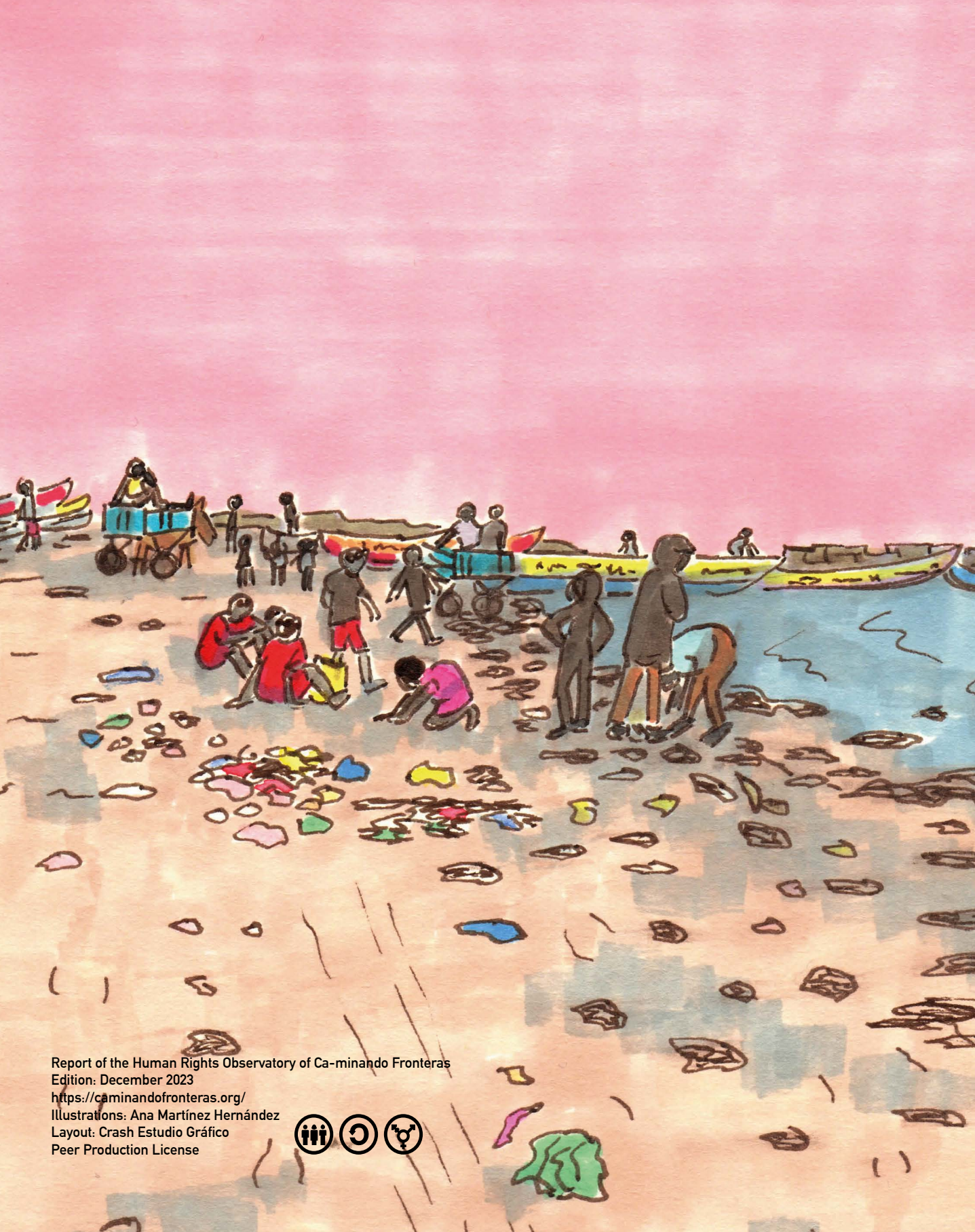


CA-MINANDO
FRONTERAS



MONITORING THE RIGHT
TO 2023 LIFE



MONITORING THE RIGHT TO LIFE 2023

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OUR EFFORTS TO ENSURE REMEMBRANCE FOR VICTIMS AND THEIR FAMILIES CONTINUE

1. Ca-minando Fronteras (2022) 'Victims of the necrofrontier 2018-2022. For memory and justice' (available at: <https://caminandofronteras.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Report-Victims-of-the-necrofrontier-2018-2022.-For-memory-and-justice-Right-to-life-ENG.pdf>)

2. Political representatives from the PP and VOX have made xenophobic, dehumanising statements regarding the arrival of migrant people on Spanish territory, comparing them to "bundles dispatched and dumped all over Spain" in the case of the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, emphasising the need to control them and "brand them like animals" in the case of Salvador Escudero, a PP councillor in Torrox, and calling for migrants coming from the Canary Islands to be "driven out" of Madrid by "chartering buses" in the case of Rocío Monasterio (VOX). For more information, see: Rozas, R. (2023) 'La deriva racista del PP: de los "fardos" de Ayuso a señalar a los migrantes como causantes de enfermedades' (available at: https://www.elplural.com/autonomias/madrid/deriva-racista-pp-fardos-ayuso-senalar-migrantes-causantes-enfermedades_319048102); Riveiro, A. & Moraga, C. (2023) 'El PP se suma al discurso xenofobo de Vox ante la crisis migratoria' (available at: https://www.eldiario.es/politica/sector-pp-comandado-ayuso-suma-discurso-xenofobo-vox-crisis-migratoria_1_10632489.html), and Mateo, J. J. (2023) 'Vox reclama a Ayuso que expulse fletando autobuses a los migrantes llegados a Madrid desde Canarias' (available at: <https://elpais.com/espana/madrid/2023-11-02/vox-reclama-a-ayuso-que-expulse-fletando-autobuses-a-los-migrantes-llegados-a-madrid-desde-canarias.html>)

3. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) challenged the use of arbitrary detention against migrants accused of captaining boats carrying other migrants in a report on the Canary Islands route that was published in 2022. In the report, it observes that those accused often have no links to smuggling networks and are simply travelling on these migration routes themselves. For more information, see: UNODC (2022) 'Northwest African (Atlantic) Route - Migrant Smuggling from the Northwest African coast to the Canary Islands (Spain)' (available at: https://www.unodc.org/res/som/docs/Observatory_Story-Map_3_NorthWestAfrica.pdf)

For another year, the team at Ca-minando Fronteras stands united in grief alongside the families and communities of the victims of the western Euro-African border. Our Human Rights Observatory works to record and analyse data on the appalling death rates on migration routes leading to the Spanish State and to ensure remembrance and justice for the victims.

2023 was the deadliest year on record: whereas in 2021¹, the total number of victims was 4,639 and 12 people died each day while crossing borders, in 2023 this shameful figure rose to 6,618 and 18 deaths per day.

Once again, the Atlantic crossing to the Canary Islands emerged as the world's most lethal migration route, swelling these terrible statistics. 2023 saw a rise in departures from more distant parts of this transit region, such as Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia. In June especially, social and political upheaval in Senegal led to an exodus of the population and an increase in the numbers of wooden boats setting off from the country, as we will see later on in this report.

"We still haven't come to terms with the loss of life in 2006; hundreds of fishermen left this neighbourhood and never came back. It's a taboo topic, so it's very hard to grieve. Every family, every individual is mourning, but it's not something that has been addressed collectively. We don't know what's going to happen now with these new victims or what the Senegalese people are going to do with this memory", said a Senegalese activist.

Despite the appalling statistics for 2023, national governments have rendered victims invisible through their policies and official narratives focus instead on the numbers of people arriving on Spanish territory, overlooking those who have died and gone missing. Official analyses of the situation at the borders have centred around a discourse of migration control, allowing racist and xenophobic messages to proliferate and be voiced even by institutional representatives². Nor has there been any reflection on the impact of migration and border control policies on the right to life or on the particular circumstances surrounding the expulsion of people from countries experiencing serious conflict, such as Senegal.

2023 was a particularly difficult year for seeking truth, justice and reparation for victims at the borders. Ca-minando Fronteras has been obliged to reinforce its field teams in order to assist thousands of families who are searching for their missing loved ones, especially in the Atlantic region.

We have increased our capacity to respond to emerging needs in Senegal and the Canary Islands and are tackling the widespread taboo around deaths at the borders. The silence surrounding the victims has been exacerbated by fear of state repression and detention³ among those who speak out. Our research also highlighted a rise in the persecution, stigmatisation and criminalisation of families looking for their loved ones.

“They had been missing for days, they should have searched for them but they didn’t. Then they turned up in Cape Verde, lots of dead people, huge numbers. They did nothing, if they had searched for them no-one would have died. We went out into the street to protest and later on the police came and arrested the families of the victims in their homes; they took their cousins, brothers, even their mothers. We can’t even make our voices heard”, explained the uncle of one of the deceased.

Social acceptance of these taboos encourages the use of border control policies and the racist, dehumanising narratives that underpin them.

Once again, our research breaks down the wall of silence imposed by migration control policies amid a period of great pain. We publish vital data to help repair the harm caused by mass deaths at the borders at the individual, family and community level.

Like our previous reports, this report is also intended as an instrument for preserving memory. It calls for an end to necropolitics⁴ on the western Euro-African border and serves as a tool for migrants’ families and communities to use in their fight to ensure that these incidents do not recur. We have a moral duty to condemn the increasingly explicit, obscene border control protocols that cause deaths among migrants and are replicated at borders across Europe⁵.

In order to fulfil this duty, our Human Rights Observatory on the western Euro-African border, a primarily maritime border running from the western Mediterranean to the Atlantic, has conducted exhaustive monitoring alongside migrants’ families and communities and produced the data that are presented in this report. This complex task would be impossible without our multidisciplinary teams, who have a transnational presence in border regions and provide 24-hour assistance via our emergency telephone lines every day of the year.

Our research is based on information from primary sources, which is subsequently added to our database and analysed. The findings of our research are primarily intended for use by migrant communities and victims’ families, as a way of contributing to their fight to defend life against border necropolitics.

“I’ve been looking for my cousins, who set off from Algeria in a little boat with 21 other people, for almost a year now. We haven’t heard from them since they left. We’ve travelled to Spain several times and visited hospitals, morgues, police stations and prisons, but we’ve found no sign of them. We’ve come to the conclusion that something bad happened during their crossing, but we can’t mourn them without any bodies or proof. We want to know what really happened and what continues to happen every day on the Algerian route across the Mediterranean”, said a relative of a man who went missing on the Algerian route.

The dynamics that have taken hold at Europe’s necroborders are repeated year after year in an attempt to control migration and the number of victims only continues to grow. Attacks on the lives of people on the move are completely unacceptable and we hope that this report will provide information and tools with which to continue to defend the right to life.

“Some say his body is in Morocco, in Dakhla, others say he’s in prison and they were arrested when they reached the Moroccan coast. My brother went there but the information isn’t clear and the bodies from the morgue have already been buried. We don’t know what to do, it’s not easy in Morocco because my brother was questioned by the police. Nobody has any compassion for us, it’s horrible”, complained the sister of a missing man.

4. According to Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe, necropolitics is the use of social and political power to dictate who may live and who must die, either through action (e.g. police aggression and other physical violence against migrant communities) or omission (e.g. inaction by the competent authorities in response to boats in danger at sea). For more information about the concept and its meaning, see: Mbembe, A. (2019) *Necropolitics*. Duke University Press.

5. At this juncture, it is important to mention the fishing boat that sank off the coast of Greece in June this year, which is the greatest tragedy ever to be recorded on the Mediterranean migration routes in numerical terms: 82 bodies were salvaged and more than 500 people remain missing. This tragedy would not have occurred were it not for the Greek authorities’ delay in mobilising search and rescue resources. For more information, see: Chen et al. (2023) ‘Greek migrant boat wreck may be Mediterranean’s “worst ever tragedy” with hundreds still missing’ (available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/17/world/greece-boat-worst-ever-tragedy-mediterranean-sea-intl-hnk/index.html>)



6.618

victims on the access
routes to Spain
in 2023

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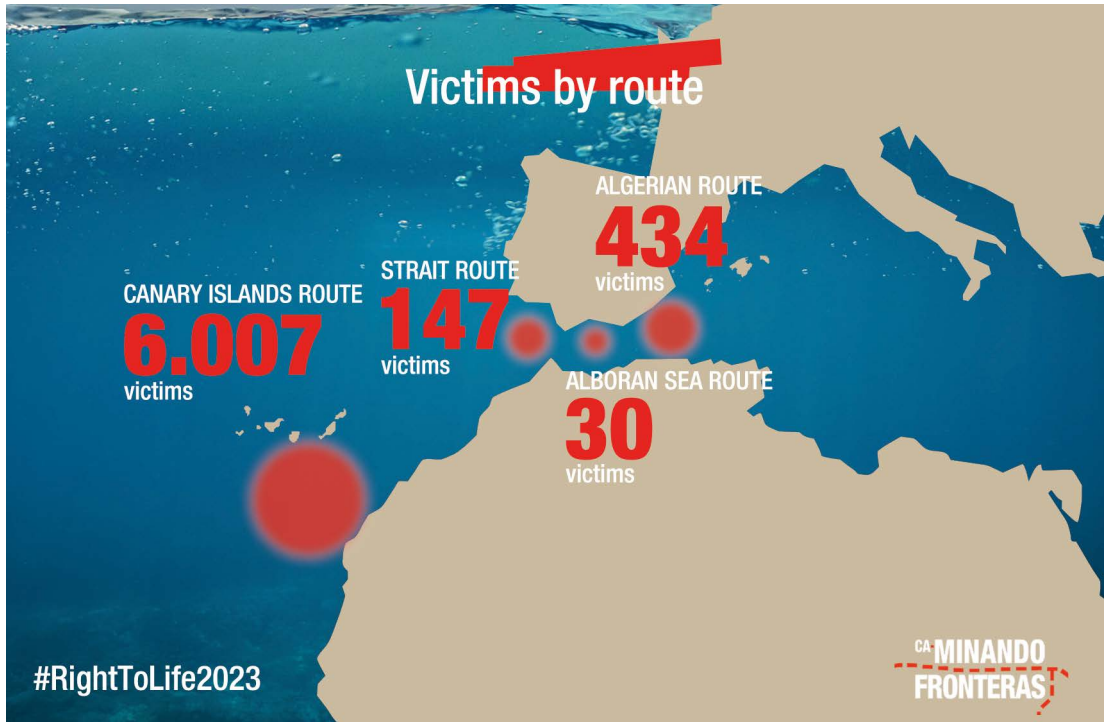
VICTIMS WOMEN AND CHILDREN



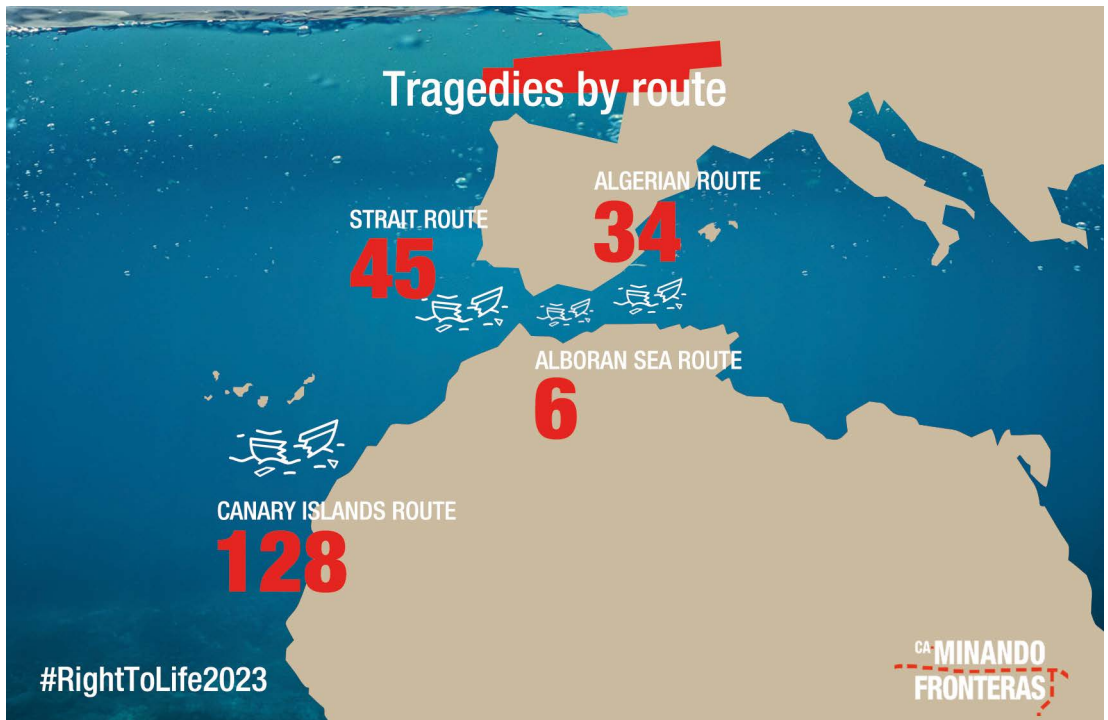
VICTIMS BY MONTHS



VICTIMS BY ROUTES



TRAGEDIES BY ROUTE



MISSING BOATS



ORIGIN OF THE VICTIMS



THE NECROBORDER IS CLAIMING MORE AND MORE LIVES

This year, rising numbers of victims on the western Euro-African border have been accompanied by ongoing social and political normalisation of deaths and disappearances among migrants⁶.

Our research has highlighted the continuation of a series of practices that could be described as 'protocols' due to their gradual implementation, which have a direct impact on the right to life of people crossing borders. In 2023, failure to render assistance and protect life at sea has been systematically used as a central tool in controlling migration.

Data on the victims and the causes of their deaths were obtained via the monitoring system developed by our Human Rights Observatory, which analysed 213 tragedies on different routes along the western Euro-African border. Particular efforts were made to follow up on 84 vessels that disappeared without a trace due to the impact of these types of incidents on victims and their families.



Canary Islands Route // 58 people on board an inflatable boat arrive in Fuerteventura on 12 October 2023.

6. In September 2023, Ruven Menikdiwela, Director of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, issued a warning about the lethal migration policies used in border regions, which have caused large numbers of deaths and disappearances, and said that there was "no end in sight" to these practices. For more information, see: UN (2023) 'Ruven Menikdiwela (UNHCR) on protection of human rights of refugees and migrants - Security Council, 9428th meeting' [video] (available at: <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1g/k1gy3425xa>)

The findings of our research point to bias in the mobilisation of search and rescue operations, which are skewed towards migration control, as one of the main causes of deaths at the borders.

This bias was identified on every route leading to the Spanish State and has been observed in several of our reports in recent years⁷.

In 2023, we noted that these migration control instruments coexist alongside often unwritten protocols applied by public institutions that are supposed to act as guarantors of rights⁸ and serve to undermine the protection of migrants' lives at sea.

The de facto implementation of these practices in a manner that evades democratic control and accountability renders victims and their families defenceless and allows the perpetrators to go unpunished⁹.

In many of the tragedies that we have documented, search and rescue operations were not mobilised or were delayed for so long that people's lives were put at risk.

This was accompanied by an increase in passive search methods¹⁰, which are largely ineffective. This bias towards delaying or failing to mobilise search and rescue operations was even applied to vessels in danger whose GPS position was known.

Delays in mobilising search and rescue operations to protect people in danger occur when relations between states prioritise border externalisation¹¹ over collaboration, contravening the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea¹².

As a result, the Spanish State exerts pressure on third countries to carry out rescue operations, even if they lack the necessary resources, capacity or will to do so. In border externalisation, the focus is on "intercepting migrants" instead of "rescuing people", which directly undermines the duty to render assistance to people in danger at sea¹³.

During our monitoring work, we also observed that the information circulating between the authorities in these countries failed to prioritise human rights and focused instead on bilateral agreements relating to migration control.

As a result, people crossing the border are used as negotiating capital to serve political interests¹⁴. In 2023, the Atlantic route was most affected by shifting relations between states, with relations between the Spanish State and Morocco¹⁵, Senegal and Mauritania¹⁶ undergoing the greatest changes.

In the context of this migration control agenda, decision-making on the mobilisation of rescue services and the resources to be used to save the lives of people on the move is highly arbitrary.

7. See: *Ca-minando Fronteras* (2022) 'Victims of the necrofrontier 2018-2022. For memory and justice' (available at: <https://caminandofronteras.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Report-Victims-of-the-necrofrontier-2018-2022.-For-memory-and-justice-Right-to-life-ENG.pdf>).

8. According to the official website for Salvamento Marítimo, Spain's maritime search and rescue agency, its primary mission and purpose is to "protect human life at sea", which is understood as a public service. For more information, see: <http://www.salvamentomaritimo.es/conocenos/nuestra-actividad/mision-y-area-de-responsabilidad>

9. Lawyer Patricia Fernández Vicens has stated that there are "signs of criminal activity" in incidents like the slaughter in Melilla and Nador on 24 June 2022, when the actions of the Spanish and Moroccan police forces caused 40 migrants to die and 77 to go missing. For more information, see the video by El Periódico de Ceuta: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YM6zBmI-Yas>.

10. In passive searches, the authorities issue an alert to commercial and recreational vessels in the area where the boat in danger is positioned, effectively making them responsible for locating and rescuing the boat and enabling the public authorities to avoid mobilising rescue operations.

11. Some of the clearest examples of international relations based on this framework can be found in the bilateral agreements on migration signed by the Spanish State and Morocco (La Moncloa (2023) 'España y Marruecos refuerzan la cooperación en materia migratoria', available at: <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/serviciosdepremsa/notaspremsa/interior/Paginas/2023/020223-acuerdo-marruecos.aspx>); Algeria (BOE (2020), available at: https://www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2020-16416); Senegal (Ministerio de Trabajo y de Economía Social, 'Memorandos España-Senegal para garantizar movimientos migratorios seguros, ordenados y regulares', available at: <https://www.mites.gob.es/mundo/consejerias/senegal/novedades/archivos/memorandos.htm>) and Mauritania (La Moncloa (2023) 'Grande-Marlaska refuerza en Mauritania la cooperación migratoria que ya ha evitado 7.000 llegadas a Canarias este año', available at: <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/serviciosdepremsa/notaspremsa/interior/Paginas/2023/111023-marlaska-mauritania-cooperacion-migratoria.aspx>).

12. The text of the Convention, which all the states on the western Euro-African border have signed, stipulates that "necessary measures shall be taken to ensure effective protection of human life" (available at: https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf).

13. For more information on the effects of border externalisation policies and on the processes of militarisation and securitisation associated with them, see the report 'Expanding the Fortress' by the Transnational Institute (2018) 'Expanding the fortress: the policies, the profiteers and the people shaped by EU's border externalisation programme' (available at: <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/expanding-the-fortress>).

14. The use of migrants as currency has been a common practice in bilateral relations between the two countries and has been criticised in recent years by several different organisations. See: CEAR (2016) 'MARRUECOS: Desprotección y vulneración de derechos de las personas migrantes y refugiadas a las puertas de Europa' (available at: https://www.cear.es/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/informe_marruecos_cear_2015_definitivo.pdf).

15. Morocco's interest in the fishing and oil resources present along the Canary Islands route is central here. For more information, see: Quarante, O. (2014) 'La riqueza robada al Sáhara Occidental' (available at: <https://mondiplo.com/la-riqueza-robada-al-sahara-occidental>).

16. In August 2023, the Mauritanian government refused to allow 168 people on board a wooden boat that had been intercepted by the Guardia Civil in Mauritanian waters to disembark in the country. For more information, see: Sánchez, G. (2023) 'Por qué Mauritania negó el desembarco a 168 migrantes rescatados por la Guardia Civil' (available at: https://www.eldiario.es/desalambre/socio-mauritania-estrella-inmigracion-negar-desembarco-168-rescatados-guardia-civil_1_10470997.html).

There has been a decline in the resources available to protect lives on migration routes, with states promoting and investing instead in resources for border control¹⁷.

The danger to migrants' lives at sea is heightened by the fact that the rescue services consider the flimsy boats used by migrants to meet nautical safety requirements¹⁸ based on an arbitrary assessment of each case and ignore the recommendations on vessels in danger made in United Nations mechanisms for protecting life at sea.

Bias against migrants can also be observed in the response to shipwrecks: rescue services only intervene during the rescue itself and do not continue to search for survivors or recover bodies, despite this being vital to ensure respect for the rights of the victims and their families.

In 2023, we detected a rise in the criminalisation¹⁹ and stigmatisation of social organisations and family members who raise the alarm over people in danger at sea. This affects the way in which the information that they provide is handled.

In many cases, the rescue services refuse to pass the information on, while in others, it is placed "under suspicion", leading to errors when it is analysed by the rescue services that can result in tragedy.

During our monitoring, we documented incidents of malpractice in rescue operations, including rescue boats that do not fulfil the conditions required to approach vessels in distress. As a result of the fo-



Canary Islands Route // Boat about to sink spots land and sends SOS. Spanish Salvamento Marítimo had stopped looking for them the day before.

17. In October 2023, the Spanish Ministry of Interior announced the immediate addition of two Guardia Civil planes to the resources available for surveillance on the Canary Islands route. For more information, see: La Moncloa (2023) 'Grande-Marlaska anuncia la incorporación inmediata de dos nuevos aviones de la Guardia Civil a la vigilancia de la ruta migratoria atlántica' (available at: <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/serviciosdeprensa/notasprensa/interior/Paginas/2023/161023-marlas-ka-coordinacion-inmigracion.aspx>).

18. These safety requirements include the mandatory provision of lifesaving (lifeboats, lifejackets, lifebuoys, etc.) and navigation equipment (e.g. light and sound signals), as per Royal Decree 339/2021 of 18 May (available at: <https://boe.es/buscar/pdf/2021/BOE-A-2021-8268-consolidado.pdf>).

19. Several international organisations, such as the Council of Europe, the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, published reports in 2023 warning of a rise in the criminalisation of human rights defenders. For more information, see: FRA (2023) 'Protecting human rights defenders at risk: EU entry, stay and support' (available at: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2023/human-rights-defenders>); Council of Europe (2023) 'Human Rights Defenders in the Council of Europe Area in times of crises' (available at: <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-the-round-table-human-rights-defenders-in-the-council-of-eur/1680aaa813>); Katssea, C. (2023) 'Criminalising Human Rights Defenders: A ticking bomb for Europe's core values' (available at: <https://gr.boell.org/en/2023/04/04/criminalising-human-rights-defenders-ticking-bomb-europes-core-values>).

cus on interception, the authorities in some countries have even caused migrant vessels to capsize, leading to shipwrecks²⁰.

There have also been deaths among migrants due to violence from the security forces, who have opened fire on migrant boats as part of a policy of migration control²¹.

Generally speaking, people on the move are vulnerable and defenceless when they arrive at the borders and this contributes to higher rates of death. Indeed, it is this very vulnerability that prompts migrants to agree to travel on flimsy boats in dangerous conditions.

During our research, we observed that migrants' lives were also at risk as they embarked on the boats and left the shore, with poor weather conditions and large groups setting off at once heightening the dangers.

Meanwhile, in 2023, an increase in migration control measures along the coasts of Senegal and Mauritania led to the activation of the longest, most dangerous route yet, which leads to the island of El Hierro. The fishing boats used on this migration route face serious danger as they move further out into the Atlantic, where they will quickly sink to the depths of the ocean if the engine fails or they drift off course²².

"In 2005, I realised that our lives had no value, we were just merchandise. I was young back then and I dreamed of Europe and human rights. I saw so many people die at the border fence in Ceuta and in the desert that I thought it would be a scandal and it would all stop, there would be no more deaths.

I stayed in Africa, I wasn't able to cross. I tried by sea at a later date, but God did not see fit for me to cross.

So, I don't know how, but I became someone that people turn to and I began to talk about what I'd experienced, what other people like me experience. Now I'm old and tired and they call me 'President', rights defender, and I don't know what I am, but I'm tired of seeing them murder young Africans.

It's important that we continue to talk about what's happening, that we keep on shouting the names and surnames of those who have died. We must keep going", said a migrant rights defender.

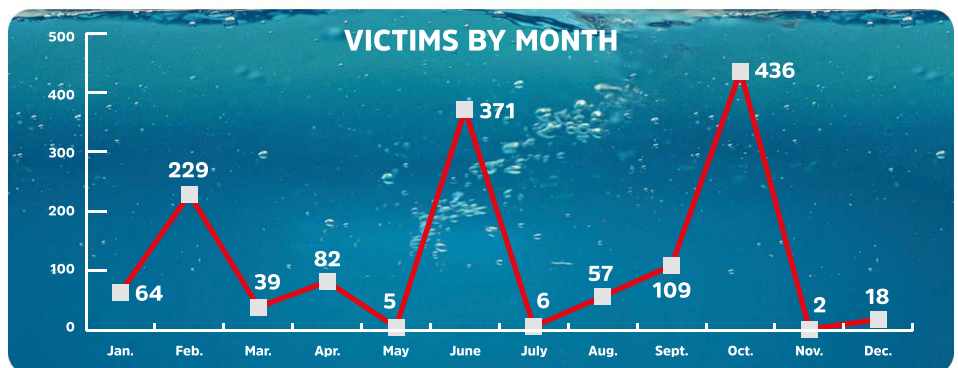
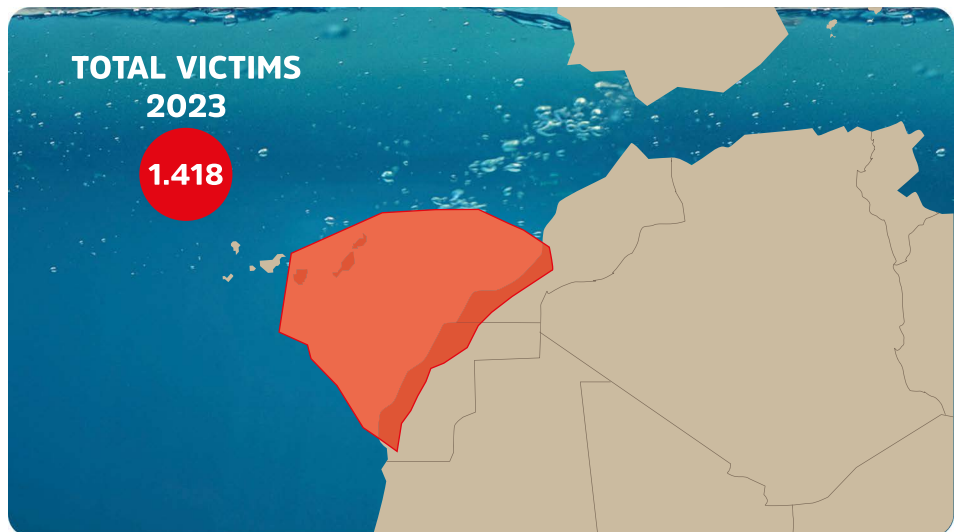
20. One example occurred in August 2023, when the Guardia Civil rammed a boat carrying 11 Moroccan migrants in the waters of Melilla, putting everyone on board in serious danger. The migrants were eventually rescued by a group of people who had witnessed the incident. For more information, see: Cadena SER (2023) 'Una superviviente de la barcaza con migrantes que volcó en Melilla desmiente la versión oficial: "Fue la Guardia Civil quien chocó con nosotros"' (available at: <https://cadenaser.com/nacional/2023/08/03/una-superviviente-de-la-barcaza-con-migrantes-que-volco-en-melilla-desmiente-la-version-oficial-fue-la-guardia-civil-quien-choco-con-nosotros-cadena-ser/>).

21. For example, the survivors of a vessel that arrived in Gran Canaria on 26 May 2023 reported that they had been shot at by the Moroccan authorities as their boat set off from Bojador and that two people had died of their wounds. For more information, see: EFE (2023) 'Los migrantes tiroteados en la patera que partió de la costa africana hacia Canarias tenían heridas de bala, no de perdigones' (available at: https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/migraciones/migrantes-tiroteados-neumatica-partio-costa-africana-canarias-tenian-heridas-bala-no-perdigones_1_10268636.html).

22. This was the case of the wooden boat that set off from Mauritania to the Canary Islands in early 2021 with 43 people on board and eventually washed up on the Caribbean island of Tobago in May 2023 with 14 bodies and other human remains. For more information, see: Rodríguez, D. (2023) 'Relato de una investigación: el cayuco con destino Canarias que aparece en el Caribe lleno de cadáveres' (available at: <https://cadenaser.com/canarias/2023/04/18/relato-de-una-investigacion-el-cayuco-con-destino-canarias-que-aparece-en-el-caribe-lleno-de-cadaveres-ser-las-palmas/>).

ATLANTIC ROUTES ON THE WESTERN EURO-AFRICAN BORDER

THE ROUTE BETWEEN AGADIR AND DAKHLA



From 2019, a shift in departures of migrant boats to the coast between Agadir and Dakhla marked the reopening of the Atlantic routes to the Canary Islands. The area drew migrants who had been displaced from the Alborán Sea and Strait of Gibraltar routes²³.

"We were pushed out from the north. I know many people who even had a residency permit but they weren't allowed to live in Tangier or Nador. Many went south, but of course

23. "Au Maroc, des centaines de migrants refoulés de force vers le sud du pays", available at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/11699/au-maroc-des-centaines-de-migrants-refoules-de-force-vers-le-sud-du-pays>

life is much worse here. It's a militarised area, the raids are much harsher and then they abandon you in the desert. Life here is worse in many ways and it's more dangerous to cross, people go mad, no word of a lie. We're much worse off than before, but we have no choice but to accept it", explained a Malian refugee^{24/25}.

In 2021, inflatable boats began to appear along this part of the border. This was a new development, as migrants formerly used more robust vessels made from fibreglass or wood.

Over the last two years, fishing boats have continued to be used at the departure points located furthest from the Canary Islands, such as Agadir and Dakhla, but inflatable boats are now the most common vessels along the rest of the route²⁶, despite being far more dangerous and unstable²⁷.

In 2023, departures of inflatable boats were observed along the coast to the south of Cape Bojador and Guelmim, although most vessels set off from Tan Tan.

During this period, migrants in transit began to mix with North Africans on the boats, which came to be known among migrants as "mixed boats".

In this region, a sizeable proportion of the migrants are women, most of whom are in transit and have experienced long, violent migration journeys. In most cases, they are travelling with their children. Many of these children are very young and were born en route²⁸.

"I've got two little girls, they were both born here. The first was born in Tangier and the second in Laayoune. I wasn't able to do anything to stop them coming, but I've accepted it because it's God's will. But now life is much more difficult, they don't go to school, I beg so that they can eat, they don't have a birth certificate or anything. I'd tell you my life story but what's the point? The only thing I can say is that I can't go back, only forwards. I left my country in search of protection, then they were born and now I have to protect them. I'm really, really scared of losing them", explained a woman from Cameroon.

The right to life of the people who embarked on this migration route in 2023 was seriously jeopardised. Ca-minando Fronteras monitored a total of 51 tragedies, with a total of 1418 victims, and 21 boats that have never been found.

During the second half of the year, our Human Rights Observatory observed numerous inflatable boats setting off within a short period of time on various occasions. These flimsy vessels are already in extreme danger in the Atlantic as their buoyancy is limited and they are much more fragile in the ocean than in the Mediterranean Sea.

When this instability is combined with the presence of several vessels at sea simultaneously, extra resources, effective coordination between states and adequate handling of alerts concerning people in danger are required in order to ensure that no-one is left behind. However, these practices aimed at protecting life are overlooked in favour of externalising migration control.



Canary Islands Route // 17 September 2023.
Spanish Salvamento Marítimo approaches to rescue a wooden boat with 31 people on board.

24. In 2018, the human rights organisation GADEM published a lengthy report on the multiple forms of violence suffered by sub-Saharan African communities during the mass deportations to the south of Morocco that were carried out by the police and the military in summer 2018, which played a central role in shutting down the migration route in north Morocco and reopening the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands from 2019. For more information, see: GADEM (2018) 'Coûts et blessures' (available at: <https://www.gadem-asso.org/couts-et-blessures/>) and Carretero, L. (2018) 'La vulneración de derechos resulta una constante especialmente en las prisiones y los centros de detención de ciudades como Laayoune'.

25. See Prison Insider (2020) 'Voie sans issue' (available at: <https://www.prison-insider.com/articles/voie-sans-issue/>).

26. In 2023, it was not unusual for several inflatable boats to arrive on the Canarian coast in a single day. See: El País (2023) 'Canarias recibe medio millar de migrantes en patera en 24 horas' (available at: <https://elpais.com/espana/2023-08-09/canarias-recibe-medio-millar-de-migrantes-en-patera-en-24-horas.html>).

27. See: Delgado, E. (2021) 'Las lanchas neumáticas siembran de cadáveres la travesía de la muerte a Canarias' (available at: https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2021-09-05/lanchas-neumaticas-cadaveres-canarias-pateras_3261926/).

28. For more information about the violence experienced by women migrants in transit and the forms of community resistance that have emerged in response to this violence, see: Alianza por la Solidaridad (2018) 'Alzando voces: mujeres que migran. Informe Marruecos 2018' (available at: <https://www.alianzaporlasolidaridad.org/casos/alzando-vozes/>).

29. The focus of the cooperation agreements signed by the two countries remains solely on security, control and criminalisation, centring around “fighting criminal groups” and “reducing illegal arrivals”. For more information, see: La Moncloa (2023) ‘España y Marruecos refuerzan la cooperación en materia migratoria’ (available at: <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/serviciosprensa/notasprensa/interior/Paginas/2023/020223-acuerdo-marruecos.aspx>).

30. Western Sahara is one of 18 non-self-governing territories recognised as such by the United Nations, which understands a non-self-governing territory to be one “whose people have not yet attained a full measure of self-government”. The UN currently has a specific mission in the territory, whose main political objective is to bring about a referendum. For more information, see: United Nations (2023) ‘Western Sahara’ (available at: <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/en/nsgr/western-sahara>).

31. This was expressed in the joint declaration released by Spain and Morocco following the 12th High-Level Meeting between the governments of the two states on 2 February 2023, which reiterated that “Spain considers the Moroccan autonomy initiative presented in 2007, as the most serious, realistic, and credible basis for resolving the dispute”. For more information, see: eldiario.es (2023) ‘España ratifica su postura sobre el Sahara en una declaración conjunta con Marruecos’ (available at: https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/politica/espana-ratifica-postura-sahara-declaracion-conjunta-marruecos_1_9920019.html).

32. In January 2020, the Moroccan Parliament passed two bills aimed at extending its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) into waters neighbouring the Canary Islands. The Spanish government reacted by emphasising the “need for dialogue” to redefine maritime boundaries and the European Parliament described the move as “illegal”. For more information, see: Morocco World News (2020) ‘Morocco Prepares to Define Maritime Boundaries Closer to Canary Islands’ (available at: <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2020/01/291813/morocco-spain-maritime-boundaries>); Kasraoui, S. (2020) ‘Morocco Maritime Borders: Spain’s Congress Seeks ‘Firm’ Measures to Defend Territory’ (available at: <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2020/02/294713/morocco-maritime-borders-spains-congress-seeks-firm-measures-to-defend-territory>); European Parliament (2020) ‘Morocco – Illegal delimitation of exclusive economic zone’ (available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2020-000518_EN.html).

33. SAR waters are the maritime areas for which each state is responsible in the event that people or vessels in danger must be searched for or rescued. The boundaries of these territories and the functions that each state must perform are stipulated in the SAR Convention signed in 1979. For more information, see: IMO, ‘International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR)’ (available at: [https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-on-Maritime-Search-and-Rescue-\(SAR\).aspx](https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/International-Convention-on-Maritime-Search-and-Rescue-(SAR).aspx)).

34. The official maps showing these areas can be viewed at: <https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Portals/9/CG-5R/nsarc/IMO%20Maritime%20SAR%20Regions.pdf>

35. Several media outlets and journalists on social media raised concerns over the change in Salvamento Marítimo’s approach to SAR zones, as the public agency disseminated a new map assigning responsibility for rescues in the waters off Western Sahara to Morocco a few days after the shipwreck, marking a shift away from the maps used previously. For more information, see: Noticias Fuerteventura (2023) ‘Polémica en cuanto a las nuevas “reglas” para el salvamento marítimo en el drama migratorio’ (available at: <https://www.noticiasfuerteventura.com/fuerteventura/polemica-en-cuanto-a-las-nuevas-reglas-para-el-salvamento-maritimo-en-el-drama-migratorio>).

36. The repression of migration movements along the western Euro-African border has become a key factor in bilateral relations between Spain and Morocco, which are shaped by the dynamics of border externalisation. For more information, see: Gazzotti, L., Jiménez-Álvarez, M. & Espiñeira, K. (2023) ‘A “European” Externalisation Strategy?’ (available at: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-26002-5_4).

37. Cadena SER released recordings of the shipwreck, in which Salvamento Marítimo acknowledges that the tragedy took place in the shared SAR zone. For more information, see: Castellano, N. (2023) ‘“Está dentro de la zona SAR nuestra”: la SER accede a las grabaciones de Salvamento Marítimo del último naufragio en la ruta canaria’ (available at: <https://cadenaser.com/nacional/2023/06/22/esta-dentro-de-la-zona-sar-nuestra-la-ser-accede-a-las-grabaciones-de-salvamento-maritimo-del-ultimo-naufragio-en-la-ruta-canaria-cadena-ser/>).

As a result, the most prominent characteristic of this crossing point is the impact of bilateral relations between Morocco and the Spanish State, which were established for the purpose of controlling the borders, on the right to life of people on the move²⁹.

The territorial dispute in the region, where the United Nations has been seeking a settlement³⁰, also affects responsibility for rescue operations in its waters and for the migrants who transit them. In March 2022, the Spanish State unilaterally recognised Moroccan sovereignty over the territory, upholding this position in February 2023³¹. Meanwhile, Morocco had already unilaterally annexed maritime areas not far from the Canary Islands in a parliamentary declaration in 2020³².

Morocco also proposed a change to the SAR (Search and Rescue)³³ waters, which affects overlapping search and rescue areas and was registered on the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) database in June 2023³⁴.

In 2023, the Spanish maritime search and rescue agency Salvamento Marítimo accepted Moroccan sovereignty in the region by disseminating maps produced by the Alawite kingdom³⁵.

By recognising Morocco’s sovereignty, the Spanish State has sought to encourage the country to take charge of rescues in areas that have traditionally been the responsibility of the Spanish government. This comes into play every time the boats in question are carrying migrants.

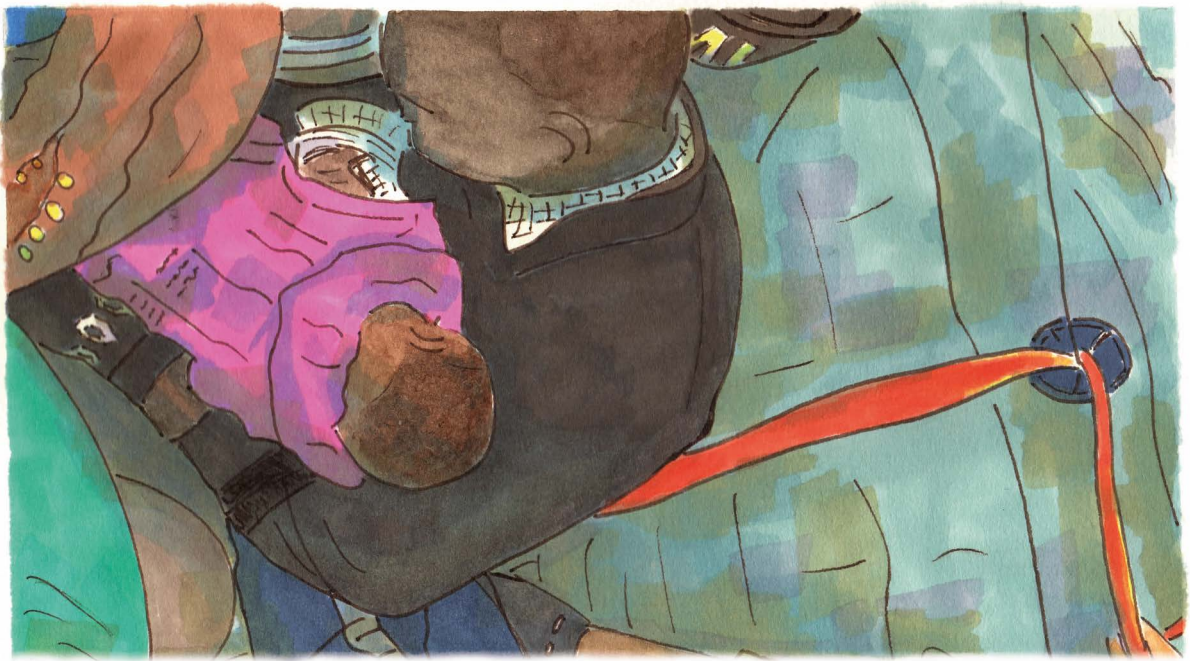
Meanwhile, Morocco leverages migration control as a tool in bilateral negotiations³⁶ with the Spanish State to secure its territorial interests in the area, both on land and at sea.

This situation is jeopardising migrants’ right to life and leading to delays in mobilising rescue operations, as Salvamento Marítimo systematically prioritises persuading Morocco to take responsibility for these operations over assessing the dangers facing migrants.

In many of the incidents monitored by our Human Rights Observatory, Morocco lacked the resources needed to launch a rescue operation or the will to protect migrants’ lives.

One clear example of these practices was the shipwreck on 21 June, which resulted in 39 deaths and is currently being investigated by the courts³⁷.

“We knew they weren’t going to go, we knew they were going to die, we always know because that’s our daily life on the border. You see it from the outside, we see our people, friends and family members, calling for help and nobody doing anything.”



Canary Islands Route // A man holds a baby in his arms on board a deflated inflatable boat on 7 October 2023.

That night was awful, we were calling over and over again, pleading with them to save their lives, but they left them to die like so many other times. And it'll happen again, of course it will, we're not stupid, we understand that they want us dead, we know that nobody will protect us and we have to protect and look after ourselves and one another", said a community leader about the 21 June shipwreck.

In addition to the failure to mobilise search and rescue resources and the delays in launching these operations, both countries favour passive search methods, which are highly dangerous in such a vast expanse of sea and pose a serious threat to human life.

These protocols go hand-in-hand with stigmatisation of the information provided by social organisations and family members. Although alerts in this area are compiled and handled by the Centro de Coordinación Regional de Canarias (CCRC)³⁸, which at least provides a guarantee that they will be received, difficulties emerge when they are assessed as Salvamento Marítimo systematically criminalises the information supplied by social organisations.

Throughout 2023, we documented at least five instances when Salvamento Marítimo cast doubt on information provided by social organisations, endangering the lives of migrants.

The conditions in which the boats depart also pose dangers: beach areas with a complex orography, poor weather conditions and overloaded inflatable boats have led to fatal accidents.

As a result of military control practices³⁹ in departure areas, migrants have been shot at by Moroccan security forces on at least two occasions and some have died of their injuries⁴⁰.

"We don't decide when to set off to sea, sometimes we spend days and days waiting in the desert, with practically no food or water. I've been to the beach twice and you can't imagine what it's like setting off on the boat, it's horrible, the waves batter it and you can't see how you'll get in. You cling on, and I can't swim so it's worse, my friend drowned because they set off but the inflatable boat was punctured by a rock and they had an accident, they weren't far from the beach but many people died because you can't swim and nobody pulls you out of the water", explained a young Senegalese man.

38. The CCRC was founded on 6 October 2006 with the aim of organising "actions to tackle illegal immigration in the Canary Islands". For more information, see: https://www.guardiacivil.es/institucional/actividadesInstitucionales/actos/10_06.html

39. For a summary of the militarisation of the European Union's external borders, see: Transnational Institute (2023) 'Telling the story of EU border militarization' (available at: <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/telling-the-story-of-eu-border-militarization>).

40. For example, the Moroccan authorities shot at a vessel that set off from Cape Bojador on 23 May 2023; at least one person died on the spot, while another two died during the journey. Several people were also injured. For more information, see: Vega, G. (2023) 'Balazos desde Marruecos para frenar la migración a Canarias: "Estaba segura de que sería la siguiente en morir"' (available at: <https://elpais.com/espana/2023-07-22/balazos-para-frenar-la-migracion-a-canarias-estaba-segura-de-que-seria-la-siguiente-en-morir.html>).

Cast adrift: the pain of indifference

SUMMARY

“We can see the plane, we can see it in the distance, please”. This was one of the last messages that we heard on the phone as we communicated with an inflatable boat carrying 65 people, including 13 women and eight children. They had set off from Tan Tan and been at sea for two days. Their families contacted Ca-minando Fronteras on 5 February 2023, worried that they had not heard from them.

The information was passed on to the search and rescue authorities immediately. Hours later, at 19:20 UTC, the people on board managed to send their location to our organisation via WhatsApp. The coordinates sent to the authorities were 28° 57' 54.4" N and 12° 45' 34.2" O.

Half an hour later, the CCRC contacted Ca-minando Fronteras again as it had mobilised air resources and issued warnings in the area but was unable to locate the vessel. At 22:00 UTC, they informed us that the boats and aeroplane had left the area after failing to sight the inflatable boat. The search was suspended overnight but the people on board insisted on the phone that they had seen the plane and a large grey ship.

In the early hours of 6 February, the authorities told us that the emergency services had obtained a second location 40 nautical miles from Lanzarote. However, no air resources were mobilised to search for the boat that night or the following morning.

The authorities insinuated that the location sent from the boat via WhatsApp had been tampered with by someone on land, despite our organisation speaking to the people at sea on the phone and being in no doubt as to the danger they faced and the fact that they had sent the information directly themselves.

On 7 February, a plane was mobilised but nothing was found. The next day, we received a last message from the people on board the boat saying that they were drifting.

Finally, on 12 February, a Moroccan fishing boat rescued 31 survivors, including two women and one child, more than a week after the boat had set off from Tan Tan.

Thirty-four people had died and their bodies left at sea, including 11 women and seven children. The father of twin girls told us several days later how he had been told that his wife and daughters had died on the inflatable boat. *“Of hunger and cold, as they were carried away by the current”*, he said, devastated, as he asked us why nobody had seen them or continued to search for them despite being sent their location.

The survivors were transferred to Laayoune. Several days later, they told local organisations that they had been mistreated while they were detained, forced to identify possible captains of the vessel and denied any kind of psychological support to alleviate their suffering.

ANALYSIS

- Salvamento Marítimo cast doubt on the information provided by our organisation and the migrants on the missing boat.
- The search was suspended at key points despite obtaining the boat's precise location.
- The surviving migrants were mistreated and criminalised despite needing psychological support.

Neglected families: the right to truth

SUMMARY

On 2 October, Ca-minando Fronteras received an alert from several family members who were searching for a mixed inflatable boat that had set off from Tan Tan. After reporting the information to the authorities, our team learned that a shipwreck had occurred the previous day.

Thanks to the information supplied by the maritime search and rescue service in Rabat and by the families, we were able to confirm that the shipwreck on 1 October coincided with the missing vessel reported on 2 October.

Our organisation was able to reconstruct the events in order to support the families, as the authorities were not responding to their requests for information.

Through this exercise, we were able to ascertain that a fishing boat had reported the presence of Moroccan and sub-Saharan African migrants on an inflatable boat in distress 78km from Lanzarote at 17:15 UTC on 1 October. A lack of available rescue resources prompted the authorities to ask the fishing boat to remain next to the vessel until the Guardamar Polimnia, one of the boats operated by Salvamento Marítimo, was able to reach it. However, by the time the Guardamar Polimnia had arrived in the area, the fishing boat was already rescuing the migrants, alongside a Salvamento Marítimo helicopter. The instability of the boat had caused it to overturn and only 43 people were rescued alive. The survivors informed the authorities that three men, four sub-Saharan African women and a 4-year-old boy had remained at sea, making a total of eight deaths.

ANALYSIS

- The authorities concealed highly important information from the family members assisted by our organisation but reported news of the shipwreck to the press.
- It is unclear whether action was taken to search for the eight people who went missing in the shipwreck, even if only to recover their bodies, allow them to be identified and buried and confirm their deaths to their families. The worst part is that the families do not even know if efforts were made to search for their loved ones after the shipwreck.

Opening fire: death and discrimination as weapons of institutional racism

SUMMARY

On the evening of 25 May 2023, we received an alert about an inflatable boat positioned to the south of Gran Canaria via our border emergency system. Following our protocol, we informed the maritime search and rescue authorities. Several hours later, the CCRC confirmed that the people on the boat had been rescued. There were a total of 43 people, including 10 women and eight children.

Upon their arrival, the EFE news agency reported that a survivor had told healthcare personnel and Salvamento Marítimo that they had been shot at on the beach. Despite the serious nature of this information, the migrants were not treated as victims of a tragedy and were subjected to the usual protocols stipulated under the Law on the Rights and Freedoms of Foreign Nationals. It was not until the next day in the CATE⁴¹ that one of the survivors complained of injuries and two people were hospitalised. Doctors at the hospital confirmed the presence of bullet wounds.

As part of our work to monitor shipwrecks and support the victims of these tragedies, Ca-minando Fronteras was able to speak to one of the survivors from the boat, who had remained on the African coast.

“They started shooting when we were on the inflatable boat, I counted up to four bursts of gunfire, it sounded like ‘boom, boom, boom’. It was awful. There was a boy next to me, he clung on to me and we both fell into the water. We were still close to the beach, I don’t know how I survived. I saw the boy who had grabbed onto me on the shore, he was dead. Two of the other companions who had been next to me were still alive. I looked at the soldiers and said ‘you’ve killed him’, all three of us were angry, they’d shot at us as if we were nothing, as if our lives were worth nothing at all. Then the police came and we began to tell them and point at the men who had shot at us. I picked up the dead boy’s documents, he had a Malian passport, I picked it up to find out who he was so that I could tell his family, and I also picked up his phone, but the police took everything off me. I was really angry and I kept saying that I wanted to make a statement, that they’d killed him. The police arrested us and ended up leaving us in the desert. I still can’t sleep at night, I hear the gunshots, I see his face, I wonder if his parents know he’s dead and where his body is”, said one of the survivors.

Several days later, we were able to confirm that the young man’s body was in the morgue at Laayoune. When we reconstructed the events at a later date, we were able to confirm the deaths of another three people who had been wounded by gunfire and who had managed to get onto the boat, but sadly died during the crossing.

ANALYSIS

• Migrants are subjected to repression and violence at border crossing points and weapons of war are increasingly used in migration control. This incident demonstrates the dangers facing migrants on the Canary Islands route compared to other routes along the western Euro-African border.

41. The CATE (Temporary Migrant Reception Centres) are the first place where migrants are taken upon arriving in Spain. People remain in these centres or camps for a maximum of 72 hours under police custody, with no freedom of movement..

- It reveals the discrimination suffered by migrants upon arrival, when the focus is on migration control protocols rather than recognition of their fundamental human rights.

Solidarity on trial: the criminalisation of civil society organisations

SUMMARY

In the morning of 18 October, our organisation received a call from 47 people, including 11 women and one child, who were travelling on an inflatable boat that had set off from Laayoune. They shared their location and we passed on all the information to the authorities. That afternoon, 83 men had been rescued from a location that the Spanish authorities identified as being close to the location of the 47 people that we had reported. However, our team was certain that there were two different inflatable boats.

The CCRC asked us multiple times if it could be the same boat, as Salvamento Marítimo had categorically assured them that it was. We replied that our organisation had spoken to the people on board directly and that the information was clear. We had heard women's and children's voices but there were only men on the boat that had been rescued.

We explained that they were two different inflatable boats, but Salvamento Marítimo maintained that there was only one vessel so the search operation was suspended throughout the night.

The next day, at 10:00 UTC, we received a WhatsApp location sent from the boat whose existence had been denied by Salvamento Marítimo. They were drifting and had entered an area with phone signal where they had been able to send the message.

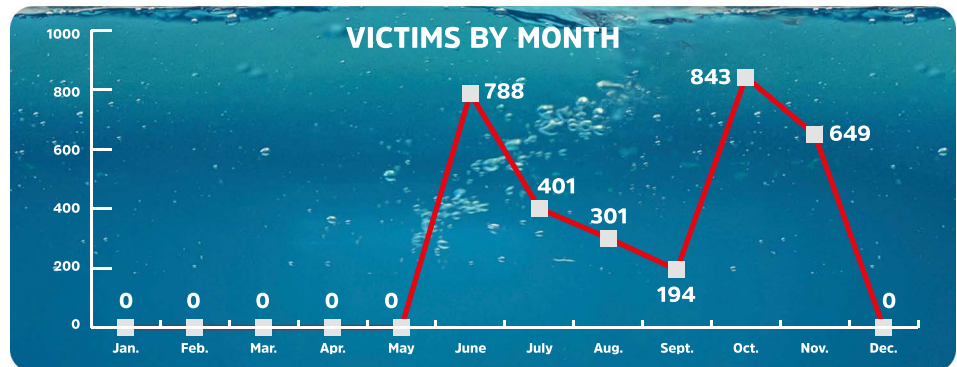
They were just a few kilometres away from Gran Canaria, but part of the boat had deflated. We shared the location and the available telephone number with the authorities. We insisted that they could contact the people on board the boat via WhatsApp and obtain an updated location in real time, just as we were doing at Caminando Fronteras. We supplied photos in which the boat was clearly in distress and the island of Las Palmas was visible.

After three more WhatsApp locations and a voice message calling for help because the flimsy boat could sink at any moment, a rescue operation was finally mobilised. The people on board were rescued and no lives were lost.

ANALYSIS

- The criminalisation, stigmatisation and persecution of social organisations causes public authorities like Salvamento Marítimo to question the information provided by these organisations and by migrants, putting people's lives in danger.
- The information supplied by family members, people travelling on boats and associations is often vitally important in defending the right to life.

THE WOODEN BOAT ROUTE: SENEGAL



42. At least 480 people went missing in a series of shipwrecks and tragedies in the country throughout October 2020, which prompted the founding of Collectif 480, a group of Senegalese social organisations (Y'En A Marr, Doyna, Frapp France Dégage, etc.) that highlight the government's role in repressing migration and granting fishing licences to large foreign companies. For more information, see: PressAfrik (2020) 'Plus de 480 Sénégalais morts en mer: À qui imputer ce crime contre l'humanité?' (available at: https://www.pressafrik.com/Plus-de-480-Senegalais-morts-en-mer-A-qui-imputer-ce-crime-contre-l-humanite_a223572.html) and Esprit Citoyen (2020) 'Marche silencieuse à la mémoire des 480 jeunes disparus dans l'émigration clandestine, le collectif 480 fustige le mutisme du chef de l'État' (available at: https://espritcitoyen.com/marche-silencieuse-a-la-memoire-des-480-jeunes-disparus-dans-l-039-emigration-clandestine-le-collectif-480-fustige-le-mutisme-du-chef-de-l-039-etat_p_2289.html).

The Atlantic route from Senegal to the Canary Islands has sadly gained prominence this year, with serious consequences for the right to life of people fleeing social and political upheaval in Senegal.

There have been thousands of victims on this section of the Atlantic border alone and this is not the first time this tragic situation has occurred. In 2020, 480 people who were travelling to the Canary Islands were lost in just one week, triggering protests in Senegal and condemnation on social media⁴².

In 2023, our Human Rights Observatory monitored xxx tragedies, which resulted in xxx victims. The situation in the region has been particularly difficult, prompting thousands of people to flee the country. It is for this reason that we have conducted a specific, in-depth analysis of the context surrounding the migration route from Senegal.

THE IMPACT OF EXTERNALISATION

As in other states bordering Europe, the criminalisation of migration in Senegal is a process that began several decades ago.

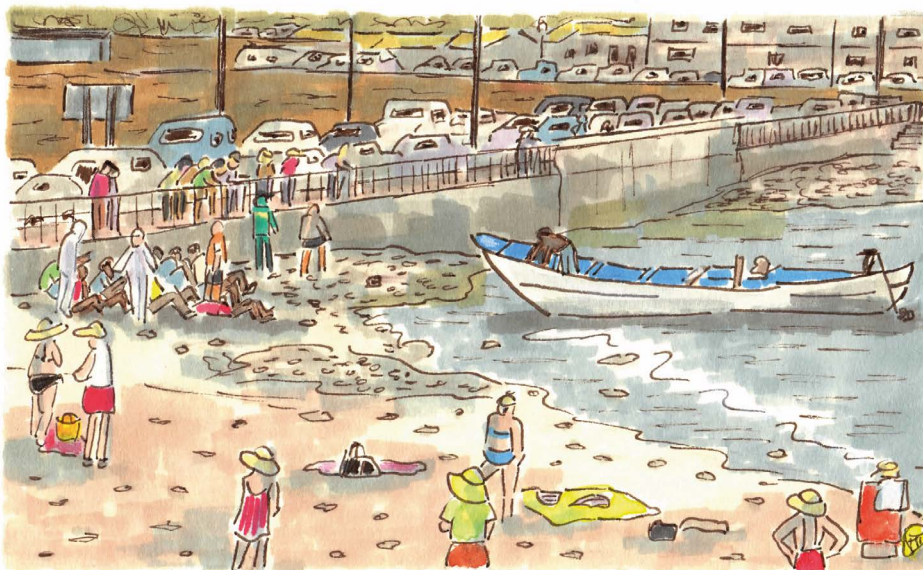
“If they don’t respect migrants when they are alive, no state is going to help you look for those who have gone missing. We need more political advocacy from social organisations”, explained a community leader.

Social organisations told us that migration control in the country is linked to colonialism, extractivism of natural resources by companies from the Global North and bilateral agreements with Europe intended to externalise borders.

“Externalisation is yet another form of violence against people. It’s not right for our country to repress people for wanting to leave, it’s not right for our country to stop people from leaving”, said a representative of a Senegalese organisation.

The silence surrounding victims of the borders has been heightened by the stigmatisation of migration through concepts such as ‘potential migrants’⁴³. Social organisations in Senegal highlight the 2005 law⁴⁴, which criminalises people leaving the country, as a turning point for migration. The law has affected conceptualisations of freedom of movement, as migration and the right to move is a part of Senegalese culture that has been passed down from ancestral traditions, like in many other African countries.

Senegal has experienced extensive internal migration from rural areas to cities: in Dakar, 25% of the population live in the *banlieues*⁴⁵ and come from other parts of the country. Meanwhile, international migrants come from many other African countries and at times when sea crossings were not taking place, overland routes to Morocco and Libya especially remained active⁴⁶.



Canary Islands Route // A wooden boat with 40 people on board arrives at a beach in Tenerife on 13 July 2023.

43. The concept of ‘potential migrant’ represents an attempt to identify and pinpoint people who may be planning to migrate. It has primarily been used in campaigns by international organisations to curb migration, which, instead of addressing the structural (economic and political) causes of migration movements, focus on the risks and dangers facing migrants with the aim of discouraging them. This has led to stigmatisation of people deciding to migrate and their families. For an example of a text in which the term is used frequently, see: IOM (2019) ‘Migrants as Messengers: The Impact of Peer-to-Peer Communication on Potential Migrants in Senegal’ (available in English and French at: <https://publications.iom.int/es/books/migrants-messengers-impact-peer-peer-communication-potential-migrants-senegal-impact>).

44. For the full text of the law, see: <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/SERIAL/72255/95466/F1384086898/SEN-72255.pdf>

45. French term meaning ‘suburbs’ and referring to neighbourhoods on the periphery of large cities, which are home to migrants from rural parts of the country and tend to have a high population density and lack of public services.

46. For more information about Senegalese communities in Morocco, see: Simoncelli, M. et al. (2023) ‘Au Maroc, la vie en pointillé des travailleurs sénégalais’ (available at: <https://africaxxi.info/Au-Maroc-la-vie-en-pointille-des-travailleurs-senegalais>). For more information about the violence and abuse suffered by Senegalese migrants in Libyan prisons, see: Carretero, L. (2020) ‘Ibrahim, migrant sénégalais en Libye: « Dans les prisons, j’ai vu plusieurs personnes battues à mort sous mes yeux »’ (available at: <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/21965/ibrahim-migrant-senegalais-en-libye--dans-les-prisons-jai-vu-plusieurs-personnes-battues-a-mort-sous-mes-yeux>).



Canary Islands Route // On 11 October 2023, 220 people, who had left Senegal, are assisted on El Hierro.

Social organisations in Senegal explain that they are aware of the serious human rights violations affecting migrants on transit routes to North Africa. Many of the migrants who are subjected to this violence are eventually deported to Senegal and are stigmatised as a result: *“a returnee is a failure and at least a dead man lost his life because it was God’s will”*, explains a representative from a social organisation.

Deaths on migration routes have a collective impact on society and social organisations attribute the silence and taboos surrounding them to repression by the authorities, as well as to the local culture, with pain kept under wraps far more in rural areas.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL UPHEAVAL AS A TRIGGER FOR MIGRATION

During the first few months of 2023⁴⁷, political instability in Senegal began to worsen and there were street protests after the leader of the opposition was imprisoned and the government decided to change the constitution to secure a third mandate for the current elected president⁴⁸. In November, social organisations described the situation as “disastrous” in terms of the loss of human lives, which was worsened by the growing numbers of people missing from boats crossing the Atlantic.

“So many people have gone missing, we’re reporting missing people every week. After the popular uprising several months ago, lots of people have prepared to leave the country and they’re still doing so to this day. There are pirogues⁴⁹ leaving for Europe, but there are also large numbers of arrests by the government authorities, police, gendarmerie and navy, and that is doing nothing to calm the situation, it’s only exacerbating it. People are fleeing and that narrative about the risks of migration is of no use when you’re fleeing”, said a fisherman from a Senegalese fishing guild.

In the protests held all over the country in 2023, the Senegalese government was accused of enabling extractivist fishing activity. In the eyes of Senegalese organisations, the granting of fishing licences to third countries has allowed large ships to ruin their livelihoods, even going as far as to destroy their traditional fishing nets. As a result, political upheaval is related to

47. International organisations documented the erosion of fundamental political freedoms and the toughening of military and police repression during the first half of the year, with the situation escalating considerably from May onwards. For more information, see: Human Rights Watch (2023) ‘Sénégal: violente répression de l’opposition et de la dissidence’ (available at: <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2023/06/05/senegal-violente-repression-de-l-opposition-et-de-la-dissidence>).

48. For more information, see: Atou Diaw, P. (2023) ‘Comprendre le débat autour du « 3e mandat » au Sénégal ?’ (available at: <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/articles/cg311qnz39go>)

49. A vessel made from a single tree, whose trunk is carved out to form a hollow for passengers.

impoverishment in the country as its fish stocks are increasingly depleted by French multinationals and Spanish tuna vessels. Despite fishing guilds organising their members to fish in shifts, their catches only provide them with enough food for that day and this has led to widespread frustration among young people.

“Many youngsters have gone out into the street to protest, there’s no future for them with these policies. And they’ve been locked up⁵⁰, yes, you heard me right, they’ve gone to prison. Women too, Fallah Fleur and some other women held a hunger strike in prison⁵¹, they’re accused of things that make no sense and thousands of people are suffering from this repression”, explained a human rights activist.

The social and political situation in Senegal has led to a significant proportion of minors travelling on the boats that arrive on the Canary Islands, which had never been seen before during other periods when this migration route was active. Large numbers of children and adolescents, aged 8-17, have been seen travelling on the wooden boats. In the last quarter of 2023, women and very young children, including babies, also began to make the crossing. This is an entirely new development compared to previous activity on this route.

“We try to persuade them to stay, but they don’t want to hear it. Many adolescents aren’t prepared for a journey like that, but they have a go anyway”, explained a community leader.

There have been numerous arrests at departure points, with controls carried out at locations where the boats set off in Senegal and along the route to Mauritania. According to local organisations, the number of departures is now triple that of arrivals. They are very concerned because there are more and more victims but no official data on the loss of human lives.

In addition to growing numbers of deaths, families protesting over their missing loved ones are also subjected to repression. In July, a group of family members spoke out to condemn the disappearance of more than 300 people. The information was publicised by our Human Rights Observatory, but the Senegalese authorities denied the incident⁵². Meanwhile, the disappearance in July of a boat carrying 130 people, which was eventually found in Cape Verde, was ignored by the authorities, which arrested the migrants’ relatives for protesting to demand justice for the victims.

“It’s very hard for the families to search for their missing loved ones. They never find them, they’re always devastated, there are lots of families crying every day, they’re really worried. What’s more, when the authorities arrest one of the organisers, if they disappear or manage to escape, they go and threaten and arrest their family as a way of putting pressure on them. That’s all the government does, but it doesn’t respond to families who are looking for their loved ones. It doesn’t respond to the social crisis the country is going through”, reported a community leader.

ACCEPTANCE OF MOURNING

Throughout 2023, our Human Rights Observatory has been able to speak with associations that have set up projects to support people as they mourn, addressing the legal, collective, individual and religious aspects of the grieving process.

“Putting a name to sadness too. Sharing how they feel, speaking about the person, because we don’t talk about individual, personal grief. As they mourn, they make contact with religious leaders to bring them closure for the missing people”, a community leader explained.

50. The imprisonment of underage children, which has gained pace this year, was already common in Senegal prior to the most recent wave of protests. See: Ba, M. (2022) ‘Sénégal : de plus en plus de mineurs dans les prisons’ (available at: [https://www.pulse.sn/news/societe/senegal-de-plus-en-plus-de-mineurs-dans-les-prisons/jzqsntn](https://www.pulse.sn/news/societe/senegal-de-plus-en-plus-de-mineurs-dans-les-prisons/)).

51. For more information, see the documentary ‘Grève de la faim des femmes détenues’ (available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqV4wll59BQ>).

52. See: Kane Fall, A. (2023) ‘Disparition de près de 300 Sénégalais sur la route des Canaries : Le ministère des Affaires étrangères dément catégoriquement et apporte des éclairages’ (available at: <https://terangnews.sn/2023/07/disparition-de-pres-de-300-senegalais-sur-la-route-des-canaries-le-ministere-des-affaires-etrangeres-dement-categoriquement-et-apporte-des-eclairages/>).



Canary Islands Route // Tenerife. On 4 September 2023, 187 people are assisted after arriving in Tenerife from Senegal.

Today, just as in 2006, the majority of the groups providing support for the grieving process are made up of women, who are trying to open up spaces where people can talk publicly about what these losses mean for them.

Senegal has a long history of migrants dying and going missing en route, which has left a lasting mark on the country. Following what the Spanish media terms “the wooden boat crisis”⁵³, Senegalese organisations informed us that there had also been a fishing crisis⁵⁴.

“So many people left the village that there was no-one left to fish and then the whole drama of the missing people began because not everyone had arrived and it wasn’t clear what had happened to them. There are no figures for the number of dead from that time, but you can see the orphans who are all grown up now in our neighbourhood. We wanted the government to compile figures of those who went missing, but it’s impossible”, said a community leader.

The work of our Human Rights Observatory has shown that families lack information about deaths and search operations for missing people on migration routes⁵⁵. Organisations that attempt to cast light on the reality of the deaths and disappearances at the border have identified dreadful difficulties, such as mourning a loved one without their body, silence from the government and denial of the situation. In Senegal, speaking about dead and missing people is taboo. Many people attempt to search for their relatives in complete solitude, taking on numerous individual responsibilities that they are unable to share. Throughout this time, women have played a pioneering role in breaking down the taboos surrounding this scourge. In 2006, a movement was launched by mothers searching for their missing sons, which led to the founding of the organisation COFLEC⁵⁶ in a Dakar suburb.

On a migration route where most of the victims’ bodies are swallowed up by the sea, it becomes almost impossible to mourn. *“Without the body, the wound cannot close. It’s as if the scar were always soft and could open again at any time”*, explained an imam.

53. This expression, which has recently been revived to refer to the boom in arrivals last year, was already being used by the press in 2006. See, for example, Sánchez, J. (2006) ‘La crisis de los cayucos’ (available at: https://elpais.com/diario/2006/03/21/catalunya/1142906843_850215.html).

54. For more information about the impact of migration from Senegal to Spain on the country’s fishing sector, see: Moreno Maestro, S. & Aris Escarcena, J. P. (2013) ‘La pesca en Senegal: entre el mercado global y la subsistencia comunitaria’, *Revista Andaluza de Antropología*, 4: 103-121 (available at: <https://idus.us.es/handle/11441/42686>).

55. With reference to all migration routes, the United Nations has acknowledged the huge psychosocial impact of a lack of information and clear search protocols on missing people’s families and communities. For more information, see: United Nations, ‘Families of missing migrants, forced to search alone’ (available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1101682>).

56. For more information on the activities of COFLEC, visit the organisation’s official Facebook page.

It has become customary in Senegal to begin to mourn after a year without news of a loved one and our Human Rights Observatory has been able to support families who have made this decision. This practice is based on the Family Code, which provides for an individual to be presumed dead if they show no sign of life for a period of 12 months⁵⁷.

“My other children told me that we had to mourn. I didn’t want to but a year had gone by, they said it was OK legally and we should leave him in Allah’s hands. I did it to keep them happy but I still have hope, I’ll never lose hope because they told me that they had all died but I feel deep in my heart that he’s alive, that my boy is alive. A mother can always feel her son”, said the mother of a missing man.

IMPACT ON THE RIGHT TO LIFE

When a vessel sets off from Senegal, it must cross one of the largest maritime zones on the route to the Canary Islands. In June 2023, wooden boats began to appear on the route leading from Senegal and their numbers swelled considerably in October.

The vast majority of the people using this route are Senegalese, but people in transit from Gambia, Mali, Guinea Bissau and Guinea Conakry have begun to join them in recent months.

“I’m a fisherman and it’s really hard when someone goes missing because, although we do our best, we have no way of convincing young people not to leave. The situation in the country is really tough right now. It’s because of the popular uprising. Many people are setting off from here, from the beaches, but others are also going to Morocco, Mauritania... even Nicaragua, to try and get into the United States from there”, explained a fisherman.

The Senegalese government’s response to thousands of people fleeing the upheaval in the country was to intensify its repression and establish a maritime control system in coordination with the Spanish State and Mauritania, which focuses primarily on migration and border control rather than on guaranteeing the right to life. As a result, people began to use the most dangerous part of the route from August onwards, moving away from the coast and heading further out to sea towards the island of El Hierro and the port of La Restinga, which is the westernmost port in the Canary Islands.

“People are really scared to report others missing because there are a lot of government informants in the villages who identify the families. They think it’s a very delicate topic that nobody wants to talk about”, complained a community leader.

The focus on migration control and lack of resources to cover such a large expanse of sea mean that search operations are rarely launched in the region when boats are reported missing.

“You go out into the ocean, that explains why so many go missing, there’s nothing after that, only America. Our boats aren’t suitable for travelling so far, they take food and water but if the engine fails or the weather changes, you’re done for. If nobody looks for you, you disappear. We know that’s what happens. It was the case in 2006 and it’s the same this year, which has been truly criminal”, explained a sailor and relative of four victims.

During our monitoring, we observed that some wooden boats were located but rescue operations were not launched until sometime after the vessels were first sighted. In two of these cases, the vessels that managed to stay afloat arrived with deceased people on board or reported a loss of human lives.

57. This is stipulated in Article 67 of Book I of the Family Code of Senegal, which allows a period of one year to notify a death, provided that it is confirmed by two witnesses. For more information, see: <http://jafbase.fr/doc/Afrique/docAfrique/Senegal/SenegalFam1.pdf>

Long journeys in difficult conditions result in victims. We documented cases of people who threw themselves overboard because they lost their minds, while others died due to dehydration, hypothermia and hunger⁵⁸.

“He sat down in the boat, said he wanted to sleep and never woke up again. That’s what my other son told me, nothing else, just that.

He went to sleep and he went with Allah, may He grant him paradise. I don’t know anything else and nor do I want to, I just pray for him and for my other son, may Allah acknowledge their sacrifice. Inshallah”, said the father of one of the victims.

Our Human Rights Observatory was able to confirm reports of shipwrecks of wooden boats that had set off from Senegal in Mauritania and in the area around Dakhla.

The survivors were sent back to Senegal overland and any bodies recovered were mostly buried in the area where the tragedy took place.

“When we hold workshops about the migration situation [in the places where the victims are from], the feeling is quite a strange one. On the one hand, we receive thanks from people who are more aware.

But for those who are not, it’s a bit difficult sometimes, especially because it’s a painful topic too, with people who haven’t come back, who have gone missing, and you can feel in the air how delicate the situation is”, explained a representative of a social organisation.



58. In October and November 2023, there were press reports of several migrants dying on El Hierro. For more information, see: Vargas, N. (2023) 'Muere un migrante intentando llegar a El Hierro en un cayuco con 80 personas' (available at: https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/migraciones/muere-migrante-intentando-llegar-hierro-cayuco-80-personas_1_10671092.html) and EFE (2023) 'Los restos mortales del joven fallecido este viernes en un hospital de El Hierro descansarán como "Inmigrante F01"' (available at: https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/migraciones/restos-mortales-joven-fallecido-viernes-hospital-hierro-descansaran-inmigrante-f01_1_10657331.html).

Canary Islands Route // On 4 November, a minor is buried in Los Reyes Hospital after being rescued in a wooden boat on 3 November.

Cape Verde, the final frontier: the importance of dignity for victims

SUMMARY

On 20 July, a group of family members contacted Ca-minando Fronteras in the hope of obtaining news of their loved ones, who had set off from Fass Boye (Senegal) on a wooden boat ten days previously.

They trusted that they would be rescued or at least that they would be located in the subsequent days.

Our team followed up on the alert, checking the missing people's details against every boat arriving in the Canary Islands and informing their families. We reported the information to the rescue services and stepped up our search over the following days in areas like Dakhla (Morocco), where boats from Senegal that had been rescued by the Moroccan navy were taken.

On 23 July, the families contacted us again to say that the wooden boat had arrived in Spain and some of the survivors had contacted their loved ones.

This information proved to be inaccurate, but the families were so worried that they clung to it in the hope that it was true.

Weeks later, on 15 August, the wooden boat was located 150 nautical miles northeast of Cape Verde, where it was rescued by the authorities from the country. After 36 days on the Atlantic Ocean, only 38 people had survived and seven were taken to hospital in a serious condition.

The corpses of another seven people were also recovered, but 75 had died in the sea.

Upon the boat's arrival, the Cape Verdean authorities conveyed their condolences to the victims' families, sent a message of encouragement to the survivors, undertook to guarantee them a decent life and emphasised the importance of burying the dead⁵⁹.

ANALYSIS

- An active, coordinated search operation would have reduced the likelihood of tragedy.
- Families need support to help them establish the truth in the face of denial from the authorities and false information about shipwrecked boats.
- It is important that authorities like the Cape Verdean Minister of Health prioritise human rights over migration control in their approach to victims.

59. For more information, see: Expresso das Ilhas (2023) 'Migrantes Clandestinos/ Ilha do Sal: "A palavra de ordem neste momento é solidariedade para com os sobreviventes" - ministra' (available at: <https://expressodasilhas.cv/pais/2023/08/15/migrantes-clandestinosilha-do-sal-a-palavra-de-ordem-neste-momento-e-solidariedade-para-com-os-sobreviventes-ministra/87228>).

Denying victims: concealing slaughter in the Atlantic

SUMMARY

In the evening of 5 July 2023, several Senegalese families contacted our alert system to report that their loved ones had set off from Kafountine (Senegal) on a wooden boat in the morning of 27 June. We immediately shared the information with the CCRC and the MRCC in Rabat⁶⁰, which confirmed that they were unaware of any rescues taking place in the previous week. During the subsequent days, a search operation was launched by air in the waters immediately surrounding the Canary Islands, but the boat was not found.

In addition to this boat, another two vessels had disappeared and a total of 315 people were missing. On 9 July, our organisation decided to publicly condemn the situation and call for the countries to come together to search for the boats. Our statement made such an impact internationally⁶¹ that on 10 July, the Spanish authorities publicised the measures that they had taken to search for the three wooden boats⁶².

At one point, they confirmed that they had located a wooden boat with around 200 people on board. Meanwhile, the Senegalese government released a statement denying that the boats were missing.

Our organisation continued to support the families and check the available information on rescued boats, but none of the wooden boats have been found to date.

ANALYSIS

- Families have a right to the truth and to transparent information on the search and rescue operations mobilised when they report a missing boat or person.
- Denial by the authorities in situations where people's lives are at stake heightens the risk to migrants.

60. Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Morocco.

61. See news articles such as ABC (2023) 'Three boats and at least 300 migrants missing at sea near Spain's Canary Islands, aid group says' (available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-10/300-migrants-missing-on-senegal-canary-islands-route/102581668>) or Mednick, S. & Brito, R. (2023) 'Spain rescues 86 migrants near the Canary Islands, but scores from Senegal remain missing' (available at: <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-07-10/300-people-traveling-boats-senegal-spain-missing-aid-group-says>).

62. See the following posts on the social network X (formerly Twitter): (11) SALVAMENTO MARÍTIMO en X: 'Avión Sasemar 101, movilizado desde el Centro de Coordinación de Salvamento Marítimo en Las Palmas, continúa con la búsqueda de un cayuco que salió desde Senegal con alrededor de 200 personas a bordo. También se siguen emitiendo avisos a todos los navegantes.' / X (twitter.com)

Death and solitude: victims on transit routes

SUMMARY

On 6 November, we received two messages via our alert system. They reported that a wooden boat had set off from Senegal and had had an accident on 4 November. They asked for help to confirm the information and ascertain the number of people who had died. Our team began to investigate the tragedy, interviewing survivors, family members and the authorities.

We were able to confirm that the wooden boat had been at sea for seven days with 325 people on board, including at least 23 women and 21 children. The survivors explained that they had encountered a violent storm off Cap Blanc in Mauritania and decided to turn back to Nouadhibou.

The wooden boat was unable to withstand the wind and waves and was shipwrecked. A total of 191 people, including 17 women and 18 children, were rescued.

The Mauritanian authorities recovered the corpses of 15 people: four men, six women and three children.

Two of the bodies washed up on the beach later on and no detailed information has been provided about them to help the families in their search.

The survivors were repatriated overland to Senegal.

ANALYSIS

- In a context in which official information from the authorities is lacking, it is very important to support families and organisations as they search for the truth about shipwrecked boats.
- The survivors did not receive adequate psychosocial support to help them cope with the impact of the tragedy.

Institutional racism: the lack of a human rights focus in migrant reception

SUMMARY

On 27 October, 122 people arrived on the island of El Hierro on board a wooden boat from Senegal after being sighted just 15 kilometres from the port of La Restinga.

Among the people rescued, 11 required medical assistance and one was hospitalised. The latter died when he was due to be transferred to a hospital in Tenerife due to the serious nature of his condition.

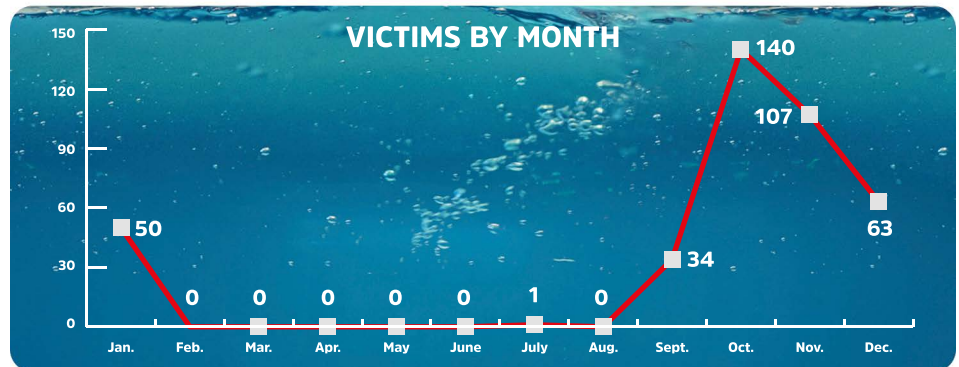
In the early hours of the night that they arrived, one of the survivors found a second person deceased in the toilets at the temporary reception centre. It was one of the people who had received medical attention at the port but had not been transferred to hospital⁶³.

ANALYSIS

- It is crucially important that medical attention for new arrivals is improved, as survivors have been exposed to long journeys in wooden boats in conditions that pose a threat to their lives and health.
- Reception centre staff highlight the lack of qualified medical personnel to refer patients when necessary, as well as to perform more accurate assessments of survivors' condition upon arrival.

63. See: EFE (2023) 'Fallecen dos personas que llegaron el viernes en un cayuco a El Hierro' (available at: https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/migraciones/112-personas-rescatadas-cayuco-hierro-han-muerto-ultimas-horas_1_10639228.html).

THE WOODEN BOAT ROUTE: MAURITANIA



The number of boats departing from Mauritania increased during the second half of 2023, with a particularly rapid rise from October onwards. They began to arrive on the island of El Hierro in August 2023. In the months of November and December, arrivals of wooden boats from Mauritania to Gran Canaria increase. Most of the boats are made from wood and fibreglass and tend to be smaller than the Senegalese boats. They carry people in transit through Mauritania, as well as Mauritanian nationals. This route is used by refugees fleeing the Sahel in particular, most of whom are Malian.

"I want to seek asylum, that's why I left. The situation in Mali is very tough and I need protection. I've lost a large part of my family and many young people from my area have fled.

The route to Mauritania is the nearest, but I never thought it would be so difficult, so dangerous. When you can't go back, you accept whatever comes, it's God's will", explained a Malian teenager.

Our Human Rights Observatory monitored 10 tragedies, with a total of 395 victims and 7 boats that have never been found.

As in Morocco, the greatest impact on the right to life is the focus placed by Mauritania and the Spanish State on migration control rather than on protecting lives. The failure to launch active search operations when boats are reported missing and the limited resources for search and rescue in Mauritania cause fatalities among migrants.

The violence suffered by migrants in transit in Mauritania⁶⁴ places them in a state of vulnerability from the outset.

“You can’t ask anyone for help here. When we saw we didn’t have enough fuel, they said they were heading back to land. I was really angry, but I don’t know much about the sea. In Mauritania, black people are slaves. If you call the navy, nobody will help you. Now I’m in Dakhla, I also work as a slave at the fish factory but I’m saving money.

I’m scared of crossing because I’ve heard about so many deaths, but what choice do I have? This is going to make me cry, let’s stop now”, said a teenage girl from Mali.



Canary Islands Route // On 7 November 2023 a Mauritanian wooden boat with 50 people on board reached El Hierro by its own means.

64. For more information, see: ACLU (2023) 'Immigrants' Rights Organisations Urge Release of Mauritanian Asylum Seekers Detained by ICE' (available at: <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/immigrants-rights-organizations-urge-release-of-mauritanian-asylum-seekers-detained-by-ice>) and Red Cross (2023) 'Desperate journeys - migrants' stories from Mauritania' (available at: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/migration-and-displacement/refugees-and-asylum-seekers/desperate-journeys>).

Unhealed wounds: supporting the quest for truth and reparation

SUMMARY

M. contacted us on 17 October 2023 to ask for information about the wooden boat that his nephew was travelling on.

The boat was carrying 80 people and had set off ten days earlier, on 7 October, from the Mauritanian capital Nouakchott. M. lives in Spain so his family had asked him to try and find out whether his nephew was still alive.

We informed the authorities and confirmed that none of the boats that had arrived from Mauritania during this period coincided with the boat carrying the missing man. We then passed this information on to the family.

Unfortunately, people often take advantage of the vulnerability of migrants' family members and offer them false information in exchange for money or scam them by convincing them that their loved ones are still alive.

Our organisation supported the families, supplying information about the dangers, distances and safety conditions on the Atlantic route. We also provided them with tools to help them exercise their rights, such as reporting missing people to the security forces.

“He hasn’t called yet, but he will when he arrives, won’t he? Could he be in prison or something like that? The family don’t know what to think, they’ve asked me to find out but I don’t know what to tell them”, said the aunt of a missing man in desperation.

ANALYSIS

- The absence of transparency and clarity from the authorities contributes to the spread of false information, with a serious impact on migrants' families.
- The cultural, community dimension of ambiguous loss (deaths where no body is found) affects the victims' communities in their countries of origin.
- Information about the conditions on migration routes and the impact of migration control policies helps families to understand the situation better and respond appropriately to false information and scams.

At the mercy of rumours: the importance of supporting families

SUMMARY

On 27 October, A.D. contacted our family support helpline to report that his son and nephew had set off from Mauritania on 10 October on a wooden boat carrying 60 people. The majority of the people on board the vessel were from Mauritania and Mali. Among them, there were at least six young men from a village in the south of Mauritania.

On 27 October, A.D. contacted our family support helpline to report that his son and nephew had set off from Mauritania on 10 October on a wooden boat carrying 60 people. The majority of the people on board the vessel were from Mauritania and Mali. Among them, there were at least six young men from a village in the south of Mauritania.

The families had received a telephone call several days previously, giving them muddled information suggesting that the young men had reached the Canary Islands.

The lack of reliable information had only served to increase the families' distrust and consternation.

A.D. contacted us again to tell us that he had returned to Mali, his home country, for several weeks to spend time with his family, give them a proper account of what had happened and hold a decent funeral for his son.

Upon returning to Spain, he told us that his family had eventually accepted that their loved ones were dead, although they continued to experience great pain and feelings of helplessness.

“My mother and my wife are finding it really difficult, they can't sleep... My sisters can't stop crying. Please, let us know if you have any news of my son. Could you send us a voice message in French so that we can play it to the family in Mali and help them understand what happened? But it's not your fault, it's God's fault. God willed it this way” explained A.D., the father of a missing man.

In November, other families called our helpline in an attempt to find out whether their loved ones had arrived and whether it was really possible for a boat to disappear without a trace. They had been told that one of the boats that had arrived on El Hierro was the one they were looking for and were waiting for a call that never came. They told one another that their loved ones might be in a detention centre and unable to call them, but that was not the case.

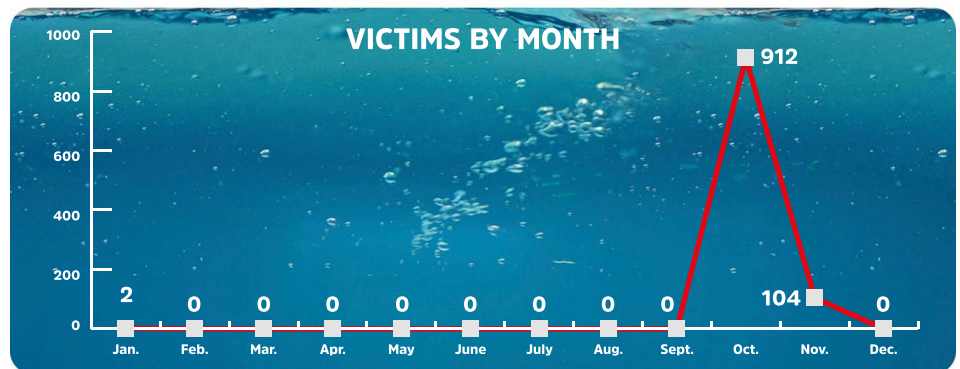
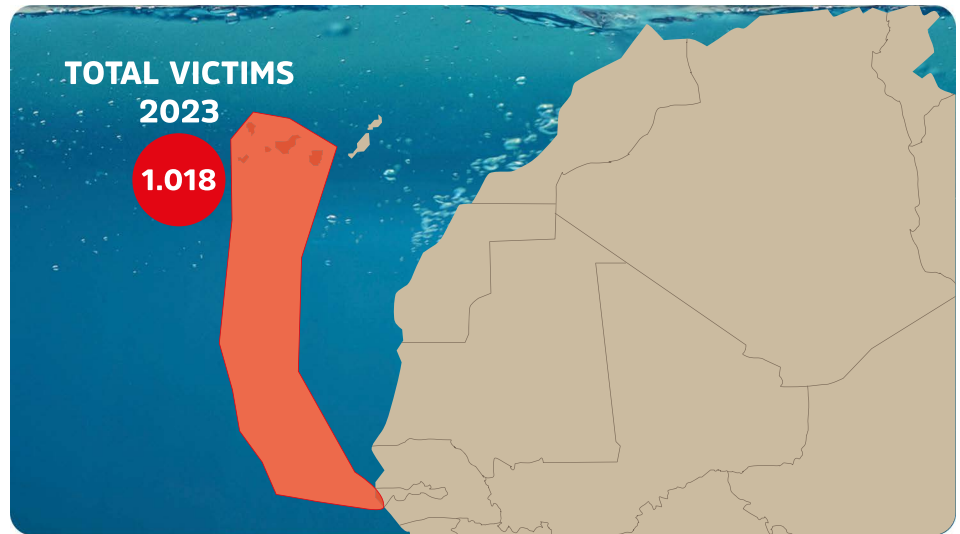
Our organisation supported them in their search, reporting the missing boat to the authorities, checking the details of the many boats arriving during this period and helping the families cope with the impact of these collective disappearances.

During this time, we were able to reflect with A.D. and other families on the difficulty of mourning a loved one without a body due to the lack of clear, official information and on the impact of large groups of people going missing on communities in Mali.

ANALYSIS

- The lack of access to official information prevents families from fully mourning their loved ones.
- People like A.D. become leaders who play an important role in transferring information to the community.

THE WOODEN BOAT ROUTE: GAMBIA



The majority of the wooden boats coming from Gambia appeared in mid-October, with departures concentrated in a three-week period.

The vessels carry large numbers of people of different nationalities, most of whom are from Gambia and Senegal, with others hailing from Mali, Guinea Bissau and Guinea Conakry.

Like the boats setting off from Senegal, there are large numbers of children among the people on this migration route.

This is the longest part of the migration route to the Canary Islands and the increased distance poses a greater risk to migrants crossing the Atlantic.

Our Human Rights Observatory monitored 12 tragedies on this route, with a total of 1.018 victims and 4 boats that have gone missing without a trace, leaving a deep mark on the communities that are left behind.

In this region, when a boat is reported missing, effective coordination by numerous countries with a focus on protecting lives is required to conduct active search operations across an immense expanse of sea. Unfortunately, this coordination is often absent and, as on the rest of the Atlantic route, the focus is on migration and border control.

No news: families united in their search

SUMMARY

On 7 November, our organisation began to receive messages from several different people in Gambia. They were all seeking information about a wooden boat that had set off from Kartong (Gambia) on 19 October 2023 carrying 155 people.

Our research team made the necessary inquiries and ascertained that the boat had not arrived in any of the countries en route. Weeks went by and the families continued to report that nobody on board had made contact with them.

On 2 December, one of the missing people's relatives contacted us to say that rumours were spreading about the boat. News had reached Kartong that the boat had been rescued by the Algerian authorities and that the migrants had been detained in Algeria. We were able to confirm that this information was false. At the time of writing, we continue to check the information received by the families regarding shipwrecks potentially involving the missing boat.

ANALYSIS

- Families lead the search for their loved ones and unfortunately continue to fall victim to false information and scams in every country.
- Collective disappearances affecting people from a single city have a lasting impact on the community. In the departures from Gambia that we have documented, we have detected groups of up to 50 people from the same village.

Mobilising rescue operations: every minute counts to save lives

SUMMARY

On 26 October, a wooden boat was located by a fishing vessel, which reported its position to the Spanish rescue agency.

It was sighted by another vessel that same day.

The next day, in the evening of 27 October, the Salvamento Marítimo plane located the boat again approximately 82 nautical miles from Tenerife. The Spanish Guardia Civil patrol ship Río Tajo and the Salvamento Marítimo boat Guardamar Caliope were mobilised.

When the boat was rescued, the corpse of a 12-year-old boy was found among the 221 survivors⁶⁵. Four people were in a very serious condition and had to be urgently transferred by helicopter by Salvamento Marítimo, while more than 100 people received medical attention once they had arrived in Tenerife.

The survivors later explained that the bodies of more than 20 people who had died during the journey from Gambia had remained at sea.

ANALYSIS

- The boats used by migrants do not fully comply with nautical safety requirements, so every minute counts when it comes to rescuing the people travelling on them alive.
- Delays in mobilising rescue operations jeopardise the right to life.

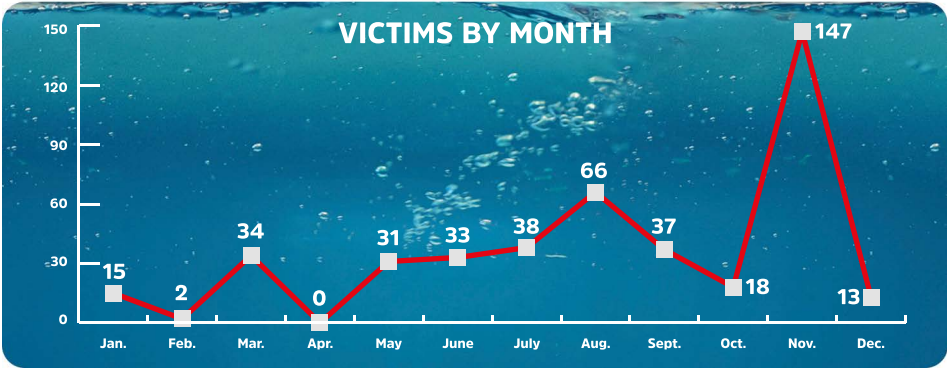
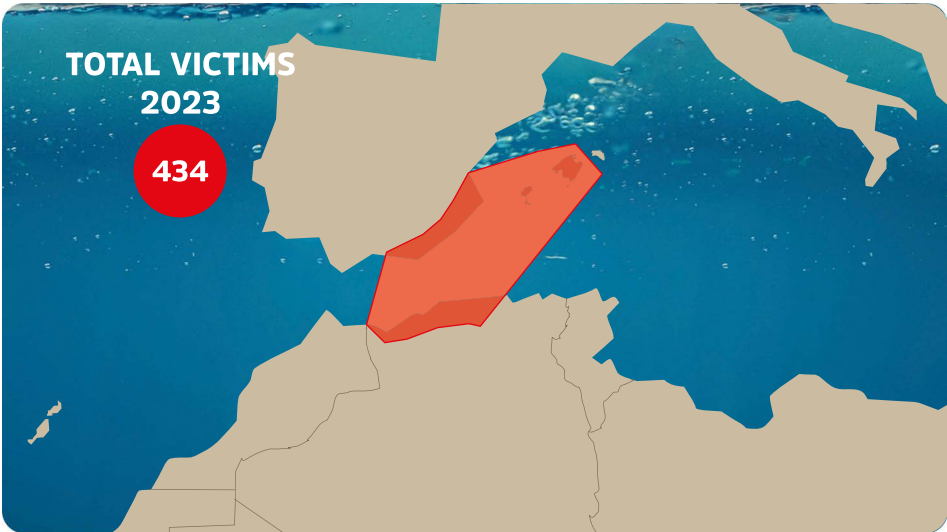
65. See: *La Vanguardia* (2023) 'El fallecido en el último cayuco es un niño de 12 o 13 años y hubo otros veinte muertos' (available at: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20231028/9336604/fallecido-ultimo-cayuco-nino-12-13-anos-hubo-otros-veinte-muertos-agenciaslv20231028.html>).



Canary Islands Route // A wooden boat arrived in Cape Verde in January with two dead people on board from Gambia.

MEDITERRANEAN ROUTES ON THE WESTERN EURO-AFRICAN BORDER

THE ALGERIAN ROUTE IN THE WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN



The level of activity on the Algerian route across the Mediterranean remained stable during the first few months of 2023, before falling during the second half of the year. Although the majority of the victims on this route are Algerian, the presence of other nationalities from Western and Central Africa has risen on the most dangerous part of the route towards the Balearic Islands.

Despite the extensive area covered by this route, little is known about the impact on the right to life in the region. Victims are rendered invisible by the Spanish authorities, whose responses to queries from human rights organisations and migrants' family members systematically lack transparency⁶⁶.

“At one of the morgues we visited, a coroner tried to help us and referred us to the Guardia Civil so that we could obtain authorisation to view the bodies and try to identify them. However, we had to overcome a series of bureaucratic hurdles and in the end we had to leave with nothing. We’re still hoping for some news, or none at all”, said the cousin of one of the people missing on the Algerian route.

Among the tragedies documented by our organisation in 2023, there were 22 missing boats that were not searched for at all, despite the search and rescue authorities being informed of their existence. Generally speaking, the Spanish search and rescue authorities only employ passive search methods on this route when they receive a report of migrants in danger and they have reiterated on multiple occasions that they will not search for boats without a precise GPS location.

In the case of confirmed shipwrecks on this migration route, it appears that no attempt is made to look for survivors or corpses. This represents a serious violation of the rights of victims and their families. Ca-minando Fronteras has documented shipwrecks in which the survivors have insisted that the search must continue for missing people but their demands have been ignored.

The criminalisation and stigmatisation of organisations and families who raise the alarm over missing boats by the Spanish search and rescue services is concerning.



Algerian Route // Fifth corpse recovered by a fishing boat on 30 May 2023 in Denia.

66. See: *La Vanguardia* (2023) 'El fallecido en el último cayuco es un niño de 12 o 13 años y hubo otros veinte muertos' (available at: <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20231028/9336604/fallecido-ultimo-cayuco-nino-12-13-anos-hubo-otros-veinte-muertos-agenciaslv20231028.html>).

In most cases, communication is very difficult and the authorities refuse to take the details of vessels in danger, evading their obligations to deliver a public service. Despite their stigmatisation and persecution, the families of the victims on this route are highly organised and break down the wall of silence and powerlessness before them by making police reports and publicly condemning the authorities' response⁶⁷.

“The right to rescue does not exist for Algerian migrants. They are not entitled to be rescued or searched for when they go missing; instead, a policy of fear and intimidation is applied because the authorities believe that’s the way to reduce clandestine migration”, complained the brother of a missing Algerian man.



INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS // Interreligious ceremony at the International Congress of Families Victims of the Border in 2023.

Fishing for bodies: migrants’ families show dignity and strength in response to violations of the rights of the dead and missing

SUMMARY

On 27 March 2023, several families contacted Caminando Fronteras to inform us that they had not heard from their loved ones who had set off from Cherchell (Algeria) since 21 March. The boat was carrying nine men, one woman, a teenager and a baby, all of whom were Algerian, along with three men and one woman from sub-Saharan Africa.

We initiated our search protocol and were able to correlate the appearance of the corpses of two young Algerians near Denia on 23 and 24 March with the missing boat.

One of the deceased men, S.A., was found caught in the net of a fishing boat approximately eight kilometres from the shore. The next day, on 24 March, another fishing boat found the corpse of K.C. in its nets. With the information supplied by the families, work to identify the bodies began in collaboration with the judiciary police in Jávea.

Other fishing boats continued to find corpses in the area as they fished during the subsequent days. On 12 April, they recovered the corpses of a young Guinean man carrying identification documents and a young Algerian man, who was identified as R.B. Bodies continued to appear in the same area on 2 and 13 June, with a total of seven corpses found.

In this case, the judiciary police in Jávea showed good practice when it came to the speed of their response, their search for ways to inform the families and their sensitive approach to the tragedy.

CASE STUDIES

67. This was discussed at our 1st International Congress of Families of Border Victims, where several relatives of missing migrants explained the numerous obstacles that they faced when searching for their loved ones and the collective strategies that they adopted to overcome them (available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r90Z2qYdJSY> - from minute 2:26:30).

Unfortunately, collaboration between countries to identify people who die at the borders continues to be very slow and painful for their families and three months after three of the bodies had been identified, the families of S.A., K.C. and R.B continue to wait for confirmation of their deaths from the Algerian authorities in order to begin proceedings to repatriate their loved ones.

Nine people from the boat remain missing and despite the seven bodies all being found in the same area, the Spanish authorities did not search for the remaining occupants of the boat despite being given sufficient information on where it may have sunk.

ANALYSIS

- It is possible for the authorities responsible for identifying migrants who die at the borders to apply protocols based on respect for their human rights, which take into consideration the unique circumstances in which these deaths occur and the vulnerability of the victims' families.

- There is a lack of international protocols to provide a rapid response and enable families to establish the truth with the greatest possible certainty so that they can begin the grieving process.

To this end, foreign relations are crucial but they must prioritise the rights of victims and their families over migration control.

- The Spanish search and rescue authorities continue to display a racist bias in their response to these tragedies, which is demonstrated by the fact that they did not mobilise a search operation on the site where the bodies were found and that the bodies were recovered instead by fishermen.

This is indicative of the failure to respect the human rights of deceased and missing people at the borders.

Mass graves: the importance of continuing to search for the dead and missing

SUMMARY

When M.B. contacted our organisation for the first time in early 2022, almost a year had passed since the boat carrying his brother and another 11 people had gone missing. The inflatable boat had set off from Oran (Algeria) on 28 January 2021 and was heading for Spain.

That day, M.B. received a phone call from his brother on the boat. He was asking for help because they were 20 kilometres from the coast of Almería. M.B. was able to alert the French emergency services but to this day nobody has informed the victim's family of the search and rescue operations that were mobilised.

When his brother went missing, M.B.'s family embarked on a search for the truth. Alongside other relatives of people on the missing boat, he travelled to Murcia in summer 2021 to report his brother missing.

The police refused to allow them to file a report and some of the families began to pay large sums of money to people posing as lawyers, who turned out to be scammers, to conduct investigations in the Spanish State.

In May 2023, M.B. returned to Spain to participate in the 1st International Congress of Families of Border Victims held by our organisation. In cooperation with allied organisations, the families agreed to travel to Murcia again and demand that the authorities allow them to exercise their right to file a police report.

They returned to Murcia two years after their first trip, accompanied by a local association, and the police fulfilled their duty to record their report and take DNA samples.

In September 2023, S.A., one of the people who had travelled to Murcia to report his brother missing, received confirmation from Interpol in France that his brother's body had appeared in Málaga in May 2021 and was being held at the Institute of Legal Medicine in the city.

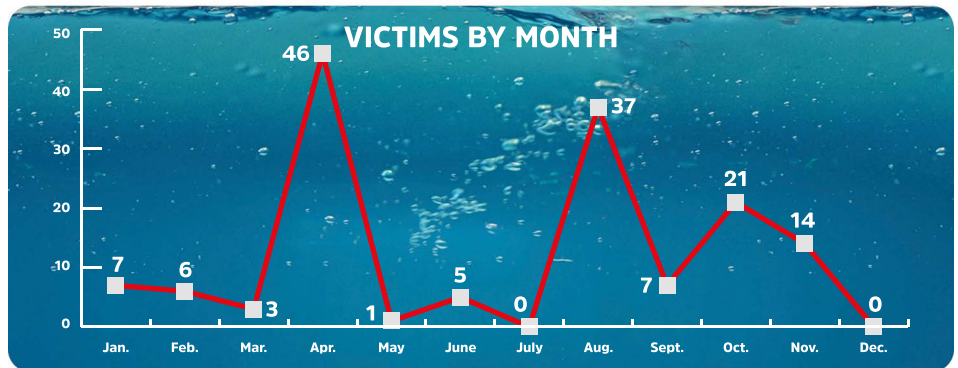
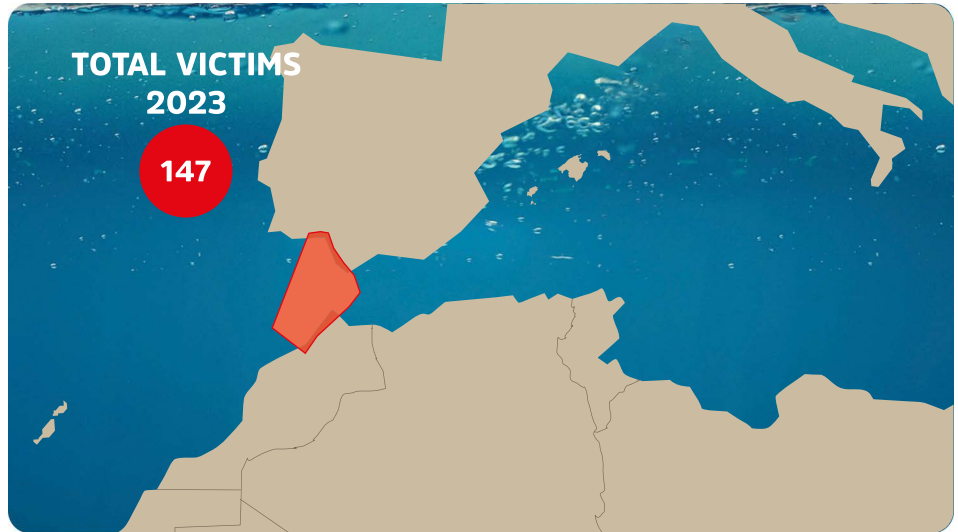
With help from local organisations, S.A. was eventually able to travel to Málaga to handle the proceedings required to certify his brother's death and repatriate his body.

This helped to bring an end to the family's endless mourning, which had lasted more than two and a half years, and provided the other families with information about a possible shipwreck.

ANALYSIS

- There is a lack of transparency from the public institutions when it comes to the rights of victims' family members.
- The Spanish authorities take an arbitrary approach to the rights of victims' family members. This case is representative of many others, where migrants' relatives make a considerable effort to travel to search for them and their right to file a missing person report is not respected. Sometimes, they are stigmatised and attempts are made to criminalise them, while at other times, they are referred to social organisations despite the search for missing people being the responsibility of the national security forces.
- The lack of coordination between states and between government agencies obliges families to make international trips to carry out the procedures required to report their missing loved ones. The other family members were unable to file a report or provide DNA samples at the Spanish consulates in Algeria.
- A lack of information from the authorities exposes the victims' families to scams.

THE STRAIT OF GIBRALTAR ROUTE



In 2023, the majority of the victims on this route died while attempting to swim to Ceuta from the areas in Morocco bordering Benzú and Tarajal⁶⁸.

On the Strait of Gibraltar route, deaths and disappearances are most commonly associated with inflatable rowing boats known as 'toys', which set off from the area around Tangier.

Deaths on this route are closely correlated with the flimsy vessels used by migrants and the focus on migration control among the search and rescue services represents a considerable danger in this region. We also monitored shipwrecks of inflatable boats that set off from the Atlantic coast to the south of Larache.

As a general trend during this period, people from Western and Central Africa used 'toys' or climbed fences in their attempts to cross the border. The migrants found swimming to Ceuta are primarily North African or Asian, while the majority of those boarding motor-driven inflatable boats are Moroccan.

68. During the first few months of the year, the number of deaths rose in comparison with the same period in 2022. For more information, see: Ceuta Al Día (2023) 'Los fallecidos en la ruta migratoria de Ceuta en 2023 quintuplican a los registrados en 2022 hasta mayo' (available at: <https://www.ceutaactualidad.com/articulo/inmigracion/estrecho/20230518164840169790.html>).

Despite the dangers facing migrants, the protocols implemented by the Spanish and Moroccan authorities on the Strait of Gibraltar route include refusing to mobilise search operations, delaying these operations and convincing Morocco to coordinate rescue operations. The Spanish State has established parallel 35° 50" as an invisible border fence or wall in the middle of the sea beyond which rescue services will not operate, heightening the danger to migrants' lives. Paradoxically, this parallel does not act as a wall when it comes to interceptions by the Moroccan security forces⁶⁹, with externalisation once again used as a tool that causes deaths at the borders.

The refusal to mobilise search and rescue operations means that many of these tragedies remain invisible and makes it much harder for families to acquire information about their missing loved ones.

"We'd almost reached Tarifa, we wanted to get there on our own because we were scared to call Spain because they always send the Moroccans, wherever you are. The Moroccans chase us as if we were rats and they come quite far up, you're not safe until you reach

69. For more information on the policies that cause deaths at sea borders in the Strait of Gibraltar, see the documentary 'Paralelo 35° 50"', directed by Sergio Rodrigo: <https://www.filmin.es/pelicula/paralelo-35o50>



Strait Route // Settlement where dozens of people survive in a forest in the city of Tangiers.

land. We know we might die but sometimes it's better to die than to turn back. Anyway, we were almost there and we were very tired of rowing, but God sent us a miracle and we reached land. We were fishermen back in my village, we're familiar with the sea but many people die because nobody rescues them, that's the truth", said a fisherman who had crossed the Strait of Gibraltar.

On this route, passive search methods are used to look for boats and resources have been considerably reduced.

The criminalisation and stigmatisation by the Spanish rescue services of organisations and families that raise the alarm over boats in danger is another important characteristic of this route and allows the veracity of the information provided to be systematically challenged, increasing the likelihood of death for people in danger at sea.

CASE STUDIES

Powerless families: the discovery of corpses confirms shipwrecks

SUMMARY

On 21 April, 23 men, one woman and four children from Morocco set off from Bouznika for Cádiz on board an inflatable boat. A week later, their families were concerned that they had not heard from them and contacted Ca-minando Fronteras, who reported the missing boat to the Spanish and Moroccan authorities.

The families continued to call in an attempt to obtain official information about the search operation, but as on many other occasions, their questions went unanswered. They visited hospitals, morgues and police stations as they searched for their loved ones.

Throughout this time, Ca-minando Fronteras remained in contact with the authorities in both countries, but they provided no information and would not even confirm whether or not they were searching for the missing boat.

On 2 May, one of the families reported that two bodies had been found in Morocco. The two men had been identified and confirmed to have been travelling on the missing inflatable boat. This confirmed the tragic shipwreck and their families were able to bury them, while the others accepted that the remaining occupants of the boat had died.

ANALYSIS

- Families are very much alone in their search for their loved ones, with only their own efforts to self-organise and the support they sometimes receive from social organisations to help them.
- People looking for missing relatives play an increasingly important role in demanding justice, challenging the impunity of the authorities when it comes to deaths at the borders.

- The lack of transparency from the authorities affects victims, their families and social organisations as they seek information to establish the truth.

Rowing across the Strait of Gibraltar: left to die

SUMMARY

On 10 October, two inflatable rowing boats left Achakkar near Tangier at around 3:00 am. In total, the two boats were carrying 18 young people from Senegal and Mali.

They had been living in informal settlements in the woods around Tangier, where precarious living conditions lead to a very strong system of solidarity, and the other residents were hugely fond of them.

Days before they attempted the crossing, there had been an increase in raids on the settlements and they had lost the few belongings they had left. Their companions told us that this had happened before and that the group had even been forcibly displaced.

The young people dreamed of seeking asylum and obtaining protection because they were all fleeing conflict in their countries of origin. They had recently requested humanitarian assistance, especially medicine, because the living conditions and violence that they were experiencing were having a serious impact on their health.

We were told by several community leaders that the weather was awful on the night of the crossing and that people underestimate the dangers on the Strait of Gibraltar because it does not look very far, but the currents and winds and the use of flimsy boats make it truly lethal.

The young people had contributed funds to purchase the equipment: two inflatable boats and some wooden oars that they had ordered from a carpenter. That night, they left on foot for the area around Achakkar, where all trace of them was lost. Their friends in the community do not know whether they were able to call for help or inform the rescue authorities and began to worry the next day when they realised that their phones were no longer working.

Community representatives in Tangier visited the police station, morgue and hospitals in the hope of finding at least one of the bodies to allow them to inform the families, but there is no news of anyone on the boat to date. The people living in the woods carried out a mourning ritual because everyone on the boat was Muslim. Their pain at the loss of the young people is accompanied by fear that they will be next, as they are acutely aware of the mortal dangers of the border crossing.

ANALYSIS

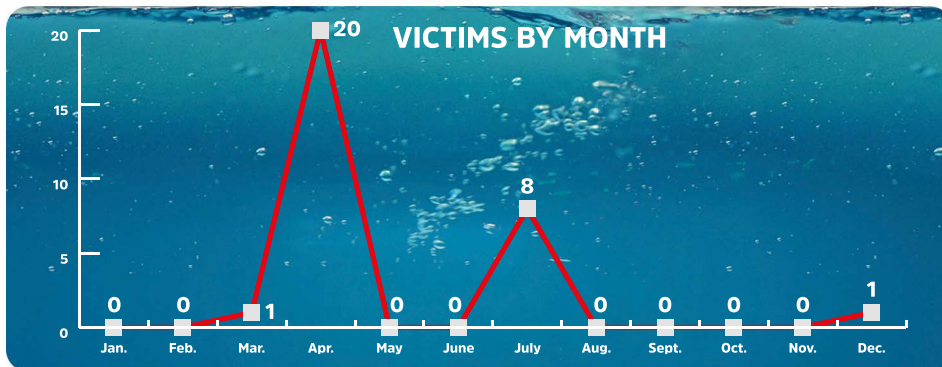
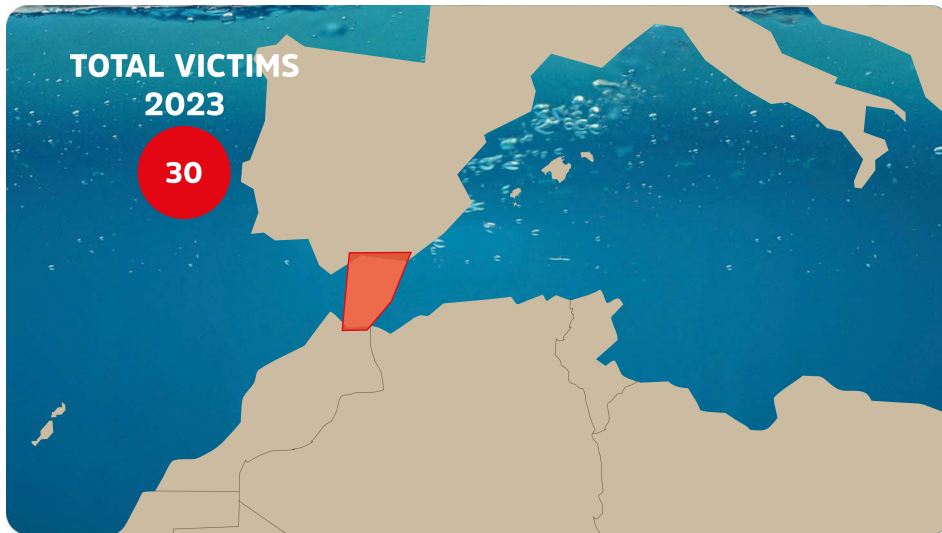
- Flimsy boats that are unsuitable for sea travel are used by people who are so desperate to escape their appalling living conditions that they set off without considering the weather conditions.

• Sub-Saharan African communities living in informal settlements in the mountains and woods are criminalised and subjected to intense police persecution as a consequence of border externalisation policies. The violence that they experience has a serious impact on their physical and mental health.



Strait Route // Dead body recovered on 31 January 2023 on La Ribera beach in Ceuta.

THE ALBORAN SEA ROUTE



As in the Strait of Gibraltar, the majority of the victims on this migration route in 2023 died while attempting to swim to Melilla in extremely dangerous conditions.

It was in the Alborán area that the policy to convert parallel 35° 50" into a wall endangering the right to life began to be implemented in 2018.

Other facets of this policy include avoiding the mobilisation of search operations, delaying these operations and attempting to convince Morocco to take responsibility for searching for migrants, prioritising migration control over protecting lives.

Passive search methods are systematically used on this route and the lack of transparency over rescue operations prevents organisations and families from quickly confirming whether missing people have been rescued or remain lost at sea.

Criminalisation and stigmatisation by the rescue services when it comes to information about missing boats from organisations and families is common on every Mediterranean migration

route, with those who fulfil their duty to raise the alarm about people's lives being at risk constantly challenged and questioned.

"I've come to Almería to look for my sister and her young son, my mother told me they'd taken a wooden boat and I was terrified to hear that. They must have arrived in Almería but I don't know, I've phoned everywhere but no-one will tell me if they're alive or dead, if they're searching for them or not. Now I'm at the port where they apparently take people, but please God, let them be searching for them, let them tell me where they are. This is torture. They're not criminals, they're people. They haven't committed any crime, are they just going to let them die?", said a relative of two people crossing the Alborán Sea.

"In Melilla, the MdLR association has detected several young men who have yet to be identified and who are buried in the Muslim cemetery or the civil cemetery. They have been buried for several years without being identified, causing great pain and suffering to their families, who do not know where their loved ones are. We've encountered administrative difficulties, such as ensuring that DNA tests are looked at and authenticating documents. The authorities must make sure these victims are treated in a dignified manner", said an activist for the rights of migrant children.



Alboran Sea Route // Citizen rescue operation of a boat on 31 July 2023 in Melilla

Unvalued lives: Salvamento Marítimo co-opted to control migration

SUMMARY

On 19 April, the families of 20 Moroccans contacted Caminando Fronteras to report them missing. Their loved ones had set off from Farjana, an area in the north of Morocco adjoining Melilla, on an inflatable boat the previous evening and they had not heard from them since.

We immediately alerted Salvamento Marítimo in writing, as well as establishing telephone contact with the control tower in Almería to emphasise the urgency of the situation. We also reported the missing people to the Moroccan authorities.

In our first contact with the Spanish authorities, we were informed that there had not been any recent rescues and that the weather was stormy. The poor weather conditions meant that the people on the boat were in even greater danger.

Several hours later, we telephoned Salvamento Marítimo again to inquire as to the status of the search for the boat. They asked us if we had the names of the missing people on board and we queried whether a boat had been rescued recently. Instead of answering our question, the operator laughed and said that they could not give us that information.

We continued to apply our own search protocols in collaboration with the families, despite the absence of cooperation from the rescue services.

To this day, we do not know whether resources were mobilised to search for the 20 missing people, what resources and for how long. What we do know for certain is that they remain missing and their families continue to look for them.

ANALYSIS

- A lack of transparency from the rescue services leaves the victims and their families helpless, while fuelling impunity and arbitrary behaviour among public servants.
- There is a racist bias when it comes to assessing the risks facing people at sea. Search operations must be launched immediately when flimsy boats are lost in stormy seas, but the uniquely dangerous conditions present on this occasion were overlooked.

The rights of the deceased: supporting families in their struggle

SUMMARY

On 6 September 2021, two young men swam from Beni Ensar to Melilla. At the last moment, one of them was struck by a wave and drowned, as his companion explained. When he reached Melilla, the young survivor reported his friend's death to the Guardia Civil and provided a description of his clothing.

On 21 September, A.A.'s body appeared and was salvaged by the Guardia Civil's search and rescue services in Melilla.

After two weeks at sea, his body was seriously damaged and his facial features had almost entirely disappeared, but his swimming trunks and shoe coincided with the description provided by his friend two weeks earlier.

As soon as his body appeared, it was clear to the Guardia Civil, his family and his friends that it belonged to A.A.

A.A.'s family in Morocco began the procedure to officially identify him. In October 2021, they tried to send a DNA sample but the authorities said that they were unable to check it against the body due to the condition in which it had arrived.

A.A.'s friends in Melilla tried to persuade the judge to accept an identification without DNA, but the body was eventually buried as an unidentified person on 14 February 2022.

The association MdLR⁷⁰ supported the family in their fight to provide DNA samples through official channels, reopen the proceedings to identify A.A. that had begun in 2021 and obtain a death certificate.

MdLR looks after A.A.'s grave and has sent photos of it to his family to help them mourn, playing a crucial role in ensuring respect for the dignity of the deceased.

After two years of struggle, the family finally obtained the death certificate.

ANALYSIS

- There is a lack of mechanisms to allow families to supply information about the deceased, including DNA samples.

Relations between Morocco and the Spanish State make it possible for samples to be taken at consulates and embassies, but families of people who have died or gone missing at the borders are denied access to this service.

- In response to the authorities' failure to support the victims' families, organisations such as MdLR step in to ensure that they are given a decent burial, provide the families with information so that they can mourn and guarantee respect for the rights of victims and their families.

70. The association MdLR supports migrant children and young people living in reception centres or on the streets in Melilla and helps them to access basic rights such as food and administrative procedures. The association's full name is 'Mec de la Rue' ('lad of the streets' in French). For more information, see the association's website: <https://mecdelarue.org/>



Alboran Sea Route // Muslim cemetery in Melilla where several unidentified persons are buried.

A REPORT BY:
**CA-MINANDO
FRONTERAS**

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