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Polish president to visit SOPHIA mission troops in Sicily on Thursday

Polish President Andrzej Duda and his wife, Agata Kornhauser-Duda, on Thursday will visit the Polish military contingent of the EU SOPHIA mission in Sicily, formed to counteract human smuggling and trafficking in the Mediterranean Sea.

According to the National Security Bureau (BBN), the president will visit the Sigonella base, where he will get acquainted with the contingent's tasks and the situation in the region. He will also take part in a Christmas meeting with soldiers. President Duda will be accompanied by Defence Minister Mariusz Blaszczak, BBN head Pawel Soloch, Chief of Staff of the Polish Armed Forces General Rajmund Andrzejczak and Operational Commander of the Armed Forces General Tomasz Piotrowski.

EUNAVFOR MED operation Sophia is one of the elements of a broader EU response to the migration crisis. The main task of the mission, operating on the EU mandate, is to counteract human smuggling and trafficking in the Southern Central Mediterranean. It also trains the Libyan coastguard and navy and contributes to the implementation of the UN arms embargo on the high seas off the coast of Libya.

Sophia is the name of a baby girl born in July 2015 on board the German frigate Schleswig-Holstein. Born from a Somali mother and rescued by the British HMS Enterprise in the Mediterranean, Sophia was named after the German ship dedicated to the Prussian princess Sophia of Schleswig-Holstein.

Federica Mogherini, the former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, suggested in 2015 that the name of the mission be changed from EUNAVFOR MED to Sophia, in order "to honour the lives of the people we are saving, the lives of people we want to protect, and to pass the message to the world that fighting the smugglers and the criminal networks is a way of protecting human life."

The mission comprises 26 EU member countries. Its headquarters are based in Rome. Poland's contribution to the mission (62 soldiers and two civilians) is among the largest.

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