DESPERATE JOURNEYS

Refugees and migrants arriving in Europe and at Europe's borders

JANUARY – DECEMBER 2018

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

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A woman is comforted by a Maltese Immigration official after disembarking in Valletta on 30 September 2018. The group of 58 were rescued by the NGO vessel Aquarius off the Libyan coast and later granted permission to disembark in Malta after France, Germany, Portugal and Spain committed to relocating them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of refugees and migrants making the Mediterranean Sea crossing fell in 2018 but it is likely that reductions to search and rescue capacity coupled with an uncoordinated and unpredictable response to disembarkation led to an increased death rate as people continued to flee their countries due to conflict, human rights violations, persecution, and poverty.

Throughout 2018, there were significant changes to the pattern of routes taken by refugees and migrants heading for Europe. For the first half of the year, more people arrived in Greece than Italy or Spain, in the second half, however, the primary entry point became Spain as more and more people attempted the perilous sea crossing over the Western Mediterranean.

Although arrivals were markedly down compared to the large numbers who reached Italy each year between 2014-2017 or Greece in 2015, the journeys were as dangerous as ever. An estimated 2,275 people perished in the Mediterranean in 2018 – an average of six deaths every day. On several occasions, large numbers of often traumatised and sick people were kept at sea for days before permission to disembark was granted, sometimes only after other states had pledged to relocate the majority of those who had been rescued. By the end of the year, this situation had not been resolved despite UNHCR's and IOM's continuous call to establish a predictable regional disembarkation mechanism in the Mediterranean Basin.

Furthermore, the Libyan Coast Guard stepped up its operations with the result that 85% of those rescued or intercepted in the newly established Libyan Search and Rescue Region (SRR) were disembarked in Libya, where they faced detention in appalling conditions (including limited access to food and outbreaks of disease at some facilities, along with several deaths). As a result, more vessels containing refugees and migrants attempted to sail beyond the Libyan SRR to evade the coast guard – either to make land in Malta and Italy or at least to reach the search and rescue regions of those jurisdictions. This trend is expected to continue in 2019.

Although the overall number of deaths at sea in the Central Mediterranean more than halved in 2018 compared to the previous year, the rate of deaths per number of people attempting the journey rose sharply. On the crossing from Libya to Europe, for instance, the rate went from one death for every 38 arrivals in 2017 to one for every 14 arrivals last year. The toll was particularly heavy in the Western Mediterranean, on the route to Spain, where the number of deaths almost quadrupled in 2018 over the previous year.

Elsewhere in Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina recorded some 24,100 arrivals as refugees and migrants transiting through the Western Balkans searched for new routes to EU Member States;

Cyprus received several boats carrying Syrians from Lebanon, along with arrivals from Turkey and more by air, straining accommodation and processing capacity; and towards the end of the year, small numbers of people tried to make the sea crossing from France to the UK.

Most of these trends look set to continue in 2019, with the root causes of displacement and migratory movements – such as human rights violations and conflict or poverty – remaining unresolved. For many people, the sea crossing is just the final step in a journey that has involved travel through conflict zones or deserts, the danger of kidnapping and torture for ransom, and the threat from traffickers in human beings. UNHCR is also calling on States to stop apprehending and returning thousands of people to neighbouring countries without allowing them to seek asylum or assessing individually whether they have international protection or other humanitarian needs - a practice known as "push-backs" – as well as to greatly step up efforts to protect children – accompanied or alone – and to provide support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, as well as better access to safe and legal pathways as alternatives to these dangerous journeys.

The past 12 months did bring some positive developments. More states committed to resettling refugees evacuated from Libya, thus enabling UNHCR to bring more people to safety via the Emergency Transit Mechanism established in Niger. At the end of the year, UNHCR opened the Gathering and Departure Facility in Tripoli, enabling the release of more people from detention. Several EU Member States also committed to relocations of people rescued in the Central Mediterranean – a sign of the potential for joint international action.

Indeed, this report calls for the urgent establishment of a coordinated and predictable regional response to rescue at sea, as well as greater responsibility sharing in general. This should include increased rescue capacity, specified and predictable disembarkation points, more solidarity and support for those countries where most refugees and migrants arrive, improved access to safe and legal pathways (such as resettlement, family reunification, education and labour schemes), greater protection for unaccompanied children and sexual and gender-based violence survivors, and tougher measures against the perpetrators of crimes against refugees and migrants, including traffickers and smugglers.

ARRIVALS BY COUNTRY 2018 JAN-DEC

TOTAL ARRIVALS* **139,300**
(Land and Sea) 2018

SPAIN
65,400
2018

ITALY
23,400
2018

GREECE
50,500
2018

KEY FIGURES 2015-2018

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Arrivals via the Mediterranean Sea to Europe	1,015,877	⬇ 363,425	⬇ 172,324	⬇ 116,647
Deaths at sea	3,771	⬆ 5,096	⬇ 3,139	⬇ 2,275
Number of arrivals by sea in Europe per death at sea	One death for every 269 arrivals	One death for every ⬆ 71 arrivals	One death for every ⬆ 55 arrivals	One death for every ⬆ 51 arrivals
Number of deaths recorded along land routes at Europe's borders	144	⬇ 72	⬆ 75	⬆ 136
Number resettled to Europe	11,175	⬆ 18,175	⬆ 27,450	24,885**
Number evacuated from Libya	-	-	⬆ 389	⬆ 2,404

* In addition, 2,211 people arrived to Cyprus and Malta

** January to November 2018
 Includes Serbia and Kosovo (S/RES/1244 (1999)).
The boundaries and names shown and the designations on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to the concerns outlined in this report, UNHCR calls on European states to:

Rescue at sea and detention in Libya

- Urgently establish a coordinated and predictable regional mechanism to strengthen rescue at sea, especially with regard to disembarkations and subsequent processing;

- Enhance search and rescue capacity in the central Mediterranean, including by removing restrictions on NGOs;

- Urge the Libyan authorities to end the arbitrary detention of refugees and migrants intercepted or rescued at sea; to release the most vulnerable individuals to the community as per the 2017 arrangements; and to amend Law 19 of 2010, which foresees hard labour as a sentence for irregular entry providing a legal basis for the exploitation of refugees and migrants;

Access to territory and asylum procedures

- Strengthen identification of those with international protection needs at borders and provide access to asylum procedures, including for people seeking asylum who arrived irregularly, as well as end push-back practices;

- Make use of accelerated and simplified asylum procedures in case of mixed movements to quickly determine who is in need of international protection and requires integration support, and who is not and thus can be channelled into return procedures;

- Facilitate timely returns, in safety and dignity, of those found not to be in need of international protection or with no compelling humanitarian needs following a fair and efficient procedure;

Protection of children

- End the detention of children for immigration purposes and ensure early identification of asylum-seeking unaccompanied and separated children and their integration within national child protection systems, including through the use of guardianship systems;

- Enhance the availability of accessible information to children on their rights, available services, and asylum processes, and speed up family reunification procedures for children;

Onward movement

- Increase solidarity and support for countries within the region and along key migration routes in order to strengthen access to protection where refugees are located and thus reduce the need for dangerous irregular journeys;

- Such solidarity and support should include a mechanism to relocate asylum-seekers from EU member states receiving a disproportionate number of asylum claims to other EU countries as part of the reform of the Dublin Regulation, as well as help strengthening asylum systems in the Western Balkans along with the primary countries of initial arrival in Europe, including as a means of contributing to reducing irregular onward movement;

- Ensure efficient and quality family reunion procedures for refugees who have arrived in the EU and have family in other EU countries, which could address one of the main causes of irregular onward movement, including for children;

Access to safe and legal pathways

- Enhance access to safe and legal pathways by further increasing resettlement pledges, including for people evacuated from Libya, taking steps to make family reunification with all beneficiaries of international protection fully accessible by removing practical and legal obstacles, and promoting complementary pathways of admission including community-based sponsorship programmes, scholarship programmes and labour mobility schemes;

Protection against dangers

- Strengthen the timely identification of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, including male and child survivors, and ensure their referral to adequate multi-sectoral services;

- Enhance efforts, including cross-border cooperation and information sharing, to bring the perpetrators of crimes against refugees and migrants, including traffickers and those involved in kidnappings for ransom, to justice.

ARRIVALS IN 2018

SPAIN

Arrivals increased by 131% in 2018 compared to 2017.

65,400 (58,600 Sea + 6,800 Land)
2018

28,300 (22,100 Sea + 6,200 Land)
2017

14,100 (Sea+Land)
2016

16,300 (Sea+Land)
2015

Dead and missing at sea

202 ⬆ **777**
2017   2018

Demographic Breakdown

11% Women

11% Children   78% Men

UASC*: 5,500 children (77% of all children that arrived in 2018).

Arrivals' most common Countries of Origin**

ITALY

Arrivals decreased by 80% in 2018 compared to 2017.

23,400 (Sea)
2018

119,400 (Sea)
2017

181,400 (Sea)
2016

153,800 (Sea)
2015

Dead and missing at sea

2,873 ⬇ **1,312**
2017   2018

Demographic Breakdown

10% Women

18% Children   72% Men

UASC*: 3,536 children (83% of all children that arrived in 2018).

Arrivals' most common Countries of Origin

GREECE

Arrivals increased by 45% in 2018 compared to 2017.

50,500 (32,500 Sea + 18,000 land)
2018

35,400 (29,700 Sea + 6,700 land)
2017

176,800 (173,500 Sea + 3,300 land)
2016

856,700 (Sea)
2015

Dead and missing at sea

59   ⬆   **187**
2017   2018

Demographic Breakdown

23% Women

37% Children   40% Men

UASC*: 1,922 children (16% of all children that arrived by sea in 2018).

Sea arrivals' most common Countries of Origin