



**THE WET GRAVE OF THE
MEDITERRANEAN:
WHY ARE AFRICAN MIGRANTS
AND REFUGEES DYING?**



Summary

The Mediterranean Sea has become a graveyard for migrants and refugees, especially those traveling from Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. These migrants risk their lives to go on dangerous voyages to Europe in search for a better life. Official reports show that thousands of migrants and asylum seekers lose their lives or disappear every day in the Mediterranean and the Northwest African routes. Indeed, the European Union (EU) has been blamed for contributing to increased migration along the Mediterranean because of its violent border control policies. These policies have not only pushed African migrants into passing dangerous routes, but have also resulted in huge death tolls and disappearances at sea. While the EU has taken a number of measures to address the migration situation in the Mediterranean, these measures have done little to prevent African migrants from dying or disappearing in Europe's borders. European destination countries like Greece and Italy have also adopted repressive immigration policies to reduce irregular arrivals on their borders. It is time for the EU to finally take a clear stand on the vast graveyard that Europe's borders have come to be. Efforts need to be made to improve search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean, and to provide safer and legal alternatives for African migrants and asylum seekers. This will go a long way in reducing the number of migrants drowning while crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

Background

The Central Mediterranean Sea is the deadliest route for migration in the world. In recent years, the route has become a graveyard for many migrants and asylum seekers from Africa trying to reach Europe. Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt are now major transit points for African refugees, who cross the Mediterranean in hopes for a better life in Europe. For these migrants, there are only two options – either the Mediterranean is going to be the pathway to their dreams or their vast unmarked grave (Kazeem, 2018). Unfortunately, the latter is usually the case. Thousands of African migrants and refugees have died or gone missing while transiting the Mediterranean route (International Organization for Migration, 2023). According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2023), over 11,000 children have made the dangerous crossing, majority of whom were alone or separated from their parents. When asked why he embarked on the perilous voyage, one 16-year-old Gambian boy said to BBC that he left home three years ago to “hustle hard and help my family” (Cuddy, 2023). The father of a 14-year-old boy from Egypt who disappeared in the Mediterranean told AFP that “in our village, young people regularly leave without telling their families, and that’s what happened to us: I learned that my son had gone (...) to Libya, where he stayed for 15 days before setting sail” (Africanews, 2023).

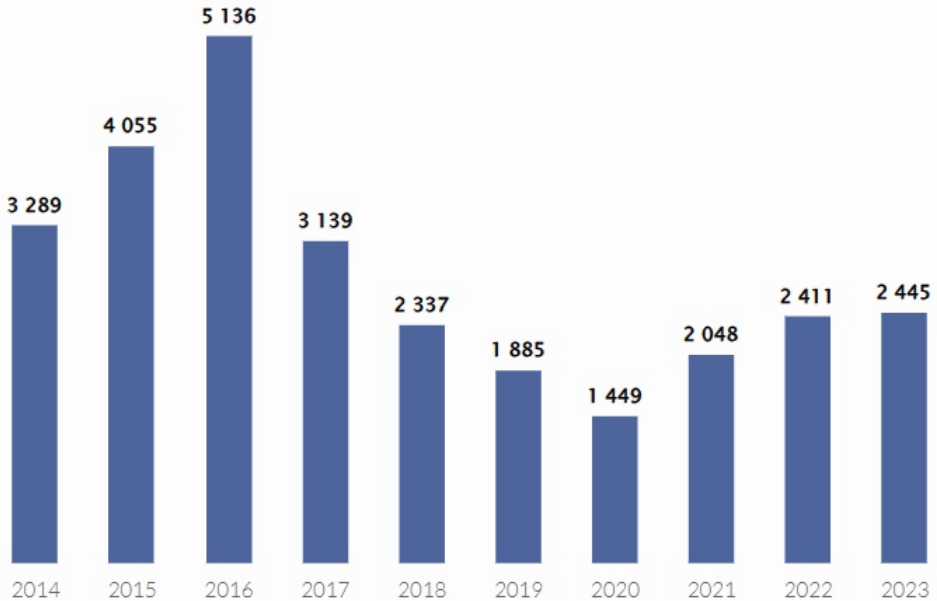
With the growing death tolls from shipwrecks, humanitarian groups and NGOs are blaming European countries for their violent border control policies. This is because of the illegal pushbacks which African migrants face from local authorities and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) upon getting to Europe. There are reports of European authorities refusing to respond to rescue missions involving refugee boats. On 13th June 2023, hundreds of people died in a refugee boat that had tried to reach Italy, but broke down along the coast of Greece. Despite being alerted about the boat in distress, the Greek and other

European authorities refused to launch a rescue operation until the boat capsized the following day (Alarm Phone, 2023). Oftentimes, some of these overcrowded refugee boats take longer and unsafe routes to avoid European forces, thereby exposing passengers to violence and other forms of human rights abuses. The European asylum and migration system is no doubt built on deterrence, which has led to increased deaths at Europe's land and sea borders (Save the Children, 2023). Evidently, European policy makers need to start implementing viable measures to protect migrants and asylum seekers, especially those traveling from the shores of Africa. It is against this backdrop that we examine the trend of migration of Africans along the Mediterranean route, the causes and effects of such migration, as well as the required policy considerations.

Key Issues

There is extensive data on the issue of Mediterranean crossings involving African migrants and refugees. According to a report published by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2023), thousands of Africans cross the Mediterranean annually by boat from the northern coasts of the continent to migrate or seek asylum in Europe. Majority of those who embark on this dangerous journey do not have the necessary documentation required by the countries of destination, and as such they take this irregular route. Since 2014, the IOM has recorded over 28,000 deaths and disappearances of migrants in the Mediterranean. According to the organisation, there were 2,337 casualties recorded in 2018, 1,885 in 2019, 1,449 in 2020, 2,048 in 2021, and 2,411 in 2022 (IOM, 2023).

Dead and Missing By the Year



Source: The IOM

Most of these casualties occur due to migrants traveling on overcrowded and unseaworthy boats, such as fish vessels and rubber rafts. Even UNICEF (2023) estimates that approximately 289 unaccompanied minors have lost their lives or disappeared while trying to cross the Mediterranean. As pointed out by the organisation, this equates to about “11 children dying or missing every week” as they search for better life in Europe (UNICEF, 2023).

Recent statistics from the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) indicate that most Mediterranean crossings originate from North Africa. For example, Tunisia (33,118) and Egypt (28,871) are considered the most common countries of origin of African migrants arrested in the Mediterranean. Other represented countries are from Asia and

they include Bangladesh (22,105) and Syria (13,894) (ICMPD, 2023). Indeed, the precarious political and economic landscape of these countries has driven nationals to search for better life and better job opportunities in more developed countries like Greece and Italy. However, this is not the only reason why African migrants risk their lives everyday in the Mediterranean. According to the UN Refugee Agency (2023), many refugees from Africa are fleeing to other countries due to armed conflict, violence or persecution in their home countries. The East and Horn of Africa is a good example of a region that experiences ongoing conflicts and climate-related events, which have displaced over ten million people (UNHCR, 2023). This has led several Africans from Ethiopia, Kenya, Niger, Somalia, and South Sudan to migrate to Mediterranean countries in an attempt to find peace and safety. It should be noted that death or disappearance at sea is not the only risk that African migrants face when transiting to Europe. They also face threats of violence and immigration detention, which are worsened by other factors such as delay in rescue missions and lack of access to protection in countries along the Mediterranean route (UNICEF, 2023).

What Are European Destination Countries and the European Union Doing to Address the Migration Situation in the Mediterranean?

In light of the prevailing migration crisis in the Mediterranean, the EU and its member states have implemented measures annually to reduce irregular arrivals along this route. In 2017, a joint migration task force was set up with the African Union and the UN. The purpose of this taskforce was to improve cooperation between EU member states and African countries, and to address migration challenges in Africa. Through this taskforce, a number of voluntary return programmes and evacuation operations were implemented

in Libya. As a result of these return programmes, over 65,000 migrants stranded in Libya were returned voluntarily to their home countries between 2017 and 2022 (EU, n.d.). The steep rise in migratory pressure on the Mediterranean led the European Commission to adopt an EU Action Plan on the Central Mediterranean in November 2022. There were 20 actions proposed in the Action Plan to tackle irregular and unsafe migration along the route, as well as to improve search and rescue missions by member states (European Commission, 2022a). One month after the adoption of this Action Plan, the EU and African partners introduced two Team Europe Initiatives, which aim to prevent smuggling and provide political and financial support to African partners through humanitarian assistance (European Commission, 2022b).

Recently, EU leaders agreed on a new set of policies to achieve a sustainable migration and asylum process in Europe. In particular, the agreement imposes financial penalties on member states that refuse to accept irregular migrants and asylum seekers. Although some members have expressed opposition to this agreement, it is set to be adopted by June 2024 and implemented in 2026 (European Commission, 2023). However, humanitarian groups have criticised the new EU policies for doing little to nothing in preventing the deaths and disappearances of African migrants in the Mediterranean. Indeed, the new policies only provide for how EU countries share responsibility when a migrant has crossed the external border, and do not address how to prevent these crossings from North African countries like Libya (Psaropoulos, 2023).

The tough migration policies of destination countries such as Greece and Italy have not made things easier for migrants and asylum seekers transiting from Africa. The Greek Government, for example, has taken a tough stance on migration by building

walled camps, refusing the right to apply for asylum, deporting new arrivals, and increasing border patrols.



In his visit to Lesbos, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the Prime Minister of Greece said he was “exceptionally proud” to have “implemented a firm but fair policy on migration”. According to him, “We protected our country’s borders both on land and at sea, and reduced irregular arrivals by 90 percent” (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2023). Italy has also made efforts to curb migrant arrivals by passing a set of immigration policies that create stringent asylum processes and reduce integration efforts. Under the new policies, asylum seekers will have restricted access to special protection and integration measures, such as psychological support, legal advice and language courses are now scrapped in reception centers. Critics have criticised this policy for being repressive and in violation of international law, as it will only push more migrants into illegality (Balmer, 2023; Vigano, 2023).

Conclusion and Issues for Policy Considerations

From the above findings, it is clear that EU's actions to address the migration situation in the Mediterranean are not working. The death tolls of African migrants and refugees continue to rise everyday, including the number of disappearances at sea. Efforts made by the Greek and Italian governments through strengthening border control have only worsened the problem and has increased the number of people drowning in their borders. Restricting the asylum process is also not the answer, as that would only drive people into illegality. EU destination countries therefore need to stop blaming irregular migration on smugglers and should focus more on protecting the lives of migrants. This can only be done by providing safer and legal alternatives to dangerous crossings. It is essential that the EU take urgent action to improve search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean, while also creating a legal passageway for African migrants and asylum seekers, many whom have legitimate asylum claims and who should be able to go to destination countries without having to take the perilous voyage along the Mediterranean Sea. It is time for the EU to take a clear stand on the vast graveyard at the borders of Europe and to hold member states accountable. Until this is done, most of these member states will continue to disregard the rights of African migrants and refugees with their repressive immigration policies.

Reference

Africanews. (2023) Risking their lives, Egyptians dream of Europe when they set sail in the Mediterranean. [Online] Available from: <https://www.africanews.com/amp/2023/06/30/risking-their-lives-egyptians-dream-of-europe-when-they-set-sail-in-the-mediterranean/> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

Alarm Phone. (2023) Europe's "shield": Hundreds presumed to have drowned off Greece. [Online] Available from: <https://alarmphone.org/en/2023/06/14/europes-shield/> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

Balmer, C. (2023) Italy narrows asylum rights in new clampdown on immigration. [Online] Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/italy-narrows-asylum-rights-new-clampdown-immigration-2023-04-20/> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

Cuddy, A. (2023) Migrant boats in the Mediterranean: Why are so many people dying? BBC News. [Online] Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66478091.amp> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

European Commission. (2022a) EU Action Plan for the Central Mediterranean. [Online] Available from: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-11/EU%20Action%20Plan%20for%20the%20Central%20Mediterranean_en.pdf [Accessed 15th September 2023].

European Commission. (2022b) EU working together with African partners on migration: Launch of Team Europe initiatives. [Online] Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_7540 [Accessed 15th September 2023].

European Commission. (2023) What is the New Pact on Migration and Asylum of the EU? [Online] Available from: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/new-pact-migration-and-asylum_en [Accessed 15th September 2023].

European Council on Refugees and Exiles. (2023) Greece: Government Praise Own 'Achievements' on Migration Ahead of Election as Violations Continue, Situation in Closed Controlled Facilities Raise EU Concern and NGO Condemnation. [Online] Available from: <https://ecre.org/greece-government-praise-own-achievements-on-migration-ahead-of-election-as-violations-continue-situation-in-closed-controlled-facilities-raise-eu-concern-and-ngo-condemnation/> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

European Union. (n.d.) EU action to tackle the Central Mediterranean route. [Online] Available from: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/central-mediterranean-route/> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

International Centre for Migration Policy and Development. (2023) Migration Outlook Mediterranean 2023. [Online] Available from: https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/58952/file/ICMPD_Migration_Outlook_2023.pdf [Accessed 15th September 2023].

International Organization for Migration. (2023) Migration Within the Mediterranean. [Online] Available from: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

Kazeem, Y. (2018) The harrowing, step-by-step story of a migrant's journey to Europe at sea. Quartz. [Online] Available from: <https://qz.com/africa/1341221/the-harrowing-step-by-step-story-of-a-migrants-journey-to-europe> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

Psaropoulos, J. (2023) EU's slow move to common asylum policy 'fails to prevent deaths'. Al Jazeera. [Online] Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2023/6/28/eus-slow-move-to-common-asylum-policy-fails-to-prevent-deaths> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

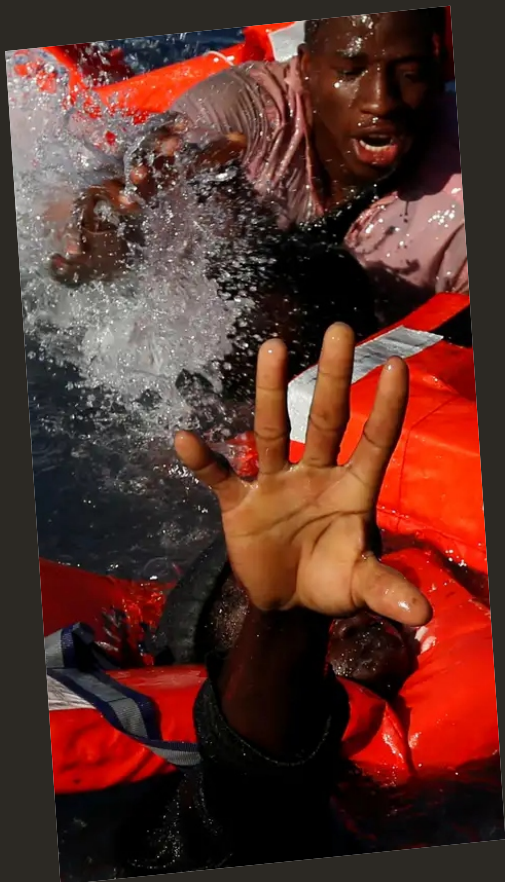
Save the Children. (2023) The EU must not be complicit in the loss of lives at sea and in rights violations at Europe's borders. [Online] Available from: https://www.savethechildren.net/news/eu-must-not-be-complicit-loss-lives-sea-and-rights-violations-europe-s-borders#_ftn1 [Accessed 15th September 2023].

United Nations Children's Fund. (2023) Eleven children die every week attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean Sea migration route – UNICEF. [Online] Available from: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/eleven-children-die-every-week-attempting-cross-central-mediterranean-sea-migration> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2022) NHCR data visualization on Mediterranean crossings charts rising death toll and tragedy at sea. [Online] Available from: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-data-visualization-mediterranean-crossings-charts-rising-death-toll-and> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2023) East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes. [Online] Available from: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/regions/east-and-horn-africa-and-great-lakes> [Accessed 15th September 2023].

Vigano, M.S. (2023) Italy: New law curtails migrants' rights. [Online] Available from: <https://www.dw.com/en/italy-new-law-curtails-migrants-rights/a-65552219> [Accessed 15th September 2023].



[@diasporaafrica](https://www.instagram.com/diasporaafrica) www.diasporaafrica.org