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Italy: Diplomatic tensions flare as migrants head to Spain

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CATANIA, Sicily — Italy escalated its standoff with France over migration Wednesday, challenging Paris to take in more asylum-seekers and demanding an apology after the French president accused the new populist Italian government of cynical, irresponsible behavior by refusing entry to a rescue ship with 600 people aboard.

Italy summoned the French ambassador for consultations and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini chided French President Emmanuel Macron by name during a speech before Parliament's upper chamber.

Salvini said France had taken in only a fraction of the 9,816 migrants it had pledged to welcome under a 2015 EU relocation plan to relieve frontline countries Italy and Greece of the burden of caring for newly arrived migrants.

"So I ask President Macron to pass from words to action and tomorrow morning welcome the 9,000 France promised to welcome as a sign of concrete generosity and not just words," Salvini said to applause in the Senate chamber.

"I speak in the name of a government but I also have the ambition of speaking for a people who have nothing to learn from anyone about generosity, volunteerism,

welcome and solidarity,” he said.

Italy has defended its decision to refuse to allow the Aquarius rescue ship to dock, saying it has never abandoned the ship and is escorting it to Spain. Spain stepped up and offered the Aquarius safe harbor in Valencia after Italy and Malta both refused.

The standoff over the Aquarius appeared a clear tactic by Italy’s new government to force Europe’s hand at the upcoming summit of EU leaders in Brussels June 28-29. Italy for years has complained that it has been left largely alone to manage Europe’s migrant crisis, but the new government says its tactics have finally gotten the point across.

Salvini has accused European aid groups of essentially operating taxi services for Libya-based human traffickers, and has said Italy will now refuse their rescue ships entry. Italian maritime vessels, however, are still docking in its ports: on Wednesday, an Italian coast guard vessel docked in Catania, Sicily with 932 migrants aboard.

The Diciotti was greeted in Catania’s port by activists criticizing the new policy, with a banner draped at the port saying “Stop the attack on refugees.”

French President Emmanuel Macron had blasted what he called Italy’s cynicism and irresponsibility in turning away the Aquarius, which is operated by the humanitarian group SOS Mediterranee and the French-founded Doctors Without Borders.

Macron’s office said Tuesday that France doesn’t want to “start a precedent” that would allow some European countries to breach international laws and rely on other EU member states to take in migrants.

In his speech, Salvini shot back and said France had turned back 10,249 migrants at Italy’s northern border since January “including women, children and disabled people.” The border crossing point at Ventimiglia has been the scene of protests and desperation for years as France has refused to let in migrants, many of whom are seeking to reach family in France or Germany.

Under the EU’s asylum laws — currently the subject of revision amid a major political dispute — migrants must apply for asylum in the country where they first enter Europe. In practice, this has placed a heavy burden on Italy and Greece, where hundreds of thousands of people have entered in recent years. Some countries feel justified in stopping migrants from entering when they should have registered elsewhere.

Salvini also demanded that France make good on its pledge to relocate migrants

under a 2015 EU scheme that never fully got off the ground.

France was to have accepted a total of 19,714 migrants from Italy and Greece; in all, it accepted 4,677. Across the European Union, only a third of the 98,255 migrants that were supposed to be relocated under the scheme had been relocated by the time it ended last year.

Salvini's League campaigned during the March 4 national election on a strong anti-migrant agenda that included promises of mass expulsions of migrants already here. According to government figures, Italy has accepted 640,000 migrants since 2014, but the number of arrivals this year is at a five-year low: 14,441 since January.

The number of migrants arriving in Italy began plummeting last year after the Italian government under the center-left Democratic Party negotiated controversial deals with Libya that beefed up its capacity to better patrol its coasts and discouraged land-based smugglers.

Earlier Wednesday, Salvini accused France of having caused the instability in Libya that has allowed smuggling networks to thrive by spearheading the 2011 NATO-led military campaign that led to the downfall of Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi.

The Aquarius and two Italian ships that have taken some of the migrants are now expected to arrive in Valencia on Saturday night, weather conditions permitting, said SOS Mediterranee's co-founder Sophie Beau. The port is some 1,500 kilometers (930 miles) from where the ship had been on standby since Saturday night.

"It's a relief for everyone, our teams and of course above all for the survivors to know that they are finally allowed to head to a safe port in Europe," Beau told reporters in Marseille, France.

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