Migrant influx fuels debate in Spain over illegal migration

AFP- A steep rise in the number of arrivals of migrants in Spain's Canary Islands from Africa has fuelled a fierce debate in the country over how to tackle illegal immigration.

The issue was thrust into the spotlight during a three-day visit by Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez to West Africa which wrapped up Thursday.

The trip was aimed at curbing the record number of unauthorised migrants arriving in the Atlantic archipelago in search of a better life in Europe.

"Spain is committed to safe, orderly and regular migration," the Socialist premier said soon after he arrived Tuesday in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, in the first stop of his tour which also included Gambia and Senegal.

He called for "circular migration" schemes which allow people to enter Spain legally to work for a limited time in sectors like agriculture, which face labour shortages during harvest time, before returning home.

"Immigration is not a problem, it is a necessity that comes with certain problems," Sanchez said.

His comments were immediately blasted by Spain's main opposition Popular Party (PP), which said the statements would encourage more migrants to try to enter the country illegally at a time when the Canary Islands is struggling to cope with an influx of migrants.

Nearly every day, Spain's coastguard rescues a boat carrying dozens of African migrants towards the seven-island

archipelago located off the northwest coast of Africa.

Over 22,000 migrants have landed in the Canary Islands so far this year, compared to just under 10,000 during the same time last year.

The archipelago received a record 39,910 migrants in 2023, a figure it is on track to surpass this year.

– 'Irresponsible' –

"It is irresponsible to encourage a pull effect in the worst irregular migration crisis," PP leader Alberto Nunez Feijoo said, accusing Sanchez of going to Africa to "promote Spain as a destination" for migrants.

This is "the opposite" of what other nations in the European Union are doing, he added.

During the final leg of Sanchez's tour in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, he appeared to take a harder tone by stressing that human trafficking rings that organise boat crossings to Spain sometimes have links to terrorist networks or drug smuggling gangs.

He said security was a "top priority" and said it is "essential to return those who have come to Spain illegally".

Deportations, however, require the agreement of the country of origin of a migrant, which is not easy to get.

– 'Contradictory' –

Cristina Monge, a political scientist at the University of Zaragoza, said Sanchez had tried to strike a balance in his comments on the issue in Africa but his message was "a bit contradictory".

His first speech in Mauritania came "from a European, human rights perspective" but when he talked about the need for

deportations the support “he gains on the right, he loses on the left,” she told AFP.

While the PP welcomed Sanchez’s sudden emphasis on security, hard-left party Sumar – the junior coalition partners in his minority government – immediately opposed it.

“Following the same migration recipes called for by the right is a failure and a mistake,” Labour Minister Yolanda Diaz, who founded Sumar, wrote on X.

With the number of crossing attempts expected to increase further in the coming weeks as Atlantic waters become calmer, the controversy is expected to intensify, especially since the PP has hardened its position on the issue in recent years in response to the rise of far-right party Vox which is hostile to immigration.

The Spanish government estimates there are some 200,000 people in Mauritania waiting to go to the Canaries. The bulk of them are from Mali where a military regime is battling an Islamist insurgency.

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