefore crucial that we do all we can in order to fight the coronavirus, also in Libya. From this point of view, Irini is also a contribution to this purpose.

I can say more things about the coronavirus, and about our efforts to help African countries to fight against the pandemic, but I think that today we have to concentrate our attention and I hope your questions to this important and good news. There are not many good news, this is one, and I am happy to present it to you. And, once again, I want to thank all the people who made it possible.

[Link to the opening statement:](#)

Q&A

Q. Irini is meant to monitor the United Nations arms embargo against Libya on the Mediterranean, how do you plan to observe the arms embargo delivered over land?

Do not you think that the Operation Irini is a one-sided intervention in Libya's civil war, as long as the European Union does not monitor the arms delivered over land? Irini is part of the solution. It is not the solution. We do not have one solution, we have to act on different fronts and we have to do what we can do. Irini is not only a navy operation. It is a navy, aerial and satellite operation. It cannot be a land operation, but we have to do what we can do. I think it is an important contribution. It is not the solution, with a capital "S", but it is an important part of a solution. For sure, it is focusing on navy, aerial and satellite means, which are the ones that we can mobilize.

Q. Will there be a Force Generation Conference this week? If so, already any results?

This afternoon a Force Generation Conference will take place, where once everything has been agreed about the rules of engagement, about the mission and about anything that has been discussed during these days, the Member States will provide assets to this operation.

As far as I know, there are many who want to contribute. This conference will take place this afternoon and I hope that at the end of the day we will know what the result is.

Q. How many and which states have pledged vessels in support of Irini? When will they be deployed and where exactly will their area of responsibility be?

Well, it will take a certain time. Once we have an agreement on which Member States will be providing assets in order to launch and implement in practical terms the operation, I suppose it is going to take some time, I do not know how long, but I suppose a short period of time in order to send these ships to the sea. I cannot precise if it is going to be one week or two weeks, but it is an operation issue in which politically speaking I do not have any possibility of intervening. It is the military staff who have to decide it according with the capacities of each Member State.

And about the area that will be allocated to each Member State, this is part of the classified information, I cannot tell you.

Q. Could you please give us some details on how the agreement was made possible? When will the mission start to be operative? In case the vessels of the European Union mission save migrants, where will they be disembarked? Is there a specific provision that indicates Greek ports? How will migrants and refugees be redistributed? Is Italy involved?

Well, as the conference will take place this afternoon, I cannot precise when the ships will be patrolling the high waters of the Libyan coast, it will be a matter of days.

Well, migrants are not migrants. Anyone in the sea has to be rescued. That is international law. These ships are not patrolling the sea looking for people to be rescued, their mission is clearly one: I want to put all the importance to the fact that this is not [Operation] Sophia bis. It is a completely different operation. The main purpose is to control the arms embargo.

There are additional tasks which are unavoidable. Say it or not, if the ships find someone in the sea, they will have to rescue them. And we have to rescue them, to save them, and there is an agreement among the Member States that will participate in the mission how to proceed, where to disembark and how to share the burden.

This is also something that is part of the confidential documentation of the mission. But this agreement exists and we know how to proceed and the navy commander will know what to do in this case, if this happens. Because the mission is not devoted to look for people and to rescue them, but if this happens we will know how to proceed.

Q. Le transfert de combattants étrangers vers la Libye est aussi inquiétant que celui des armes. Sans résoudre ce volet de la question libyenne dans lequel la Turquie joue un rôle public, pensez-vous que Irini sera vraiment efficace?

Je l'espère bien. Mais comme je l'ai dit avant Irini ce n'est pas la potion magique d'Astérix, il ne s'agit pas de mettre un peu d'Irini et le problème est résolu, le problème est complexe, difficile et multidimensionnel.

C'est une partie de la solution, nous faisons ce que nous pouvons faire et ce n'est pas parce que nous ne pouvons pas faire certaines choses que nous devons nous empêcher d'en faire d'autres. Il faut agir là où nous pouvons agir. Nous ne sommes pas dans une situation où nous pouvons envoyer une force terrestre à la frontière entre l'Égypte et la Libye, cela nous ne pouvons pas le faire. Est-ce que cela veut dire qu'on ne peut rien faire ? Non, nous pouvons faire beaucoup.

Il y a des moyens navals, des moyens aériens et des moyens satellites. Cela va donner beaucoup d'informations et cela va nous permettre de contrôler une partie importante de la route que prennent les armes vers la Libye. Ce n'est pas 100% de la solution mais c'est une partie importante et cela ouvre le pas pour chercher d'autres [solutions].

L'efficacité, on verra bien, j'espère bien que [l'opération] sera efficace. Je n'ai aucun doute qu'une fois que les bateaux des différentes marines européennes seront déployés dans les eaux libyennes ils feront bien leur travail.

Q. La flotte européenne devrait agir dans les eaux internationales en face de l'Est de la Libye. Il est prouvé qu'environ 90% des violations de l'embargo des armes sont enregistrés dans les frontières orientales de la Libye. L'Opération Irini aurait-elle les moyens d'observer de telles violations?

Oui. Ce n'est pas seulement une opération maritime. C'est une opération maritime, aérienne et satellite. Il y aura des moyens d'observer ce qu'il se passe dans l'espace aérien et ce qui se passe à la surface à travers des satellites et des systèmes radars embarqués dans les bateaux.

Des systèmes d'observation à très longue distance, tels que les satellites, et des systèmes d'observation à courte distance que sont les radars embarqués sur les bateaux qui vont faire une surveillance systématique de ce qui se passe dans la frontière orientale de la Libye.

Q. Concernant les violations de l'embargo par la Turquie, l'Opération Irini possède-t-elle des relais qui permettraient d'observer les activités suspectes en provenance de Turquie pour aider les troupes du Gouvernement de Tripoli ?

C'est une opération de contrôle du trafic maritime et du trafic aérien, évidemment c'est fait pour cela.

On ne peut pas mettre un nom précis, ce n'est pas la Turquie ou un autre pays, il s'agit de voir ce qu'il se passe du point de vue du trafic d'armes. On ne peut pas désigner un nom ou un pays quelconque.

Le trafic d'armes n'est pas l'exclusivité d'un pays déterminé il y en a beaucoup qui participent.

Q. Will the NATO cooperate with Operation Irini as it did with Operation Sophia? If yes, what kind of support do you expect from the NATO?

Well, this is a European Union mission, NATO is not engaged. It is an European Union operation.

Link to the video:

Press contacts

Press Contacts:

[Peter STANO](#)

Peter STANO

Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

+32 (0)460 75 45 53

[Xavier CIFRE QUATRESOLS](#)

Xavier CIFRE QUATRESOLS

EEAS Press Officer

+32 2 297 35 82

+32 460 75 51 56

www.eeas.europa.eu

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