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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject: Migratory situation in Mauritania

1. Context

Mauritania is a key country for the stability of the Maghreb and the Sahel, as well as a crucial place of transit and destination. It is the only Sahelian country that has remained unaffected by the wave of constitutional overturns that has been taking place in the region since the coup in Mali in 2020, and has for years been an example of success in the fight against terrorism and radicalism, with no attacks since 2011. Mauritania seeks to project stability in the Sahel and to this end plays an active role in multilateral initiatives, trying to bring dynamism into the G5 Sahel (whose presidency it holds) or hosting the IV Ministerial Meeting of the General Assembly of the Sahel Alliance last July. It is also a member of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, the Union for the Mediterranean and the 5+5 Western Mediterranean Dialogue Forum.

In foreign policy, Mauritania follows a balanced approach, maintaining good relations with its neighbours. The country faces important challenges stemming from its geographical situation, as instability in the Sahel could lead to an increase in migration and/or refugee flows.

Relations between the EU and Mauritania are mainly based on the Cotonou Agreement, signed in 2000 by the EU and 79 ACP countries. A political agreement on the new Post- Cotonou framework was reached in December 2020 and initialled on April 15, 2021 but has not yet entered into force. In addition, in September 2018 Mauritania signed the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between the EU and the West African States-ECOWAS-WAEMU, still awaiting ratification (Nigeria's signature is pending). On the other hand, mention should be made of the Conclusions on the EU integrated strategy for the Sahel adopted in April 2021 by the Council, as well as the general framework for EU-Africa relations, marked by the New EU-Africa Strategy adopted at the 6th EU-AU Summit in February 2022.

The Mauritanian authorities have recently expressed their desire to see EU cooperation strengthened in all areas, with concrete deliverables on infrastructure, and special emphasis on emergency assistance to refugees and host populations, among other matters, including cooperation on migration.

2. Migration issues

Mauritania has become primarily a destination for regional and seasonal migrants, as well as a refuge for Malians seeking safety in the country. Recently, Mauritania has issued warnings about its borderline situation in terms of capacity and resources to cope with an increased flow of refugees and migrants. Mauritanian authorities estimate that more than 100,000 irregular migrants reside in Nuakchott and its outskirts. The figure is even higher if we add up those living in the rest of the country.

The situation is particularly complex in the M'Berra refugee camp on the border with Mali, where there are already more than 90,000 refugees, in addition to another 16,248 scattered in the rest of the country, a number that is steadily increasing. This situation risks being further aggravated by the coup d'état in Niger.

In the preceding year, between July and October, the government of Mauritania undertook a significant initiative to comprehensively document and address the presence of irregular immigrants within the country. According to reports from the Ministry of Interior, approximately 140,000 foreign individuals successfully underwent regularization procedures. Nonetheless, estimations suggest that an additional 100.000 individuals may still find themselves in an undocumented or irregular status.

On the other hand, Mauritania is also a transit country for people seeking to reach Europe. In the last years, it has experienced a significant increase in the migratory pressure due to the tightening of the Moroccan migration policy, the conflict in Guerguerat and the health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, among other structural reasons.

Mauritania develops discreet remarkable efforts to curb irregular migration and actively fights against trafficking in human beings and migrant smuggling networks. As a result, it was able to reduce irregular departures from approximately 1,208 in 2020 and 1,957 in 2021 to around 200 in 2022. 2023 figures show an increase in comparison with 2022, but the situation is far from the one in 2020 and 2021.

The EU has been working closely with Mauritania to address shared migration challenges, focusing on border management (land and maritime), the fight against trafficking in human beings and smuggling of migrants, protection of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, creation of job opportunities for migrants and host communities, the promotion of safe and legal migration, and vocational training for the youth and migrants. Through joint projects and agreements, both parties have made significant progress in that area. One of the most tangible results of this collaboration is the notable reduction in irregular arrivals from Mauritanian shores in 2022, with around 200 arrivals compared to the 1,957 recorded in 2021. This decrease is largely due to the action of the Mauritanian authorities and the support of EU Member States.

Recently, Mauritania has emphatically called for increased support by the EU and its Member States for various reasons, including:

- 1) The need to live up to the increased migratory pressure the country experiences due to the growing instability of the region, among other factors.
- 2) The serious internal consequences that it faces as a migration destination and transit country.
- 3) The comparatively greater support that the EU provides to countries in other migratory routes (i.e. Tunisia), despite Mauritania being one of its most long-lasting and reliable migratory partners.

3. **EU Action**

The EU has established a strong partnership with Mauritania on migration issues with the objective of tackling shared challenges. The main elements of the migratory cooperation include:

- In March 2022 the EU, under the EUTF, funded the project "***Creation of joint operational team to support the fight against migrant smuggling and the management of irregular migration in Mauritania (POC)***", led by FIIAPP. The main objective of the project is to strengthen police and judicial investigation capacities against criminal networks linked to migrant smuggling and to improve the structural and operational capacities of the irregular migration management system.
- EUR 25 M allocated directly to the Mauritanian government for the project "***The EU for the security-resilience-development nexus***", which consists of direct financial support for governance, border management, maritime security and migration.
- In the framework of funding under NDICI, there are currently four programmes focused on Mauritania:

- "**Governance- Strengthening land and sea border management**" (EUR 6,37 M). The programme is under preparation and will aim to reform the capacities, border infrastructures and available equipment, as well as the interconnection and transmission of data to the central government. Moreover, it will take into consideration local communities in the dynamics of border management.
- "**Territorial control, stability of border areas and migration management**" (EUR 10,5 M estimated). This action, adopted in 2022, contributes to the regional Team Europe Initiative (TEI) "for a comprehensive approach to migration in the Maghreb, Sahel and West Africa on the Atlantic/Western Mediterranean route." Complementarity, synergies and coordination with Member States can therefore be explored.
- The EU is supporting refugees and host communities in M'Berra Camp (EUR 5 M). This action, adopted in 2021 is funded under the regional programme "**Durable solutions for displaced populations in Africa**" (RMIP). It provides a response to forced displacement of Malians hosted in Mauritania's South-East border.
- "**Preventing irregular migration in and from Mauritania through reinforcing its youth and migrants access to TVET and jobs**" (EUR 20 M) under the Flexible Mechanism. Actions will support host communities and regularized migrants in the country, through developing their skills and employability, thus reducing the risk of irregular transit migration towards Europe.
- In the framework of **HOME funds** (RDPP/AMIF - implemented by Italy), two new projects have been signed with IOM and UNHRC for the Registration, Documentation and Refugees Status Determination as well as for the support to the institutional and community care of vulnerable children.
- **Migration TEIs**. As regards the TEI of the Atlantic/Western Mediterranean Route, the EU, its Member States and Switzerland have so far mobilized EUR 908 M to support cooperation with several African countries, including Mauritania and Senegal.

- Mauritanian authorities are in the process of negotiating with FRONTEX a working arrangement which would provide Mauritanian border management authorities with capacity building and intelligence information. An Africa-Frontex Intelligence Community **Risk Analysis Cell** was inaugurated on 20 September in Nouakchott and is now operational. In addition, continuous diplomatic relations have been maintained, both at the political level, as evidenced by the visit of the CEP to Mauritania on November 20-21, 2022, and at the technical level, reflected in the Commission/FRONTEX mission to Mauritania in mid-September 2022.

Cooperation on migration between Mauritania and the EU has produced positive results in terms of better migration management. However, there are still significant challenges, such as trafficking in human beings, the smuggling of migrants, and irregular migration, which require continued attention.

The Presidency presents the following questions intending to steer the discussion on the way forward:

- *What concrete responses can we give in the short term to Mauritania to enable it to cope with migratory pressures?*
- *Mauritania has expressed concerns about perceived unequal treatment by the EU, especially in comparison to other countries like Tunisia. How can the EU address these concerns and ensure a fair and balanced partnership with Mauritania?*
- *Which would be the most effective strategy for the EU to enhance its communication with Mauritanian authorities, keeping them consistently informed about agreements with other countries while simultaneously increasing awareness of the available tools and resources?*