

At Sigonella Air Base in Italy

## Margarita Robles argues Operation Sophia should continue as it is essential for Spain and the European Union

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Ministerio de Defensa

The Acting Minister for Defence, Margarita Robles, travelled to Sicily (Italy) to visit the Spanish servicemen deployed at Sigonella Air Base, the enclave from where Operation Sophia is being coordinated.

Margarita Robles declared "Spain's interest in continuing with Operation Sophia", an operation, she declared, that "is essential for Spain and for the European Union".

The Acting Minister for Defence highlighted the "strategic interest" of the Mediterranean Sea for Spain, as well as the symbolic choice of Sigonella, since the visit to this deployment is, among other reasons, is to stress the value of Operation Sophia.

In a statement to the media, Margarita Robles stressed the efforts being made by Spain to contribute to European security, highlighting that Spain is the largest contributor to EU missions. And as regards NATO, she quoted the example of the bases located on Spanish soil that contribute decisively to NATO operations.

She also mentioned those people who are sceptical about the role of the armed forces overseas, and recalled that "in this globalised world, any threat to world security is a threat to the security and peace of the European Union".

To end, Margarita Robles stressed the leadership that Spain has taken on by committing to space and to cyber-security, the latter aspect which gives more visibility to Spain within the European Union and throughout the international community.

Upon her arrival at the air base, Margarita Robles was received by the Head of Operation Sophia, Admiral Enrico Credentino, and by the Head of the Grappa detachment of the Spanish Air Force, Lieutenant Colonel Guillermo Cordero.

Before beginning her tour of the installations, the acting minister met with Admiral Credentino who provided her with details of the progress of the operation and the latest actions in the Mediterranean.

Subsequently, she travelled to the area where the Spanish servicemen are working, where the head of the air force detachment, Colonel Guillermo Cordero explained to her their commitments and the day-to-day operations they undertake.

The acting minister also held a meeting with the members of the detachment, and wished them a Merry Christmas. She also told them that they are one of the finest manifestations of Spain and that these men and women deployed in Sigonella are the best of the air force".

The Acting Minister for Defence concluded her visit to the base by viewing the communications centre, the maintenance area, the support centre for the mission, role 1, the operations area and the D4 VIGMA aircraft - the maritime patrol plane that the air force contributes to this international mission.

During her visit, the acting minister was accompanied by the State Secretary for Defence, Ángel Olivares; the Chief of Air Force Staff, General Francisco Javier Salto, and the Second-in-Command for Operations, General, Francisco Braco.

## Operation Sophia

The Italian air base of Sigonella, located on the island of Sicily, is a military installation that forms part of NATO and, since 22 June 2015, coordinates European Union Naval Force Mediterranean, known as Operation Sophia.

The aim is to patrol the waters in the south of the Central Mediterranean to identify and capture vessels suspected of being used by smugglers or people traffickers.

On a subsidiary basis, the mission supports the implementation of the arms embargo imposed on Libya by resolution of the United Nations, and to train the Libyan Coastguard and Navy.

This operation includes participation from 26 Member States, with five of these having direct participation: Luxemburg, Poland, France, Italy and Spain.

Specifically, the Spanish Air Force contributes with a maritime patrol aeroplane (a D-4 Vigma from 803 Squadron, from Getafe Air Base). At present, 38 Spanish servicemen are deployed in this enclave.

Spain also supports the operation with eight servicemen based at the General Headquarters in Rome, and three more at the Force General Headquarters in Rota (Cadiz).

The European Union countries agreed on 27 March 2019 to temporarily suspend the naval deployment due to a lack of agreement on the disembarking of immigrants rescued. However, the Member States seem disposed to addressing this issue again and to resuming the deployment of naval assets under this operation.

*Non official translation*