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E.U. Offers Turkey 3 Billion Euros to Stem Migrant Flow

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu of Turkey, left, with Donald Tusk, the European Council president, on Sunday in Brussels. Credit Virginia Mayo/Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Under heavy pressure from Germany to get a grip on the migrant crisis in the Continent after months of dithering, the European Union agreed to a deal on Sunday with Turkey that aims to slow the chaotic flood of asylum seekers into the 28-nation bloc.

Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, speaking to reporters late Sunday, acknowledged that the agreement, under which Europe will provide 3 billion euros, about \$3.2 billion, and other inducements in return for Turkish help on migrants, would not immediately halt the flow of asylum seekers from the Middle East and elsewhere. But Ms. Merkel said it would help “keep people in the region” and out of Europe.

The meeting, the seventh gathering of European leaders since the spring regarding the divisive question of migration, came days after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane and added a new element of uncertainty to a crisis that has overwhelmed Europe.

Another cloud hanging over the Brussels gathering was the arrest last week of two prominent Turkish journalists, a move that deepened concerns among human rights activists and some European politicians that Turkey had taken an authoritarian turn under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

A Family Swept Up in the Migrant Tide

This summer, as the Majid family left Syria for Europe, The New York Times followed the group through weeks of defeat and triumph, disillusionment and determination.

Asked about human rights violations in Turkey by a Kurdish reporter at a news conference on Sunday, Ms. Merkel said leaders “did not talk at any great length about that.” But she added that “all issues have to be on the table” as Europe pushes for closer ties with Turkey.

The Turkish prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, standing in for Mr. Erdogan at the Brussels meeting, said Turkey would “work shoulder to shoulder” with Europe to curb the flow of people into Greece and other European countries but warned that the crisis would continue until the conflict in Syria was ended.

“I wish to say to you that, yes, the migrants will decline,” he said, but “we cannot say this because we don’t know what will be going on in Syria.”

At the same time, Mr. Davutoglu said, Turkey would fulfill the promises that the country had made to Europe, which included pledges to crack down on smuggling rackets, and he said there should be “much more regular migration rather than illegal immigration” to Europe in the future.

A group of eight European countries, including Germany, held a separate meeting on Sunday and discussed the possibility of sharply increasing the number of refugees who could be resettled to Europe from refugee camps in Turkey and elsewhere, giving more migrants a legal path to the Continent. That would sweeten the deal for Turkey, but any agreement among European countries on expanding resettlement may come only at the end of the year after the European Commission, the European Union executive body, prepares a draft plan.

“It is an uphill effort, but it is well worth the effort,” Ms. Merkel said Sunday.

Speaking to reporters before the meeting, Ms. Merkel said that Europe had many reasons to work closely with Turkey but that the essential part of the negotiations was the need to “replace illegal migration with legal migration.” Her statement reflects a hope that the unruly flow of asylum seekers — a mix of refugees fleeing war and economic migrants seeking a better life — can be brought under control before the people reach Europe.

Europe wants Turkey’s help in identifying those it considers genuine refugees, notably Syrians, who would be allowed entry in an orderly fashion, and in halting people fleeing poverty who do not have an obvious right to protection under international law.

Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, the body representing European leaders, set out Europe’s objective in blunt terms. “We expect a major step toward changing the rules of the game when it comes to stemming the migration flow that is coming to the E.U. via Turkey,” he

said late Sunday. He described Turkey as a “key strategic partner” on issues like counterterrorism and the civil war in Syria.

Earlier on Sunday, Mr. Tusk insisted that Europe itself needed to do more to secure its borders and that it could not “outsource this obligation to any third country,” like Turkey. Failing to protect the Continent’s outer borders, he warned, would mean that one of Europe’s most important achievements, the 26-nation visa-free zone established by the Schengen agreement, “will become history.”

As the meeting got underway, Mr. Tusk told the participants that 1.5 million migrants had entered the European Union this year.

It is unclear how secure the new agreement will be. Leaders first endorsed a so-called action plan with Turkey more than a month ago, but it was delayed by haggling over details. The Europeans still have not agreed on how to raise the money earmarked for Turkey, and putting the agreement into effect will ultimately depend on Mr. Erdogan.

There were also warnings that the deal, even if put into effect, might not diminish the flow of migrants any time soon.

Gerald Knaus, the chairman of the European Stability Initiative, a research organization in Berlin, said that Germany and other countries would need to resettle “sizable numbers” of Syrian refugees from Turkey to relieve the pressure there. Turkey, he said, will also need to take back migrants that reach Greek islands close to the Turkish coast if that migration route is to be sealed off. Without that commitment and others, Mr. Knaus added, “we will see more refugees crossing, more drowning, more recriminations between the European Union and Turkey and an even worse relationship two months from now.”

Europe’s negotiations with Turkey have been dogged by concerns in some quarters that the country is becoming increasingly authoritarian and that it violates the rights of the president’s critics, journalists and members of the Kurdish minority.

“We have seen a systematic regress of the rule of law and fundamental freedoms in Turkey,” Marietje Schaake, a Dutch member of the European Parliament, said Saturday. “It must be crystal clear that cooperation requires respect for basic rights.”

Ms. Merkel on Sunday defended the outreach to Turkey, noting that, despite sheltering so many refugees, it “had received little international support for that and therefore rightly expects that the European Union and the member states attempt to lighten Turkey’s burden.”

Europe was also offering Turkey the chance to resume regular summit meetings. In addition, Turkey won a promise to speed up negotiations on visa-free travel for its citizens to the European Union, as well as a resumption of negotiations on full membership in the bloc.

Having failed to bring the migrant flow under control after many meetings and failed action plans, Europe is now hoping that Turkey will help it curb a crisis that has opened up deep divisions between countries and led to dark warnings that the European Union could collapse under the strain. Efforts to control the number of people passing through the bloc's external borders have been largely ineffective, and a plan announced in May to relocate migrants from front-line states like Greece and Italy has barely started.

Laura Fauss contributed reporting from Berlin.

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