

On Monday, October 9, the French President Emmanuel Macron declared that the plan to process asylum requests in Niger and Chad was entering its final phases. Macron originally announced this initiative in July, stating a desire to process asylum requests on African soil in order to spare families the risky path to Europe. Processing asylum requests on African soil is but one aspect of Macron's broader plan for immigration reform.

"Realistic Solutions" on the table: Macron's France takes action

The measure will be carried out by *Advanced Protection Missions* based in Niger and Chad. It is to be a joint effort between the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless People (OFPRA), the UNHCR, and the Nigerien and Chadian governments. In order to identify asylum seekers, the missions will use lists of vulnerable persons provided by the UNHCR. The OFPRA will then evaluate each claim, and interview those who meet the criteria for asylum. Those who are selected to be transferred to France will undergo cultural training while their transfer is being prepared. The mission in Niger is set to be open in the last weeks of October, while that of Chad does not yet have a definite date.

The aim of processing demands for asylum before migrants reach Europe is to better control migration flows and prevent those whose claims would be rejected from

undertaking the dangerous journey across the Central Mediterranean. The claims of African asylum seekers are often rejected: The European Council on Refugees and Exiles stated that 60% of Africans who demanded asylum in Italy were rejected in 2016. It is hoped that pre-screening of asylum seekers will allow a more rapid processing of asylum requests and an easier separation of those who are truly in need of asylum from economic migrants. France has offered to accept 10,000 refugees coming from third countries by 2019, with 3000 of those being from the centers in Niger and Chad.

In an interview with *Le Monde* in September, the UNHCR Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean Situation, Vincent Cochetel, responded favorably to Macron's proposal. Amnesty International has also backed the move, stating that it would permit refugees to avoid putting their lives in danger. However, others have criticized the centers as a means for the EU to externalize its borders and deny refugees the right to leave their country in search of asylum. It also remains to be seen whether advanced processing of asylum claims will deter those who are rejected from making the journey to Europe on their own.

Niger and Chad are important centers for transit migrants seeking to reach the Mediterranean, as well as refugees fleeing conflict in neighboring countries. As of September 2017, there are 407,996 refugees and asylum seekers in Chad, primarily from the Sudan and the Central African Republic. Niger currently hosts over 160,000 refugees from Mali and Nigeria. Both countries also have over 100,000 internally displaced persons, most of whom are fleeing the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad region.