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Baroness Verma
Chair of the EU External Affairs Sub-Committee
House of Lords
United Kingdom

Dear Baroness,

Thank you for your letter of 12 July in relation to the report "Operation Sophia: a failed mission", prepared by the House of Lords EU External Affairs Sub-Committee. The findings of your Committee, on what is a very serious and complex security regional and global challenge, are being carefully looked at. However, let me first offer an initial reaction.

Operation SOPHIA is only one part of an integrated strategy pursued by the European Union to address the challenge of people smuggling and trafficking across the Central Mediterranean. Finding a political solution to the situation in Libya is one pillar of that strategy. This would help facilitate stability, the rule of law, good governance, and security in that country. Addressing migration and its root causes at source and in transit is a second pillar. Operation SOPHIA is part of the third pillar, addressing the issue in the Mediterranean Sea.

Operation SOPHIA is doing a sterling job in difficult circumstances and has been adapted to make an active and constructive contribution to the objectives it was set up to achieve. I therefore feel it is incorrect to describe it as "a failed mission", a description that does not do justice to the difficulties of the circumstances, the dedication of its staff, and the need to adapt to the realities as they are. The situation is evolving and the mission with it. It is, for now, a shared assessment with EU Member States that Operation SOPHIA constitutes a necessary and useful contribution to the efforts aimed at disrupting the business model of traffickers in the Mediterranean. This has been reconfirmed in the latest strategic review of the operation and Member States have agreed to extend its mandate until the end of December 2018. Furthermore, the Operation has also been endorsed twice by the UN Security Council, underscoring its value as an internationally backed naval operation.

Operation SOPHIA has so far apprehended 110 suspected smugglers and traffickers and transferred them to the relevant authorities, while 463 vessels have been neutralised. In order to adapt to the situation where the existing Libyan authorities have not felt able to allow SOPHIA to operate within its territorial waters, the Operation has begun actively training the Libyan Coastguard, who do operate within those waters, and developing capacity to improve monitoring their actions at sea. This should lead to greater effectiveness in addressing the migratory challenge and combating illegal trafficking. In addition to these tasks, Operation SOPHIA is contributing to the implementation of the arms embargo decided by the UN Security Council.

I appreciate your recognising that Search and Rescue is a vital human obligation and I am proud that Operation SOPHIA is fulfilling that part of its mandate, and is seen to be doing so with over 39,000 men, women and children's lives saved by Operation SOPHIA's personnel since its launch in 2015. It is clear that Operation SOPHIA will likely have to continue responding in this fashion over the summer and we have a collective duty to maintain our readiness and willingness to save lives in the Mediterranean.

The EU is of course well aware of the limitations and constraints linked to the prevailing security and political situation in Libya. For this reason, Operation SOPHIA is but one part of the efforts being deployed to tackle the Central Mediterranean migratory challenge, as indicated above. As the recent Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) Conclusions of 17 July identified, a unified government in Libya able to provide security across the country would permit more effective action against smuggling networks onshore. Along with our international partners, under the overall coordination of the UN and through the Libyans themselves, the EU is working hard to achieve a political solution based on Libyan Political Agreement that will restore stability in Tripoli and throughout the country.

EU operational engagement to support the Government of National Accord is broad. The EU Liaison and Planning Cell supports the UN Mission in Libya in implementing plans to restore stability in Tripoli. However, we are also examining ways in which to help the Libyans combat irregular migration by other means, including on their southern borders and through the work of our EU CSDP Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM). The latter is engaging with and assisting more intensively Libya's internationally recognised authorities in its areas of focus as per its mandate, namely border management, law enforcement, and criminal justice. Special attention is being paid to Libya's southern regions and its southern borders by engaging with Libya's neighbours, particularly in the Sahel region, and via CSDP efforts deployed in Niger and Mali.

As part of the comprehensive approach, the EU has also mobilised a total of 90 million euros for Libyan projects on protection of migrants and community stabilisation. Additional funding for border management has been announced in the European Commission Action Plan on measures to support Italy, reduce pressure along the Central Mediterranean Route, and increase solidarity, published on 4 July.

The EU has been providing significant support to Libya since the beginning of the crisis. The EU has currently a package of over 120 million euros in bilateral support to Libya in 37 projects across six sectors: civil society; governance; health; youth and education; migration and protection; and support to the political process, security and mediation. These packages for the benefit of the Libyan population are provided in cooperation with and in support of UNHCR and IOM.

The migration crisis is a complex phenomenon. Libya is but one element, a transit country, although the deep political and security crisis that it is immersed in has contributed in no small manner to the deep aggravation of migrant trafficking in the Central Mediterranean in recent years. The EU has deployed operational, financial, and political means and will continue to do so. It is also engaging intensely with neighbouring countries and countries of origin. No single line of action will produce results in isolation. It is the combination of efforts; strong commitment, and determination that will help Europeans advance towards sustainable solutions. The support of the House of Lords will undoubtedly be of great value in advancing in this direction.

Yours sincerely,



Federica Mogherini