

Forced Migration Review

Issue 75
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Dangerous journeys

Saving lives and responding to
missing migrants and refugees



Forced Migration Review

Forced Migration Review (FMR) brings together diverse, knowledgeable authors – especially those with lived experience – to foster practical learning and discussion that can improve outcomes for forcibly displaced people. Our free flagship magazine is accessible to a global audience in Arabic, English, French and Spanish, online and in print. Related audio and visual content is available online.

Forced Migration Review

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From the Editors

Every theme covered in Forced Migration Review feels important and none more so than a topic which relates to life and death. FMR 75 started as a shorter feature on the idea of rescue but as we explored the topic, it expanded to become the fuller issue you have in your hands today. The interest we had in the call for articles – the largest number of proposals in our history – more than confirmed that this was a topic which deserved deeper treatment.

FMR is a space for debate, for stimulating discussion and for inspiring solutions to challenging problems. The themes discussed here are more politically contested than some we have covered in our pages and we are aware that debates can become charged and polarised. We have endeavoured to publish articles which explore both the complexity of the issues and the simple humanity of the lives endangered by journeys towards places of hoped-for sanctuary.

Authors come from a wide range of regional and sectoral perspectives, including academics, politicians, lawyers, advocates, psychologists and humanitarians. All are engaged in thinking and acting in order to see fewer lives lost, and dignity and respect shown to those who perish along the way. We are particularly privileged to hear from people who themselves have experienced dangerous journeys and those who are first-hand witnesses to the lived reality of hazardous terrains and high-risk contexts.



Cover photo: Crossing the Río Grande near the US-Mexico border. Credit: Alfonso Caraveo, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Mexico



Alice Philip



Jo Boyce

You will find articles related to a particular region or route, with several covering different issues and angles in the same regional space. The Mediterranean Sea, the Darién Gap, the Andaman Sea, the Sahara and the Alps are all amongst those featured.

Thematically there is a huge variety too. There are articles relating to sea and to land journeys, articles on rescue and on recovery, articles about on-the-ground support and on higher-level political change. Some describe in detail the challenges faced by those undertaking dangerous journeys, others address the grim realities of recovering the bodies of those lost en route. Whatever your interest in this issue, we hope that the range of articles will broaden your perspective and connect you with others working to bring about positive change.

We are extremely grateful to our major donors on this issue, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, and to ICRC, IFRC, IOM and UNHCR for their financial support alongside the expertise they have offered at every stage of this project. The co-authors of the preface, Mariela Guajardo, Samuel Boutruche, Florian Von Köning and Sanjula Weerasinghe, proposed we cover this theme and it was their passion, commitment and energy which convinced

us that this was an FMR issue which could make a real impact on the lives of displaced people. They contributed to the reviewing, alongside Vittorio Bruni, Martha Guerrero Ble and the FMR Editors, in order to make the final selection of articles, an extremely difficult process given the very high quality and breadth of submissions.

There is a growing community of people who contribute to FMR and we would love you to consider bringing your insights to our engaged and expanding audience. Please do join our mailing list and follow us on social media to make sure that you hear about opportunities to write for FMR, as well as to read what others have written.

Finally, we'd love to hear from you if you have a topic you'd like to see featured in FMR or if you'd like to partner with us in some way. We are always looking for new ways to reach our audiences with fresh and insightful content and welcome your suggestions and comments. Please do get in touch!

With best wishes,

Alice Philip and Jo Boyce
FMR 75 Editors

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Alice Philip (Managing Editor), Emily Arnold-Fernández (Associate Managing Editor), Catherine Meredith (Deputy Editor), Jo Boyce (Deputy Editor, maternity cover), Maureen Schoenfeld (Communications and Finance Assistant) and Sharon Ellis (Administrative Assistant).

Foreword

What is lost when a migrant or a refugee dies or goes missing along dangerous journeys? For the individual and their families? What is lost for communities and societies?

How are we contributing to this tragedy when we forget the stories we hear, the images we see? When we fail to imagine the person, their hopes and needs, the anguish of their families?

What does it mean for our humanity, our moral duty to safeguard human dignity? For the legal obligations and commitments we agreed to fulfil?

This FMR issue attempts to help address these questions and to provide a window into the dangerous journeys of migrants and refugees on land and at sea across the globe. It seeks to illustrate the risks and harms en route, the humanitarian needs that remain unmet and the tragic consequences faced by migrants and refugees. More than 74,000 deaths and disappearances have been documented since 2014. The true number is far higher.

The articles in this issue compel us to confront these realities, to grapple with fundamental questions, and to work towards preventing and reducing deaths, disappearances and harms faced by migrants and refugees along mixed movement routes. Human rights, adherence to international legal obligations and agreed commitments should not be at the mercy of politics, competing objectives and resource constraints. A steadfast commitment to the humanitarian imperative, human dignity and the right to life must remain at the core of our individual and collective action.

The authors who have contributed to FMR 75 illustrate how change is already happening. They document the tireless efforts of individuals, communities, local actors, organizations and governments across the world. From policymakers to migrants and refugees. From protection staff on rescue ships, to mountain rescuers, to local responders who search and identify the missing. From advocates to researchers.

Many of these initiatives have inspired multilateral and multistakeholder action in support of both migrants and refugees. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, the Global Compact on Refugees and other international instruments and mechanisms provide frameworks for strengthening action and reporting on relevant commitments. As part of such processes, different initiatives are being put forward. These include pledges, collective statements and the UN Secretary-General's recommendations to strengthen cooperation on missing migrants and prevent the loss of life in transit, on which all of our organisations collaborated and which were presented to UN Member States in December 2024.

Yet existing efforts are far from enough. Stronger leadership must come from all corners, from the highest levels of power to the grassroots. The articles remind us why this work is important, what can be done, and what part we could play in that change.

Florian von König (ICRC), Sanjula Weerasinghe (IFRC), Mariela Guajardo (IOM) and Samuel Boutruche (UNHCR)¹

1. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the ICRC, the IFRC, IOM or UNHCR.

The practice and politics of mountain rescue on the French-Italian border

Elisa Sisto

Restrictive migration policies have made Europe's mountainous alpine borders even more perilous for the migrants crossing them. A distinctive citizen-led approach to mountain rescue in the Hautes-Alpes is helping to reduce the risks.

Since France reintroduced border controls with Italy in 2015, containment measures have increased along the border's coastal area and on the main train and bus lines. As a result, migrants arriving through the Balkan and Mediterranean routes have increasingly re-routed their journeys into the adjacent alpine region.¹ As migrants began crossing the rugged snow-covered terrain at night, the first cases of hypothermia, frostbite, amputation and death emerged in the Hautes-Alpes.

Locals with deep knowledge of the terrain initiated early rescue efforts, which grew into structured volunteer-led mobile units, called *maraudes*. These ensure a nightly presence in the mountains, alongside daytime efforts to secure and level the snow-covered paths. Moving towards a joint approach, local organisation Tous Migrants² and Médecins du Monde partnered to create mobile rescue and assistance units bringing together medical professionals, locals with terrain familiarity drawn from the *maraudes*, and volunteers from other regions.³ The mobile units' operations are intimately tied to the landscape and contrast in various ways with rescue in other terrains. Due to the nature of the terrain and the type of cross-border mobility, data on crossings is incomplete. However, more than 20,000 pushbacks were recorded at the Montgenèvre border post in the Hautes-Alpes between 2016 and 2023,

and at least 145 migrants have died at Alpine borders since 2015.⁴

Humanitarian efforts at the Alpine border have generated a wealth of knowledge through the obstacles they have faced and the experiences they have acquired. Of particular note are three approaches to saving lives and seeking justice for migrants crossing mountainous borders: 1) setting up co-piloted mobile rescue units in the mountains; 2) engaging with border forces and disseminating legal guidance; and 3) investigating border deaths and pursuing justice.

Setting up co-piloted mobile rescue units

In response to the growing number of injuries and deaths at the border and the increasing barriers to aid, Tous Migrants and Médecins du Monde formalised a partnership in 2019 to create joint mobile units. The partnership agreement spells out each organisation's responsibilities, noting that the mobile units are jointly piloted by a Tous Migrants *maraudeur* – member of a *marau*de – with intimate knowledge of the terrain, and a Médecins du Monde health-care professional. The health-care professional is responsible for all medical decisions, while the *maraudeur* is responsible for all logistical decisions relating to the geographic and climatic context.

These volunteer citizen-led mobile units

patrol the Hautes-Alpes mountain paths between Briançon, Montgenèvre and the Clarée valley at night and assist migrants in distress. This includes providing emergency blankets, warm tea and dry clothing, conducting rapid health assessments, bringing people to safety and shelter, and calling State rescue services in the most severe situations. The operations are always solely aimed at reducing risks and assisting people in distress to prevent loss of life. As Médecins du Monde's Transalpine Migration Programme coordinator notes, anyone walking in the mountains on a dark winter night, other than a professional alpinist, is inevitably at risk and helping thus becomes a duty rather than an offence. Echoing rescue at sea, the coordinator compared Médecins du Monde's vehicle to a humanitarian vessel: "As long as people are in this vehicle, just as they would be on a boat, [the border guards] should not stop us from doing our work. We need to bring them to safety."⁵

In this co-piloting model, Médecins du Monde provides the humanitarian aid vehicle emblazoned with its logo and a Tous Migrants member drives it. Tous Migrants, based in Briançon, possesses the local and experiential knowledge required to navigate the borderland, especially in the dark. Meanwhile, Médecins du Monde provides essential medical care to migrants while also working to secure broader recognition of the issues at stake. Recently, the prefectural office recognised the legitimacy of Médecins du Monde's vehicle, thereby reducing some of the barriers to humanitarian access. In addition, leveraging medical authority in border negotiations can be critical to resolving emergency situations and ensuring medical needs are prioritised during border procedures.

The alpine example highlights a distinctive approach to rescue and solidarity which

connects mountaineering principles of assistance with medical and humanitarian expertise. In 2017, Guides Sans Frontières addressed an open letter to the French president raising concerns over the dangers faced by migrants at alpine borders. Representing a collective of mountain professionals, they emphasised that safety, rescue and solidarity lie at the core of their profession's *esprit de cordée*. This expression, commonly used to denote team spirit and camaraderie, originates from *corde* – rope – a mountaineering symbol of mutual assistance and equality. This *esprit de cordée* challenges traditional hierarchies in humanitarian work. Early mountain rescue and assistance efforts were predicated on equality and interdependence among all participants involved.

Engaging with border forces and disseminating legal guidance

The role of law enforcement is both significant and complex at the Hautes-Alpes border, with around 250 officers stationed along the mountainous frontier.⁶ These consist of border police, assisted by officers drawn from mobile gendarmerie squadrons, at times reinforced by soldiers from the Operation Sentinelle. All these entities operate under different hierarchies, follow separate directives and use distinct equipment. The mobile gendarmerie squadrons are deployed on three-week mandates with often limited prior training on the border context or asylum laws. Witnessing repeated occurrences of ambush and chase tactics which resulted in severe injuries and put migrants' lives at risk, Tous Migrants quickly identified the need to engage with border forces and develop educational materials to prevent loss of life.

In collaboration with the États Généraux des Migrations,⁷ Tous Migrants published a guide⁸ for law enforcement officers entitled *Au nom*

de la loi (In the name of the law). This reader-friendly booklet outlines officers' rights and obligations during border procedures relating to respect for life, assistance to persons in distress and the use of force. It cites international, regional, bilateral and national legal frameworks, as well as the French Internal Security Code (Article R. 434-5) and Penal Code (Article 122-4) which enshrine officers' right to refuse manifestly illegal orders that seriously compromise public interest and their personal liability when executing them.

Currently in its second edition, the guide has served as a critical resource and hundreds have been distributed to law enforcement officers during border encounters. However, lessons have emerged that will inform the drafting of the third edition. Since 1945, France has passed an average of one new immigration law every two years and a total of 118 legislative texts directly addressing immigration.⁹ This legislative hyperactivity forces humanitarian actors to constantly adapt and update guidance, at the risk of obsolescence and loss of credibility. To overcome this, Tous Migrants plans to further anchor the next edition in fundamental rights and limit references to fluctuating laws and policies, thereby ensuring longer-lasting relevance. Balancing the need to respond to ever-changing policies while pursuing their own activities remains a major challenge for humanitarian actors at the border. Some view these constant shifts as a tactic to sow confusion, exhaust those trying to help, and divert civil society and humanitarian organisations' attention. Organisations must therefore balance the need to mobilise around legal and policy changes, while simultaneously rising above the terms of these debates to remain focused on preventing loss of life. The third edition will finish with several real-life anonymised testimonies of officers

who have successfully challenged unlawful orders at the border, giving the booklet further force.

Investigating border deaths and pursuing justice

Despite significant rescue efforts, at least 145 migrants have died at alpine borders since 2015, 11 of whom died and five of whom went missing specifically at the Hautes-Alpes border.¹⁰ Among them was Blessing Matthew, a Nigerian woman whose body was found in the Durance River in May 2018, two days after mobile gendarmes attempted to apprehend her in the upstream village of La Vachette. The French authorities opened an investigation into her death and subsequently dismissed it without attributing responsibility. Seeking truth and justice, Blessing's family and Tous Migrants initiated further inquiries into the circumstances leading to her death.

Partnering with investigative agency Border Forensics, they conducted a counter-investigation using spatio-temporal analysis, a testimony from Blessing's fellow traveller reporting a police chase, cartographic evidence and spatial event reconstruction.¹¹ The findings highlight inconsistencies between the mobile gendarmes' statements and reveal a sequence of actions and omissions that are likely to have caused Blessing to fall and drown in the Durance. This counter-investigation builds on a growing corpus of initiatives by groups such as Forensic Architecture and Forensic Oceanography which employ scientific and visual methods to investigate and document violence. Using these innovative methods and corroborating evidence to reproduce missing images is particularly important in mountainous terrain where the rugged landscape can conceal violence.

Although substantial time, effort and resources were invested in taking Blessing's

case to the European Court of Human Rights, the Court considered the case and declined to reopen the investigation in January 2024. From a legal perspective, the counter-investigation is thus considered unsuccessful. However, from a broader perspective, it shed public and media light on the need to critically investigate the causes of migrant deaths, which are all too often classified as ‘accidental’ or caused by ‘natural elements’ with their cases soon closed. In Border Forensics’ words, this context makes it “all the more important that the voices of the survivors be heard and these investigations be presented beyond the forums of the law, including in cultural spaces, so that we may collectively refuse that the law’s blindness become our own.”¹²

Scaling lessons beyond the Alps

This case study sheds light on the significant and often overlooked contributions of local and citizen-led approaches to rescue and assistance along dangerous mountainous journeys. Migrants have long taken harsh, high-altitude paths, crossing the Andes, Himalayas and Pyrenees. The perils along these journeys are shaped and exacerbated by migration policies and border practices. Against this backdrop, this study highlights innovative approaches to saving lives and seeking justice in the Alps, which merge humanitarian principles, medical ethics and mountaineering solidarity. The mobile units’ co-piloting model demonstrates how humanitarian organisations and locals with deep terrain knowledge can collaborate to effectively navigate, reduce risks, and

save lives in extreme terrains – a framework which could be adapted for rescue in forests, deserts and other harsh landscapes.

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With gratitude to Tous Migrants, Médecins du Monde, Association Refuges Solidaires and the collective of humanitarian organisations operating at the French–Italian border, whose work and insights have been integral to writing this piece. Thank you for generously sharing your experiences and observations with me during my research in the Alps.

1. In this article, the term ‘migrant’ refers collectively to refugees, asylum seekers and other people on the move at the French–Italian border.
2. tousmigrants.weebly.com
3. ‘Rescue’ encompasses the medical care, sheltering and risk-reduction activities carried out by the mobile units, called *maraudes* and *unités mobiles de mise à l’abri* (UMMA).
4. Tous Migrants (2024) *L’accueil des personnes exilées dans le Briançonnais et dans les Hautes-Alpes – Annexe 1: aperçu quantitatif*
bit.ly/accueil-briançonnais-hautes-alpes
‘Commemor’action à Briançon : dénoncer et rendre hommage’, Médecins du Monde, 25th February 2025
bit.ly/commemoraction-briancon
5. Interview with the coordinator of Médecins du Monde’s Transalpine Migration Programme, 23rd August 2024. Author’s translation.
6. Fassin D and Defossez A-C (2024) *L’Exil, toujours recommencé. Chronique de la frontière, Seuil*
7. États Généraux des Migrations bring together local or national organisations working to support foreigners in France and to reform migration policy.
8. bit.ly/au-nom-de-la-loi
9. ‘Une « nouvelle loi » sur l’immigration qui s’ajoutera à une longue série de 118 textes depuis 1945’, *Le Monde*, 14th October 2024
bit.ly/nouvelle-loi-immigration
10. ‘Commemor’action à Briançon : dénoncer et rendre hommage’, Médecins du Monde, 25th February 2025
bit.ly/commemoraction-briancon
11. bit.ly/investigation-blessing
12. Visionscarto (2023) *From the Sea to the River, the deadly violence of Europe’s borders*
bit.ly/from-sea-to-river

The 2023 Pylos shipwreck: applying the Disaster Victim Identification Protocol

Antonietta Lanzarone, Panthelis Themelis and Florian von König

Most migrants who die before reaching their destination are never identified. The Greek authorities' response to a shipwreck in 2023, however, provides an excellent case study of successful identification.



Disembarkation of bodies recovered from the Pylos shipwreck at Kalamata, Greece. Credit: Greek DVI Team

Among the tens of thousands of migrants who have gone missing and are assumed to have lost their lives in the 10 years since 2014¹ only a small minority have ever been identified.² Although in many cases human remains are not recovered, along migratory routes around the world countless remains are found every year but never identified. Instead, they end up in anonymous burials, leaving their relatives permanently without answers. The reasons for this include the lack of medico-legal capacity in the countries involved, the lack of political will

to address cases of missing migrants and the complexity of transnational identification processes that require the exchange of information between countries of origin, transit and destination along migratory routes.

However, the technical know-how to conduct successful identification has steadily developed. The management by Greek authorities of the cases of 82 deceased migrants recovered from the June 2023 Pylos shipwreck showed how it was possible to put

into practice experience acquired over the previous decade to achieve an exceptionally high 90% rate of identification, despite the complexity of the case in terms of diverse geographic/national origin.

On 14th June 2023, an overloaded fishing trawler sank in international waters, 47 nautical miles southwest of the Peloponnese coast near the town of Pylos. The vessel had approximately 750 migrants on board, including men, women and children from Pakistan, Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine and Egypt. The boat had departed for Italy from Tobruk, Libya, on 10th June. Concerns about the safety of the vessel were raised by 13th June. The next morning, at 2:30 am local time, the boat's engine failed and within 40 minutes it capsized and sank, according to a statement released by the Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG). The Search and Rescue operation, led by the HCG and the Hellenic Police's Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) Unit, lasted seven days, concluding on 21st June 2023. A total of 104 men were rescued and 82 bodies recovered. By 18th June, officials acknowledged that over 500 people were presumed dead.

The recovery and identification response

The Pylos incident was the first instance where Greek authorities decided to activate the country's DVI team in the context of a migration-related incident. The team had been established in 2018 with the humanitarian mandate to identify disaster victims. The majority of its members are police officers, including forensic experts, forensic pathologists, forensic odontologists and forensic anthropologists. Since 2018, the ICRC has built strong cooperation with and provided support to the DVI team.

Disaster Victim Identification is an internationally recognised forensic process used to identify victims of mass fatality incidents, such as shipwrecks, natural

disasters and conflicts. It follows standardised procedures to ensure accurate identification while respecting the dignity of the deceased and their families.

DVI operates under the Interpol DVI Protocol, which consists of four key phases:

- 1. Scene Examination** – recovery of human remains, personal belongings and forensic evidence
- 2. Post-Mortem Data Collection** – forensic examination, including autopsies, fingerprinting, odontology and DNA sampling
- 3. Ante-Mortem Data Collection** – gathering missing persons' records, such as medical and dental files, fingerprints and DNA
- 4. Reconciliation** – comparing post-mortem and ante-mortem data to confirm identities³

The response to the Pylos shipwreck consisted of several phases. The examination of the scene and the recovery of remains lasted two days and were carried out by the Hellenic Navy and the Hellenic Coast Guard. During this phase, the DVI team assigned a unique post-mortem number to each recovered body and took fingerprints. Simultaneously, recognising that the number of rescued individuals and recovered bodies was much lower than the estimated number of people on board, the team communicated with neighbouring countries in Europe (Italy and Malta) and North Africa in case bodies were found in their waters or on their shores.

The collection of post-mortem data (PMD) lasted from 16th to 21st June. Official Interpol forms were completed for each body, accompanied by photographs, fingerprints and DNA samples. Autopsies were performed by forensic pathologists. Personal belongings were photographed, registered and stored. Biological samples were collected and DNA profiled by the forensic science division of the Hellenic Police.

The collection of ante-mortem data (AMD) lasted from 16th June to 13th October. All survivors of the shipwreck were interviewed to collect information about those on board, including the deceased. This yielded crucial information about the missing, such as their appearance, clothing and origin. A DVI call and reception centre was established immediately after the shipwreck to facilitate communication between families and Greek authorities, ensuring the proper collection of AMD. An information campaign was launched, involving all relevant national and international stakeholders. In coordination with Interpol, countries of origin such as Egypt, Pakistan and Syria, transit countries such as Libya, countries where concerned families resided such as Jordan and Lebanon, and destination countries in Europe, such as Germany and the UK, were informed about the incident in order to facilitate contact with concerned families.

Interviews with family members were conducted with interpreters in English, Arabic, Pashto and Urdu; each lasted approximately 45 minutes, with official documents submitted via email or other electronic means. The hotline remained active until the end of July 2023, with reduced operations in August. Other actors, including the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, IOM, UNHCR and the ICRC, assisted the DVI team in receiving missing persons reports. These reports, combined with the interviews with survivors and families, allowed the DVI team to create a passenger list and, subsequently, a missing persons list. By the end of this phase, 668 AMD files had been compiled. Around 50 families personally visited the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, where they were informed of the importance of DNA from first-degree relatives and submitted DNA samples.

The fourth phase focused on the reconciliation

of information and identification of remains. The DVI team processed nearly 700 cases of missing persons, categorising them by nationality and the countries where their relatives resided. This facilitated the process of DNA collection and transmission. While most family member DNA profiles were collected and transmitted via Interpol channels, the DVI team also accepted DNA profiles from family members via other international organisations (such as the ICRC and the International Commission on Missing Persons) when families were unable to use State mechanisms, demonstrating flexibility that could simplify future procedures. A total of 541 families provided their DNA. A comparison between AMD and PMD was conducted, resulting in a list of hypothetical identifications, followed by official identification through primary forensic methods. In the first stage, 17 bodies were identified through fingerprints (one through Eurodac, one from a criminal database and 15 from Pakistan's civil national database). These identifications were additionally confirmed by DNA. Furthermore, 57 bodies were identified by DNA alone. In the end, a total of 74 victims (31 Egyptian, 28 Syrian, 15 Pakistani) out of 82 were successfully identified.

Key lessons

The Pylos operation and its aftermath revealed several critical lessons to guide future efforts in handling migration-related search, rescue and identification scenarios.

1. Use a standardised approach: DVI

A standardised DVI protocol is essential for managing mass casualty incidents systematically and effectively. Greece's decision to activate its DVI team for the Pylos incident was critical in achieving the high rate of identification. As part of a series of recommendations relating to missing migrants issued in December 2024,

the UN Secretary-General has called for the systematic operationalisation of DVI responses to mass casualty events involving migrants.⁴ An additional key element was the availability of Greece's national DNA database, which served as a vital resource for matching DNA profiles.

2. Obtain all available information

The successful resolution and identification of missing migrant cases relies on the collection and processing of the maximum amount of information. This can be obtained by way of:

- Witness interviews with translators: Ensuring the availability of trained interpreters is essential to overcome language barriers during interviews with survivors and family members, improving information accuracy.
- Systematic processing/autopsy of each case: A scientific and methodical approach, including full autopsies for all recovered remains, enhances the identification process and ensures no details are overlooked.
- Systematic fingerprinting and DNA profiling: Conducting DNA sampling and profiling and, where possible, fingerprinting for each case ensures robust cross-referencing and verification against existing databases or familial samples.
- Communication campaigns: Public awareness efforts (including establishing hotlines) in relevant countries of origin, transit and destination allow families to report missing persons and share vital information that contributes to the identification process.

3. Multi-stakeholder approach

Collaboration among various stakeholders brings together diverse expertise and resources. Utilising the knowledge and capabilities of actors such as forensic

experts, law enforcement agencies, humanitarian organisations and international forensic experts maximises the effectiveness of response efforts, while such partnerships allow for better coordination and shared responsibilities, reducing the burden on any one organisation.

4. International cooperation

Missing migrant cases transcend national borders, necessitating cooperation across countries and regions; establishing well-defined avenues of transnational cooperation and information exchange is critical.⁵ The DVI Protocol provides for this by using Interpol channels. However, in the Pylos case, several of the countries involved did not have designated focal points for international cooperation – as recommended in the UN Secretary-General's 2024 report – and/or lacked established structures and processes to collect and profile DNA from families. Greek authorities therefore resorted to a more flexible approach combining police, consular and third-party channels. The latter included the ICRC and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, who can act as intermediaries to reach families in complex contexts and facilitate cooperation with authorities. The Pylos response thus showed how opening different pathways for families to transmit information can increase chances of success.

5. Employ multiple methods of identification

Diversifying identification techniques enhances accuracy and completeness. Biometric databases, such as Pakistan's national fingerprint database, can provide crucial identification leads when available. Many countries have biometric databases, whether for administrative, electoral, immigration, criminal or other purposes, access to which could help identification. Data protection should be an important

consideration when determining access and sharing modalities. Combining multiple methods – DNA analysis, fingerprint matching, dental records and personal belongings – ensures a more comprehensive and reliable identification process.

By implementing these lessons, future operations should be better equipped to handle the complexities of migration-related tragedies of any scale, ensuring dignity for victims and closure for families while improving efficiency and collaboration in crisis response.

The response to the Pylos shipwreck illustrates how timely and well-conducted operations that rely on an ever-growing body of international best practices can yield high identification rates. However, even within Europe and in other countries with similarly developed medico-legal capacities, such successes remain the exception rather than the rule, due mostly to a lack of political will and lack of resources allocated to this purpose. This makes the Pylos case all the more important in terms of demonstrating to decision makers what is, and should be, possible.

Moreover, even for countries that lack many of the capacities that the Greek authorities could rely on, the Pylos case can hold valuable lessons. These include appointing national focal points for missing migrants to serve as points of entry for international cooperation, creating DVI teams that can improve responses to a broad range of disasters, establishing channels of communication to communicate with families and pinpointing government data that can help identify missing citizens

abroad. As ever more migrants are having to opt for longer and more perilous routes, resulting in higher risks of disappearance or death, the Pylos case should inform urgent adaptations at both policy and operational levels to mitigate future disasters.

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Search and rescue in the desert: taking a proactive approach in Niger

Malvika Verma

A supportive environment for search and rescue in Niger has made possible an effective humanitarian response to migrants in distress in the desert, offering lessons for other contexts.

Niger is a major departure, transit and destination point in West and Central Africa. Situated at the intersection of key trans-Saharan routes, the country's northern region, Agadez, is crossed by a main regional migratory axis as well as several auxiliary routes, notably to North Africa.¹ The region receives migrants of multiple nationalities in different phases of migration, including some in transit to and from other West African countries, as well as towards Europe via North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea. Some have been forcibly expelled to Niger from Algeria and Libya, to which they had migrated for work. While the needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of migrants vary according to the phase of migration in which they find themselves, both expelled and in-transit migrants in Niger can often remain stranded for days on end in need of life-saving assistance and protection.

Unlike the recent trend in several European contexts, civilian search and rescue (SAR) operations for migrants in distress are not criminalised in Niger and are, in fact, supported by authorities.² Further, with the recent revocation of the so-called 'anti-smuggling law' (No. 2015/036) in November 2023 and an evolving geopolitical context, the migration landscape in Niger has changed significantly. From its enforcement in 2016 and until its revocation, this law effectively penalised activities associated with migration.

An increase in controls on migratory routes by law enforcement (namely the police and gendarmerie) and the military, combined with a growing fear of persecution, led to the emergence of clandestine routes, often passing through dangerous desert areas to evade patrols and making migrant access to basic services even more difficult.

Monitoring and analysis undertaken by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) indicates that migrants have resorted less to clandestine routes in the period since revocation of the law. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 505 migrants were reported to have died or disappeared in the Sahara desert between January and September 2024, with 111 cases reported in the Agadez desert, compared with 548 in Agadez in the same period in 2023.³ However, migrants in the region remain vulnerable to disappearance, death, exploitation and other abuses. Clandestine and dangerous migratory routes continue to be used as mistrust in the system combined with migrants' lack of access to information persists.

People in danger in the desert

MSF is one actor conducting SAR activities to assist migrants in distress in the Agadez region. Other organisations, such as Alarm Phone Sahara (APS) and IOM, undertake similar SAR activities in the region. In 2024, MSF conducted 42 operations, rescuing

or providing lifesaving assistance to 535 migrants (including women). Among these, MSF treated 22 migrants with fractures, 28 sick migrants and 122 migrants suffering from extreme dehydration. In May 2024, MSF also recorded the deaths of 11 migrants following their expulsion from Algeria in violent and inhumane conditions.

Since 2017, the number of expelled and other migrants arriving in Niger from Algeria has remained high. According to migrant testimonies collected by MSF, Nigerien nationals expelled from Algeria are transported by the Algerian security forces in 'official convoys' to the village of Assamaka in Niger and benefit from support offered to them to return to their community of origin. However, migrants of other nationalities are abandoned by Algerian forces in the middle of the desert at a point colloquially known as 'point zero' at the border of Niger and Algeria. Such migrants find themselves lost in the vast desert, without access to food, water or shelter at least 15km away from Assamaka, where the border police post is situated. IOM reports just under 8,500 migrants were expelled between January and June 2024 via official convoys,⁴ while APS reports 14,300 migrants were expelled from Algeria to Niger between January and May 2024,⁵ including those travelling in unofficial convoys.

Information sharing and coordination in response

Quick and transparent information sharing facilitates the proactive deployment of SAR teams. For instance, upon receiving information about expulsions from the police or community members in Assamaka, MSF promptly deploys a search team comprising a nurse, a community mental health educator and a health promoter (whose role covers community liaison and awareness raising) in a vehicle equipped with emergency

medications and water. These proactive operations allow MSF to scope vast areas in the desert to search for migrants who may be stranded or lost and unable to reach help. This can be lifesaving in the case of expelled migrants because MSF teams have received reports of migrants having their personal belongings (including identification documents, mobile phones and money) confiscated or stolen during expulsion. Any gravely injured or ill migrants are stabilised on-site and then transferred to the nearest health-care structure supported by MSF.

Alarm Phone Sahara uses motorbikes to search for and rescue migrants who may be stranded, as these allow quicker deployment in the desert. Upon discovery of migrants in distress, they also relay the information as an alert to other NGOs in Assamaka or nearby authorities who can rescue them and/or mobilise a larger rescue operation. As such, rapid information sharing by the police in Assamaka is central to lifesaving SAR operations in the desert of Agadez.

Information sharing and coordination are also facilitated by the operation of helplines – an activity which is not criminalised or obstructed by the State. Since November 2018, MSF has operated a 24/7 toll-free helpline for those in distress on migratory routes. This is particularly useful for migrants transiting through Niger to destination countries as breakdowns and accidents of vehicles transporting migrants are common, leaving migrants stranded for prolonged periods in the middle of the desert. The helpline can be used by the authorities, law enforcement bodies or the military, local communities or even migrants themselves to inform MSF about a situation of distress, thereby raising the alert to launch a rescue operation.

In addition, coordination and facilitation of community-led rescues involving village

leaders, vehicle drivers, etc., also boost overall rescue capacities in the region. Not only are such rescuers closest to the place where migrants may be stranded, but they also know how to navigate the vastness of the desert and are aware of any risks or dangers. As such, rescues in the desert require mobilisation of a combination of public and private resources in terms of fuel, vehicles, assistance, personnel and volunteers, etc. Nigerien authorities, law enforcement and the military are integral to the entire process; their involvement avoids any obstructions or impediments to raising alerts and serves to actively maintain and promote smooth information sharing and coordination among NGOs and other private and State actors.

In addition, following rescue and depending on the migrants' needs and plans to continue their onward journey or return home, the military, police and/or local authorities direct them towards relevant actors and services in the region. Those willing to return home are oriented towards IOM transit centres in Arlit, Agadez and Dirkou for enrolment in the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programme, while others in need of urgent medical attention are referred to health centres where actors such as MSF can provide free health care, including psychosocial and mental health support. NGOs, in collaboration with law enforcement and local authorities, also facilitate proper and dignified burial of deceased migrants for those found without identification, and contact with families of the deceased for those who can be identified.

After an arduous journey and potentially traumatic experiences leading up to rescue, migrants may find themselves forced to resort to negative coping mechanisms, exposing them to exploitation. Even in Niger, while

those migrants who are accommodated in the IOM-run transit centres (space permitting) following rescue have access to assistance and protection, other migrants in transit unable to be accommodated in the centre or unwilling to return are often left to their own devices for survival. As such, there is still a need to boost holistic reception service provision (particularly for non-national migrants in Niger), including access to protection services, safe and legal channels for continuing their journey, integration into host communities, and social cohesion opportunities.

The way forward

MSF's experiences in the Niger desert with SAR are in stark contrast to those in the Mediterranean Sea. Since 2015–16, MSF teams have witnessed a gradual disengagement by European member States from their duty to assist people in distress at sea, combined with an approach focusing on border and law enforcement as opposed to life-saving efforts.⁶ MSF teams have reported increasing attempts to obstruct civilian SAR activities in the Mediterranean through the hindering of information sharing, defamation, administrative harassment and the criminalising of NGOs and activists.⁷ Most notably, Law 15/2023 in Italy, also known as the Piantadosi Decree, has severely limited humanitarian assistance at sea. By contrast, in Niger, even when law No 2015/036 was effective, neither the authorities nor law enforcement or military attempted to obstruct or impede SAR efforts. There is a collective responsibility to reinforce coordination between State and other relevant stakeholders, including communities and migrants, to reduce loss of life and suffering, and to protect migrants' rights. To this effect, this article recommends the following:

1. Enhance scope for solidarity-driven SAR by facilitating information sharing and supporting community-based rescue efforts.

For both land and sea rescues, proactive searches within a humanitarian framework by State entities, complemented by timely sharing of information about migrants in distress between State and private actors, is integral to preventing loss of life. As seen in the case of Niger, communities and migrants themselves can be mobilised, trained and equipped to undertake SAR activities with logistical and coordination support from authorities and NGOs. Further, via improved and more proactive NGO-supported community engagement efforts, migrants can be sensitised on issues such as safer migratory routes and availability of services in order to facilitate a safer journey overall.

2. Tackle distress alerts as a humanitarian emergency instead of taking a law enforcement approach centring on border security, surveillance and interception.

Persons rescued from situations of distress must not be subjected to further physical and psychological stress. A humanitarian approach to SAR must encompass adequate reception, including access to medico-humanitarian assistance and protection services in line with international legal frameworks and standards, regardless of nationality and/or willingness to return.

3. States need to foster and build an environment conducive to SAR.

States need to decriminalise activities linked to migration and actively address administrative and bureaucratic obstacles to civilian SAR activities. Restrictive legal and policy frameworks on migration driven by containment, deterrence and expulsion practices have detrimental consequences that perpetuate patterns of violence across land and sea.

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Migration packages: commodification and risk along the Americas corridors

Alberto Hernández Hernández and Carlos S Ibarra

Commodified migration packages in the Americas' corridors heighten already unequal risks, forcing resource-poor migrants onto more perilous routes. Effective policies are urgently needed to mitigate and prevent exploitation along these corridors.

In recent years, migration routes linking South and North America have seen a surge in undocumented crossings due to economic precarity, political crises and US immigration policy changes. Three key corridors stand out: the Darién Gap, the Mexico–Guatemala border and the US–Mexico border. Each presents distinct hazards and local economies that shape migrants' journeys.

The Darién Gap, a remote jungle between Colombia and Panama, is marked by dense foliage, steep mountains and dangerous rivers. Although until recently considered largely impassable, it now sees migrants from South America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia navigating its dangers. Local guides, or 'coyotes', sell survival supplies and arrange campsites, while criminal networks impose fees or threats. This unregulated dynamic creates a volatile environment where safety costs can spiral. Migrants with limited resources often take more dangerous routes, facing injuries, theft or separation.

Further north, the Mexico–Guatemala border combines formal checkpoints with informal crossings such as raft services (charging a fee) across the Suchiate River. However, intermediaries – including raft operators and local officials – often demand additional payments for such services. Migrants also face additional extortion at interior checkpoints, draining their resources and trapping some in debt. The presence of military personnel can also serve to push migrants onto riskier

routes, while local businesses profit by selling essential supplies.

At the US–Mexico border, heightened enforcement drives smugglers to market costly 'safer' routes. Migrants often pay more for partial assurances, with costs varying by nationality or perceived wealth. Commodification pervades these migration corridors, intensifying risks for the vulnerable and highlighting the need for equitable strategies to address harmful disparities.

Our research draws on ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation and over 60 interviews, carried out from 2020 to 2023 in the Darién Gap, on the Mexico–Guatemala border and in a number of US–Mexico locations.¹ Interviewees included migrants, local stakeholders and government officials.²

The rise of 'migration packages'

Across these corridors, a new market in 'migration packages' has reshaped how people move north. Rather than relying solely on ad hoc smuggling arrangements, migrants increasingly purchase organised tiers of service – often labelled as basic, standard or VIP. These packages promise varying degrees of safety, speed and comfort, from expedited boat trips across dangerous rivers to basic provisions such as food, tents and rudimentary medical kits. Sometimes they even include third-party 'protection services' where local armed actors guarantee passage in exchange for additional fees.

Smugglers, local intermediaries and informal travel agencies frame these packages as near-essentials, suggesting that paying more translates into fewer risks. Wealthier migrants who can show evidence of funds or financial sponsors are guided along shorter treks, with organised rest stops and appropriate areas to camp. Guides might promise safer crossing times (for example, avoiding nighttime for jungle routes) or provide canoes for river crossings instead of flimsy rafts. In practice, however, many 'exclusive' routes still expose travellers to intense physical dangers and sporadic encounters with criminal groups. For instance, a Colombian migrant recounted paying roughly double the usual rate to shorten his trek by two days, only to discover mid-journey that local gatekeepers demanded further payments, negating much of the promised 'premium' benefit.³

Stratified risks

The commodification of migration creates unequal journeys that reflect and intensify existing global inequalities. Those who can afford premium services generally face fewer delays and somewhat lower risks of theft or violence. They may receive clearer instructions on which checkpoints to avoid, faster boat transfers or rudimentary medical care. A Venezuelan interviewee who travelled with two small children highlighted how a 'VIP package' enabled them to bypass several known conflict zones in the Darién Gap. Although she felt exploited by the high fees, she believed the extra cost was worthwhile to reduce her children's exposure to the elements and limit their contact with potentially violent groups.⁴

Meanwhile, migrants with fewer resources endure the most gruelling conditions: trekking through remote jungle trails, crossing rivers at night without the proper equipment, clothing or footwear, or relying on older smuggling networks that no longer guarantee safe passage. They may be more

likely to rely on misinformation from social media or word-of-mouth rumours passed along the route. If they run out of funds, they are also more prone to falling victim to local extortion, including repeated stops by corrupt officials who demand bribes.

Women travelling alone or with children face compounded dangers, particularly in isolated areas without formal shelters. Interviewees reported that certain smuggling rings require women to pay additional 'insurance fees' to ward off sexual assault. Unaccompanied minors, many of whom are teenagers fleeing violence or extreme poverty, described how they join loosely organised groups for mutual protection but still remain vulnerable to kidnapping and labour exploitation if they cannot keep up physically or pay the required transit fees.

Some smugglers actively profile migrants by nationality or perceived wealth, offering Spanish-speaking South Americans slightly different rates than Haitian or African migrants. In the Mexico–Guatemala borderlands, multiple Haitian and Central American migrants reported being steered to the longest, least secure routes due to smugglers assuming they had limited funds. Beyond adding a layer of racial and economic discrimination, this practice forces the poorest onto routes where robbery, assault or abandonment is more prevalent. By reinforcing social hierarchies, the commodified migration industry ensures that the harshest risks fall upon those with the fewest choices.

Impact on humanitarian access and rescue efforts

Humanitarian agencies and local organisations attempt to provide relief in these corridors but tiered smuggling practices significantly complicate their outreach. Migrants who pay premium prices often bypass official routes, sheltering in

guarded hideouts that are inaccessible to aid groups. Meanwhile, less affluent individuals may become scattered across remote trails or forced into prolonged stays in risky border towns, making consistent humanitarian coverage difficult.

Volunteers in places like Necoclí (Colombia) and Tapachula (Mexico) have found that the continual shifting of smuggling routes hampers their ability to deliver essential services such as medical aid and food supplies. Reliance on clandestine paths also reduces the likelihood of swift intervention in emergencies. In the Darién Gap, for instance, those who deviate from established footpaths to avoid detection are more likely to go missing or suffer injuries with no hope of prompt rescue. Thus, the commodification of passage not only puts poorer migrants in harm's way but also constrains humanitarian efforts by increasing the fragmentation and invisibility of vulnerable populations.

The role of social media

Digital connectivity offers critical lifelines for many migrants, such as real-time updates on which checkpoints are active, discussion of new policy changes, and tips for safer lodging or legal aid. Yet this same environment also fuels the commodification of migration. Online forums, WhatsApp groups, TikTok accounts and Facebook pages serve as a massive advertising space for smugglers touting 'limited-time offers' or one-stop 'migration packages'. Some present themselves as humanitarian volunteers, only to demand exorbitant fees once they have earned migrants' trust.

Influencers and YouTubers looking for high view counts sometimes glamorise these journeys, highlighting scenic footage of crossing rivers or scaling tropical mountains while glossing over the brutal hardships that are frequent realities. This curated portrayal can mislead prospective migrants, making

them underestimate the potential costs (financial and personal) and overestimate the success rates of certain routes.

At the same time, social media remains a powerful tool for grassroots organising. NGOs and migrant advocates use Telegram or WhatsApp to share warnings about known extortion rings or unscrupulous local authorities. In certain border towns, volunteer-run Facebook pages maintain 'bad actor' watchlists, encouraging migrants to report exploitative practices immediately. These efforts constitute a fragile but critical form of consumer protection. However, lack of robust digital literacy among some migrant populations, coupled with language barriers or limited internet access, can leave many susceptible to misleading advertisements. Ultimately, digital platforms mirror the broader complexities of migratory corridors: they enable both solidarity and subterfuge, empowerment and exploitation.

Good and poor practices

Several local and grassroots initiatives attempt to mitigate exploitation along these corridors. In Tapachula, for instance, migrant-led 'caring economies' have emerged, where Haitian women organise communal kitchens offering shared meals and information. By pooling resources and knowledge, migrants reduce their reliance on costly smuggler-run services. Local NGOs and church-based groups also distribute basic supplies and provide advice on navigating regional checkpoints, thereby decreasing migrants' vulnerability to fraudulent 'guarantees'.

However, not all interventions work as intended. Military deployments at the Mexico–Guatemala border, aimed at disrupting smugglers, often push migrants into less-travelled, more perilous routes. Heightened checkpoints drive up smuggler fees and deepen reliance on hidden passages. Similarly, some high-profile

policy declarations, including cross-border agreements to curb irregular movement, unintentionally propel smuggling demand by restricting safer, regulated pathways. These measures, although they may be well meaning, can exacerbate the very problems they seek to solve.

In the Darién Gap, a few pilot programmes to regulate local guides and ensure set pricing have shown promise. By issuing credentials and standardising service costs, community leaders reduce extortion and protect migrants from dubious intermediaries. However, these measures require ongoing monitoring to prevent co-option by criminal networks.

The core lesson is clear. Piecemeal enforcement or blanket crackdowns can inadvertently spur new smuggling strategies, hurting the poorest migrants most. Instead, policies and practices should integrate community-driven efforts, prioritise safe transit options and include transparent oversight. Such an approach holds potential for mitigating exploitation rather than simply displacing it to more dangerous areas.

Reflections and recommendations

Our research confirms that migration in corridors like the Darién Gap and the Mexico–Guatemala border increasingly operates under a market logic, leaving resource-poor migrants exposed to higher risks. Social media both enables real-time navigation and facilitates profiteering, while local economies, often intertwined with smuggling networks, generate parallel markets in basic supplies and ‘safer routes’.

Policy interventions must be realistic about the involvement of criminal interests and address the fact that many local livelihoods now depend on the migrant economy. Instead of broad crackdowns that push migrants further into danger, discreet oversight mechanisms could focus on identifying and penalising persistent exploitation (including

by government officials) without punishing small-scale community enterprises. Regional cooperation should create pressure for fairer service pricing and safe, predictable channels, even if partially informal, rather than forcing migrants onto criminal routes.

Humanitarian interventions could include selective, conflict-sensitive partnerships with vetted local actors who do not directly profit from dangerous smuggling tactics. Establishing neutral referral points away from dominant smuggling hubs – and supporting these with mobile clinics or legal aid – would help reduce reliance on exploitative ‘packages’. Building local trust may require creative, low-visibility methods that protect residents from retaliation by organised crime. Future research could examine how to shift local dependence on smuggling-related income by developing alternative livelihoods, alongside deeper study of the impact of digital misinformation on migrant decisions.

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Networks of possibility: journeys from the Middle East to the US-Mexico border

Houman Oliaei

People from the Middle East attempting to reach the US navigate varied terrains as well as bureaucracy, corruption and changing visa regimes. Migration brokers develop dynamic networks, both regular and irregular, to help people move.



The culmination point of the Americas journey: the US-Mexico border. Credit: Greg Bulla, Unsplash

The following words, from a migration broker in Istanbul, illustrate an emerging trend of long-distance journeys from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Turkey into the Americas:

It costs around \$17,000. We get them visas for Brazil and Nicaragua. They travel to Brazil, then fly on to Nicaragua. From there, they pass through Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico to the US border, about a month's journey. It's safer; they don't have to go through Colombia or Panama. We can also

help with asylum paperwork, but that costs more. We have plans for everything.

While forced migration from the Middle East to Europe has long attracted policy attention, tighter European borders and cutbacks in formal resettlement have prompted many to head towards North America. As a result, arrivals from the Middle East at the US-Mexico border have surged in recent years.

This article argues that migration routes

should be understood not as fixed geographical paths but as dynamic networks of legal-geographical possibilities.¹ ‘Legal’ and ‘illegal’ statuses emerge in a shifting continuum shaped by laws, policies and social contexts, rather than existing as fixed opposites. What migrants and facilitators call the ‘game’ – rather than ‘smuggling’ – embodies this fluidity. It represents an interplay of legal statuses, visa requirements, and strategic decision-making across multiple jurisdictions.

Each type of movement has its classification in this system, from ‘*khodandaz*’ (‘self-directed game’ in Farsi) involving walking through forests and mountains to ‘taxi game’ using vehicles to cross borders, ‘ship game’ utilising boats, ‘police game’ involving coordinated actions with border officials, and ‘ticket game’ using trains or buses. Some attempt the ‘air game’, using borrowed or forged documents to fly directly to their destination. Information shared on social media, such as which embassy is most lenient or which checkpoints demand only minimal bribes, allows migrants to piece together a route that is never completely regular yet not entirely clandestine.

At each stage – acquiring a visa, crossing a border or seeking a permit – people toggle between recognised and unrecognised forms of movement, in ways seldom captured by binaries such as regular versus irregular or migrant versus refugee. Instead, each transition relies on the reading of local law enforcement practices, diplomatic entanglements and unexpected policy changes. Even legally obtained documents can become meaningless if a checkpoint’s rules abruptly shift, or if an officer interprets paperwork as invalid.

Brokers thus function as navigators of legal-geographical possibilities, continually orchestrating ways to keep their clients in,

or close to, nominal legality. Their expertise lies less in maintaining static corridors than in reading and re-reading shifting legal frameworks and anticipating changes in visa policies, enforcement patterns and diplomatic relations that might open or close particular pathways. In this sense, the ‘game’ is a strategic system: individuals must learn its rules, improvise when constraints tighten, and pivot when new openings arise.

Migration from the Middle East to the US–Mexico border traverses a legal landscape that is as complex as it is unpredictable. Rather than following a linear, pre-determined route, migrants move through multiple layers of bureaucracy, corruption and continually changing visa regimes. Although no blueprint captures the multitude of possible itineraries, several corridors have emerged as typical examples of how Middle Eastern migrants reach the US–Mexico border by transiting through Latin America.

Brazil as a main entry point

For many Iranians, Brazil is the first legal entry point into Latin America. Although obtaining a Brazilian tourist visa is not guaranteed, many prospective travellers in Tehran or Istanbul turn to migration brokers for assistance. These brokers help applicants in collecting financial statements and other documents, and at times provide false itineraries to enable them to meet visa requirements. Even with such preparation, refusals can happen if consular officers perceive a high risk of onward travel to the US or Canada. When visas are granted, migrants land in São Paulo with legal tourist status for a limited period. Almost immediately, they begin seeking ways to move north. Brokers connect them with local facilitators who arrange overland travel, typically by bus, through the continent. A common path goes from São Paulo into Peru; there, short

transit permits for roughly 5–10 days can be secured at some border checkpoints, although the ease of obtaining these permits varies. Migrants describe frequent extortion at Peruvian police checkpoints, where bribes are often demanded to continue onwards. This ‘police game’ can involve facilitators providing specific instructions and sometimes symbolic items; in one account, an interviewee noted that a facilitator provided him with a King of Spades card, a signal meant to ease interactions during document checks. After Peru, most travellers head towards Colombia. Many then converge in Necoclí on Colombia’s northern coast, a launch point for crossing the Gulf of Urabá and approaching the Darién Gap.

The Venezuela route

Although Brazil remains the main entrance gate, Venezuela might also be used as a transit route for Middle Eastern nationals, especially for those coming from Iran, as political partnership has encouraged the government of Venezuela to adopt relatively benign visa procedures for Iranians. From Caracas, some go west to Maracaibo to begin the overland journey north. Crossing Venezuela by this route entails passage through eight to nine security checkpoints, which facilitators will guide migrants across. Once the migrants reach the border of Colombia, they cross the border on foot for around 500 metres, as they cannot take taxis or buses. Then migrants must proceed to a bus terminal where an upfront payment to drivers effectively buys their passage. They must stay on the bus all the way through various checkpoints, as they cannot get off due to their lack of documents. Once across, migrants often join those coming across from Brazil, and all of them prepare for the Darién Gap.

Afghanistan to Brazil on humanitarian visas

Afghan migrants follow a distinct pathway that begins with Brazil’s humanitarian visa initiative, a programme introduced after the Taliban regained power in August 2021. Most Afghans residing in Iran or Turkey have either pending refugee applications or refugee status, which allows them to remain in those countries and apply for the programme via their Brazilian embassies. These visas offer a legal entry point, usually into São Paulo. Many of those who arrive view Brazil as a transit point rather than a destination, however, and will aim to move northwards. The northbound journey starts in Rio Branco, a city near the Peruvian border. They bus through Peru, with many stopping in Cusco, before flying from Lima to Tumbes, a city near Ecuador’s border. The journey continues inland through Ecuador, which can be crossed in one or two days, into Colombia. In Colombia, the trip involves a bus ride to Cali, lasting approximately 24 hours, then on to Necoclí. There, Afghan migrants join others in attempting the crossing of the Darién Gap.

Navigating the Darién Gap: three options

The Darién Gap is a dense, roadless swathe of jungle that connects Colombia and Panama and is the only land bridge between North and South America. Migrants generally have three main options for traversing it. The first involves bypassing the jungle entirely by flying from Brazil to Nicaragua, if they hold valid visas for both countries. In practice, Nicaraguan authorities rarely issue visas to nationals from certain Middle Eastern countries. Consequently, this option is only available to those who can get the services of well-connected brokers who expedite approvals; even then, the high cost of air travel is a formidable barrier.

A second option – the cheapest but most physically and emotionally difficult option – is to cross the Gap on foot. In what facilitators call ‘self-directed games’, migrants are supplied with the equipment they need to navigate thick vegetation, cross dangerous rivers and flee from organised criminal groups.

A third option involves the ‘controlled flow’ policy set up by Panama to manage migrants travelling northwards from South America. This programme requires migrants to register with the Panamanian authorities and provide biometric data after they have crossed the Darién Gap on foot. They are then housed temporarily in a Migrant Reception Station (Estación Temporal de Recepción Migratoria). At the centre of the programme is a structured bus transportation system to Costa Rica, operating via private companies in cooperation with the Panamanian authorities. Although designed to be a safer alternative to irregular routes, the programme does face several important limits. At peak levels, 40-60 buses depart daily, each carrying about 50 migrants. However, this capacity of roughly 2,000-3,000 people per day is still inadequate given the surge in crossings, which reached over 81,000 people in August 2023 alone.²

Mexico: the final leg

Once in Mexico, migrants face the last segment of their journey. Two main pathways emerge here. The first is the semi-legal route, which involves obtaining an FMM (Forma Migratoria Múltiple) humanitarian permit. Migrants typically apply for these permits at the Tapachula immigration office near the Guatemala border. The process involves official fees of \$150 to \$200 and may take days or weeks to complete due to high demand. With an FMM, migrants can travel within the country by bus or air to reach northern border cities. The

second pathway involves entirely irregular movement facilitated by smugglers. This option is more expensive, costing \$800 to \$1,000 or more. Migrants opting for this route often travel in private vehicles at night along remote roads to avoid detection. Regardless of the path chosen, all migrants face numerous police and immigration checkpoints. Even those with official permits frequently face extortion for bribes, typically \$10 to \$50 per checkpoint.

The need for more nuanced responses

At the time interviews were conducted with the Istanbul-based broker in mid-2024, the cost of travelling from Iran to the US-Mexico border was about \$17,000, yet by early 2025 it had increased to \$22,000. Such rising costs, tied to sharper border crackdowns and political rhetoric around hardline enforcement, echo a recurring pattern: tougher measures do not halt migration but they do boost prices, intensify threats and entrench deeper reliance on clandestine operations. These shifts in cost structure reflect how facilitators must constantly recalibrate their orchestration of legal-geographical possibilities. As certain pathways close, such as the tightening of Brazilian visa requirements or increased enforcement in the Darién Gap, facilitators forge new combinations of legal documentation and clandestine movement. The ‘game’ thus emerges not just as a set of tactics but as a systemic response to the changing architecture of border control, where each new restriction requires fresh configurations of visas, permits and informal crossings.

In this light, rather than being a simple line drawn on a map, a migration ‘route’ can fragment into multiple transitions. Individuals may begin with valid documents in one country only to lose that status upon crossing an unregulated border or secure short-lived

permits that dissolve when a policy changes. Such conditions result in journeys where life and death hinge on navigating physical terrain and rapidly shifting legal frameworks. Accepting that the 'game' is built on toggling forms of legality highlights the need to reconceptualise migration governance. While current policy approaches, as seen in both the Americas and Europe, focus on strengthening enforcement along predetermined routes, this research indicates the need for more dynamic and coordinated responses.³ These could include creating a network of small-scale, mobile processing units in key transit points that could issue short-term humanitarian transit documents without requiring fixed addresses or financial guarantees. These units could employ staff familiar with the languages and circumstances of Middle Eastern migrants and have the flexibility to relocate as migration patterns shift. Implementing a graduated system of regional transit permits would acknowledge the reality of onward movement while providing temporary status. The Panamanian 'controlled flow' model could also be expanded to other critical points in the journeys, with dedicated humanitarian corridors that provide safe passage, basic services and temporary documentation. Finally, cross-regional funding mechanisms could distribute financial resources based on actual migration volume rather than geographic

location, preventing undue burden on transit countries like Panama or Mexico. These mechanisms could be structured as flexible cooperation agreements that do not require comprehensive multilateral treaties, allowing for quicker implementation and adaptation. Such measures would acknowledge that migration occurs through networks of possibility rather than fixed corridors. The reelection of Donald Trump in 2024 has introduced new uncertainties into US migration policies, yet migration brokers remain active, adapting their strategies to the evolving context. As indicated by their ongoing social media presence offering routes to the US-Mexico border, albeit at higher costs, these networks demonstrate a persistent ability to navigate changing possibilities.

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From commitments to action on missing migrants: the role of humanitarian diplomacy

Angela Cotroneo and Florian von König

Multi-stakeholder humanitarian diplomacy at global and regional levels, including transregional dialogues, is key for mobilising State efforts to address missing migrant cases.



ICRC taking part in the 2022 International Migration Review Forum. Credit: Florian von König

Objective 8 of the 2018 Global Compact for Migration (GCM) is a commitment to ‘Save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants.’ Its inclusion brought missing migrants onto the global agenda by establishing a set of political commitments on how to address their plight. As soon as the GCM moved to the implementation phase, however, this milestone turned into a challenge: how to put these global commitments into effect on the ground to prevent deaths and

disappearances and improve search efforts along migratory routes.

The first round of GCM reviews conducted in 2020–21 showed an exceptionally low implementation of Objective 8 as only a few States reported progress on it.² It also became evident that there was a risk of misinterpretation of its commitments against the backdrop of prevalent security-centric (as opposed to protection-focused and rights-based) approaches to migration, as preventing migrants’ (dangerous) journeys

could be claimed as an obvious way to save their lives.

States' reluctance to engage in a concrete way on missing migrants should not have come as a surprise. Deaths and disappearances of migrants are often linked (directly or indirectly) to restrictive migration-related policies and practices and, as such, are a sensitive and often politicised issue. Furthermore, the complexities attached to, and the lack of established know-how regarding, transnational search and identification also constitute obstacles. Finally, the lack of an effective lead agency combining political clout with operational presence and the absence of a dedicated UN Network on Migration (UNNM) workstream further hampered implementation during the first years following GCM adoption.

This article examines how a multi-stakeholder and multi-layered humanitarian diplomacy effort carried out since 2022 has managed to reverse this trend. Work done by a growing coalition involving the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNHCR and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC), with the support of other actors, has enabled tangible progress in promoting States' coordinated efforts to address missing migrant cases, providing a promising blueprint for the road ahead.

Engagement at the global level

From the outset a two-pronged approach was pursued: on the one hand, an effort to reinvigorate and strengthen the important framework of commitments provided by the GCM; and on the other hand, a focus (following a route-based logic) on regional and sub-regional organisations and bodies as agents of mobilisation of States. This approach benefitted immensely from a mutually supportive interplay with the work

of global and regional human rights bodies, including the Committee against Enforced Disappearances³ of the UN and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.⁴

Given the sobering reality of early Objective 8 implementation, ICRC and IOM sought to leverage the first International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) (which monitors progress in implementation of the Global Compact on Migration) in 2022 to push for a greater focus on Objective 8 and reemphasise the importance of missing migrants and their families. From the start, cooperation between the ICRC and IOM was key, based on the latter's data, analysis, reach and influence, coupled with the ICRC's technical expertise, presence on the ground and long-standing experience working for the missing and their families in situations of armed conflict and violence. The broadening of this alliance through the launch of a joint UNNM-ICRC-IFRC statement on missing migrants in early 2022 increased its ability to inform and influence the outcome of the IMRF process and the next phase in GCM implementation.⁵

Following concerted advocacy efforts, in paragraph 76 of the IMRF Progress Declaration the UN General Assembly requested that the UN Secretary-General provide "actionable recommendations on strengthening cooperation on missing migrants and providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in distress ... with the aim of preventing loss of life in transit." A dedicated UNNM workstream was established to respond to this mandate with IOM and the ICRC leading the work on missing migrants and IOM, UNHCR and IFRC working on the aspect of humanitarian assistance to migrants in distress. Over 18 months the workstream brought in other participants from the UN and civil society, conducted multi-stakeholder consultations,

and compiled best practices, lessons learned and existing guidelines and tools for prevention and case resolution.⁶

This led to the development of a set of 26 concrete recommendations⁷ which were presented to the UN General Assembly in a report of the UN Secretary-General in December 2024.⁸ Importantly, these recommendations are expressly intended to be applicable to refugees and other persons in need of international protection too, thus reinforcing the complementarity between the two Global Compacts, on Migration and on Refugees, notably in the context of mixed movements. Such complementarity, which is emphasised in a general manner in a specific section of the Secretary General's report, is of critical importance as no commitments comparable to Objective 8 of the GCM are found in the GCR. Applying Objective 8 commitments to all people moving across international borders in mixed movement settings, irrespective of status, is significant progress as it avoids the often harmful definitional disputes that have marred previous discussions.

Engagement at the global level, however, would not have been sufficient on its own to foster concrete progress in State responses to missing migrants, as this requires prioritising coordinated prevention, search and identification efforts along migratory routes, across countries of origin, transit and destination, including by States that did not adopt the GCM.

Regional-level engagement

Regional and sub-regional bodies as well as, importantly, transregional migration dialogues have proven critical in providing platforms for States to discuss and jointly address missing migrant-related challenges. These bodies and processes can help turn global commitments into practical policies or recommendations adapted to regional

realities. This has been recognised by the UN Secretary General who in 2024 recommended to UN Member States to “leverage regional and sub-regional bodies to facilitate cooperation among States and other actors on search and identification along routes such as through common policies, information-sharing and exchange of practices.”⁹ Since 2019, not least due to sustained advocacy by the ICRC, IOM and others both at multilateral and at individual State level, a growing number of regional bodies around the world have taken on the issue of missing migrants.

In 2022, following two years of consultations, the 11 Member States of the Regional Conference on Migration in the Americas adopted a comprehensive set of ‘Recommendations on Regional Coordination and Information Exchange Mechanisms in the Search for Missing Persons in the Context of Migration’.¹⁰

In the same year, the Rabat Process (Euro-African Dialogue on Migration) began to focus on the issue through dedicated thematic discussions, leading its 54 Member States to incorporate missing migrants into their joint action plan the following year. Since then, strong leadership on the issue by The Gambia and Switzerland in this forum, supported by the ICRC, IOM and UNHCR, has yielded path-breaking results in the form of a Network of National Focal Points.¹¹

In Africa, the ICRC and the African Union Commission have jointly organised several high-level meetings on missing migrants. The AU Commission now plans, with support from IOM, to develop a set of continental guidelines on the issue. Similarly, several discussions have been held between 2022 and 2024 in the framework of the Economic Community of West African States to work towards a Strategic Plan for Missing Migrants.¹²

In Europe, intergovernmental discussions – let alone frameworks and policies – have been woefully lacking (outside the Rabat Process), despite the continent having the world's largest reported caseload of missing migrants at its shores and on its doorstep, notably but not only linked to the Mediterranean and Atlantic routes. However, two recent developments give cause for optimism. At the level of the EU, in March 2024 the Belgian Presidency initiated the first ever technical discussion of the missing migrants issue at the Council of the EU.¹³ And at the level of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in October 2024 parliamentarians representing 46 Member States adopted a resolution¹⁴ on 'Missing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – A call to clarify their fate'.¹⁵

In Asia, which has an important share of the global caseload of missing migrants, initiatives had been largely lacking. This changed in late 2024 with a Policy Roundtable to improve the response to people going missing along dangerous routes in Asia.¹⁶ Convened by the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process, IOM, UNHCR and the ICRC, this meeting brought together several of the 45 Member States of this regional migration dialogue. However, concerted governmental action on missing migrants in Asia remains an ambitious longer-term goal.

While the above regional initiatives are important, they differ greatly in depth, reflecting complex realities of political will and interest, capacities or the lack thereof, and the degree to which irregular migration and the issue of migrants going missing are negatively perceived in different societies. Nevertheless, based on years of engagement on the issue, it is possible to identify several factors which have clearly contributed to successful humanitarian diplomatic engagements.

Success factors

1. Mobilising champion States

Like many humanitarian issues, the fate of missing migrants is often neglected and reliant on the advocacy of humanitarian actors. However, we observe time and time again that where States decide to actively promote this issue in intergovernmental discussions, outcomes tend to vastly improve compared with situations where humanitarian actors alone speak for the issue. As noted, this has been the case with The Gambia and Switzerland in the Rabat Process and Belgium during its time as EU Presidency. Peer-to-peer exchanges are also more effective in inspiring State action. Mobilising one or more champion States to become standard-bearers should therefore be a critical priority for any effort to have influence in multilateral fora with the goal of prompting action at national level. Moreover, mobilising countries of origin as effective advocates for their missing citizens is key. This often means overcoming a culture of stigmatisation which many countries attach to the irregular migration of their citizens.

2. Broadening the coalition

The continuing increase in the number of actors that support humanitarian diplomacy on missing migrants has been critical. Especially at a time of unprecedented uncertainty in terms of humanitarian funding and mandates, strength in numbers provides a much-needed degree of insurance – so that one actor dropping out will not take the issue down with them. The combination in terms of mandate, expertise, influence and geographic reach of actors such as IOM, UNHCR, IFRC and the ICRC is also a unique strength, assuring representation in, and access to, a wide range of fora and discussions, alongside the requisite relevance and legitimacy for dealing with the topic. Finally, promoting encounters between civil society and

governments on this sensitive issue is key to ensuring that the voices of those affected are directly heard by those who can bring about change.

3. Grounding humanitarian diplomacy in data and operational practice

Being able to base policy prescriptions on proven operational practices that the ICRC, the wider Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and many other actors have developed over the years has been key to our engagements. Few arguments are more convincing than being able to show that other countries are already successfully searching for and identifying missing migrants. Similarly, the data and analysis provided by IOM's Missing Migrants Project remains a critical resource for any influencing effort.¹⁷ Expanding this body of evidence by sustaining operational engagements and transferring knowledge between regions should therefore be a collective priority.

Reasons for optimism

Although we are far from where we should be in terms of effective State responses to the plight of missing migrants and their families, there has been much progress since 2018. The multiple initiatives, resolutions and meetings described in this article, combined with the growing number of instances where States have taken successful action (such as, for instance, in the case of the Pylos shipwreck), bear out this assertion.¹⁸ On an issue as sensitive and complex as missing migrants, taking the long-term view and remaining optimistic is the only way forward.

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Providing emergency medical care at the Belarus–Poland border

Rafal Zadykowicz, Judyta Kuc, Joanna Ladomirska, Federica Zamatto and Sylvia Lim

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) takes a flexible approach in its provision of medical care at the Belarus–Poland border. Its model emphasises collaboration with civil society, challenges systemic barriers, and is adaptable and replicable.

In recent years, Europe has faced humanitarian emergencies at its borders due to strict immigration policies, increased security measures and externalisation of migration control. These approaches create significant health risks and exposure to violence for migrants traversing the forests at the Belarus–Poland border, most of whom originate from conflict-affected countries such as Syria, Somalia, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.¹ MSF has been working in this context since 2022 and has provided care for nearly 450 migrants in dense wilderness. Almost one third of MSF’s patients were woman and children.

This case study examines how MSF has responded to humanitarian needs in Poland’s ‘green border’ area – the forested border region between Poland and Belarus – and how the organisation adapts to constantly changing national and regional migration policies. It seeks to provide the outline of a replicable model of medical humanitarian response in logistically challenging, insecure and politically charged environments. It contains examples of collaborations with civil society organisations (CSOs) in responding to needs at the border area, and discusses the importance, utility and challenges of collecting data to inform operational decision-making and advocacy.

Providing urgent medical care in the forest

Delivering medical care for migrants in the

Belarus–Poland border areas, particularly in the Bialowieza Forest, poses significant logistical challenges. To reach migrants in one of Europe’s oldest wildernesses (which is inaccessible to ambulances and other vehicles), the MSF medical team often has to trek through dense marshes and rivers, carrying large medical backpacks. Any evacuations of patients must be done on foot. A typical intervention lasts approximately four and a half hours, with some lasting up to 12 hours. Not all migrants receive sufficiently early care: in 17% of cases, patients are never even located, and between 2021 and 2024, 89 deaths were recorded. Patients continue to report encountering dead bodies during their journeys.²

Adapting its response to such an environment, MSF works with local medics to provide care as it needs people who know the area well and are physically fit enough to hike long distances carrying heavy backpacks. To provide appropriate care, MSF have created and adapted medical protocols to manage common health conditions within significant constraints such as dirt, rain, cold and darkness. Accordingly, the contents of medical backpacks have been standardised, taking into consideration the weight and space of essential items and their reliability in low temperatures and harsh conditions. In addition, the team must work within strict security operating procedures and are equipped with tracking tools to ensure

safety. This is both to prevent criminalisation and to protect responders.

In typical wilderness medical emergencies or forest medicine, patients would receive stabilising care on site and then be transferred to a medical facility for follow-up. In this context, however, referrals for further treatment cannot always be guaranteed. Patients sometimes refuse to go to hospital for fear of being deported or pushed back across the Belarusian border. Even if they agree, they may face discrimination from ambulance care technicians and State health providers. Polish Border Guards have sometimes interfered with the referral process, either causing significant delays or intimidating responders and patients. Hence, MSF medics often treat conditions in the forest – such as hypothermia and trench foot – that would normally require further care in a medical facility, adapting treatment protocols to contextual constraints.

Policy changes in Poland in 2024 continue to exacerbate the challenges faced by migrants and humanitarian organisations. The East Shield project, which aims to fortify Poland's eastern borders with advanced surveillance, physical barriers and electronic warfare, raised concerns around humanitarian access and violence against migrants.³ The establishment of a buffer zone, massive deployment of military forces, expansion of the border fence, suspension of asylum rights and a legal amendment allowing pre-emptive use of firearms by border guards have all contributed to increased violence against migrants. In 2024, 42% of MSF patients reported experiencing assault, compared with 17% the previous year. This rising trend is reflected in the injuries MSF treated such as bruises, wounds and cuts. The number of patients who reported being tear gassed and/or had their belongings stolen or destroyed doubled between 2023 and 2024. Due to

the added patrols and prohibited zones, MSF and other organisations face additional access restrictions.

Coordinating responses with local actors

Effective and sustainable interventions at the Belarus–Poland border require strong coordination among diverse stakeholders. MSF's work is deeply integrated into the broader civil society humanitarian response at the border and involves close collaboration with CSOs and community-led initiatives. This partnership is essential for ensuring access, long-term solutions and the sustainability of interventions beyond MSF's direct involvement.

In Poland, MSF emphasises the importance of supporting and strengthening local initiatives, especially in the area of protection and other types of relief assistance where it does not have specialised expertise. By partnering with CSOs, MSF aims to incorporate CSO-led interventions as part of the durable solutions for the migration response, promoting solidarity, mutual validation and knowledge exchange. Such collaborations ultimately enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts, especially in the provision of more holistic care to migrants in the forest and in advocacy for policy changes.

MSF typically conducts joint interventions in the forest with local CSOs. Members of the CSOs along with an MSF medic will trek through the forest to locate the migrants who have requested assistance through the CSOs. Once found, the medic will treat migrants for injuries and other medical needs, while the CSOs provide potable water, warm food, clothing and legal support.

In this way of working, the CSOs share with MSF their knowledge of how to adapt responses in the forest, their understanding of the political dynamics at the border, and

their insights into local policies and culture. In return, MSF shares medical knowledge and its experience of working in emergency settings, and promotes recognition of the CSOs' work. On a practical level, MSF trains CSO members in first aid and basic wound care. MSF has also initiated and plans to continue providing workshops for local medical organisations on migrant health needs, to address issues of discrimination and stigma, and to attract volunteers. In its advocacy efforts, MSF helps to amplify the CSOs' visibility and motivations, and to increase their reach to and credibility with key decision-makers. Such cooperation not only strengthens the immediate response and boosts shared advocacy efforts but also seeks to legitimise humanitarian actions in the eyes of State actors to counter the increasing criminalisation of aid. By consistently advocating for and highlighting the capacity of local organisations, INGOs like MSF can help shift perceptions.

Equally important is MSF's engagement with State actors. Interactions with local and national government authorities are necessary to secure the permissions and operational approvals needed to function effectively. However, liaising with State authorities about the border areas presents complex challenges due to prevailing power dynamics. In addition, the lack of formal coordination mechanisms between governmental and non-governmental actors can create significant delays in responses. Continuous advocacy with State entities is essential to safeguard a neutral humanitarian space, maintain timely access to those in distress and highlight the violence that migrants face. MSF will also continue to engage with State authorities on patient rights and medical ethics as these negotiations are critical to maintaining access to vulnerable populations and slowly dismantling systemic barriers to humanitarian action.

Data collection

Data plays a vital role in MSF's work across the world. MSF relies on data not only to inform its care and intervention strategies but also to document humanitarian needs and violence, including at the Belarus–Poland border. However, collecting data in this environment is difficult due to rugged working conditions, limited patient contact time, and language barriers (patchy internet coverage sometimes affects the use of translation apps). Often, those whom MSF has treated were suffering from more than one condition, and many were found emotionally distressed and exhausted. As there were few standardised medical indicators for migration-related programmes in MSF, project-level tools have been developed and adapted. Over time, the data collected has reflected the health consequences that can be related to changing migration policies, and this is crucial for MSF's advocacy work for humanitarian access.

MSF gathers both quantitative data and narratives to obtain a rounded understanding of migrants on the move. Routinely gathered quantitative data captures the physiological impact of the migrants' journeys, including documented trauma cases and the effects of prolonged exposure in the forest. In the former category, 50% of the patients MSF treated in 2024 bore injuries inflicted by others such as bruises from rubber bullets and dog bites, and/or cuts and fractures sustained from attempts to scale razor-wire fences. Similarly, 50% presented with cold-related injuries such as hypothermia, frostbite and trench foot, conditions acquired after spending considerable time moving through and hiding in the forest to evade detection and pushbacks. A quarter of the patients MSF saw were treated for gastrointestinal infections, contracted from drinking surface water from ponds

and swamps. The frequency of certain conditions can be linked to the establishment of particular government policies, and MSF has used this information to advocate for patients. For example, when the buffer zone was introduced in 2024, MSF documented the first injuries related to rubber bullets and the subsequent doubling of wounds related to intentional violence compared with 2023. Using local jurisdiction information, MSF confronted law enforcement about specific patient situations and informed the public about the buffer zone's impact.

In addition, MSF has made significant efforts to obtain narratives about their journeys from migrants, whose voices are often unheard in the dominant political discourse on migration policies. These anonymous testimonies were collected only after the patient had arrived safely at a different location and given informed consent. Such information is crucial as it sheds light on individual experiences of abuse and rights violations that statistics alone cannot convey. These stories humanise migration policy debates, foster empathy and raise awareness – all critical for driving policy changes.

A replicable model

MSF's decision to prioritise flexibility in its operations and advocacy strategies on the Belarus–Poland border has been key to addressing immediate health needs, challenging systemic barriers and avoiding complacency in established views of humanitarian responses. This approach allows MSF to remain responsive to the evolving needs on the ground and to navigate the often hostile environment.

It is a model that offers the organisation a different way of providing medical care in logistically challenging, insecure and politically charged situations – and that is both adaptable and replicable. This model highlights the importance of creating and

maintaining solidarity with CSOs through resource sharing, mutualised advocacy efforts and knowledge exchange. The model focuses on obtaining quality data, as data is essential for powerful advocacy and for bearing witness to rights violations, holding authorities accountable and de-escalating violence. Though still fulfilling its organisational charter, the way of working that MSF has adopted in Poland represents a significant shift from its usual, more autonomous operational methods. Looking forward, MSF aims to continue to adapt its response model in this and other similar contexts.

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Coordinating a route-based approach for Rohingya movements

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Adopting a civil society-supported 'route-based approach' can enhance existing coordination structures and more effectively assist and protect Rohingya refugees undertaking dangerous maritime and overland journeys.



A Rohingya man heading to work in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Credit: DRC/Ahmad Yusni

In the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis, thousands of refugees fleeing Myanmar and Bangladesh became stranded at sea after people smugglers abandoned their boats and neighbouring countries refused to allow them to come ashore. Over 8,000 people were left adrift for weeks without food, water or medical care. Following resolution of this crisis, regional States identified strengthened coordination as one of the most critical measures required to prevent future tragedies and better protect those who risk their lives at sea.¹

In the years that followed, several initiatives were implemented with the intention of improving coordination. At the regional level, this included the establishment of the Bali Process Task Force on Planning and Preparedness (TFPP) to enhance coordination capacities, the Bali Process Consultation Mechanism as a new emergency response mechanism, and the ratification of the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP).² Yet when there was a resurgence of maritime movements across

the Andaman Sea more recently, these reformed coordination mechanisms failed to deliver the anticipated improvements in protection. Poor communication between relevant officials, the continued enforcement of pushback policies, and disjointed responses by regional States have resulted in the Andaman Sea route becoming one of the deadliest in the world. In 2024, one of every 13 people undertaking the journey across the Andaman Sea was reported as dead or missing (657 individuals in total), as compared with one of every 22 individuals in the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis and one of every 39 people crossing the Central Mediterranean in 2024.³

Conceptualising a route-based approach for the Rohingya

The movement of Rohingya across the Asia-Pacific is complex, continuously evolving in response to conflict dynamics in Myanmar, changing policies by regional host countries, adaptive patterns in smuggling operations and Rohingyas' shifting assessments of risk and opportunity. Children and women now make up the majority of passengers undertaking maritime journeys, in contrast to the predominance of young men (including Bangladeshi migrants) during the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis.³ Patterns of movement have also shifted, with an increasing proportion of boats heading towards Indonesia rather than Malaysia and Thailand, although many arrive with the intention of eventually continuing their journey to Malaysia. In addition, thousands of Rohingya continue to make use of overland smuggling routes that provide passage to Malaysia via Myanmar and Thailand.⁴

A review of recent data from the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) has found that protection risks encountered by Rohingya refugees are multifaceted, spanning the entirety of their journeys. On maritime routes,

inhumane conditions aboard overcrowded boats, combined with inadequate access to food and water, contribute to high fatality rates. Women and children are particularly vulnerable, with numerous reports of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse during transit. Protection risks persist even after arrival in destination countries, where Rohingya frequently face prolonged stays in camps, inadequate shelter and limited access to basic services and livelihood opportunities. The psychological toll of these experiences, including trauma and mental health challenges, further compounds their vulnerabilities.⁵

In response to these challenges, we argue that a civil society-supported route-based approach can play a crucial role in strengthening the provision of appropriate assistance and protection for Rohingya on the move. We follow a definition of the route-based approach that understands it as a “comprehensive strategy to address the needs and protect the rights of migrants and refugees at every stage of their journeys in countries of origin, transit, destination, and return” which involves “implementing continuous protection and assistance measures from departure to arrival and integration into destination communities”.⁶ Drawing on this, and building on the conceptualisation articulated by UNHCR,⁷ we propose that the following principles should be recognised as the distinctive features of a route-based approach which, if adopted, would bolster current responses to forced displacement: 1) adaptability to shifting migration patterns; 2) cross-border cooperation; and 3) sustained engagement across different stages of migrant and refugee journeys.

Furthermore, to effectively implement this in the Rohingya context, we emphasise

that a route-based approach needs to be supported by a corresponding route-based coordination mechanism that would be tasked with ensuring that government and stakeholder interventions are coherent, resourced and adaptive to the shifting patterns of Rohingya movements. If such a mechanism were sufficiently resourced and supported, it would facilitate communication, harmonise responses across borders and enable humanitarian actors to better address the specific needs of Rohingya refugees at each stage of their journey.

Addressing root causes

One of the most important aspects of the route-based approach is its emphasis on addressing root causes as part of a comprehensive response. This is particularly relevant in the case of the Rohingya route, as the deterioration of conditions faced by Rohingya in Bangladesh and Myanmar remains the primary driver of Rohingya maritime movements. In Myanmar, the Rohingya experience of decades of violence, discrimination and persecution has worsened since the February 2021 military takeover, as armed conflict has precipitated food shortages, diminished access to essential services and involved repeated attacks on civilians. In Rakhine State, security concerns have become particularly acute since the escalation of conflict in October 2023. Meanwhile, Rohingya in Bangladesh are facing precarious security conditions with escalating levels of gang violence, forced recruitment and gender-based violence. This is compounded by overcrowding, restrictions on mobility and formal livelihoods, limited access to education and minimal prospects for durable solutions. Further exacerbating these drivers are environmental factors which function as a ‘threat multiplier’ for vulnerabilities related to shelter, health, sanitation, food and water security and livelihoods.⁸

The significance of ‘root cause’ conditions in Myanmar and Bangladesh extends beyond their role as drivers for onward movement, however. These also have significant downstream effects and consequences which influence what kinds of assistance and protection interventions are needed at later points in their journeys. For instance, MMC has found that smugglers have been one of the main information providers for Rohingya refugees embarking on onward movements from Bangladesh and Myanmar, influencing refugees’ decisions on whether to embark on maritime or land routes, which countries to transit, and even their intended country of destination.⁵ Coordination mechanisms should therefore not only mobilise resources and actors to respond to refugees in transit but also support pre-departure interventions aimed at addressing this information gap, so that Rohingya do not have to rely on unreliable information from smugglers.

Third-country solutions

In addition to addressing root causes, the route-based approach recognises the important role that the international community can play as part of a comprehensive response. For example, the involvement and engagement of resettlement States in supporting third-country solutions and offering financial support could provide a significant contribution in increasing access to durable solutions for Rohingya refugees.

Inclusion of local and civil society actors

Analysis of the application of a whole-of-route approach in Latin America underscores the critical role that local and civil society actors can play in “[ensuring] that interventions are relevant and sustainable.”⁶ In the Rohingya context, enabling the participation and engagement of local actors in a whole-of-route coordination structure is particularly important both due to the critical

role they play in supporting the Rohingya humanitarian response and because these actors have often already developed internal coordination mechanisms that can facilitate strengthened responses.

In Indonesia, for example, fishermen and local civil society groups in Aceh have played leading roles in rescuing refugees in distress and providing emergency assistance, by making use of messaging platforms to enable rapid mobilisation of frontline responders and swift dissemination of information about boats in distress to local, national and regional stakeholders. However, despite their significance, these local actors remain largely excluded from key strategic decision-making and planning roles in national and regional coordination structures, which remain predominantly managed and organised around the capacities and interests of State actors.

Supplementing national coordination structures

One of the most notable reforms implemented at the national level in the aftermath of the Andaman Sea crisis was Indonesia's adoption of Presidential Regulation No 125 in 2016 (PR No 125), which provides guidelines and outlines responsibilities for government agencies in search and rescue and in management of refugees, and also codifies a definition of refugees in alignment with the 1951 Refugee Convention.

However, although PR No 125 is a significant step towards advancing the rights of refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia, it does not provide guidance on how cross-border cooperation with other regional States should be managed or how search and rescue and disembarkation policies should be harmonised across States. This is significant in the context of Rohingya maritime movements because search

and rescue is a shared responsibility that cannot be achieved by Indonesia alone. A route-based coordination mechanism could play a significant role in addressing this gap by establishing clear channels of inter-governmental communication and facilitating the negotiation of responsibility-sharing agreements among regional States for disembarkation responsibilities.

It is also important to note that the provision of protection and assistance as part of a route-based approach extends into the post-disembarkation or post-rescue phase. This is partially addressed in PR No 125, although recent responses to Rohingya arrivals in Indonesia have revealed some gaps in its implementation. For instance, PR No 125 does not provide State funding for local governments mandated to implement refugee management responsibilities nor does it establish clear procedures for sheltering refugees, and these omissions have caused significant delays in the provision of resources and services while negotiations with local authorities are resolved. In addition, there has been insufficient engagement of important non-security focused agencies (such as the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, and the Ministry of Health), which has prevented Rohingya receiving the support services they need.

The Bali Process: a potential coordination mechanism

The Bali Process has a mandate to “facilitate cooperation and collaboration, information-sharing and policy development on irregular migration in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond” and a broad membership that includes source, transit and destination countries for Rohingya movement.⁹ Given this, it is well positioned to take on a leading coordinating role to support whole-of-

route interventions and provide the critical coordination support that the route-based approach requires. And indeed, in its 2016 internal review of the region's response to the Andaman Sea crisis, the Bali Process identifies several "calls to action" that would contribute significantly to a whole-of-route response. These include "systematic and regular reporting on movements," "concerted efforts to address root causes and push factors" and "coordinated and predictable search and rescue protocols and disembarkation points".¹ The review also identified the need to develop and maintain a registry of contact points, including officials at the national level and locally based international agency and civil society staff members, to help improve national planning and preparedness. Under a whole-of-route approach, such a registry should be extended and made accessible to all relevant stakeholders and actors along the Rohingya routes.

By realising these previously identified calls to action, which remain as important and relevant now as they were in 2016, the Bali Process would establish a strong foundation upon which a more route-based approach to Rohingya movements could be enacted, thereby enhancing the regional coordination capacities that have been built through the establishment of the Consultation Mechanism and the Taskforce on Planning and Preparedness. In so doing, the Bali Process could facilitate stronger cross-border cooperation to deliver more sustained support for Rohingya in need of protection.

Meeting the challenge

In the absence of other viable alternatives and legal pathways, and given the escalating conflict in Myanmar, Rohingya refugees are likely for the foreseeable future to continue to undertake perilous journeys in search of safety and protection. To meet this challenge

and ensure the dignity of those on the move, coordination remains vital; the whole-of-route approach provides a constructive framework through which to address gaps in current responses, establish fairer responsibility-sharing arrangements and enhance existing coordination structures. Through the establishment of stronger linkages with civil society and local actors and by building on the foundations of the route-based aspects of existing coordination mechanisms, significant improvements in the delivery of protection and assistance at every stage of their journey can be delivered.

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Missing migrants in Southern Africa: building State investigation capacity

Lucinda Evert, Stephen Fonseca and Vaughn Rossouw

Many State authorities dealing with the missing and the dead have systems in place for managing such cases. With minimal adjustments, these systems can be adapted to address the specific challenges relating to missing and deceased migrants.



The ICRC visiting families of missing migrants in Zaka, Zimbabwe. Credit: Stephen Fonseca

People leave their homes for many reasons including political instability, environmental hazards or economic hardship. Some will be seeking asylum; others will be in pursuit of better opportunities for work. Unfortunately, many go missing in a variety of circumstances, either on their journey or once they arrive in their destination country. They may be detained without access to any means of communication, or they or their families may choose not

to seek assistance for fear it may lead to deportation. They may also die during their dangerous journey or after arrival in their destination country. It is important that these vulnerable migrants and refugees are not forgotten.

Seeking to reduce the high number of missing migrants and unidentified deceased individuals in the Southern Africa region, primarily between South Africa and Zimbabwe, the International Committee

of the Red Cross (ICRC) undertook a pilot project entitled the Missing and Deceased Migrants Program from 2016 to 2018. The project entailed working with South African and Zimbabwean authorities to complement their existing systems, tools and resources used to locate missing persons, whether living or deceased. The objectives of the project were to provide families of missing and deceased migrants with answers about the fate of their loved ones; to restore the identity and dignity of deceased persons and enable the return of their human remains to their loved ones for proper burial; and to improve the manner in which families, public authorities and forensic practitioners share information used to search for and identify missing and deceased migrants.

The initial phase involved engaging with State authorities and community groups to better understand the problem. This was followed by registering missing persons cases by conducting interviews with families of migrants from the Zaka and Gwanda districts in Zimbabwe who had gone missing in South Africa. During the interviews, information on the possible whereabouts of the missing migrants and personal data which could be used to assist in identification were collected and compiled as a tracing request (for enquiries within South African communities) and an accompanying missing persons information form was completed (for search through authority databases and ongoing enquiries). During the pilot phase, tracing requests and missing persons forms were compiled for 61 missing migrants, with 15 of these people subsequently being located and reunited with their families. The pilot project confirmed that when there is an accessible conduit for reporting missing relatives, families will readily participate. Furthermore, families can provide useful missing persons

information that is pertinent for tracing enquiries and which can also be entered into the various databases managed by authorities to complement efforts in identifying deceased persons.

For any identification to be successful there needs to be sufficient information to enable comparisons and matching. We also need to recognise that some of the missing migrants may have died after their arrival in South Africa. While no formal numbers are reported, officials have estimated that up to 10,000 unidentified persons – many of whom are believed to be migrants and refugees – are buried annually by South African authorities. To address this issue, the ICRC collaborated with the authorities to enhance the forensic identification procedures used in one of the leading high-throughput mortuaries in the country, dealing with up to 3,000 cases of unnatural deaths each year. This involved: introducing secondary examinations for the purpose of identification conducted after completion of autopsies; standardising forms and processes; and training practitioners and forensic students. These practitioners took radiographs and documented and photographed unique identifying features such as scars, skin marks, tattoos, piercings, malformations and amputations. This information, a set of fingerprints and a DNA sample were submitted to authorities for use in searches through their databases. This specialised forensic team processed 128 unidentified bodies during this time; of those who underwent secondary examinations, 57 identifications were confirmed – a success rate of 44%. An interesting observation made during this pilot was that these secondary examinations increased the identification rates for both foreign nationals and South African citizens alike, thereby providing a clear benefit to authorities, especially considering these

unidentified bodies are buried as ‘paupers’ at the State’s expense, placing a heavy financial strain on State resources.

Developing a programme from the pilot

The pilot project offered significant promise. The ICRC had demonstrated the immediate success of applying a holistic approach to ensuring both that families in Zimbabwe were able to provide information about their missing relatives and that post-mortem information could be properly collected from unidentified deceased persons at one of the busiest mortuaries in South Africa. This allowed for the pilot to be developed into a low-cost programme (with structured coordination of forensic pathology services, law enforcement, universities, Red Cross National Societies and the community, complemented by digital community support tools) that enables States to collect and share missing persons information with neighbouring States who are dealing with the responsibility of identifying the dead.¹ The programme also introduced the standardisation of forms and processes, and the establishment of the Human Decedent Identification Unit at the Johannesburg Forensic Pathology Service which, through the committed efforts of its specialised forensic staff and students, continues to conduct secondary identifications and identify individuals who might otherwise have remained unidentified. These efforts have led to a 22% increase in the overall identification rate.

As part of the process of developing the pilot into a programme, training was conducted in collaboration with the Zimbabwe Republic Police for their staff (at both provincial and headquarters level) on the procedure to follow when families report persons who have gone missing in another country. This was critical as many police staff were not aware that they could accept these cases,

nor of the procedure to follow to share this information with the authorities in South Africa. The existing Interpol system makes provision for countries to submit yellow notices (for a missing person) and black notices (for a deceased person) allowing for the sharing of information across borders. To assist with the dissemination of this information to all provinces in Zimbabwe, the ICRC collaborated with Interpol to produce an information leaflet and posters detailing the steps to be taken. The cases compiled during the pilot phase were also registered with the authorities to assign them an official reference number and were submitted to Interpol to be passed on to South Africa.

The ICRC also considered the fact that many migrants and their families may be hesitant to come forward or engage with authorities regarding their missing relatives, especially where they are undocumented. The ICRC therefore worked closely with their partners, the Zimbabwe Red Cross Society and the South African Red Cross Society, to empower them to act as intermediaries between the families and the authorities. The Red Cross Societies have many trusted volunteers in communities and often act as auxiliaries to the State. These volunteers were trained in collecting missing persons data from families, which was then shared with the Zimbabwe authorities for submission through the official system. Similarly, volunteers in South Africa are well placed to obtain information from vulnerable communities that may assist the authorities in the resolution of cases – information that individuals are often hesitant to share with authorities. All these steps are critical to ensure that the programme, now referred to as the Transnational Approach to the Missing and Dead, can be handed over to authorities and maintained. This will be supported by Oversight Committees in

both countries comprising members from relevant government departments, who will be responsible for governing and guiding the programme.

Reflections

Programmes to address the issue of missing or deceased persons are most effectively managed when undertaken in collaboration with the authorities mandated to investigate such cases. These initiatives typically require only minimal resources and can often be implemented with straightforward measures, such as providing training and basic equipment. Collaboration with other civil society organisations is highly recommended, particularly when authorities lack the necessary human or material resources or where those who have pertinent information lack trust in authorities. Given its low cost and simplicity, this programme can be readily adapted and replicated in other resource-limited countries.

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The psychological impact of missing family on forcibly displaced people

Belinda Liddell, Kimberly Archer, Nicole Batch and Jill Stockwell

For family members who have missing relatives who may have died on dangerous journeys, not knowing the fate of loved ones can have profound psychological and social consequences, especially if they are displaced themselves.

Forced migrants face innumerable challenges and risks that can include going missing while undertaking dangerous migration journeys in search of safety from war, humanitarian crisis and persecution. Their families and communities carry the psychological burden of not knowing what has happened to their loved ones and can require significant support, both in seeking their missing family and in managing uncertainty and the tension between hope and despair during the search process. This is especially true if they themselves have been forcibly displaced. Yet, there has been very little systematic research into the psychological repercussions of having missing family under such circumstances. We know even less about how these psychological and social impacts may evolve over time, nor about the processes that enable families to cope.

What existing research tells us

Most psychological research has focused on the mental health symptoms associated with having a missing family member. These studies have been conducted with a wide range of participant groups, including both non-refugee and refugee and asylum seeker populations. Collectively, studies observe that people with missing family report elevated rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety or complicated (that is, severe and persistent) grief.^{1 2 3} Refugees with missing loved ones may also experience physical symptoms, such as poor health or pain, due to the stress this

causes.³ These conditions typically occur following experiences of trauma, such as the unexpected death of a loved one or other traumatic experiences involving threat to life or injury. However, the traumatic loss that occurs when a loved one is missing may have distinct repercussions compared to these other trauma types.⁴ For instance, traumatic stress responses typically relate to past events, yet the impact of having a missing family member continues in the present and often over a long timeframe. As such, the psychological response to a missing loved one may reflect chronic trauma – a traumatic event that does not end, which carries sustained psychological and physical symptoms.⁴

The impact of having a missing loved one also appears to go beyond increased risk of mental health disorders and affect broader psychological processes and social functions.⁵ One study conducted with forcibly displaced people settled in Australia found that in comparison to the experience of being separated from family whose whereabouts remain known, having a missing loved one was associated with more intense feelings of grief, including yearning for the lost person, emotional pain, a sense of meaninglessness and grief reactions that interfered with daily life.⁵ Practice-based insights accumulated by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement highlight the enduring impact of missing family on psychological states, including feelings of guilt, and self-blame, difficulties

with self-regulation, emotional withdrawal and irritability and cognitive changes, including preoccupying worries about the missing person.⁶ Having a missing family member can also affect how an individual relates socially, including within their family and with the wider community^{4 5} as well as their capacity to work, study or care for others.⁶

Ambiguous loss as a useful framework

Ambiguous loss describes experiencing the psychological presence but physical absence of a loved one, and could be a useful framework to consider the psychological impact of having missing family.⁷ It reflects the lack of resolution that flows from not knowing the fate of a loved one, which may limit a person's ability to move through the natural and cultural rituals of bereavement. This can lead to a life lived in limbo and an inability to engage in everyday activities. The psychological impact can therefore be even more severe than that experienced with the death of a family member. For instance, forcibly displaced people from Syria, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan resettled in Germany and experiencing ambiguous loss because a family member was missing displayed greater symptoms of prolonged grief disorder than refugees whose family member had died.² Ambiguous loss has also been described as a form of chronic trauma.⁴

Physical distance or ongoing instability and conflict in countries of origin can make it difficult to search directly for or enquire about missing loved ones. Consequently, families commonly have a low sense of control over their situation, and research has shown that they report feeling helpless and guilty for not being able to do more.⁵ While displaced families can use services such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent Restoring Family Links programme to help trace their family members, answers can take years to arrive

or might never come. Therefore, families face the challenge of making decisions about their future without knowing the whereabouts or fate of their loved ones.³

The impact of 'double ambiguity'

Refugees and asylum seekers with missing family live with a 'double ambiguity', that is the ambiguity associated with having a missing loved one and the uncertainty that arises from forced displacement and resettlement itself. Globally, the high levels of mental health difficulties reported by refugees have been attributed to multiple and cumulative trauma exposure pre-migration, including mass violence, deprivation and human rights violations such as torture; the distress of displacement around the time of migration; and ongoing stress and uncertainty experienced post-migration. The combination of past trauma and ongoing stress can make it challenging for refugees to adjust to life in their new country of residence. These difficulties may be compounded by the experience of having missing family. For example, displaced families may also be vulnerable to economic stressors if the missing family member provided income for the family. Ambiguous loss also affects the family unit, increasing family stress and anxiety. Members may shift to different roles in the family due to the absence of loved ones (for example, work to provide an income, or become the caregiver and emotional support person), which may add to the pressures of navigating settlement in a host country.^{4 5}

The vast majority of displaced people live with temporary status, lacking access to permanent settlement pathways and facing uncertainty about their future. Visa insecurity on its own is associated with increased levels of PTSD, depression and suicidality. However, the effects of insecure residency may be compounded by ongoing fears for

the safety of missing loved ones.⁵ Temporary visa status is also commonly associated with restricted access to formal family reunification migration pathways. If missing family members are found, resettled refugees with temporary status may be unable to access sponsorship programmes or even travel across borders to visit them. Even for refugees with permanent and secure visas in high-income countries such as Australia or in Europe, applying for family reunification is a long, expensive and convoluted process. For forcibly displaced people who do regain contact with their missing family, the joy and relief can be tempered by new pressure to provide significant emotional and financial support to loved ones.⁵

Resilience and coping mechanisms

Families of the missing may be coping with significant daily stress and pressure, yet few studies have examined their resilience or the coping mechanisms they use. One study conducted with forcibly displaced people now living in Australia who had missing family or were separated from their family found that engaging in activities such as work or household jobs helped to distract them from worrying about their absent family member.⁵ Study participants reported that social engagement, religious practices, and other forms of emotion-focused coping (for example, acceptance of the situation) were useful strategies. Formal support services provided by government, non-government, community or health services also helped with practical problems. However, there were often barriers to accessing these services, such as low English proficiency, social isolation and temporary visa status – another effect of ‘double ambiguity’. Taking action to find missing family members by connecting with agencies that provide family tracing services and using informal, personal channels was reported as a coping strategy as it helped people gain some agency over

their situation.⁵

Despite this evidence of resilience, psychological and neuroscience research has shown that the psychological impact of ongoing absence may limit people’s ability to use these strategies. For example, humans naturally develop an attachment system based on caregiver relationships during infancy, which manages threat and stress responses throughout life. This attachment system may be compromised for refugees separated from missing loved ones who are often important attachment figures in their lives – such as parents, spouses and siblings. A brain imaging study involving displaced refugees and asylum seekers living in Australia provides evidence for this.⁸ In the study, participants viewed pictures of attachment (for example, a mother with a child) to activate the attachment system before viewing threat-related (for example, a conflict scene) and neutral (for example, a street corner) pictures, while undergoing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain scanning. The study found that for participants with PTSD, their attachment system was less effective in managing strong emotional reactions to both threat and neutral pictures, depending on how much grief they reported in relation to their separated family. This was demonstrated in the brain by a pattern of heightened activity in the amygdala (the core region for facilitating fear and emotion responses) and less activity in the medial prefrontal cortex (which controls behaviour and thoughts and regulates emotions). This study provides preliminary neurobiological evidence that separation grief interferes with intrinsic attachment-related stress coping systems for refugees and asylum seekers. How the attachment system specifically affects forcibly displaced people with missing family is unknown, but it is likely to involve the compounding effect of ambiguous loss.

An evidence base for better support

Despite this evidence on the impact of missing family, gaps in our knowledge remain and further research is needed to improve our understanding of how to help people cope.

A new research programme, the Project Researching the Impact of Separated and Missing (PRISM) Family, is being undertaken to shed light on these issues.⁹ PRISM Family is a joint project between the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Sydney, the University of Newcastle, the Australian Red Cross Restoring Family Links programme and the International Committee of the Red Cross's Central Tracing Agency. PRISM Family is connecting with members of the Australian community who have been forcibly displaced to understand how having missing and separated family affects individuals and families. The study aims to account for how the capabilities and needs of forcibly displaced people with missing family change over time, particularly if families are reconnected, reunited or information regarding the fate of a missing family member comes to light.

Building an evidence base through PRISM Family will provide critical information to develop and direct services that support forcibly displaced people to navigate the painful complexity of having missing family, particularly if they live with double ambiguity. This knowledge will drive advocacy efforts for policies that uphold the protection, health and wellbeing of forcibly displaced people, including optimising reunification pathways if families of the missing are reconnected with their loved ones.

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Strengthening State collaboration to prevent and resolve cases of missing migrants

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Migratory routes linking Africa with Europe are among the world's deadliest. Recognition of the central importance of States in addressing this issue is at the heart of a new Network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants.

According to IOM's Missing Migrants Project, of the more than 70,000 people who have died or gone missing on migration routes globally in the 10 years since 2014, more than 31,000 cases were recorded in the Mediterranean and 16,000 on the African continent.¹ Another report, by UNHCR, IOM and the Mixed Migration Centre, estimates that, with many more people crossing the Sahara Desert than the Mediterranean Sea, the number of migrants dying in the desert is double that of migrants dying at sea.² It is clear that many cases go unreported, as migrants lose their lives during increasingly dangerous migration journeys, become victims of trafficking, or vanish in irregular detention. At the time of submission of this article, 2023 was the deadliest year for migrants on record, with at least 8,500 reported deaths along migration routes worldwide. This represents a tragic increase of 20% compared with 2022, highlighting the urgent need for action to prevent further loss of life.

The fate of those who die or disappear during their migration journey is rarely clarified. Most of the deceased are buried in unmarked graves in transit or in destination countries or are never recovered. This has devastating consequences for the families and communities left behind who face perpetual uncertainty over their loved ones' fate as well as stigmatisation, economic hardship due to the loss of a breadwinner,

and a range of psychosocial needs. Where these issues are not adequately addressed by States, they risk becoming additional drivers of instability and migration.

Navigating States' roles and responsibilities

Although international law lacks a comprehensive framework of obligations applicable to the specific issue of missing migrants, it does contain provisions relating to missing persons and their families. For example, International Humanitarian Law defines obligations to search for missing and dead persons in the context of armed conflict. International Human Rights Law (IHRL), notably through the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, obliges States Parties to take preventative measures, investigate cases and provide remedies for victims. In September 2023, the Committee on Enforced Disappearances adopted the first General Comment on Enforced Disappearance in the Context of Migration, highlighting that the growing numbers of missing migrants include victims of enforced disappearance.³ Other human rights treaties have been interpreted as giving rise to obligations relevant to this issue. These obligations include clarifying the fate and whereabouts of missing persons and ensuring that States uphold the rights of their relatives and the deceased.⁴ In addition, the prohibition of pushbacks under the *non-refoulement* principle and of immigration

detention without proper registration and the right of detained migrants to contact their relatives or a legal representative are IHRL principles of relevance to the issue. While International Refugee Law does not directly address missing persons, its provisions relating to *non-refoulement*, family reunification, protection of vulnerable groups, and humanitarian principles are of direct relevance to the issue of missing and separated persons.

States have also begun to develop increasingly specific political commitments, policies and practices that aim to increase efforts to prevent and resolve cases of missing migrants. These call for the development of adequate and effective legal and institutional frameworks, the sharing of knowledge and technical capacities, and enhanced cooperation along migratory routes. Such commitments recognise that efforts to prevent and address missing migrant cases cannot succeed without States playing a central role as they have unique prerogatives that cannot be exercised by other actors. For example, the identification of a deceased person is a legal act, usually based on scientific analysis, that can only be carried out by State authorities. States also hold information of critical importance to any search efforts, for example information contained in immigration databases and detention registers. Finally, States have unrivalled resources and capacities, whether pertaining to the recovery and management of the dead, the search for missing persons including through law enforcement institutions, or the power to enact and amend policies and practices that help prevent or contribute to the issue.

At the continental level, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights took a leading role in 2021 with the adoption of the Resolution on missing migrants and

refugees in Africa and the impact on their families.⁵ The resolution lays out a broad range of measures that States should adopt in order to prevent the disappearance of migrants and to address the multiple consequences that such disappearances generate for their families and communities. In September 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe followed suit by adopting a Resolution on 'Missing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – A call to clarify their fate'.⁶ Such initiatives illustrate that, for a growing number of States, ignoring the all too often preventable deaths and disappearance of thousands of migrants is no longer an option.

Case study: The Gambia

Like many other countries in West Africa, The Gambia has been profoundly shaped by migration as a country of origin, transit and destination. With over 60% of its population under the age of 25, the country grapples with high youth unemployment, driving many people to seek opportunities abroad. The political history of The Gambia has also contributed to outward migration. Although the political climate has improved since 2017, systemic issues persist, prompting continued emigration.

In the absence of sufficient pathways for regular migration, Gambians often embark on dangerous migration journeys, commonly through the Central Mediterranean route, via Senegal, Mali, Niger and Libya, or the Western Mediterranean route through Morocco to Spain. These routes are fraught with risks, including extreme desert conditions, overcrowded boats and the constant threat of human trafficking, forced labour and exploitation, particularly in North Africa. As a consequence, many Gambians never reach their destination. In 2024 alone, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recorded approximately 50 cases of families searching for their missing

loved ones. Prominent Gambian migrant activist, Ebrima Drammeh, claims that 1,608 Gambians have gone missing while trying to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean in 2024.⁷ Women and children face additional vulnerabilities, particularly in detention and during deportation without legal protection.

The Gambian government has recognised the fate of its citizens missing abroad as a political priority. In 2023, it became a member of the Global Alliance for the Missing, an initiative launched by Switzerland and the ICRC in 2021.⁸ This alliance, now comprising 13 Member States, raises awareness about missing persons and separated families, influences global responses and drives action to address this critical challenge. At the same time, The Gambia has begun to strengthen legal and institutional frameworks with regard to missing persons and to increase capacity in areas such as identification and tracing as well as border management. Authorities are also working to expand regular migration opportunities as essential measures to mitigate the risks faced by Gambians seeking a better future abroad.

Specifically with regard to missing migrants, The Gambia has created an Inter-Agency National Taskforce on Missing Migrants under the Migration and Development Technical Working Group, which has developed community-based systems that leverage local networks and civil society organisations in order to collect ante-mortem data. These use digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp groups, activist-run online TV channels and Facebook to facilitate information sharing. These platforms help families, communities and organisations report cases, share updates, and track missing migrants in real time. Although this initiative enhances coordination and collaboration among

government agencies and local actors, the verification of information and the support to affected families remains a challenge. However, this approach recognises the vital role of community members, activists and civil society groups in addressing migration-related challenges, raises awareness about migration risks and provides a platform for affected families to seek assistance.

Additionally, The Gambia has established psychosocial support services for affected families and has enhanced its collaboration with organisations like the Gambia Red Cross Society, ICRC and IOM. The National Taskforce on Missing Migrants comprises key institutions such as the Ministries of Justice, Interior, Health, and Gender, along with the Gambia Red Cross Society. For such measures at the domestic level to yield results, in particular, in terms of resolving cases of missing Gambians abroad, greater cooperation among countries of origin, transit and destination is required. This is also aligned with the goal of the Rabat Process in addressing the issue of missing migrants.

The Rabat Process: from recommendations to action

Since its inception in 2006, the Rabat Process, formally known as the Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development, has served as an important platform for fostering dialogue and cooperation among 57 partner countries and key stakeholders, including the EU and the Economic Community of West African States. By connecting countries of origin, transit and destination across Central, West and Northern Africa and Europe, it provides a unique space for policymakers and practitioners to share knowledge and jointly address migration and development challenges. Recognising that effective responses require coordinated action, the Rabat Process has become instrumental in

developing policy recommendations and translating them into tangible initiatives.

By according the ICRC permanent observer status in December 2022, the Rabat Process sought to strengthen its commitment to protecting vulnerable migrants. Since then, working closely with the Secretariat, the ICRC has played a pivotal role in transforming dialogue into meaningful action based on humanitarian principles.

Under its diplomatic initiative on missing migrants, Switzerland launched a discussion on missing persons in the context of migration within the Rabat Process in 2021. The topic was thereafter introduced as a key milestone in the Cadiz Action Plan 2023–2027, the Dialogue’s strategic blueprint for action.⁹ As part of this plan, Member States agree to establish trans-regional coordination channels, share information on missing persons with families (while respecting data protection rules) and enhance coordination to identify deceased migrants along migration routes. A discussion of the issue followed during a thematic meeting on ‘Family separation and missing persons in the context of migration’, co-chaired by Switzerland and The Gambia in Geneva in 2023.¹⁰ The meeting identified critical challenges, good practices and lessons learned in preventing migrant deaths, tracing missing persons and reuniting separated families. Among the challenges discussed was the shortage of government officials with designated responsibilities for these matters, which often rendered transnational cooperation impossible. A key recommendation therefore focused on the creation of a network of national focal points.

A network of national focal points

Endorsed by Rabat Process partners, the Network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants was launched in July 2024 by the

ICRC, Switzerland and The Gambia with support from the Rabat Process Secretariat.¹¹ Its members meet regularly on a virtual basis to sustain focus on this pressing challenge and to catalyse governmental action to clarify the fate of missing migrants and provide relevant information to their families. The network seeks to develop links between families, authorities and support organisations, ensuring that information is gathered, shared and acted upon efficiently and in line with basic data protection standards. It also aims to leverage local knowledge, community-driven approaches and coordinated transborder cooperation. Drawing on concrete initiatives, the network has so far focused on the exchange of best practices carried out by authorities in different countries to search for and identify missing migrants. The network has offered practical solutions and lessons learned and thereby equipped national focal points with additional tools and knowledge to navigate the complexities of missing person cases. The network offers a valuable model for addressing the humanitarian tragedy of missing migrants that could inform similar efforts – such as those in East Africa under the framework of the Khartoum Process.¹² Usually situated in Ministries of Foreign Affairs or overseeing the migration portfolio, a national focal point’s primary role is to receive and respond to inquiries by authorities in other countries with regard to specific cases, and to represent their authorities in discussions on cooperation or policy questions. At the same time, the focal points are intended to act as an entry point for families of missing migrants, including through intermediaries such as local Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies. It is vital to secure participation by relatives throughout the search and investigation process, even if they are located abroad. In order to be able to refer case enquiries when needed, focal

points need to have an understanding of relevant policies and practices as well as the role of different authorities, including police, border management, immigration officers, prison services, forensic experts, coastguards and others.

As of April 2025, 20 partner countries of the Rabat Process have officially nominated a national focal point for missing migrants and more are expected to join soon. Looking ahead, The Gambia will host a thematic meeting with Rabat Process partner countries, co-chaired by Switzerland and aligning with the thematic focus of the Nigerian chairmanship of the Dialogue in July 2025. The members of the network, along with regional and international organisations, will be invited to participate and contribute to discussions aiming to enhance collaboration, foster innovative solutions and strengthen the network's role in addressing the humanitarian challenge of missing migrants.

To conclude, fostering collaboration among States is essential to improve and advance policies, processes and mechanisms given the increasing number of migrants going missing each year. The migratory context presents unique challenges in searching for missing persons across multiple countries, which requires a coordinated approach among States involving countries of origin,

transit and destination. The Network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants aims to overcome these challenges and to offer solutions to missing migrants and their families.

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Should your government wish to join the network and nominate a national focal point for missing migrants, please contact the Rabat Process Secretariat at rabatprocess@icmpd.org.

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Cameroonian women navigating the dangerous journey through the Americas

Ngang Fru Delvis

Cameroonian migrant women journeying through Latin America to the US encounter multiple challenges. Despite mutual support and local community assistance, they face particular forms of violence as women and must develop strategies to keep safe.



The Sonora Desert, part of the treacherous journey north. Credit: Wonderlane, CC BY 2.0

With the increasing fortification of Europe's borders, a new pathway for irregular migration has emerged among Sub-Saharan nationals. Instead of embarking on the traditional northward route through the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean to Europe, many are now opting for a westward trajectory. They are crossing the Atlantic Ocean by flight to visa-friendly entry points in Latin America, then making a dangerous overland journey to the US.

According to the US Customs and Border

Protection agency, there were 58,000 Africans at the US-Mexico Border in 2023.¹ While migration routes in Latin America are well-trodden and extensively studied, the experiences of African migrants on these pathways remain under-reported. This article examines the experiences of Cameroonian women navigating these highly perilous routes, highlighting the risks they face, the support (or lack thereof) they receive from local communities and the gender-sensitive safety strategies they develop along the way.

Cameroon has been grappling with multiple, overlapping humanitarian crises, with the most acute unfolding over the past nine years in the North West and South West regions of the country. These challenges, compounded by ongoing conflict in neighbouring Central African Republic, have led to both internal displacement and significant refugee inflows. An estimated 3.4 million people out of Cameroon's approximately 29 million population are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.²

Fleeing conflict, persecution or lack of economic opportunities, many Cameroonians are increasingly taking this emerging migration route. For most, the journey typically begins in Nigeria or another West African country, where they board commercial or charter flights (with the aid of informal travel agents and intermediaries) to Peru, Ecuador or Colombia. Thereafter, they embark on the northward trek through Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala to the Mexico-US border. The archetypal trajectory involves a long and gruelling trek through several countries. This inevitably includes navigating the Darién Gap, a treacherous 60-mile stretch of dense rainforest, rivers, mountains and swamplands between Colombia and Panama, fraught with drug traffickers, armed bandits and venomous wildlife. At the Mexico-US border, most then endure the brutality of the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts that straddle the border (one of the deadliest regions for irregular migration in the world) before facing protracted detention in US asylum centres.

This article explores how the intersection of conflict-driven displacement, environmental factors, restrictive border policies and the social dynamics of local communities along the route shapes the experiences of these migrants. It draws on remote semi-structured

interviews with seven Cameroonian women, a travel agent and a relative of a deceased migrant, conducted between November 2024 and January 2025. The participants, whose names have been changed for anonymity, comprise Mattha (aged 32), Elize (42, mother of two), Pamela (39), Eposi (32), Jama (32), Ngum (27), Atemkeng (27), Paul (travel agent, 49) and Rosaline (migrant's relative, 34). They were selected through a combination of personal networks, referrals from travel agents, and 'snowball' sampling – in which participants recruit additional participants.³

A journey of violence, death, detention and deportation

A recurrent theme throughout the discussions was the violent impact of migration, with the journey inflicting both physical and mental harm on the migrants. Mattha recounted:

"My journey began with a flight from Nigeria to Ecuador, and thereafter mostly trekking [through several countries] ... before arriving in Talismán in Mexico. This lasted for over a period of two months ... and it was physically exhausting."

Traversing these unforgiving terrains – rivers, mountains and swamps – for prolonged periods left migrants with bodily injuries. Mattha said that "we walked for several hours every day; my feet were swollen ... I thought I would lose my toes... and my legs ached so badly." Beyond physical suffering, the journey was marked by the ever-present spectre of death. Mattha witnessed how "a woman collapsed from exhaustion and never got up." For those who succumbed to exhaustion, dehydration or injuries, there was often no help, and their bodies became silent testimonies to the brutality of the journey. As Ngum painfully recalled: "I saw many people who couldn't go on [...] left along the road to die or already dead."

While trekking was the dominant mode of movement, almost all the women relied on unsafe smuggler-operated transportation for parts of the journey. These were often fraught with life-threatening risks. For example, Elize and her two children entered the Darién Gap via the coastal town of Capurganá. To get there, she and others paid for passage aboard a rickety speedboat. Reflecting on the dangerous ride, she recalled how “the boat was shaking so much, I thought we would capsize at any moment. I held onto my children tightly, praying we wouldn’t drown.” Others embarking on such unsafe transportation suffered a worse fate. In 2023, three Cameroonians died and 13 others went missing after a stolen boat sank off the coast of Saint Kitts and Nevis.⁴ Rosaline reported that “my brother called me just before getting into the boat. He said the boat engine kept failing to start... that was the last time I heard from him.”

Whether on foot or aboard some form of transportation, the women reported frequent encounters with narco-traffickers, armed bandits and smugglers. While some of these criminals offered passage for a fee, many engaged in horrific acts of violence, including robbery, harassment, rape and even murder. Pamela recounted that “when we arrived in Capurganá, a gang charged each of us \$125 to take us across the jungle... but they abandoned us on the way.” In struggling to find their way, the women met a group of armed bandits who robbed and sexually molested them. She reported that “they took everything we had.... they did things to the women that I can’t even speak of.” These violent encounters sometimes resulted in migrants’ deaths. Atemkeng recalled how “a Senegalese woman, who was fighting off bandits sexually molesting her, was fatally struck with a machete.”

Encounters with border controls were

frequent. In most countries, this typically involved migrants having to register and receive permission to transit within a specified period. However, these controls became significantly stricter, and particularly violent, upon reaching Mexico’s southern borders. Recent changes to Mexican migration policy, particularly the suspension of humanitarian passage to irregular migrants, left many stuck in southern Mexico. When Eposi arrived in Tapachula, she was arrested and detained at the migrant holding facility there. She recounted that:

“They held us there for three weeks. You couldn’t call anyone. Every day, we’d watch buses pull up, fill with people and disappear. We heard they were being deported to Guatemala.”

The migrants expressed concerns about forced disappearances during the arrest and deportation process. This haunting reality is exemplified by the testimony of Ngum: “We have never heard from one Cameroonian who was arrested at Tapachula.”

Community support: a mix of hospitality and hostility

During this journey, Cameroonian women migrants received significant support. Mutual aid constituted the first source of support among migrants, manifesting itself primarily in the sharing of personal resources, as recounted by Jama: “We shared everything, food, water, clothes. When one woman had something, she shared with those who had none.” Additionally, they provided emotional support to each other. Atemkeng recalled that “when someone broke down crying, feeling they couldn’t continue, we would encourage them. We became like sisters.” This extended to childcare, with Ngum recalling that “if a mother was exhausted, others took care of her children while she rested.”

They equally met with acts of kindness and solidarity from local residents and community groups. Perhaps the most immediate and essential form of support came in the provision of basic sustenance. Jama recounted a moment of profound relief in a small Mexican town:

“We were walking, hungry and thirsty. We saw a woman selling fruit by the roadside. We had very little money left. She ... offered us mangoes, bananas, a large bottle of water, and refused to take any money.”

Beyond these fleeting encounters, some communities offered more sustained, albeit informal, shelter and respite. Mattha described how, in a rural village, “we were exhausted, with nowhere safe to sleep. A community group, seeing our distress, offered us a space and blankets to sleep.” Community members were also crucial sources of information about potential danger from criminal groups and corrupt officials. Pamela recounted how a local shopkeeper warned them “to be careful in the next town [as] gang members were there, demanding money from migrants.”

Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, some community members actively offered safety and protection. Mattha tearfully recalled how, when the migrant women were being harassed by some men in a town, “a group of women from the market came rushing out, shouting at them.... They chased the men away.” These acts of community kindness reflect local communities’ notions of hospitality and a moral obligation towards migrants.

However, initial community hospitality swiftly transformed into tension and hostility. Eposi described this shift:

“At first, when we arrived, the locals were so kind and welcoming, offering us food, water and even shelter. But as more migrants

arrived, their attitude changed. Their initial warmth turned to cold stares and hostile remarks. It was as if their welcome had a limit, and we had reached it.”

Paul highlighted this solidarity ‘fatigue’ in the face of ever-growing migration numbers, noting that:

“Truly, Latin Americans have shown understanding and tolerance towards migrants, recognising the hardships they’re escaping. However, since the arrival of large migrant caravans, the initial generosity has started to fade in many communities.”

Adding to this complexity, Mattha observed that “there is a lot of racism particularly in Mexico towards black people. They treat us differently from migrants from other Latin American countries.”

Gender-sensitive safety strategies

The Cameroonian women migrants developed a range of gender-sensitive strategies to ensure their safety during these perilous journeys. Central to their concerns was access to essential information. As Pamela articulated:

“If we knew where the dangers truly were ... real information about which paths to avoid, which towns are unsafe for women ... that would be the first step to protecting ourselves.”

The women also voiced a strong need for safe spaces and shelters along the journey. According to Eposi, “women need a space to sleep in a place where you don’t fear, where there are other women, where the bathrooms are safe, and someone listens to your worries.” They emphasised the importance of accessible gender-based violence response mechanisms and sexual and reproductive healthcare. To this effect, Pamela stated that: “We need places where we can report abuse without being judged

or arrested ... and where women can get help with pregnancy.” Equally crucial, in their view, was the proactive engagement of local communities as protectors. Mattha’s recounting of the market women’s intervention perfectly illustrates this point: “When we saw those market women stand up for us ... it gave us so much hope. If more communities could be like that, it would change everything.” Some suggested that governments with restrictive border policies should implement tailored passage for women migrants. Failure to provide humanitarian corridors or interventions often compels women to resort to smuggler-operated services, significantly increasing their risk of gender-based violence. As Elize says, when “they close the doors at the border ... we are forced to take the paths controlled by men who see us as bodies to be used.”

The way forward

Cameroonian women using this route are subject to a number of interconnected risks, stemming from the physical environment, criminal activities, dangerous transportation and state policies that criminalise mobility. Their vulnerabilities to these risks are further heightened by their gender. Despite these challenges, these women have demonstrated remarkable resilience, leveraging mutual aid and community support to survive. Their experiences with local communities powerfully convey the

potential of local community to create safer pathways, especially where formal State protection is lacking. However, the precarious and fluctuating nature of such ad hoc support systems – where initial acts of profound human kindness can coexist with, or transition into, resentment and racially charged hostility – demonstrates the enduring challenge of achieving sustained hospitality in the face of large-scale human displacement. The needs of these Cameroonian women migrants call for a fundamental shift in both policy and programmatic interventions, from generic approaches towards a gender-sensitive framework that recognises and actively mitigates the unique risks faced by women making dangerous journeys.

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Stowaway journeys and Protection and Indemnity Clubs in Brazil

Flávia Rodrigues de Castro

Protection and Indemnity Clubs could play a more effective role in managing stowaways on ships if they cooperated more with civil society to improve humanitarian outcomes.

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) defines stowaways as people who board a ship or its cargo without permission. They are found on board after departure from a port or during unloading of the cargo. West African migrants stowing away are frequently connected with aspirations to reach Europe; many migrants, however, are choosing longer and more dangerous voyages to pursue opportunities in South America, especially in Brazil and Argentina. This migratory trend still represents only a small share of worldwide migration but has been expanding rapidly in the decade up to the end of 2024. Most migrants heading for South America depart from West African countries such as Senegal, Guinea, Nigeria and Ghana with the majority entering South America through Brazil. The country's historical and cultural ties to West Africa, combined with its formally liberal visa regulations, make Brazil the main country of destination in the region.¹

Stowaways who reach Brazil are typically unaccompanied migrant men who arrive at the ports of Paranaguá, Santos and Vitória, on the country's south and southeast coasts. Ports in Brazil's north and northeast have also reported stowaways. In some cases, migrants have arrived in Brazil after boarding ships that they assumed were heading to the US; there are records of the same stowaways arriving in Brazil after failing in multiple attempts to enter the US, only to be sent back eventually to West Africa. Some stowaways seek to make a profit. In these cases, they

instrumentalise the fact that any delays in establishing their nationality and organising repatriation will increase costs incurred by the vessel – and so they are able to negotiate a payoff in exchange for their cooperation to speed up the process.

Stowing away on transatlantic routes, often for months, exposes migrants to extreme hazards. They have to survive unsanitary conditions – and if discovered may be thrown overboard or set adrift in precarious rafts. Still, the increasingly restrictive migration policies being adopted in Europe are making this an alarmingly popular option.

Not surprisingly, incidents requiring authorities to deal with the arrival of stowaways are becoming more common in Brazil, bringing to light the dangers that such undocumented migrants face. In August 2023, the Brazilian Federal Police rescued Nigerian stowaways in the wheelhouse area of a cargo ship, near the port of Vitória, on Brazil's southeastern coast.² The group had been at sea for 14 days, drinking seawater, having run out of food and fresh water after hiding for almost 4,000 miles.

Protection and Indemnity (P&I) Clubs are supposed to be part of the solution. P&I Clubs were created in 19th century Britain to protect commercial operations and to cover a wide range of liabilities – including assisting shipowners to provide adequately for any stowaways found on board.³ The main clubs are located in Europe, and the International

Group of P&I Clubs (IGP&I) operates from London. It has 13 member clubs that cover almost 90% of the world's ocean-going tonnage. Once a stowaway is found aboard a ship, the company responsible for the vessel might face steep financial penalties, repatriation costs and the need to redirect the ship to another port of disembarkation. In theory, P&I Clubs are meant to serve as focal points to help shipowners with so-called 'stowaway management'. In practice, however, the task of caring for stowaways is not always straightforward and requires inter-agency cooperation.

P&I Clubs in Brazil

Brazil has no P&I Club but several international clubs have representatives (known as 'correspondents') there. In terms of the financial costs of managing stowaways, P&I Clubs cover the costs incurred in sending migrants back to their home country and for them to be housed and taken care of until they are repatriated or disembarked; they also cover the costs involved in administering the fines handed out to the shipowners for not stopping stowaways. Another important role is legal assistance. P&I Clubs can provide legal experts to deal with immigration law, international maritime law and port regulations. Last, but not least, P&I Clubs have established a significant network to cooperate with port authorities, Federal Police and embassy officials to support them in their management of undocumented migrant stowaways. Civil society, however, is an important actor missing from these networks.

On discovering a stowaway, the shipowner informs different actors, including port officials, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, and correspondents of P&I Clubs. If the ship is far from the coast, it is necessary to wait

until it reaches the next port that allows safe disembarkation. If the ship has arrived at its destination port in Brazil, the Federal Police authorises admission of the stowaway to the country, whether documented or not, but only under the custody of the shipowner and the P&I Club correspondent.

P&I Clubs instruct the crew on some procedures after a stowaway is discovered on board. These range from a search of the stowaway's items and the area where they were found, to a full health examination. Crew are also instructed to take photos and search for hidden papers or ID and to question the stowaway about their reasons for stowing away. The main concern is to get as much information as possible to help determine their identity. Other measures relate to safety and security such as guarding or reinforcing the cabin door to prevent escape; if the crew believes that the stowaway's behaviour may jeopardise their safety, they can use handcuffs, chains or straps as means of physical restraint. The ship's master is responsible for providing a full statement to the local authorities including the stowaway's data, behaviour and health, as well as the food and security standards on board and the security measures implemented.

In repatriation cases, the P&I Club needs to provide the stowaway with accommodation and food in Brazil, a return ticket to their country of origin, documentation (including an emergency passport), continuous monitoring by a formal representative in Brazil, and private security at hotel doors until repatriation occurs. The length of this process varies depending mainly on any difficulties incurred in confirming the stowaway's nationality. In the absence of any personal documents, representatives from the Federal Police and the P&I Club interview the stowaway to try to identify the correct

embassy to contact. Embassies usually need another interview to confirm nationality before issuing the necessary documents. Only then can the repatriation process begin. The Federal Police and the airline being used will require at least two escorts to return the stowaway. The P&I Club's responsibility ends once removal is complete.

In circumstances where the stowaway wishes to apply for asylum in Brazil, a correspondent from the P&I Club contacts members of the country's National Committee for Refugees. The Federal Police receive all the documentation and issue the asylum seeker's provisional identity card. In some cases, the correspondent of the P&I Club also contacts civil society organisations (CSOs) that work with refugees and they will then help guide the asylum seekers through any bureaucratic hurdles that may arise. In these cases, the P&I Club's responsibilities cease when the Federal Police issue the provisional identity document. This could result in P&I Clubs preferring to deal with asylum applications rather than repatriation on grounds of cost and simplicity.

The need for improved cooperation

In 1957, a conference in Brussels adopted the International Convention Relating to Stowaways.⁴ It has never come into force but international principles do exist – such as the guidelines issued by the International Maritime Organization and the 1965 Convention on Facilitation of International Maritime Traffic (FAL Convention) and its 2018 amendment.⁵ These initiatives lay down the responsibilities of port authorities, shipowners and flag States. They also highlight that every effort should be made to establish the citizenship of the stowaway. Ultimately, they advocate for close cooperation among all authorities and individuals involved in managing stowaway cases.

The management of stowaways presents

significant humanitarian challenges. It is crucial to ensure adequate food and shelter, both on board and during the repatriation or asylum process. Stowaways may suffer health issues from their long and dangerous journey, including trauma, starvation, exposure and dehydration, and may need medical attention. Avoiding exploitation is also vital because stowaways are vulnerable to human trafficking. Moreover, these undocumented migrants may be refugees, and their right to international protection and *non-refoulement* must be considered. Given their precarious situation during long journeys, it is critical to monitor their treatment onboard to prevent human rights violations.

The need to balance the protection of maritime operations with stowaways' rights calls for improved coordination between P&I Clubs and civil society. In Brazil, CSOs are at the forefront of defending migrants' rights in reception, integration and relocation. Given the experience and authority of P&I Clubs in stowaway management, it is important to incorporate them into the model of shared responsibilities – involving State organisations, international organisations and NGOs – that the country has followed since the 1970s.

It is critical to acknowledge several barriers to cooperation between P&I Clubs and CSOs – barriers that are not exclusive to Brazil. The current lack of coordination stems from their different methods and conflicting priorities. P&I Clubs manage liability for shipowners while CSOs often focus on humanitarian work, and achieving alignment across these goals can be difficult. Inconsistent policies on managing stowaway identification, reception and processing add yet another challenge. It is therefore crucial to develop regulatory projects combining P&I Clubs' maritime expertise with CSOs' knowledge in the field of migration.

In 2024, Brazil's northern state of Pará launched a stowaway management initiative, the first coordinated effort of its kind. This included the creation of a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP).⁶ UNHCR Brazil, the Federal Police, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the State Public Defender's Office and the Maritime Agencies Union of Pará collaborated on the document. The SOP emphasizes *non-refoulement*, non-penalisation for irregular entry and non-discrimination. It also seeks to ensure family unity, free legal aid, access to information and provision for basic needs. The document requires P&I Clubs to report stowaways to Brazilian authorities 72 hours before docking (although in practice stowaways may only be discovered at the time of unloading). In such cases, a public defender must meet privately with the stowaway (with an interpreter if necessary) and identify and advise on the stowaway's protection needs. P&I Club correspondents should not attend the meeting.

The SOP created in the northern region is a first for Brazil in stowaway management. Although CSOs remain absent from the SOP, it is a big step forward in inter-agency cooperation, and crucial to building partnerships between private entities and CSOs so that they can develop procedures and best practices to meet international standards. The new structure can help authorities share duties, promote human rights and ensure accountability. This may include developing an inter-agency platform to share information on stowaway cases. It is also important to establish focal points in different organisations. When authorities find

stowaways, networking can help to expedite responses and ensure migrants are treated in accordance with international standards. This framework allows CSOs to address urgent humanitarian needs while P&I Clubs deal with operational difficulties, using a shared responsibility model.

Better coordination between P&I Clubs and CSOs could help improve stowaway management. Meanwhile, regional strategies and national cooperation could be facilitated through South American networks led by Brazil and Argentina. A regional initiative could help P&I Clubs by pooling resources and expertise to cut costs, boost social responsibility and improve humanitarian outcomes for these undocumented, stowaway migrants.

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Engaging commercial shipping in maritime rescue and data collection

Ralph Mamiya and Caroline Abu Sa'Da

Maritime migrants navigate the world's busiest shipping lanes alongside thousands of commercial vessels. Commercial shipping is an important but overlooked partner in mass rescue and migration policy, from issues of data collection to rescue operations.



Heavy commercial traffic remains an untapped resource for sea rescue. Credit: Chris Johnson, Unsplash

Every year, tens of thousands of migrants and refugees make perilous journeys across the open ocean, resulting in a significant but difficult-to-determine number of deaths. The world's major maritime migration routes, from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Aden to the Strait of Malacca, are often viewed as vast empty ocean, yet nothing could be further from the truth. They are also some of the world's busiest shipping lanes, and engaging the commercial shipping sector is an essential step in understanding the dynamics of maritime movements

and supporting the safety of life at sea. Surveys undertaken by the Foundation for Humanitarian Action at Sea (FHAS)¹ shed light on the perspectives and attitudes of commercial seafarers and suggest concrete steps to strengthen partnership between commercial and humanitarian maritime actors.

Why is commercial shipping important?

Commercial ships, like all vessels, have a duty under international law to rescue persons in distress at sea, including maritime migrants and refugees. This principle is most

clearly codified in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) but is also reflected in the International Convention on the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention). Possibly more importantly for the seafarers themselves, the moral and practical obligation to rescue is as old as seafaring itself, deeply embedded in the culture of seafarers today. Indeed, the first international discussions of codifying a duty to rescue arose not from diplomats and humanitarians but from the commercial seafaring community in the 1880s.²

While many stretches of ocean are vast, many of the world's busiest maritime migration routes are crowded with commercial traffic. For example, based on data gathered by FHAS from one shipping company, between October 2022 and October 2023 there were 32,886 vessel transits through the Malta Channel (between Sicily and Malta). During that time, a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) called upon ships to assist in a rescue situation 216 times – an average of 18 times per month. Given that maritime movements generally peak in the Mediterranean between July and September, at least one distress call per day is broadcast during this period. This small data point highlights how important the commercial shipping sector is when considering the issue of mass rescue of refugees and migrants.

Perspectives on mass rescue

When commercial shipping is discussed by the migration policy community, however, it is often either to raise them up as heroes – such as the captain of the *Maersk Etienne*, which rescued 27 migrants in 2020 – or to vilify them as only interested in profits and all too happy to ignore the plight of migrants. In 2024, FHAS conducted an anonymous survey of more than 250 shipping industry personnel, predominantly representing

seafarers (captains and crew members). While not a representative sample, the perspectives gathered provide insight into the motivations and incentives of the seafaring community.

The survey highlights that maritime migration is an issue of significant concern for commercial seafarers: 40% of respondents reported being 'very concerned' by maritime migration and an additional 34% reported being 'concerned'. When asked to rank their reasons for being concerned, the most important reasons were respectively 'the safety and security of your vessel' and 'the safety and security of your crew', followed closely by the 'the safety and condition of the migrants'. The safety of migrants far outranked concerns such as 'the commercial impact of diversions', 'long standoffs at sea' or even 'the risk of criminalisation'. These findings highlight that while crew and ship safety is understandably their paramount concern, seafarers also have a strong humanitarian motivation. The vast majority of respondents (87%) felt that the work of rescue professionals (including coastguards and NGOs) was a 'humanitarian necessity'.

Nearly half the respondents, however, did not feel sufficiently trained or equipped to assist maritime migrants and refugees. Nearly half (44%) called for more training for seafarers on the legal and operational context, with 24% calling for more training on search and rescue operations. (Most rescue training provided to seafarers is for conventional person-overboard or single-person rescue scenarios.) Many seafarers also called for more protection and support, with 63% seeking greater protection from criminalisation when assisting migrants and refugees, 28% recommending more psychological support and 34% seeking more support from captains and shipping companies.

Many commercial ships also face operational challenges to conducting rescues. These range from the challenge of safely moving refugees and asylum seekers from the waterline to the deck (a distance that can reach more than 10 metres) to the reality that ships may be carrying hazardous or flammable chemicals. There are also basic limits to the amount of food and water, and the number of life jackets and other provisions that these ships carry. Even large ships will only have a crew of 15 to 20 people who alternate shifts around the clock.

Supporting mass rescue and data collection

The shipping sector is an essential partner for mass rescue, both in directly effecting rescue and in gathering data. Commercial ships regularly support mass rescue efforts. In the Mediterranean alone, at least 1,001 people were saved in 22 instances of rescue by or assistance from commercial ships between 2022 and 2024.³ These numbers, though substantial, are probably not the fully realised potential of commercial ships as rescue actors.

Even when not directly involved in rescues, commercial vessels' widespread presence on major shipping routes makes them critical for monitoring maritime movements. Refugees and migrants often avoid detection, which complicates data collection and leads to numerous 'invisible shipwrecks' – undetected fatalities at sea. For example, in November 2024, 82 vessels with automatic identification system transponders were observed along Indonesia's Aceh coastline, a key destination for Rohingya refugees. Spaced 20–60km offshore, these ships provided near-complete ocean surveillance, with each vessel's 12km visual range covering wide swathes of sea. Leveraging such coverage to track maritime movements and enhance rescue efforts is a significant and under-utilised opportunity.

Engaging the shipping sector

Engaging the commercial shipping sector to strengthen their partnership in mass rescue can be more challenging, however. The 'shipping sector' encompasses numerous actors with complex contractual connections. There are often several parties involved in the ownership structure of commercial ships, ranging from the registered owner (the legal entity named in registration papers, sometimes required to be based in the flag state) to the beneficial owner (the overall parent company, which may own or control the registered owner) to the disponent owner (a party that takes over the ownership role, including leasing and chartering the vessel, for a specified period of time or particular voyage). In addition, the management of such ships is often handled by specialised management companies, which take responsibility for numerous financial, administrative and recruitment tasks and play a key role in ensuring that ships meet international standards. Finally, there will be the Charterer, the company which has chartered the vessel to transport goods or people or for other reasons (such as cable laying) and this can be for an extended period or a particular voyage, which both require significantly different rights and obligations between the parties.

Any rescue situation would involve all the above parties, with decision-making responsibility, legal responsibility and liability for associated costs depending on the specific contractual relationships. A complex web of insurance covers may also be involved, ranging from those covering the shipowners (such as for 'Hull and Machinery' and 'Protection and Indemnity') to those covering the actions of the Charterer and the cargo itself. Such a complex network of actors and interests results in every rescue situation being handled in its own unique manner.

It is seafarers themselves, however, who are on the frontline of rescues, including the ship master and crew. The duty to rescue in international law is focused on the ship master, who is the individual in command of a vessel (not the ship's owner or management company). As noted above, ship masters and crews often recognise the importance of the duty to rescue but feel constrained not only by a lack of resources and training but also by their duty to the safety of the crew, the ship and the cargo. The level of support they receive from the ship owner or ship manager may also be a critical factor in shaping their decision making.

Commercial vessels operate under the jurisdiction of their flag states, which, under UNCLOS, must ensure crew readiness to uphold the duty to rescue.⁴ In addition, the SOLAS and SAR Conventions establish a system of search and rescue regions around the world, each operated by a different coastal State. National Maritime Rescue and Coordination Centres (MRCCs) coordinate rescue and cooperate with neighbouring rescue agencies.

Effectively engaging the shipping sector requires an approach that understands the wide-ranging concerns of the parties involved without ignoring the constraints inherent to competitive enterprise. Supporting mass rescue diverts resources from core business operations, potentially influencing participation in rescue if adequate plans, guidance and insurance are not in place. However, the sector has demonstrated numerous times the ability to come together to tackle non-commercially beneficial issues, such as environmental and safety standards. Lessons from anti-piracy measures – now integrated into shipping operations – offer a framework for enhancing rescue capabilities.

Opportunities and strategies

There are a number of key elements to be

considered when working to engage the commercial shipping sector for mass rescue. Firstly, it requires uniting a diverse group of actors on a sensitive issue. This requires dialogue, training, planning, engaging flag states on data and building links with MRCCs and coastal States. Many seafarers recognise the humanitarian imperative of rescue but they and their employers are well aware of the political controversies that may arise. This requires an extended and inclusive dialogue, an openness to listen to the shipping sector's concerns, the agility to engage different actors together or separately and assurances of discretion and confidentiality. The FHAS convened such discussions with key actors in 2023 and 2024.

Shipping sector membership associations and seafaring-focused organisations are important starting points. The International Chamber of Shipping (ICS), the Baltic and International Marine Council (BIMCO), the Oil Companies International Marine Forum (OCIMF) and the International Association of Independent Tanker Owners (INTERTANKO) are all examples of important membership organisations which can represent shipping company interests while also supporting policy development and implementation. Seafarer welfare organisations such as Mission to Seafarers are also important partners with which to work.

It is also critical to bring flag States and coastal States, and multilateral organisations such as the International Maritime Organization, into these dialogues. These actors develop the legal and regulatory framework within which shipping companies operate. Leveraging existing standards can strengthen the incentives for shipping companies to engage in rescue-related activities.

Secondly, a key opportunity lies in data collection. In 2015, the International Maritime Organization, the International Organization for Migration and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime jointly established a platform for information sharing on migrant smuggling.⁵ This platform serves as proof of concept that commercial vessels can cooperate with flag States and international organisations to provide information on maritime movements, potentially greatly improving awareness of migration dynamics around the world. Although only a few States, such as the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Saudi Arabia, regularly participate, the platform demonstrates the potential for collaboration. FHAS is working to expand awareness and usage of this mechanism to improve insights into migration dynamics.

Building the shipping sector's capacity and confidence to undertake mass rescue is a third key element. Ship masters and crews may have legitimate concerns about the logistics and operations of effecting rescue, resources for accommodating refugees and migrants, and language abilities and social skills to manage a large crowd. There may also be legal questions regarding which, if any, nearby port will accept the rescued persons for disembarkation, whether this places the ship and crew at risk of a prolonged voyage with migrants on board, and whether the ship master or company may be held liable if their actions come into conflict with coastal State law or policy.

A detailed discussion of these legal and policy issues is beyond the scope of this article. It should be stressed, however, that for ship masters and crews, these issues are not academic; they are life-and-death questions that need answers in real time. For this reason, FHAS works with a range of legal and policy expert organisations to provide concrete, actionable guidance to

seafarers, shipping companies and other maritime rescue stakeholders. This guidance does not consist of aspirational statements of what the law should be but rather what risks, if any, ship masters may face and how those risks can be mitigated while still upholding their duty to rescue. This guidance can take numerous forms, from simple procedural bulletins in crew common areas, to briefings for officers when entering waters frequented by maritime refugees and migrants (similar to security briefings held in areas at risk of piracy), to strengthening the knowledge of mass rescue for land-based company advisors who will be in regular communication with ships during any incident.

Each of these steps is incremental and is only one part of a larger effort to improve mass rescue and to save lives at sea. As part of the practitioner and policy community, the Foundation for Humanitarian Action at Sea views these steps as essential for strengthening the participation of the commercial shipping sector, a truly untapped resource in mass rescue efforts.

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Fear as a weapon of deterrence for asylum seekers: a case study from a Greek island

Aliya Abidi

Heightened border security and the fear it instils are increasingly prompting asylum seekers to hide from authorities on arrival in Greece, with sometimes tragic consequences. Fostering trust is enabling an NGO to help.



Local women with the Refugee Biryani & Bananas international team. Credit: Refugee Biryani & Bananas

The migration route between Turkey and Greece has long been undertaken by those fleeing persecution from many different countries of origin. In the aftermath of a huge movement of refugees that began in 2015, Greece and other European countries invested heavily in securitisation of borders, implementing policies across land and maritime borders that endanger lives. Among the most damaging aspects of this tightened border security, and the

detentions, kidnappings and pushbacks that have resulted, is the fear it instils in asylum seekers along their journeys and after arrival, leading people to hide from services and authorities. Frontline responders such as Refugee Biryani & Bananas¹ (RBB) witness the physical and psychological impacts of these practices on asylum seekers and on their family members in countries of origin or other countries desperately trying to locate their loved ones.

Increasing pushbacks and criminalisation

UNHCR reported that 54,417 people crossed the Aegean Sea to various Greek islands in 2024.² In the same year, they reported 125 people as either dead or missing, although the real number may be significantly higher. Reports from human rights defenders and the press give evidence of repeated human rights violations at Greek borders and at sea, with denial of the right to asylum, in many cases resulting in people going missing or their bodies being recovered.³ Pushbacks, the practice of using force to remove asylum seekers from the territory in which they have arrived, constitute a type of *refoulement*, and thus violate the rights expressed in the Refugee Convention not to be returned to a country of potential risk. Despite this, pushbacks in Greece and other European countries have become all too common and are well documented by journalists and NGOs.

As a result of this increase in border violence over the years, RBB and other NGOs working in Greece have noticed a marked change in the behaviours of newly arrived refugees and migrants. Whereas in 2015 arrivals were keen to present themselves to authorities openly to seek asylum, the current climate is so hostile that instead they fear the police and seek refuge in remote areas. When asked why, people overwhelmingly describe being afraid of abuse and pushbacks to Turkey via the sea or land. This fear is based on lived experience or from hearing about such incidents from others seeking asylum via the same routes. Asylum seekers being arrested and charged with crimes further perpetuates this fear.

According to data reported by Hellenic Coast Guard, 228 people on the move were arrested by the Greek state between January and November 2024 and accused of smuggling, as they were identified as

having steered boats that reached Greece.⁴ In many cases these charges are dropped after months or years of detention and delayed trials, causing more harm to the people affected.

There are also attempts to criminalise humanitarian assistance to people at risk at sea and on land, with a number of aid workers and human rights defenders arrested and facing long, drawn-out trials. Such criminalisation puts constant pressure on frontline workers who face intimidation from authorities and scrutiny for conducting their work, resulting in a withdrawal of many from the Greek islands where support is needed. RBB has so far remained present, conducting community-led support services for refugees in this highly scrutinised environment, by building on acceptance and trust from communities to support highly vulnerable cases of people in distress.

A case study from Chios Island, Greece

Refugees and migrants arriving on Chios Island, which lies close the Turkish coast in the northern Aegean Sea, experience much of what has been outlined so far in terms of abuse, pushbacks and a climate of fear. People feel compelled to hide for days without food and water in the mountains and forests, leading to serious impacts on physical and mental health. Cases to which RBB has been alerted over the years have included families with children and infants, elderly people, people with disabilities and pregnant women, as well as men. The numbers missing in the mountains and forests of Chios or at sea are not known. In some cases, people have reported being pushed back up to 16 times before finally making it to the Chios Reception and Identification Centre in Vial Camp for registration, where they often arrived injured and emaciated.

As an NGO supporting refugees, RBB is

alerted to arrivals who are seeking support and often submits reports to authorities on their behalf to request search and rescue if people are lost in remote areas. In one particularly tragic event, RBB tried to assist three people missing on the island. The case provides a devastating example of how current border practices result in people going missing and dying.

Huda's story

In June 2022, 32 people arrived at Chios Island by sea. Although details of what happened on their arrival are unclear, it appears from testimonies that 21 people from the group were immediately found and taken to the area of registration for asylum, while the others fled in fear of pushback to Turkey. The group of 11 who went into hiding consisted of eight men and three women, including Huda, a 24-year-old woman from Somalia. The group remained hidden in the forest, climbing higher into the mountains until they found themselves lost and stranded.

The information was provided to RBB by family members, who later shared voicemails from members of the group in which the fear could be heard in their voices. According to one male member of the group, the condition of the three women deteriorated, forcing them to remain where they were, while the men eventually descended the mountain to find help and were found by police. They reported the condition of the women and their whereabouts to the police and were told that they would be searched for. According to one man's testimony, this group of men were then detained by the police, handcuffed and put onto a boat. An unknown agency took them out to sea and left them there, where they were eventually found by Turkish rescue efforts.

At the same time, RBB was alerted about the three women in the mountainous forests

surrounding a village called Kardamyla, in the northeast of Chios, by an NGO based on another island who reported that their health was not good. Different agencies and organisations were contacted to try to support them remotely, as NGO workers fear criminalisation if they approach arrivals directly. RBB was part of a response network that submitted missing persons reports and requested assistance on at least two occasions from local authorities, including the police, sharing last known locations to assist, but no rescue efforts were launched.

Sadly, Huda died days later and was found in a field, part of the Agia Triada monastery, in Kardamyla. She had died of starvation and a lack of water after hiding in the forest for five days. The two other women were tragically never found. During this time, and for many months afterwards, RBB offered support to the family and community members of the women, including Huda's brother who later came to identify and repatriate her body to Somalia for burial. RBB continued to advocate for the recovery of the other two women through a coalition of NGO workers, journalists, volunteers, family and friends of the women and members of the Somali community, who requested that a thorough search and investigation be conducted, and for accountability over the incident. Despite efforts from the Greek Ombudsman, no attempts were made to find the women or to investigate the incident.

This story shows how pushbacks, criminalisation, and state neglect in performing search and rescue impact displaced people in Greece in profound ways.⁵

Trust and community support

The story of Huda and the other unknown women also highlights the type of support asylum seekers on Chios Island need, and how NGOs can assist. Having built

trust among refugee communities with lived experience, RBB is often contacted through its helpline when people arrive on the island and are in distress. The NGO works discreetly with a small network of organisations, journalists, volunteers and legal aid workers to deliver rapid remote interventions to help people access urgent aid, including food and clothing, and to give them the best chance of being rescued or transferred to registration facilities for asylum claims. Interventions can last a few hours or days at a time.

In such a hostile climate, trust is a key element and any responding NGO must learn how to gather essential information sensitively from people already scared and in distress. The information is then used to submit an urgent report to the relevant bodies informing them of the arrival and requesting search and rescue. Reporting through official channels in this manner has proven to be useful in reducing the risks of pushbacks as it means there is some accountability over those involved in these practices. Where appropriate, it can also be helpful to publicise the situation on social media and via journalists and to inform human rights groups in the hope that greater publicity will prevent pushbacks. Over the years the RBB helpline has helped countless arrivals find the reception centre on the island and been a trusted source of information and support. Challenges occur if the emergency services are unable to find people and refuse to perform an advanced search and rescue mission, however, as aid workers risk criminalisation if they approach arrivals directly.

In this highly sensitive environment, RBB advocates for an accompaniment model of assistance, meaning that the holistic needs of refugees and migrants are considered, even after the incident which led them to contact

RBB. An accompaniment model, particularly in the context of healthcare and social justice, involves organisations or individuals 'walking alongside' those they serve, offering support, resources and advocacy, rather than simply providing services. The aim is to be flexible and responsive to the unique needs of individuals, acting as partners in responding to those needs. Accompaniment de-centres the role of the external NGO worker and centres the experience of the person facing the challenge and their surrounding community. In many situations, NGOs work independently of existing community networks, however RBB has found that these networks are an invaluable support to people in distress. Especially in the case of missing persons, connecting with community can provide information about last known locations, as well as offering family members much needed comfort and moral support. Members of the community help with interpretation, information sharing and awareness raising, and RBB becomes part of the community response to the crisis, working in a trusted relationship with affected people. Accompaniment prioritises respecting the decisions people take for themselves, and therefore RBB assists in taking testimonies of violations if the affected person wishes either to pursue a legal route, or to use their experiences to raise awareness of the issues among the public. While there may be few tangible outcomes to simply recording an individual testimony, the practice of ensuring people have some access to justice enables them to feel less invisible within a system that overwhelmingly removes their agency.

Recommendations

Frontline NGOs such as RBB witness the full impact that border violence has on the lives of refugees and migrants on arrival and are often in touch with affected families of victims long after the event. The lack of

state response towards missing persons in Greece and across European borders causes long-term and irreparable harm to family members who may never know how or where their loved ones have died, and causes devastating moral injury to the frontline workers who feel they have not been able to carry out their duty of care towards people in distress.

There is an urgent need for an increase in search and rescue efforts in border areas, especially when information is reported, regardless of the legal status of the individual. NGOs should be allowed to operate without intimidation from authorities, and funding bodies should look towards frontline NGOs who can be enabled to provide crisis response in a framework that centres community-led care and holistic support for the people affected. Finally, the need for human rights observers along border areas has never been more crucial

to ensure pushbacks are not conducted unlawfully and are witnessed and reported for effective accountability.

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Refugee Biriyani & Bananas is a female-led grassroots initiative with volunteers from refugee and migrant communities. The case study in this article was generously shared through testimony from affected persons.

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Navigating choppy seas: challenges to civil search and rescue

Anna Bowen

A joint operation on the *Ocean Viking* seeks to save lives and protect the rights of migrants and refugees. But the regulatory challenges it faces highlight the need for a more conducive environment for humanitarian action.

*On the shore of death, your journey ended.
Your little heart, still unripe, could not endure.
It was filled with love, overflowing until the very last breath.
You left, my beautiful one, my little one.
Your gentle voice has vanished forever,
Leaving behind a father, a mother, and a sister – Lost, wandering between sea and sky.
How could your kind heart leave your dear ones suddenly?
You bore the hardship of travel, the cruelty of the waves – All for what?
For a dignified life.
Yes, you have found it now, Rahaf. You are in eternal bliss.
May your soul rest in peace, my love.*

A father's tribute to his 7-year-old daughter, who died during an emergency medical evacuation from the *Ocean Viking* in the Central Mediterranean, 28th January 2025.

In January 2025, a family of four was among a group of 92 people who were rescued from a boat in distress in the Central Mediterranean Sea, near Malta. They were brought on board the search and rescue ship, the *Ocean Viking*. But before reaching the allocated disembarkation point, the seven-year-old daughter, who had an underlying heart condition, went into cardiac arrest. After failed attempts to revive her on board, the rescue team called for her to be airlifted to a hospital in Malta. Tragically, she did not survive the journey. In her father's tribute to her, he asked, *"You bore the hardship of travel, the cruelty of the waves – All for what?"*

Sadly, she was not the first child to lose their life in avoidable circumstances at sea. Nor will she be the last.

Alarmingly high numbers of people are dying and going missing on what the International Organization for Migration (IOM) calls "the deadliest known migration route in the world", the Central Mediterranean crossing between North Africa and Italy. Since the establishment of IOM's Missing Migrants Project in 2014, more than 31,700 deaths and disappearances have been recorded in the Mediterranean, with approximately 24,600 of these being in the Central Mediterranean Sea (and 2,475 in 2024 alone).¹ In reality,

it is likely there are more. These figures include children, many of whom are unaccompanied.²

There are international legal obligations on coastal States to provide search and rescue (SAR) services and on ships' flag States to render assistance to persons in distress at sea (regardless of the nationality or status of such persons or the circumstances in which they are found) and to disembark survivors in a place of safety.³ However, people continue to die and there is no coordinated SAR mechanism in place to prevent deaths and save lives across the Mediterranean Basin. This would suggest that the current legal and operational frameworks are failing to provide adequate support to those in need and to prevent loss of lives in the Mediterranean.

In an attempt to help fill the gap in humanitarian response to assist and rescue persons in distress at sea, in 2021 the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) joined the European maritime-humanitarian organisation SOS MEDITERRANEE on board their vessel, the *Ocean Viking*. This is an operational partnership that has served as both a civil search and rescue operation (SOS MEDITERRANEE oversees the SAR component) and a Humanitarian Service Point⁴ at sea, with IFRC offering relief, protection, and health services to people rescued in the Central Mediterranean. Nevertheless, current SAR efforts and support to survivors are not enough on their own. People will continue to die and go missing if efforts are not made to address the structural conditions that contribute to their vulnerability (and, ultimately, their decision to move).

Many states' current focus on securitisation and externalisation in the approach to migration is making this work increasingly challenging. The emphasis on border

security, deterrence and cooperation with third countries to intercept and return migrants has seemingly overshadowed humanitarian considerations and the protection of human rights. This approach has also included the criminalisation of humanitarian assistance to migrants in an irregular situation, making it difficult for humanitarian organisations to continue their life-saving work.

A complex regulatory environment

Along the Central Mediterranean migration route, the lack of protection for people on the move poses serious threats to their lives – the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has spoken of a “lethal disregard for desperate people”.⁵ An increasingly complex regulatory environment in the EU, along with bilateral agreements with countries of transit and origin, are exacerbating the risks and vulnerabilities faced by people on the move, particularly those taking ‘irregular’ routes.

Through the operation on the *Ocean Viking*, the IFRC and SOS MEDITERRANEE have experienced, first hand, the impacts of current policies on SAR and disembarkation activities, including the implications for civil SAR operations and the protection threats to migrants and refugees.

For instance, state-level restrictions on secondary rescues – including the sequence of requirements to secure authorisation to perform such rescues and the limited accessibility of the relevant maritime authorities at these times – have reduced the *Ocean Viking's* capacity to save lives in the search and rescue zone.⁶ The allocation of distant ports for disembarkation has also limited this capacity and inflated the operational budget of the *Ocean Viking*. In 2023, the ship travelled more than 21,000 additional kilometres to reach 13 distant ports, rather than disembarking in the closest places of safety. This is estimated

to have cost an extra EUR 500,000 in fuel.

In addition, the *Ocean Viking* has been the target of confrontational coastguard practices on several occasions, which have posed risks to the safety of crew and survivors. These challenges have been compounded by complicated maritime safety specifications, as well as penalties for non-compliance, including fines, detainment of crews and impoundment of vessels.

In February 2024, the *Ocean Viking* received a detention order from Italian authorities following the disembarkation of 261 survivors in Brindisi. The legal team representing SOS MEDITERRANEE challenged the constitutionality of the regulatory framework used to determine this matter (the 2023 Piantadosi Decree, Decree Law No. 1/2023), arguing that it violated fundamental rights and principles of proportionality and reasonableness.⁷ The judge of the Court of Brindisi referred the case to Italy's Constitutional Court, questioning the legitimacy of the decree itself. It is a legal challenge that underscores the tension between humanitarian imperatives and current regulatory frameworks.⁸

Meanwhile, externalisation of the EU's migration management, exemplified by agreements with countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania, further complicates the situation. This was most recently illustrated by the implementation in October 2024 of the Italy-Albania Protocol.⁹ The Protocol has been subject to significant, ongoing operational and legal challenges, focused on its implications for the human rights of refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants. Concerns have also been raised by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights.

At the same time, the EU's Facilitation Directive, which criminalises the act of

assisting someone's unauthorised entry, transit, and stay, has been used to prosecute individuals and organisations providing humanitarian aid to such migrants. To ensure that humanitarian actors – including the crew of the *Ocean Viking* – are able to perform their principled, life-saving work effectively, an explicit and binding humanitarian exemption will need to be included in the directive.

Towards a new EU framework for SAR

Despite the current situation, there is reason to be hopeful. The European Commission and Parliament have both recognised the need for greater search and rescue capacities and improved coordination among actors present at sea. As part of the Commission's call for the establishment of a more structured, reliable, and sustainable SAR framework that aligns with EU and international standards,¹⁰ Member States and Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), have been urged to enhance proactive SAR operations by deploying sufficient vessels, equipment and personnel along key routes, ensuring an effective response to distress situations.¹¹ In addition, the European Parliament has called for the establishment of a comprehensive EU SAR mission, implemented by national authorities and Frontex, to ensure a coordinated approach to saving lives at sea.

These calls have been made alongside the adoption, in 2024, of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which aims to establish a common EU system to manage migration and asylum. The Pact offers a critical opportunity to improve the situation, however its effectiveness in saving lives and reducing humanitarian needs, or alternatively worsening the situation, will depend on how it is implemented.

As negotiations on implementation measures continue, the IFRC and other organisations

working with migrants and refugees continue to highlight the humanitarian imperative of their operations, focusing on the provision of essential support to people on the move.

Final thoughts

The IFRC-SOS MEDITERRANEE operation on the *Ocean Viking* exemplifies the humanitarian imperative to save lives and protect the rights of migrants and refugees. However, the regulatory challenges faced by civil SAR operations in the Central Mediterranean highlight the need for a more conducive environment for principled humanitarian action. This would entail enhanced coordination and cooperation among EU Member States, NGOs, and international organisations – including clear communications protocols and standardised procedures – to facilitate fair and efficient SAR operations and disembarkation practices. In parallel, more safe and legal pathways for migrants could help to reduce the reliance on dangerous seas routes and further prevent the loss of lives at sea.

Rahaf's father asked, *"You bore the hardship of travel, the cruelty of the waves – All for what?"* His answer was, *"For a dignified life."* It is for the sake of people like Rahaf, and the many boys, girls, men and women facing the same fate in the Mediterranean, that we must together strive to improve the protection of people and the provision of assistance needed to save lives at sea.

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The views expressed in this article belong to the author and not the author's employer, its affiliates, or employees.

1. IOM's Missing Migrants Project tracks incidents involving migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, who have died or gone missing in the process of migration towards an international destination bit.ly/iom-mediterranean
2. Since the IFRC partnered with SOS MEDITERRANEE in September 2021 (and up to end-January 2025), approximately 2,054 children have been rescued by the Ocean Viking, 1,630 of whom were unaccompanied.
3. Regulated generally in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982); regulated more specifically in two IMO treaties, the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS Convention, 1974) and the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention, 1979).
4. bit.ly/humanitarian-service-points
5. OHCHR (2021) "Lethal Disregard": Search and rescue and the protection of migrants in the central Mediterranean Sea
6. All rescues are made in consultation with the relevant country's maritime authorities. Italian law requires the OV to immediately head to the 'place of safety' nominated by their maritime authorities as soon as a rescue is made. That means that they cannot – unless expressly permitted/authorised – respond to any subsequent distress calls.
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From criminalisation to bureaucratisation: State obstruction at sea

Marc Tilley

States increasingly rely on bureaucratic measures to obstruct search and rescue, marking an evolution in the criminalisation of solidarity. This threatens humanitarian efforts, contravenes international obligations and places greater burdens on commercial shipping.

In the context of migration governance and humanitarian assistance, criminalisation refers to the use of criminal law to penalise individuals and organisations providing support to migrants, often under charges such as facilitating irregular entry or aiding illegal migration. This approach has been widely used by States to prosecute search and rescue (SAR) NGOs, humanitarian workers and civil society actors engaged in acts of solidarity with migrants.

In contrast, ‘administerisation’ – also referred to as bureaucratisation – denotes the strategic deployment of administrative and regulatory measures to obstruct SAR operations and humanitarian assistance without resorting to formal criminal proceedings. These measures include excessive licensing requirements, arbitrary port closures, vessel detentions under the guise of safety inspections and financial penalties, all of which create operational and legal uncertainty for NGOs. While criminalisation entails direct legal prosecution and carries the risk of imprisonment, bureaucratisation circumvents the legal safeguards of criminal law by imposing indirect but equally obstructive regulatory constraints, enabling States to deter SAR activities while avoiding legal scrutiny and public backlash. The shift from criminalisation to bureaucratisation represents an evolution

in State tactics, allowing for sustained suppression of humanitarian actors under a veneer of legal legitimacy. It has profound implications for both humanitarian law and the broader maritime sector, directly and indirectly delegating migration governance to administrative bodies and effectively diminishing access to traditional legal rights and remedies available for criminal proceedings.

The evolution of criminalisation

The criminalisation of humanitarian actors in Europe has been largely shaped by two main drivers: first, the lack of European solidarity regarding the equitable redistribution of new arrivals on EU territory, in addition to the resources required to ensure humane reception conditions; and second, a resurgence of anti-immigration sentiment across political and public discourse, exacerbated by the so-called 2015 refugee crisis. Research from the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) has documented a steady increase in the criminalisation of individuals providing assistance to migrants, particularly since 2015. Between 2015 and 2019, at least 171 people in 13 EU Member States faced legal action for acts of solidarity, including individuals who provided food, shelter or transport; these legal actions principally targeted SAR operations in the Central Mediterranean corridor between North

Africa and Southern European States, where the highest number of crossings occurred during this period.¹

The most notable example of criminalisation occurred in 2017, when the *Luventa* case exemplified this misuse of criminal law to suppress humanitarian search and rescue operations. Relying on politicised evidence, procedural irregularities and the deliberate misuse of legal provisions, Italian authorities accused the crew of the ship *Luventa* and SAR NGOs of facilitating irregular migration.² After a seven-year legal battle, which saw multiple delays due to lack of evidence and serious procedural shortcomings, the Court of Trapani dismissed all charges on 19th April 2024.³ The prosecution had failed to properly notify defendants of critical procedural stages, undermining their right to defence. Preliminary hearings remained closed to independent observers despite public leaks of defendants' identities, violating fair trial standards. The Italian Ministry of the Interior, acting as a civil plaintiff, submitted unsubstantiated claims of human trafficking, which the judge later informally struck from the record. Wiretapped communications were used without adequate legal justification, and key evidence was mistranslated, prejudicing the case against SAR workers. The State also sought excessive penalties under Article 12 of the Immigration Act, imposing aggravating factors that disproportionately increased sentences despite the absence of any financial gain or harm to migrants.

Italian authorities weaponised Article 12 and the EU Facilitators Package to criminalise SAR efforts, exploiting vague legal definitions and the discretionary nature of the Package's humanitarian exemption to selectively target rescue workers.⁴ The territorial restrictions of this humanitarian exemption meant that assistance provided before migrants

set foot on Italian soil was not protected, despite clear obligations under international maritime and human rights law. In doing so, Italy effectively circumvented international rescue obligations while simultaneously reinforcing its pushback policies. A pending European Court of Justice ruling may clarify that humanitarian assistance is not a crime, but this case highlights the broader trend of authorities manipulating legal frameworks to suppress civil society action.⁵

Obstruction by bureaucracy

In recent years, States have increasingly turned to administrative measures to obstruct SAR activities. Rather than criminalising SAR NGOs outright, governments have introduced complex compliance requirements, imposed arbitrary port restrictions and seized vessels under the pretext of safety regulations. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) has documented more than 50 cases of SAR ships being detained, prevented from sailing or subjected to excessive inspections under national maritime laws in the period between 2018 and 2020. Italy's *Piantedosi Decree* (Decree Law No. 1/2023),⁶ for instance, mandates that NGO vessels must head directly to designated ports after each rescue, effectively limiting their ability to conduct multiple rescues in a single mission, and being subject to discriminately stringent port inspections. While legitimate environmental and safety concerns merit regulatory scrutiny, the discriminatory and lengthy nature of such inspections disproportionately and systematically targeting NGO vessels – an infinitesimally small component of the shipping fleet sailing to and from Italy and Malta – is a clear indication of ulterior political motives designed to reduce their time at sea rescuing and disembarking migrants.

This bureaucratisation of obstruction has had severe consequences. Legal and logistical hurdles have resulted in fewer

NGO vessels being able to operate in the Mediterranean. As of the end of 2024, only a handful of vessels and reconnaissance aircraft remained active, compared with the 41 that were deployed at the height of SAR operations in 2018. Many of these ships are regularly blocked in port due to administrative proceedings, while others have been forced to suspend operations due to financial and legal uncertainties. Among the latter are MSF's *Geo Barents* which ended operations in December 2024, attributing this to persistent repression by Italian authorities, which saw their vessel detained in port for 160 days in the previous two years, including an episode in June 2023 when they were instructed to sail to La Spezia in the north of Italy to disembark 13 survivors, despite having capacity to carry up to 600 rescued people.⁷ Similarly, the Italian Civil Aviation Authority has further restricted reconnaissance missions by imposing bans on NGO aircraft, severely limiting aerial SAR capabilities which have proved essential to sighting vessels in distress and coordinating a timely response.

Another such example was the Maltese trial against Claus Peter Reisch, the captain of the NGO rescue ship *Lifeline* following the rescue and disembarkation of 234 people in Malta. The case hinged on allegations that the vessel was improperly registered and lacked the required operating licences to conduct search and rescue. Authorities argued that the ship's International Certificate for Pleasure Craft, issued in the Netherlands, did not equate to official registration under Dutch law. The prosecution claimed that the vessel lacked a recognised flag State, rendering its operations illegal. Additionally, authorities invoked Article 4(2)(a) of Malta's Ports and Shipping Act, which prohibits vessels from engaging in commercial activities without a valid licence. The court found that *Lifeline* was operating in Maltese

territorial waters without the necessary authorisation, even though it was conducting humanitarian SAR missions rather than commercial transport. The prosecution's focus on licensing requirements, typically applied to commercial maritime operations, demonstrates how regulatory frameworks were repurposed to uniquely target SAR NGOs. This technical interpretation of flag State requirements served as the basis for seizing the ship for over a year, allowing it to fall into a state of extreme disrepair through lack of adequate maintenance; upon Captain Reisch's eventual acquittal more than a year later, the *Lifeline* was no longer deemed sufficiently maintained for operational activities, forcing its sale and the search for a new vessel, at considerable cost to the NGO. Despite losing their case on appeal, Maltese authorities had achieved their punitive goal against human rights defenders in the Mediterranean.⁸

Rise in deaths and erosion of rights

The withdrawal of SAR vessels has been directly linked to an increase in deaths at sea. According to the International Organization for Migration's Missing Migrants Project, over 29,800 people died or went missing in the Mediterranean between 2014 and May 2024, making it the deadliest known migration route in the world. The correlation between reduced SAR capacity and rising fatalities is stark. As State-imposed administrative and legal barriers forced the gradual withdrawal of SAR ships, mortality rates rose sharply, despite a significant decline in overall crossings. The absence of dedicated humanitarian vessels does not stop people from attempting to cross; rather, it increases the likelihood that they will perish before reaching safety. With fewer SAR NGOs operating in the Mediterranean, commercial ships are increasingly being called upon to fill the gap, shouldering the burden of life-saving operations that they are neither

equipped nor trained for. This has placed immense pressure on the shipping industry, forcing vessel operators and their crews into legal and logistical dilemmas that could have far-reaching economic consequences.

The trend towards bureaucratisation also raises serious concerns about the erosion of fundamental rights. The European Court of Justice has ruled that port State inspections must be justified by clear safety concerns and not used as a means to obstruct SAR activities.⁹ Nevertheless, national authorities continue to exploit regulatory frameworks to hinder rescues. Recent cases before European courts highlight the precarious legal environment facing SAR actors, as authorities impose shifting compliance demands that are difficult to contest in real time.

The bureaucratisation of SAR obstruction is not merely a humanitarian concern but a systemic issue affecting maritime safety and legal predictability. If left unaddressed, it risks normalising the use of administrative tools to undermine fundamental rights, setting a precedent that could extend to other areas of humanitarian and civil society activity. As EU Member States shape global legal norms, their use of administrative barriers against SAR operations could encourage similar

tactics worldwide, fundamentally altering the landscape of humanitarian assistance at sea.

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Deadly crossings at the Afghanistan–Iran border

Neela Hassan

The disturbing number of deaths and disappearances at the Afghanistan–Iran border could be reduced through better international responsibility-sharing, holding Iran accountable for its immigration policies, and enhancing humanitarian services at the border.

Iran is one of the primary destinations for Afghans fleeing war and poverty, largely due to its land borders with western Afghanistan. As reported by UNHCR,¹ Iran currently hosts approximately 3.7 million Afghans, of which 761,000 are registered refugees and the remainder asylum seekers and undocumented Afghans living in a ‘refugee-like’ situation.² The Afghanistan–Iran border is fairly porous, with many Afghans crossing informal borders due to difficulties in obtaining passports and visas, often paying smugglers or relying on information from those who have already made the journey. For the majority of Afghans, crossing the border into Iran represents an opportunity to escape the Taliban regime and seek better economic opportunities. However, for some, this initial crossing is merely the beginning of a much longer journey, as they seek to reach Turkey and eventually European countries. After the Taliban’s return to power in 2021, there was a significant influx of approximately 1 million Afghans crossing unofficial land borders into Iran.³

Crossing the Afghanistan–Iran border, Afghan migrants face a number of risks and challenging conditions, including violence and torture by smugglers and Iranian border police, harsh weather conditions, dangerous transportation and lack of food and potable water. As someone born and raised in Afghanistan, I grew up hearing

stories of young Afghans who disappeared after migrating to Iran or who returned with chilling accounts of being abandoned by smugglers or tortured by Iranian border police. Reports by international organisations detail death, harassment, shooting and beatings by Iranian authorities at the border.⁴ There have also been reports of torture, sexual harassment and theft by smugglers. The smuggling networks navigate routes through treacherous mountains and rugged terrain, heightening the risk of casualties from both road accidents and violence inflicted by smugglers.

While the exact number of migrants who go missing or lose their lives at the Afghanistan–Iran border remains unclear, reports from media highlight the escalating violence and abuse Afghan migrants endure there.⁵ This escalation has been particularly pronounced since the Taliban’s takeover in Afghanistan in 2021, which led to a dramatic increase in the number of Afghans trying to enter Iran irregularly. A report from Amnesty International reveals that, between August and December 2021 alone, during the early months of the Taliban’s takeover, humanitarian workers and Afghan doctors documented 59 deaths and 31 injuries among Afghan migrants attempting to cross into Iran.⁶ In 2020, Iranian lawmakers proposed new legislation to impose severe prison terms on undocumented migrants

and authorise security officers to shoot at vehicles suspected of carrying them.⁷ Although the legislation was not enacted, numerous reports have documented instances of Iranian police opening fire on Afghan migrants at the border. The death of over 250 migrants in a mass shooting by Iranian border police in October 2024 – reported by Haalvsh, an Iranian human rights organisation – is one recent instance of border violence perpetrated by official authorities.⁸

To shed light on the experiences of Afghan migrants crossing the border into Iran, I examined testimonies and stories shared by migrants on five well-known Afghan YouTube channels between September 2021 and December 2024.⁹ These channels regularly broadcast reports on the challenges and realities faced by Afghans, covering a wide range of social, political and economic issues. My objective was to analyse how these migrants perceive their journey crossing the border, the dangers and risks they encounter and the types of support and services they require along the way.

Experiences at the border

Given the repressive Taliban regime and deteriorating humanitarian conditions, many Afghans lack the economic means or the time to obtain valid travel documents to migrate to Iran. Additionally, Iran's embassy in Afghanistan issues single-entry visas valid for three months from the date of issue. Travelers may extend their stay within Iran for an additional 90 days, meaning the total stay, including visa extensions, can be up to 180 days. Given the financial requirements for travel documents and the short duration of the visa, the majority of migrants attempt to cross the border without valid travel documents and often with the assistance of smugglers. This does not guarantee

success, as migrants can be turned away at the border or deported shortly after crossing.

One Afghan migrant who was deported from Iran only a month after crossing the border describes his harrowing story of entering Iran through smuggling routes:

“They [smugglers] tell you that you will cross the border with 100% confidence. But once you get to the border, you see that the road conditions are so bad and there are police checks every 1,000 metres. Even a fly can't cross that border, let alone humans.”

Another Afghan migrant described his encounters with smugglers and Iranian border police as the most heartbreaking experience of his life:

“You wish that the earth would open and swallow you alive when you see the treatment by Iran's police at the border. They [smugglers] made us go through rivers and deserts, which I wouldn't cross even if I were paid, but I didn't have a choice. We were a group of 30. The border police started firing at us. I was injured on my head. A friend of mine suffered broken ribs.”

An Afghan deportee, sharing his experiences of arrest and detention by the Iranian border police, stated:

“Afghans don't have anyone to defend them. You can have a valid passport and visa, and they will still arrest you and deport you. The reason is that we don't have a government; we don't have anyone to support us. They beat you and curse you. Afghan refugees are treated like a piece of hay in Iran.”

Preventing deaths and disappearances

Amid a prolonged economic crisis and ongoing sanctions, the Iranian regime's frustration has increasingly been directed at Afghan migrants in recent years. According to a report by the Norwegian Refugee Council, Iran's economic challenges

have worsened since the re-imposition of US sanctions in 2018 and the COVID-19 pandemic, hindering its ability to adequately support and accommodate Afghan migrants.¹⁰ Additionally, both the Iranian government and the Taliban show a blatant disregard for their international human rights obligations which has been widely condemned. Preventing disappearances and fatalities at the border requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that not only responds to the immediate needs of migrants at border crossings but also considers fundamental solutions at local, regional and international levels. Currently, no official body tracks the deaths or disappearances of Afghan migrants at the Afghanistan–Iran border, neither the Taliban regime, the Iranian government, nor any international organisation.

1. Accountability and immigration reform in Iran

The arbitrary nature of Iran's immigration policies concerning Afghan migrants is illustrated by their frequent arrests, treatment in detention centres and the power exercised by the Iranian border police to prevent undocumented migrants from entering the country. The Government of Iran, as a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, is obligated to ensure that its detention and deportation policies align with the principles outlined in the Convention. UNHCR should urge the Iranian government to legislate clear policies regarding Afghan migrants' detention and deportation in Iran. The instances of killings and torture of Afghan migrants at the border require a comprehensive investigation, and it is imperative that the individuals and entities involved are held accountable for their actions. In the past, the UN and other international organisations have condemned the mass shootings of Afghan nationals by the Iranian border police but no substantive

investigations have been conducted.

2. Responsibility-sharing and coordination

It is evident that, given Iran's diplomatic relationships with the West, there is diminished interest from governments worldwide in providing direct support to the Iranian government for hosting Afghan migrants. However, more effective use of existing legal and international frameworks could not only lift some of the burden currently placed on Iran but also save lives at the border. One way to do so is to involve and support other countries in the region to offer regular immigration pathways for Afghan migrants. The global community previously established a Comprehensive Plan of Action to address the Syrian refugee crisis. Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey established temporary protection programmes, offering Syrian refugees the right to work, adequate shelter and housing and legal status. Similarly, the Temporary Protection Directive gave Ukrainian citizens expedited stay, residence and work status in many EU States.¹¹ Despite the fact that by their nature such programmes do not offer permanent solutions, a similar scheme might provide regular and alternative immigration pathways for Afghan migrants.

3. Saving lives through humanitarian aid

Although there are hundreds of daily crossings on both sides of the border, there are currently only two reception centres, operated by the International Organization for Migration, which provide immediate humanitarian post-arrival services at the border. These services include temporary accommodation, hot meals, onward transportation and medical care. Additional services such as mental health support and mine risk education are also offered. These centres are located at the main entry points along the border in Afghanistan's Herat and Nimroz provinces. While most Afghan

migrants use established routes to cross into Iran, the heavy security at key border crossings forces many undocumented migrants to risk their safety by opting for less monitored and more dangerous remote routes. For example, in recent years, an increasing number of Afghan migrants have entered Iran through Pakistan. They use smuggling routes in Nimroz province to cross into Pakistan, after which they typically undertake a three-day journey – two of those days on foot – to enter Iran via the Kalagan Valley in Saravan, a city located in the province of Sistan and Balochistan in the south-east of Iran. By using such remote and unmonitored routes, migrants encounter not only the threat of violence and exploitation from smugglers and armed groups but also harsh environmental conditions and restricted access to essential resources.

As a result of these more dangerous routes being used more frequently, there is a critical need for programmes that offer essential services such as medical treatment, water, food and temporary shelter for migrants. In this context, the presence of NGOs is crucial, as they can not only provide practical support to migrants but also help to identify the factors that jeopardise their lives and offer insights into the number of deaths and disappearances at the border. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the international community has faced significant challenges in formulating an effective response to the situation in Afghanistan. A primary concern has been how to provide meaningful support to vulnerable Afghans while simultaneously holding the Taliban accountable for their actions and policies that violate human

rights. This challenge could be mitigated by supporting local communities and impartial non-profit organisations to lead life-saving efforts at the border. Local actors have strong ties to their communities, which enables them to navigate the social, cultural and logistical complexities of the region effectively. As reflected in many ongoing humanitarian programmes in Afghanistan, local actors can coordinate with Taliban authorities to facilitate the implementation of their initiatives without directly funding or supporting the Taliban or their institutions.¹²

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The end game: risking everything on the Western Balkans route

Laura Lungarotti and Joanie Durocher

Migrants travelling the Western Balkans route are subject to a multitude of risks. The EU and their partners in the region have a shared responsibility to protect those in vulnerable situations.

Migrants refer to it as the ‘game’. The objective is simple: to cross the border into the EU without being caught. Since 2016, the Western Balkans authorities have registered 959,397 irregular crossings of migrants, including refugees, asylum seekers and people in search of a better life.¹ Today, the Western Balkans route remains one of the most utilised routes for mixed migratory movements from the Middle East and South Asia (the Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan, Türkiye and Iraq) towards the EU. But with time, the ‘game’ has become considerably riskier.

At least 400 migrants have died while travelling the Western Balkans route since 2014, with road accidents, drownings and violence the top three causes of death.² The real toll is likely to be much higher: the International Committee of the Red Cross estimates that 87% of those who go missing on Europe’s southern borders are never found.³ The Western Balkan region has dozens of unmarked graves, leaving little information for families to trace their lost ones.⁴

As they move across the region, migrants face numerous risks, including harsh winter conditions, treacherous natural environments and the presence of landmines. In August 2024, 12 migrants including a baby drowned after their boat

capsized on the Drina River at the border of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. The same year, dozens of migrants were injured after falling from bridge crossings between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Violence, exploitation and abuse

Experience of violence, exploitation and abuse (VEA) is frequent for those travelling the Western Balkans route. A total of 19% of 1,350 migrants interviewed by IOM in 2024 reported personal experience of VEA during their travels on the Eastern Mediterranean route (one of the migratory routes of the Mediterranean primarily involving arrivals in Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria), which represents the main corridor for onward movements through the Western Balkans and towards Northern and Western Europe.⁵ In the Western Balkans, violent pushbacks at borders have been routinely reported by various human rights organisations and actors.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, IOM collects testimonials from migrants sheltering in temporary reception centres, which shed light on some of the alleged practices in place at borders. Confiscation and destruction of documents and personal items, denial of access to asylum procedures, detention without food, water or opportunities to communicate with family members, pushbacks through remote or

risky environments, as well as the use of dogs, are frequently mentioned. In 2024, 5,741 migrants reported having experienced pushbacks and inhumane treatment at or after crossing the border, with 12% of cases involving women and unaccompanied or separated children. In 55% of the incidents documented, migrants reported excessive use of force by Border Police officials.

In one illustrative account, one group reported being intercepted by two alleged police officers with a police dog. As they stated, the police unleashed the dog who started biting them, and two migrants sustained serious injuries. They were then transported to another location where another group of masked 'police officers' awaited. During this traumatising event, the migrants were beaten, all their belongings were confiscated and they were forced to lie on the ground while the masked officers stamped on them. After the beating, they were forced to jump into a river and swim back towards Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶

IOM also started receiving reports from migrants of encounters with criminal gangs extorting, robbing or even kidnapping migrants. According to investigative research commissioned by IOM in the Western Balkans, local criminal groups also acted as agents for foreign smuggling groups and perpetrated violence against migrants being moved by rival smugglers.

The profile of people on the move is another significant dimension. With regard to the experience of VEA as documented by IOM on the Eastern Mediterranean route, risk factors include primarily age (younger men are more likely to be subject to VEA than older ones) and the reasons for leaving countries of origin (those who migrated for 'economic reasons' are 60% less likely to report experience of VEA than those who cited 'other reasons'). In

particular, victims of VEA are more likely to be people from Afghanistan, who more often cite 'fleeing conflict' as the main reason for leaving their country and who are particularly vulnerable due to the foothold that violent smuggling networks from Afghanistan have acquired in the Western Balkans.

Efforts to 'close' the Western Balkans route

In 2023, Europol declared that the smuggling networks operating in the Western Balkans were among the most violent in Europe.⁷ Police operations to crack down on smuggling networks were initiated in Serbia in October 2023 and effectively disrupted movements in the region, with a reported 66% decrease in registrations of new arrivals in the Western Balkans in 2024 compared with 2023.⁸ However, an increasing proportion of migrants interviewed by IOM claimed not to have been formally registered as they travelled the Western Balkans route in 2024. To a large extent, the changes in Serbia contributed to a shifting of flows towards the Bosnia and Herzegovina–Croatia border, extending travelling times and forcing passage through more difficult terrain. Evidence suggests that smuggling groups previously operating in Serbia moved to other routes, contributing to a notable increase in violent incidents involving firearms in reception centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Indeed, efforts to 'close' the Western Balkans route have had paradoxical effects in the region. Today, migrants who have successfully navigated the entire route on their own are increasingly rare. In 2023, 11% of the 8,052 migrants interviewed by IOM in Bosnia and Herzegovina reported having used smugglers or facilitators during their travels. This proportion increased to 37% in 2024. Tellingly, the closer migrants move towards the EU, the more likely they are to rely on smuggling groups.

Addressing the gaps

Amid complex migratory dynamics, authorities along the Western Balkans route have demonstrated commitment to addressing shared challenges related to mixed migratory movements, especially with regard to reception and accommodation. However, security considerations have continued to be prioritised over protection and prevention of deaths and disappearances along the route, with only limited resources and capacities invested in search and rescue and in rights-based assistance to migrants, as well as in helping families looking for lost loved ones.

In the Western Balkans, the migration response remains piecemeal and lacks a long-term, strategic outlook. Furthermore, political and operational challenges relating to cooperation in the region continue to hamper efforts to build a more sustainable, solutions-oriented approach to addressing mixed movements in the Western Balkans. However, there has certainly been no lack of humanity and solidarity shown by local communities, which have often been at the forefront of the response in the municipalities most affected since the activation of this route.

From the failure to make safe dangerous bridges across borders to the slow response in situations of distress, recent events bring new evidence of the ad hoc nature of the mechanisms in place to manage migration in the region. Migrants have limited information on how to stay safe during their journey and little to no support should they need help. From an operational and a policy perspective, there are many ways to address the gaps.

Data and information provision

The importance of providing reliable information in appropriate languages, including information on assistance points

along the route, cannot be overstated. Information on safe migration options and pathways (such as asylum, family reunification and complementary options such as return) is also critical in enabling informed decisions prior to departure and during the journey. In the Western Balkans, IOM works with local partners and other international organisations – notably the UNHCR – to ensure access to rights-based information. In temporary reception centres, legal information sessions and focus group discussions on rights and on the risks associated with irregular migration are held regularly. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, almost 1,000 migrants and first responders have attended Mines Awareness Information Sessions – delivered in reception centres – since the tragic death of a migrant due to a landmine in 2021. Lastly, through the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), IOM meets with thousands of migrants to report on their profiles, experience, needs and intentions. The DTM system set up along the Western Balkans–Türkiye corridor enables IOM and its partners to develop route-based analysis. This data has proven exceptionally important for understanding, responding to and occasionally anticipating needs and risks.

Mobile operations

In collaboration with local authorities and the local Red Cross Society, IOM has set up mobile rescue teams to ensure migrants have access to information and life-saving assistance (such as food, non-food items and health care) along the route, improve identification and registration processes, and provide referrals for medical assistance and reception. In some specific settings in the Western Balkans, mobile assistance was the only option possible amid complex and ever-changing political and operational conditions. However, to ensure effective modalities for reaching migrants in distress and the

most vulnerable, a transfer of ownership from international organisations to local authorities and local partners is needed, alongside a more widespread network of local organisations capable of supporting people on the move in various locations and situations. Mobile rescue teams and local organisations can play a crucial role in reducing risks and vulnerabilities for people on the move and providing effective means of monitoring and relaying instances of human rights abuse at borders.

A comprehensive approach

IOM developed ad hoc standard operating procedures (SOPs) for search and rescue missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, following the tragic drownings of August 2024. However, to date, the SOPs have not been institutionalised by the relevant authorities. In a context where incidents involving migrants in distress are frequent, the country – and most of its Western Balkans neighbours – requires well-organised, comprehensive approaches and effective systems to manage search and rescue operations. These measures can help save lives by clarifying roles and responsibilities and the cooperation required during border incidents and by ensuring that rights-based procedures are in place during and after the response to an incident. Moreover, while authorities in the region have strengthened protection-sensitive border management procedures, additional efforts are required to ensure regionally coordinated approaches to tackle violent criminal organisations and reduce the risks they represent for vulnerable migrants.

Political commitments on safe migration

The involvement of Western Balkans authorities has been central to the humanitarian response to mixed movements in the region, but it has also been limited by political considerations, notably in determining responsibility for incidents,

taking long-term measures to reduce risks faced by migrants travelling irregularly – including the most vulnerable, such as unaccompanied and separated children – or agreeing on common approaches and systems to address certain situations, such as cross-border search and rescue operations. To overcome these obstacles, Western Balkans authorities engaged in policy dialogues during ministerial gatherings in both 2022 and 2023. Through the Skopje Declaration and the Jahorina Action Plan, Western Balkans partners reaffirmed their leadership and commitment to advancing comprehensive, sustainable and solutions-oriented approaches to making migration safe, orderly and regular. IOM is committed to helping partners in the region to translate these important commitments into concerted and concrete actions.

Looking ahead

Ten years after the start of the mixed movements in this region, migrants continue to face enormous risks while travelling the Western Balkans route. While the response of local authorities has noticeably improved, structural approaches and solutions are needed to make migration safe, orderly and regular.

The governance of migration in the Western Balkans remains a critically important dimension of the region's EU accession process. The EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans, which encompasses clear objectives to strengthen border management, tackle migrant smuggling, enhance readmission cooperation and returns and achieve alignment of visa policy, continues to drive policy changes in relation to migration management.

The EU has funded most of the critical actions implemented in the region since 2016, balancing life-saving protection-sensitive interventions with border

management and return, reintegration and readmission support. Diverging political views on how to tackle migration within the EU, often sending mixed messages to partners and the public alike, have also had an impact on priorities in the Western Balkans. In this context, political efforts to set up functioning systems to monitor the risks faced by migrants along this route and the impact of laws, policies and practices on the human rights of migrants have been limited.

The EU Pact on Asylum and Migration, which will enter into force in 2026, will provide a comprehensive compendium of legislative instruments and operational instructions for States to abide by – and its implementation will have an immediate impact on the EU's direct neighbours, including countries in the Western Balkans. All stakeholders will follow the situation closely to see whether the implementation of the Pact provides an opportunity for greater coherence in the region's migration management systems, and greater emphasis on fairness of treatment and due process to uphold migrants' rights, so that those travelling the Western Balkans route have alternatives to playing dangerous 'games' with their lives.

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The opinions expressed in the article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

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Cartagena+40: a missed opportunity for regional cooperation on dangerous journeys

Gilberto M A Rodrigues and Luiza Fernandes e Silva

In December 2024, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean approved an update to the Cartagena Process, their regional framework for refugee protection. However, the new deal lacks concrete cooperation measures to address dangerous journeys.



Navigating perilous waterways in the Darién Gap. Credit: © UNHCR/Melissa Pinel

As in other regions, the largest and most persistent migratory flow in the Americas is south–north, with the US the primary destination. Consequently, the main intra-regional migratory routes extend from South America through Panama and Central America to Mexico, where the land border with the US has become the principal gateway for both regular and irregular entry into North America. These routes narrow at a critical bottleneck between Colombia

and Panama: the Darién Gap, the most dangerous route in the region.

Challenges to protection in the Darién Gap

The Darién's hostility stems both from its harsh natural characteristics and from the security risks posed by the presence of gangs, drug traffickers and guerrilla groups. Until recently, only a few seasoned adventurers, researchers and journalists ventured into the Darién. However, over

the past decade, waves of migrants have increasingly used it as a bridge to the north, particularly the US. Initially dominated by Cubans and Haitians, the flow now includes thousands of daily migrants from diverse origins, including Ecuadorians, Congolese, Chinese, Afghans and, most prominently, Venezuelans. This trend has accelerated due to worsening political and economic crises in migrants' home countries, coupled with stricter migration controls in Central America, imposed under US pressure to curb the arrival of immigrants, who, in turn, have begun seeking alternative routes.

Human smuggling has become a highly profitable business, with criminal organisations – such as the powerful Clan del Golfo (Gulf Clan) paramilitary group – charging exorbitant fees to assist migrants in their perilous crossings. While they promise a journey lasting just one day, the reality is far harsher, often taking up to 10 days. Migrants endure gruelling treks, nights spent in the jungle, risky boat journeys, thirst and hunger. Those who suffer health issues, injuries or exhaustion are frequently abandoned by their guides or fellow travellers. Encountering corpses or witnessing deaths along the route is tragically common. The risk of sexual violence is so acute that many women carry emergency contraception (morning-after pills).

A significant challenge for international protection is that migration along these routes is highly mixed, encompassing both voluntary and forced migration. UNHCR and humanitarian organisations view the Darién Gap crisis as a regional responsibility rather than solely an issue for the countries directly affected. However, regional governments have struggled to establish bilateral cooperation or multilateral mechanisms to address international protection along dangerous migratory routes such as the

Darién. This inaction is largely due to the politicisation of migration policies and the influence of US immigration policy. Pressure from various US administrations on Latin American governments has impeded regional cooperation. Bilaterally, Colombia and Panama prioritise national security concerns over their international protection obligations in the Darién, where State institutions struggle to maintain a consistent presence.

CAR+40 and dangerous journeys

Latin America and the Caribbean have a longstanding tradition of international protection in the context of forced migration and asylum.¹ The 1984 Cartagena Declaration expanded the refugee definition beyond the 1951 Refugee Convention, laying the foundation for a regional protection framework. Over four decades, the Cartagena Process has evolved as a governance regime that engages governments, international organisations and civil society. The Declaration of San José (1994) and the Declarations and Plans of Action of Mexico (2004) and Brazil (2014) renewed the region's commitment to solidarity. Although non-binding, these frameworks are widely endorsed by States and migration policy actors addressing refugee and statelessness issues.²

On 12th December 2024 in Santiago, Chile – 40 years after the original Declaration – Cartagena+40 (CAR+40) approved a new Declaration and Plan of Action to guide international protection policies in the region for the next decade (2024–34). However, although the CAR+40 Process updated and advanced aspects of international protection and forced migration governance at the regional level, it failed to establish concrete mechanisms to address dangerous journeys. In its Introduction, the Chile Plan of Action acknowledges this issue, stating: “It has

been observed that people face increasing risks along the routes they travel, such as extortion, kidnapping, disappearances, death, and violence, including gender-based violence, forced recruitment, exploitation, and human trafficking.”³

The document further emphasises:

“Of particular concern is the disproportionate impact on women, children, and adolescents, as well as individuals in vulnerable situations, who represent a significant proportion of those on the move.”

Despite this strong recognition of the dangers associated with some migration routes, CAR+40 fell short of ensuring effective regional action. While the document reaffirmed individual State commitments to refugee protection in countries of transit – aligned with the Global Compact on Refugees – it did not go far enough in establishing concrete enforcement measures. Moreover, Chapter 1(I) commits States to “(d) Develop tracking and registration systems, including biometric systems...; (e) Guarantee timely identification, assistance, registration and referral processes...”⁴ But these commitments leave room for both security-driven and rights-based interpretations, making CAR+40’s overall impact somewhat ambiguous.

Input from civil society organisations

It is crucial to recognise that civil society organisations dedicated to migrants and refugees play a key role in protection efforts and are often the first responders to their needs. As part of the CAR+40 Process, the Technical Secretariat held three thematic consultations that brought together not only government delegations but also other important players, including organisations of refugees and displaced persons, civil society organisations, the private sector and international organisations within the United

Nations system. These organisations were consulted on five topics to shape policies and provide immediate assistance.

In this context, two faith-based regional networks – Red Jesuita con Migrantes and Red Clamor – approved a document setting out recommendations in seven thematic areas.⁵ In addition to addressing the five topics covered in the consultation, the document highlights two other critical aspects: first, the urgent need to address migration corridors in critical conditions, that is, “where people experience extreme vulnerability and human rights violations due to containment policies”; and second, the mechanisms for participation, regional cooperation, implementation and monitoring of the Chile Plan of Action. The Darién is specifically mentioned in topic 6, as a migratory corridor that poses unavoidable regional challenges. The recommendations clearly call for a comprehensive regional response, emphasising the need for cooperation among states to: strengthen civil institutions rather than militarising responses; identify the Darién as part of a broader continental journey that involves countries of origin, transit and destination, thus necessitating a coordinated regional strategy; and establish humanitarian corridors where governmental institutions work in collaboration with international organisations to prioritise protection measures over security-focused approaches.

These recommendations could have helped the Plan of Action evolve into a robust and effective alternative, offering a viable solution to current shortcomings. A well-coordinated regional strategy – rooted in cooperation, humanitarian principles and institutional support – could not only have enhanced migrant protection but also contributed to greater regional stability.

Through meaningful collaboration, States could have shifted from fragmented, reactive responses to a cohesive, proactive framework that upholds human rights and ensures safer migration pathways for all. However, the recommendations were not incorporated into the final CAR+40 documents.

A missed opportunity

Consequently, the Chile Declaration and Plan of Action failed to introduce substantial measures to address dangerous migration journeys through regional mechanisms. As a result, the prevailing response remains unchanged: the UNHCR will continue urging States to take individual action, while independent State bodies – such as national human rights institutions, ombudsmen (public advocates) and public prosecutors – alongside humanitarian and human rights organisations, will attempt to fill the gaps left by insufficient State cooperation.

Looking ahead, sustained advocacy is essential to push for concrete regional commitments that prioritise the safety and protection of those embarking on these dangerous journeys.

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Rescue amid shifting politics in the Central Mediterranean

Eleanor Paynter

In the Central Mediterranean, humanitarian rescue crews working to save lives do so under policies that make rescue a costly and potentially criminal act.



The Humanity 1 carrying out a rescue operation. Credit: Wanda Proft / SOS Humanity

The Central Mediterranean crossing zone between Libya, Tunisia, Malta and Italy is one of the world's deadliest passages. In the ten years to the end of 2024, more than 930,000 people have attempted this voyage, most of them hoping to reach the EU via Italy and obtain asylum or humanitarian protection.¹ Since 2023, when Italy's Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi issued the country's most restrictive rescue-related decree, more than 4,400 people have disappeared along this route.² These risky journeys and deaths are well documented by the International

Organization for Migration and by activist collectives like Alarm Phone that respond to SOS calls at sea, as well as in journalism and scholarship.

Although Italian and EU authorities are well aware of the risks and frequency of these crossings, their approaches to border management have shifted from prioritising Search and Rescue (SAR) to criminalising both migration and rescue. The 2023 Piantedosi Decree (Decree Law No. 1/2023), which specifically targets humanitarian

vessels, has created significant challenges for rescue crews, including these new stipulations:

- Crews can only perform one rescue operation before immediately disembarking migrants at a safe port.
- Carrying out these tasks must not create dangerous situations on board.
- Crews must initiate the collection of information for survivors' asylum claims.
- Violations can result in fines of up to €50,000 and seizure of the ship.³

Since the passing of this law, Italian authorities have regularly directed humanitarian vessels not to the nearest port but to ports anywhere along the Italian coastline. For example, even if the port closest to a rescue event is in Sicily, the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Rome may instead assign a port in northern Italy for disembarkation.

What NGOs refer to as the 'distant ports' practice renders the completion of these now one-off rescue missions much longer than necessary in mileage and time. Humanitarian crews maintain that these consequences are not incidental but strategic: in a political environment hostile both to migrants (whether refugees, asylum seekers or other migrant categories) and to rescue practices, assigning distant ports stretches the resources of crews and puts migrants at further risk, testing the feasibility of humanitarian-run SAR.

In discussing these challenges and how humanitarian groups are confronting them, I draw on data shared with me by the NGO SOS Humanity, which has operated the Humanity 1 rescue ship since 2022, and on an interview with SOS Humanity General Director Till Rummenhohl in June 2024, when the Humanity 1 was docked in Siracusa, Sicily.

Changing approaches

The Piantadosi Decree follows a decade-long shift in the Italian government's approach to SAR. Legal changes and related practice have repeatedly called into question long-established international principles. The Convention on the Law of the Sea requires seafarers to rescue a nearby boat in distress and to deliver rescued passengers to the nearest port of safety for disembarkation.⁴ In 2014, Italy prioritised SAR. The country's Mare Nostrum military-humanitarian operation rescued more than 150,000 people over 12 months but was then terminated, with Italy citing unsustainable costs. Subsequent missions run by EU border agency Frontex were smaller in scope, effectively de-emphasising SAR, despite people continuing to cross in high numbers and despite research⁵ that has debunked the notion that rescue ships act as a pull factor.⁵

Humanitarian organisations were already active at sea but in 2015-16 they grew in number, stepping in to fill this gap in SAR capacity. Initially, humanitarian crews were recognised as a crucial part of the network of seafarers assisting people in distress and cooperating with Italy's MRCC. Since 2016-17, however, multiple EU nations have criminalised migration and rescue; in Italy, leaders have targeted NGO-operated vessels through ship seizure, fines and restrictive laws. Italy has also enlisted third countries in detaining or processing migrants. Especially significant for rescuers is the 2017 Memorandum of Understanding with Libya, which tasks the Libyan coastguard with apprehending migrants at sea and returning them to inhumane Libyan detention facilities.

Related rhetoric reflects the politicisation of rescue. Dominant political discourses reframe what were once collaborations as criminal activities, upholding narratives that suggest that rescue crews and anyone steering a

migrant vessel are smugglers facilitating 'illegal' migration, rather than people acting to prevent death at sea. Ship sequesters carried out under the Piantadosi Decree feed these narratives; under this law, NGO-operated ships fulfilling international rescue obligations were detained more than a dozen times in 2023 alone.

Consequences of the distant ports practice

According to data collected by SOS Humanity, in 2023–24 under the Piantadosi Decree the 12 large and nine small NGO vessels operating in the Central Mediterranean travelled for 653 additional days and more than 261,990 additional miles in order to disembark migrants at assigned ports. In practical terms this means that had authorities assigned the vessels closer ports, migrants would have disembarked and accessed aid and asylum and reception processes more swiftly. The vessels, in turn, could have performed more rescues during the time they instead had to spend travelling past Sicily and up the Tyrrhenian coast to ports as far north as Genova.

Under Italy's reception system, new arrivals are usually first sent to a 'hotspot' for identification. Hotspots are large processing centres introduced in 2015 at the external borders of the EU to cope with record numbers of migrants. If their protection claim is not immediately rejected, they are sent to a reception centre in one of Italy's 20 regions, where they live while awaiting a protection decision.

Officials and political leaders justify assigning distant ports by saying that hotspots where the ships might otherwise disembark are full. As Rummenhohl explained, "They say it's a logistical matter... they cannot always provide the closest port in Sicily, which is fair – there are a lot of arrivals, and the hotspots in Sicily fill up." However, he clarified, the cities to

which vessels are now sent often lack hotspot capacity, and therefore migrants might still have to be transferred to another region to be processed.

The distant ports approach is not approved across the board. When the Piantadosi Decree was introduced, the EU Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern that it "could hinder the provision of life-saving assistance by NGOs in the Central Mediterranean and, therefore, may be at variance with Italy's obligations under human rights and international law."⁶ Similarly, Amnesty International and other humanitarian organisations argue that the practice unlawfully holds shipwreck survivors at sea, delays the processing of claims for people known to be seeking protection and delays access to legal, medical and social aid.

The risks of extended journeys

Migrants who cross the sea have fled situations of violence or extreme precarity in their countries of origin, and in many cases they are also most immediately fleeing violence, threats and enslavement in Libya. In recent years, between 15 and 20% of these passengers have been minors, many travelling on their own. When they board overcrowded and generally unseaworthy vessels, they are already in need of medical care, legal protection and often counselling or mental health support as they navigate the trauma they have suffered.

The sea crossing itself exacerbates this trauma; travelling in small boats across rough waters with few supplies, migrants further risk their lives in hope of reaching safety in Europe. Rescued migrants often show signs of dehydration, hypothermia, and burns and rashes caused by salt and oil on their skin. In the first nine months of 2024, the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) crew aboard the *Geo Barents* rescue vessel treated 273 survivors who exhibited serious symptoms, including

wounds in need of immediate care, or psychological trauma, including flashbacks.⁷ Forcing rescue ships to undertake longer journeys delays migrants accessing the care they need and can exacerbate their symptoms.

Implications for rescue operations

Given the dearth of safer means to reach Europe, these crossings continue, and rescuers now have to keep track of a new set of factors while at sea. One strategy the Humanity 1 has employed, for instance, is to expand its legal resources. Rummenhohl explained to me that two external lawyers on rotation follow each of the ship's missions from start to finish and are in daily communication with the team on board to document and process decision-making in an environment in which the ship's every move is treated by authorities as suspect.

The Humanity 1 adopts a holistic approach to rescue and already included, for instance, a care coordinator, medical doctor, midwife and mental health specialist on board. The team also includes a human rights observer who documents events during rescue and communication or other engagement with Italian authorities or – sometimes – when Libyan ships threaten rescue vessels. SOS Humanity collaborates with other NGOs to document and analyse mileage, fuel and other aspects impacted by the Piantedosi Decree in order to understand and respond to the material consequences of increasingly restrictive policies.

Human and material costs are connected. Longer post-rescue journeys require more resources on board, including food and water, medicine and hygiene products. In addition, NGOs spend more on fuel. In 2024 the Humanity 1 spent more than 36 additional days at sea (calculating the travel difference between the nearest port and the distant port assigned). That extra travel

amounted to nearly €80,000 in fuel costs alone – funds that did not support rescue but instead supported the imposed delay of disembarkation. This effect is, again, strategic. At the end of 2024, MSF withdrew the *Geo Barents* from the Central Mediterranean, saying that Italian laws and policies have made their work impossible.⁸

Beyond humanitarian rescue

These accusations might suggest that EU Member States no longer recognise the Law of the Sea, or that any rescue operation might be subject to legal action. In fact, one critical data point often omitted from media coverage and political debate is that humanitarian groups perform only 10–20% of total rescues in the Central Mediterranean in any given year. Up to 80% of rescues are instead carried out by Italian authorities. In 2023, the Italian coastguard performed 2,123 coordinated rescue events and rescued 106,582 people. That same year, NGO crews collectively rescued just over 12,500 people.⁹

Yet the coastguard rescues receive much less coverage and are not subject to the same policy constraints; coastguard vessels regularly disembark migrants at southern ports with hotspots, for example. As SOS Humanity maintains, this demonstrates that the State does still recognise the obligation to rescue. The coastguard states in its 2023 annual report:

“Providing assistance to people in difficulty at sea is a legal obligation established by customary and conventional international law. Under the SAR Convention, contracting countries are obliged to develop maritime SAR services and take urgent measures to ensure that necessary assistance is provided to any person who is in danger at sea.”¹⁰

Clearly, it is changes in policy, not in understandings of the obligation to rescue or the right to seek asylum, that reshape rescue dynamics.

Recommendations

Saving more lives at sea can be supported by multiple actors, in particular in three areas:

Firstly, dangerous sea crossings and the current challenges facing rescuers underline the pressing need for policymakers to create and support safe routes and modes of entry for people seeking asylum in Europe. The Humanitarian Corridors programme is one such model.¹¹ Funded through the EU and coordinated by a network of religious organisations, this programme has flown more than 1,000 refugees directly to Italy and France. Additionally, reassessing quotas for work and study visas could give more people the means to reach Europe without having to undertake dangerous journeys. It is widely acknowledged that policies that limit legal and safe means of entry do not prevent people from crossing borders but instead ensure that they have to undertake more dangerous journeys to reach a place where they can find safety and seek protection.

Secondly, as these perilous crossings continue, the EU Commission should insist on a return to the collaborative SAR model. Reframing SAR as a network of cooperative partners would promote swifter rescue, uphold international law and ensure that people at risk of losing their lives while en route to seek protection have the best chance of reaching safety and exercising their right to claim asylum. Decriminalising rescue and removing restrictions against humanitarian crews would not prevent every death at sea nor keep people from needing to make dangerous crossings in the first place but would enable the saving of more lives.

Thirdly, media coverage of Mediterranean crossings should emphasise the realities of rescue. The focus on humanitarian crews feeds the idea that rescue and humanitarian efforts are a problem and enables the conflation of rescue and smuggling, narratives

that politicians in Italy and across the EU have embraced to justify closing borders and preventing humanitarian rescue. Rather than focusing exclusively on NGO-operated vessels, journalists should emphasise the broader context in which Italian coastguard ships regularly rescue people in distress and in the process uphold the same international laws called into question by the targeting of NGO-operated missions. Shifting rescue narratives can, in turn, contribute to changing other problematic narratives that position migrants as probable criminals, smugglers or helpless trafficking victims.

The challenges of humanitarian rescue today illustrate how policies affect the material reality of crossing and rescue at sea, as well as the politicisation of rescue. Advocating for safer journeys and saved lives requires confronting both issues.

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On board the *Ocean Viking*: safety, dignity and protection

Matilde Moro and Jordi Cortes Espasa

Protection activities on board the *Ocean Viking* respond to a wide range of needs. Based on a survivor-centred approach, these activities aim to promote safety, dignity and humanity.

For many people, travelling by sea in unsafe and unstable boats is a last resort to escape physical and psychological violence and serious violations of their human rights, both in their countries of origin and in countries of transit. On board the *Ocean Viking*, a search and rescue (SAR) vessel operated by SOS MEDITERRANÉE and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in the Central Mediterranean Sea, protection activities play a leading role in ensuring both that people's immediate needs are addressed and that they receive the support and information they require.¹

The *Ocean Viking* operation functions as a Humanitarian Service Point (HSP)² at sea, forming a crucial part of the IFRC's Global Route-Based Migration Programme. This programme spans multiple countries along key migratory routes, where National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies) operate safe and neutral HSPs to provide essential humanitarian support to people on the move.

On board the *Ocean Viking*, the protection team – comprising a protection team leader, a protection delegate and a cultural facilitator – is deployed by National Societies from a pool of experienced migration and protection professionals. This close collaboration not only strengthens the IFRC's global response capacity but also reinforces its unified approach to migration and protection.

Before heading to the area of operations, the team undergoes training on various protection issues in preparation for their work with survivors, and on specific scenarios that have occurred in the past to help them to avoid any dangerous or compromising situations affecting staff and/or survivors that might arise.

The moment of arrival

Immediately after a rescue is performed, the medical and protection teams identify anyone with serious medical conditions, who are prioritised until they are stabilised. At a later stage, non-urgent medical cases will be treated individually and confidentially.

A registration process starts shortly after survivors arrive on board. This activity is especially important because it allows the protection team to understand the group of survivors and any potential needs they might have. Survivors are asked about their country of origin, age and gender, and any family relations on board. Information on visible disabilities and pregnancy is also collected to enable proper follow-up. Survivors are given a bracelet with a number linked to the information provided during registration, which helps the protection team to maintain confidentiality and safeguard personal information. Additional colour-coded bracelets indicate various levels of vulnerability or any medical conditions.

A significant moment is the Welcome

Speech, which conveys important information about life on the *Ocean Viking*, including rules about safety on the ship, and introduces the teams on board and their roles. This is an opportunity for the protection team to get to know survivors in a more relaxed atmosphere, and is the first chance for survivors to actively engage and help the team to share information with survivors speaking diverse languages and dialects. Engaging survivors in life on board is a crucial part of the survivor-centred approach, promoting dignity and a sense of empowerment and meaningful participation.

The protection team shares the name of the port in Italy assigned by authorities for disembarkation as soon as it is available. This can happen either immediately after the rescue or up to a few hours later, in contrast to past ‘stand-offs’, where ports were often not assigned for long periods. This communication brings reassurance to survivors, as many fear being returned to unsafe places.

Enhancing dignity

Following the registration process, survivors receive a blanket and a welcome kit comprising a new set of clean clothes and underwear, a towel, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a bottle of fresh water and some high-calorie, high-protein food. Survivors are often suffering from severe dehydration and hunger, not having had access to food and drinkable water for several days. Due to rough conditions at sea and the precarious state of the boats in which people travel, oil spills are common, and their clothes are usually wet with gasoline and salt water, a combination that can cause severe burning. In addition, the strong fuel smell can lead to headaches, nausea, dizziness and irritation of airways. Removing all wet clothes and washing thoroughly is therefore extremely important from a health perspective, but

providing new clothes, hygiene items and access to washing facilities also helps promote the dignity of survivors.

Information on the asylum procedure

What awaits survivors after disembarkation in Italy is difficult to predict, and this uncertainty is likely to have a strong impact on their psychological well-being. Indeed, one of the most frequently asked questions is, “What will happen to me when I reach Italy?” Providing information about asylum procedures in Europe and Italy, the rights and duties of asylum seekers and some insights on reception systems is important as it empowers survivors with tools that will allow them to make informed decisions once they have disembarked. Sessions on international protection – organised with a focus on survivors’ particular situations and in their own languages – are a good opportunity to discuss the often complex legal migration system. They also help to reduce the stress and anxiety linked to the uncertainty of what will happen next and allow the team to identify any specific needs.

Awareness about sexual violence, torture and human trafficking

Sexual violence, torture and human trafficking are widespread practices in detention centres where people may have been held during transit. Disclosures from survivors on the *Ocean Viking* and many reports (such as by OHCHR³ and Amnesty International⁴) have raised concerns about these brutal forms of coercion and punishment. Talking about such experiences is often very difficult for survivors, who suffer shame, lack of trust and deep trauma. The protection team organises sessions on sexual violence and torture with the goal of ensuring survivors are informed about the physical and psychological consequences these types of abuses can have on them. These sessions complement other work

by the protection and medical teams in providing psychosocial support and care for physical injuries. Emphasis is placed on creating a supportive environment in which survivors can make decisions about the steps ahead in their recovery journey. The protection team also works to inform survivors about specialised services on land, which can include case management carried out by organisations working with survivors of sexual violence, torture, and victims of human trafficking, as well as other mental health and psychosocial support services.

Connecting families

After many days at sea before rescue, marked by constant uncertainty, the survivors' ability to communicate with their families is critical for their mental wellbeing and that of their relatives. The Salamat service, provided in collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), is an opportunity for survivors to inform their loved ones that they are alive, safe and heading to a safe port in Italy.⁵ The team confidentially collects contact information which is sent through a secure system to ICRC colleagues who, thanks to the support of National Societies in the relevant countries, deliver a 'safe and well' message to families. The Salamat service is a two-way communication channel and therefore feedback from the phone calls is transmitted back to survivors. The relief shown by people when they receive positive feedback on the delivery of their message is a truly emotional moment, showing how much the separation of families impacts the lives of people on the move. Similarly, families who receive the call feel great relief. Moreover, through the Restoring Family Links service, survivors can submit reports about family members they have left behind, or those who should already have reached safety in Italy with whom they have lost contact.⁶

Promoting continuity of care

While conducting protection activities and during any other interactions with survivors (such as one-to-one conversations, medical visits or recreational activities), the protection team and other members of the crew look out for possible indicators of vulnerability. In addition to whatever a person decides to share with the team, there are signs – certain behaviours, reactions or expressions shown by survivors – that can alert the crew that more support may be needed. Disclosure should always come from the survivor, but observation is a crucial part of the work of the protection team. However, it is essential to make survivors aware both of the limitations of services on board and of services available on shore.

When dealing with vulnerabilities, it is crucial to uphold the highest standards of confidentiality and obtain the consent of survivors to all decisions made. Safeguarding survivors' integrity and fostering their engagement in each step of the process are essential to avoid doing further harm and as a first step for survivors to recover from the trauma they have suffered.

Before disembarkation, the team provides survivors who have disclosed a specific vulnerability and have consented to be referred once on shore with an 'information management' form. The form has no legal value; it is a personal document that outlines the vulnerability and any other related needs that might require further attention. The form can be used as a first disclosure to a humanitarian actor to avoid having to tell their story again from the beginning; it is at the discretion of the survivor to decide if they want to use it or not. To ensure continuity of care beyond disembarkation, referrals to shore-based service providers, authorities and other relevant international humanitarian organisations are a core part of

the operation and are essential to safeguard survivors' dignity and well-being

Mental health and psychosocial needs

Survivors face many challenges on their journeys, including family separation, loss of livelihoods, abuse, institutional violence and discrimination. They may have a lack of trust in authorities and other actors. All these hardships leave them with complex mental health situations that often require psychosocial support and specialised services.

Protection staff on board focus on providing psychological first aid and improving survivors' psychosocial well-being to help them cope with stress and to prevent more severe mental health conditions from developing. The aim is to strengthen and reinforce resilience through tools that survivors can use in their day-to-day interactions once they disembark. Through recreational and community-engagement activities, the protection team focuses on activating and maintaining social networks, peer-to-peer support, strengthening life skills and supporting well-being through good physical health. These activities are usually conducted in groups to promote a sense of belonging and community. Psychosocial well-being activities also help build trust among survivors and with the protection team.

Challenges and opportunities

When dealing with protection on board a search and rescue vessel, it is necessary to carry out continuous assessments and be ready to adapt to situations that might change quickly. This includes unforeseen weather conditions and a lack of control over the behaviour of other actors at sea which might require a response.

In addition, the team never knows what the physical and mental state of survivors will be,

and this unpredictability represents a great challenge to the crew's ability to address their immediate needs effectively. Resources on board are also quite limited. Furthermore, the amount of time spent with survivors can be short, which makes it more difficult to build the level of trust needed for survivors to feel comfortable enough to share their personal experiences with the team.

Any unusual or unexpected situations the team faces on board become a source of learning to improve services and response mechanisms. In this way, unpredictability is transformed into a useful tool for learning and improving operating protocols.

Ongoing SAR activities in the Central Mediterranean and providing humane and dignified treatment to survivors are vital and, we believe, a moral obligation. We must continue capturing lessons and adapting our approaches to make our actions more effective in protecting lives and responding to humanitarian needs at sea.

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Separation of children: causes, impacts and mitigation strategies

Magdalena Arias Cubas, Sanjana Bhardwaj, Simon Robins and Jill Stockwell

Unaccompanied and separated migrant children face great risks to their safety, well-being and dignity. Yet there is too little awareness of the specific dangers they face, the reasons behind their separation or how to reduce such risks.



Collecting data as part of the missing migrants project. Credit: Cruz Roja Colombiana 2024

While separation on migratory journeys can be a choice, involuntary separation can greatly increase children's vulnerability to a variety of risks. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab and multiple National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies) are currently conducting qualitative research on separations and disappearances across 19 countries in Africa, the Americas and Europe. This article presents initial findings from

data collected with migrant children and young adults, including refugees and asylum seekers, in vulnerable situations in Europe.

Migrant children separated from their families or travelling alone are at heightened risk of sickness, injury and violence (including sexual violence and abuse), trafficking and exploitation, and going missing.¹ Children can be particularly vulnerable as they may not be able to meet their essential needs, and may be rapidly pushed into harmful

coping mechanisms, including hazardous or dangerous forms of child labour, survival sex or child marriage.²

Separation as a strategy

As discussed below, not all separations are the same. Family separation can be a conscious choice to follow a ‘step migration’ path, where some family members migrate at one time and others seek to follow them later.³ Although any separation may heighten the risks that children face in migration, such conscious separation does allow migrant families to take precautions, such as by ensuring that children are accompanied by other people they know.

By contrast, when separation occurs unexpectedly, children’s vulnerability can dramatically increase. For instance, the data shows that where people are seeking to migrate with a large family, it becomes harder to ensure children are not separated. In other cases, children are themselves fleeing family-sanctioned abuse (such as child marriage) and have no alternative but to travel alone and often with no contact with their family. They may also be encouraged to leave by family members due to the threat of forced recruitment or violence. There are also cases where children leave alone without the permission of their parents.

Separations caused by smugglers

The data sheds light on the circumstances under which separation is likely to occur for children and young adults travelling across the Mediterranean and within Europe. Faced with limited safe and legal pathways for asylum and regular migration, migrants’ dependence on smugglers heightens a range of risks, including involuntary family separation. When smugglers assign individuals to vessels or vehicles for a journey, families may be split by gender or age, isolating fathers from children and siblings from each other. As noted by a key informant:

“[I remember the case of two] unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who fled Afghanistan together through Europe... Smugglers made the older sibling leave the younger sibling behind... and he was looking for his younger sibling... Sadly, he received the news that his younger sibling had passed away... That is unfortunately really, really common.”

Given the high risk of trafficking and sexual violence faced by children, in particular girls, boarding of boats and vehicles can also be used as an opportunity to deliberately isolate potential trafficking targets. For instance, in one case from the data a child was taken from their mother when the mother declined sex with smugglers; the child is still missing.

Separations caused by health challenges and violence

Irregular migration is increasingly risky and arduous, particularly for children and the frail. Sickness, tiredness or pregnancy can lead to families separating, with migrants left with no option but to sacrifice family unity so that one or more family members may continue their journey. As one migrant explained:

“During the migration process in the forests, for example, if a kid got tired or someone got tired and they sit a little bit, they won’t wait for him or her, they will continue. So, some of the other family members will continue with the rest because if they stop or go back to find this person, they also will lose the path...”

Many journeys also involve leaving, or passing through, countries in conflict or otherwise dangerous contexts where separation is an ever-present risk. This is exemplified in the data by the case of a mother whose two children went missing on their journey following an explosion and shooting.

Separations at borders

When groups of migrants seek to cross borders, including within Europe, the real or perceived actions of authorities, including the use of force or the deliberate isolation of family members (such as separation by gender or age), can lead migrants to rapidly disperse in panic and confusion, contributing to separation of families. Indeed, there is evidence that pushbacks at borders (both land and sea) can drive separation as migrants seek to evade authorities.⁴ Children cannot run from the police as fast as adults can, which increases the chances of family separation in such situations. If families are caught by the authorities at a border or elsewhere, they can be deported separately or held in separate detention places. As noted by a key informant:

"You know if there is a group that is chased by police or border guards... they might become split up. Family members might be put in separate vehicles by agents, you know, told that they would meet up with the family at a later point on the journey, but it doesn't happen."

In some cases, migrants have reported that parents deliberately separate from children before attempting to cross a land border because they believe the children will be more likely to be permitted to stay if they travel alone.

Mobile phones and loss of contact

Mobile phones are crucial for planning, navigation and documentation of journeys, enabling regular contact with family, friends and other who assist migrants, as well as smugglers.⁵ There is significant risk associated with the loss of a device to theft or confiscation by authorities or others, and the need to maintain or restore contact through alternative means. As noted by one migrant:

"Because if you go through this route, there's no way that you can escape your phone being taken, your money being taken, any papers that you have will be taken away. So, if you memorise one or two numbers of your family whenever you have a chance to, you can get in touch with them."

Preventing child separation

The study also provides insights into the strategies and approaches that are, or could be, used to mitigate some of the risks.

Awareness and information about the risk of loss of contact

The study shows that many children have a limited understanding of the challenges they may face. Key informants emphasise that dispelling the myth that the journey is easy or that it is relatively safe is a priority. Such awareness raising can begin in countries of origin, framed not by an agenda of dissuading people from migrating but by supporting them to do so as safely as possible, including by ensuring they can maintain contact with families through the provision of both information and services. For example, National Societies operate Humanitarian Service Points⁶ along migration routes where migrants, irrespective of status, can access accurate and trusted information in multiple languages and Restoring Family Links services to help reunite with or contact their loved ones. Crucially though, the provision of information to migrants, both before and during their journeys, must confront the fact that decisions – be it to leave, which route to take, or how to travel – are often made spontaneously, with little planning and with limited choice.

Self-protection strategies

Children adopt self-protection strategies. One element seen in the data is what one key informant called 'invented kinship', where groups of children travel together for both companionship and safety, and

these ‘cousins’ become important to them as the journey progresses. For instance, such networks may be helpful for informing family members if someone is detained during the journey. Their separation, however, can lead to both distress and enhanced vulnerability for children.

Migrants were often aware of the need to memorise or record phone numbers to avoid losing contact if a mobile phone is lost or taken, and of the need for services to help them maintain or restore contact after the loss of their phones. For instance, National Societies along some migration routes in the Americas and Africa, as well as those operating along migratory routes leading to and through Europe, provide free phone calls, battery charging and access to wi-fi for migrants to reduce migrants’ reliance on their own mobile phones. Likewise, ICRC has developed a safe platform and app – RedSafe – that provides reliable information on assistance and protection, and document storage facilities, to migrants and other people in vulnerable situations.

Efforts to restore and protect family links

Data shows that efforts to search for, and reunite, missing or separated migrants present particular challenges. It is often hard to provide details about the separation, as migrants often lose their sense of time and space in stressful or fast-moving situations. Search efforts can be hindered as migrants choose, or are forced to, continue with their journeys despite their separation or are obstructed when relatives in countries of origin are unable to aid such efforts. An example is relatives’ inability to travel to where migrants have gone missing or to provide DNA samples to aid identification efforts.

There is also a need for greater awareness and access to support not only in countries of destination in Europe but also along

routes, so that separated migrants – including children – can start searching for their families as soon as possible. Knowing where to turn to when searching for information about missing or separated relatives remains a significant challenge, especially when migrants are fearful for their own safety. It is crucial that efforts are made to ensure that migrants feel – and are – safe when accessing support.

State policies and practices must not create or increase risks for migrants

Ultimately, these efforts will be limited unless States take all feasible measures to protect children and prevent involuntary family separation. States have the right to regulate migration but they must comply with international, regional and national obligations and commitments, including the protections and care to which children are entitled. Children have the right to be with their family or caregivers, and migration and border management policies should not deliberately or inadvertently cause separations.

This begins with focusing on how the policing of borders can increase the risk of separation, through the action of security forces that disperse groups of migrants and families in ways that make separation likely. Those policing borders should be aware of the risk such approaches incur and be supported to adopt alternatives. States should commit to end the immigration detention of children, and alternatives to both child detention and involuntary family separation should be explored.

States can also take action to minimise the risk of separation faced by child migrants within their borders. For example, the failure or breakdown of family reunification processes may lead family members to pursue riskier irregular options, heightening risks for children and their families. This

makes fast family reunification – among other safe and legal pathways – imperative.

States should also make every effort to determine the fate and whereabouts of separated or missing family members reported by migrants, irrespective of their legal status. States should be supported to maintain and re-establish contact, including through cooperation with concerned actors such as the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement and other States. Every effort should be made to reunite unaccompanied and separated migrant children with their families or caregivers when in the best interests of the child.

The way forward

To prevent child separation in migration, it is crucial to ensure migrant children are aware of the risks they face on their journeys and are supported to take precautions if they do lose contact, such as through memorising or otherwise storing phone numbers; and to support migrant children in developing self-protection strategies, such as travelling in groups and building protective relationships with other migrants. All migrants, irrespective of legal status, should have access to support services, including services to restore and protect family links, such as those provided by ICRC and National Societies.

Ultimately, though, the protection of migrant children and family links requires acknowledgment and action from all actors, especially States. States' policies and practices must not create or increase risks for migrants. This requires the provision of safe and legal pathways for migration, ensuring that the policing of borders does

not drive involuntary family separation, fast and effective family reunification procedures, and a concerted effort to re-establish contact between children and their family members separated during migration.

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Shaping policy responses to missing migrants through the Council of Europe

Julian Pahlke and Paulo Pisco

The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly works to bring together governments, parliamentarians and civil society actors from across Europe to design and promote effective, humane policies to prevent migrant deaths and disappearances.

International organisations, coastguard agencies and NGOs regularly provide chilling figures on the (under)estimated number of fatalities, missing persons and people in distress in the context of migration. The increased visibility of this tragic phenomenon has raised calls within our European societies to recognise our moral obligation to take action and provide a humanitarian – humane – response. Yet despite this growing awareness of the numerous and complex factors which contribute to placing men, women and children in situations of extreme vulnerability in migration, incidents and reports of migrants losing their lives or disappearing during perilous journeys are on the increase.

The Council of Europe is a 46-nation international organisation dedicated to upholding human rights, democracy and the rule of law, composed of parliamentarians appointed by national parliaments. Its Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) is its deliberative political body, which meets four times a year. While it cannot create laws, it has various powers that enable it to hold member governments to account in different ways.¹ As part of its work, PACE collaborates with member States to design and promote effective policy responses to prevent deaths and disappearances in the context of migration. As politicians, our

ability to act lies first and foremost in the legal framework which applies across our respective countries and in the regional and international organisations of which our respective States are members. However, although international human rights and refugee law lay down clear principles and obligations, their practical implementation in border management is complex, not least due to highly polarised debates around issues of domestic security and migration policy.

Within the Council of Europe member States, the principles of the right to life and the prevention of torture and of inhumane and degrading treatment are fundamental and non-derogable – that is, they are rights that cannot be infringed or suspended, even in times of emergency. The European Convention on Human Rights safeguards the rights of all individuals in Europe, imposing obligations that, if properly followed, could be used to work to prevent migrants from disappearing or perishing, and to ensure that families are informed of the fate of their missing ones. Most member States are also bound by many other Council of Europe legal instruments, such as the Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, the Convention on Preventing and

Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data.

Other international obligations derive from – among others – the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea and the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue also affirm very clear obligations for States and non-State actors to assist and rescue persons in distress at sea.

Many initiatives have helped reflect on how the existing standards should be interpreted and implemented in an international migration context. Examples include the adoption of the General Comment No. 1 (2023) on Enforced Disappearance in the Context of Migration by the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances in 2023, and the promotion by the UN Secretary-General of ‘Actionable recommendations on strengthening co-operation on missing migrants and providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in distress’ in 2024.²

Across the Mediterranean, as well as in relation to other oceans and seas in Europe, civil society initiatives have structured their work in accordance with the International Law of the Sea. They have developed their own methods of working as well as protocols to complement the capacities of official search and rescue (SAR) authorities to save lives. Other local initiatives involve forensic practitioners who have put in place their own systems to try to trace and identify the bodies of those considered likely to be migrants. Examples of good practice include keeping on record any post-mortem

data gathered from the bodies which could later aid identification; deploying Disaster Victim Identification teams in the case of shipwrecks; marking the graves of unidentified corpses likely to be those of migrants; and training prosecutors on the importance of investigating cases of unidentified bodies to enhance the chances of finding out who they are.

Such efforts have played a role in gathering consensus on the significance of dealing with and preventing vulnerability in the context of migration. Transnational cooperation, however, requires harmonising procedures among multiple State and non-State actors, including judicial, police, search and rescue, consular and forensic services. Moreover, there needs to be clarity about the differing roles and responsibilities of public authorities and civil society. These entities are too often put in opposition, which can lead to the criminalisation of NGOs in the most extreme cases and which severely hampers the efficiency of any efforts to prevent cases of disappearance, to search for and rescue people in distress and to identify missing persons.

Promoting policy development

The Council of Europe body of standards provides an extensive framework to prevent human rights violations and promote human rights-compliant policies for all, including for people on the move, as confirmed by the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights and in the Action Plan on Protecting Vulnerable Persons in the Context of Migration and Asylum in Europe (2021–2025).³

Addressing situations of distress in the context of migrations means, foremost, establishing concrete preventative mechanisms aligned with the human rights standards to which member States have committed themselves. The Council

of Europe provides unique standards that give body to the universal human rights principles laid down by European societies in the ashes of the Second World War 75 years ago. The Council also enables the 46 member States to discuss the practical implementation of these standards, thanks to the monitoring bodies of these conventions; especially relevant are the monitoring mechanisms on the prevention of torture, action against trafficking in human beings, and combating gender-based and domestic violence. The Council of Europe also provides cooperation frameworks for relevant public authorities such as prosecutors, national human rights institutions and Ministries of Foreign Affairs, and training tools for the judiciary and administrative bodies. Whether from a border management perspective or as a preventative mechanism to protect migrants from embarking on risky journeys, providing effective access to legal mobility pathways is essential.

PACE – the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe – provides a privileged forum to reflect on these obligations, identify the challenges that our countries face, and promote good practices and policy measures that address these challenges in line with international human rights law. The Assembly brings together 612 parliamentarians from the 46 national delegations, across the political spectrum and working within five political groups. PACE members elect the judges of the European Court of Human Rights. They adopt documents which do not have legal authority but which do hold political importance, with the moral authority to push for change and even sometimes paving the way for the adoption of international conventions.

In 2024, the Assembly adopted a Resolution

on how to clarify the fate of missing migrants, alongside a Recommendation addressed to the Committee of Ministers (the Council of Europe's decision-making body).⁴ This important step marked the acknowledgment by PACE of the tragedy of missing migrants, and the role of the Council of Europe in preventing and addressing it.⁵ The Resolution acknowledges the importance of international cooperation, in line with Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, aligning itself with the commitments made by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2021 and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2019.

The Resolution urges States to fully honour their obligations in order to avoid situations of vulnerability and disappearance, for instance by ensuring the systematic registration of persons deprived of liberty. Moreover, it calls for ensuring that migrants, including unaccompanied children, are provided with proper reception conditions as a means to prevent cases of absconding and the possible disappearances that might ensue. The Resolution also invites States to issue visas for families, allocate more resources for forensics and appoint officials to act as focal points on missing migrants to facilitate inter-State cooperation in identification, search and repatriation cases.

The Resolution also touches on the important question of databases. Many stakeholders have information which can help in the search for and identification of missing migrants, whether dead or alive. However, much remains to be done for the data sets to 'speak to each other', ranging from including personal data protection safeguards to standardising data collection so that information can be compared safely and effectively. This includes individually

marking graves so that they can later be matched to data collected. Bringing the data together is a huge task, involving human rights, technical, legal and political issues, but it is critical to allowing families to receive information about the fate of their missing relative and have access to the place of rest. Families need a point of contact for safe and reliable assistance and information, including on how to provide a DNA sample, without fear of reprisals. What is happening often in a local and non-joined-up way needs to be brought together by the public authorities into a coherent policy framework. Official authorities should be involved so that the many local initiatives can be replicated; this is a matter of public policy.

As regards SAR operations and strategies to save migrants' lives at sea, a second Resolution under preparation will explore policy avenues and good practices.⁶ This involves better cooperation both at State and pan-European level, sufficient funding and recognising and respecting the important role of civil society in protecting migrants' rights both on land and at sea. From a perspective of international human rights law, more effective measures are needed to address the smuggling of migrants, a crime which should not be conflated with irregular border crossing; neither migrants nor those defending human rights should be criminalised. Overall, respecting international law and ensuring safe disembarkation, respectful treatment, access to health care (including mental health care) and effective access to asylum procedures and legal advice are also key elements for saving lives at sea.

The policy recommendations discussed in this article draw on a series of hearings and fact-finding missions in the Evros region,⁷ in Lampedusa⁸ and in Calais.⁹

Promoting parliamentary engagement

As PACE members, our work goes beyond reaching a political consensus across the Assembly on our Resolutions. We, as Rapporteurs, place particular emphasis on the follow-up to this work. As the situation keeps worsening for men, women and children in Europe and beyond, promoting these policy recommendations across the various national parliaments is paramount.

At the national level, we are able to promote these decisions within our respective parliaments through hearings or by launching inquiries. Parliamentarians vote on the budget in their home country, and can facilitate discussions on allocating more resources to enhance the preparedness of entities dealing with migrants, such as those responsible for identification, search or repatriation processes, or those providing support, running reception services or involved in human rights border monitoring mechanisms.

Parliamentarians can also ensure follow-up by engaging with the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe; the policy recommendations on missing migrants were presented in late 2024 to the permanent representations of member States and to the Network of member States' Focal Points on Migration. Organising events with parliamentarians, including PACE's Observers and Partners for democracy, across Europe and beyond, can leverage parliamentary cooperation to increase momentum.¹⁰

Finally, we believe that parliamentarians have a responsibility to ensure awareness of the policy recommendations adopted by PACE by making them known beyond the political institutions. Europeans are often unaware of the link between national parliaments and the Council of Europe, and

of their ability as constituents to call on their own parliamentary representatives to commit to the decisions they make in Strasbourg.

The tragedy of migrant deaths at sea and missing migrants is an unbearable reminder that these vulnerable human beings – those seeking international protection and fleeing wars, persecution, crises and disasters, extreme poverty and danger – remain marginalised in their ability to access the most fundamental rights and dignity. The Council of Europe has a significant role to play in bringing together governments, parliamentarians and civil society actors from our European continent and beyond in order to address societal challenges from this perspective of human rights and human dignity.

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Managing forced migration: an alternative to dangerous journeys?

Jeff Crisp

Can the international refugee protection system be reoriented in a way that enables the victims of persecution and violence to find safety in other States without risking their lives on hazardous routes?

For the last 75 years, the international refugee protection system has been based on the notion of territorial asylum. According to this principle, people who are threatened with persecution and violence in their own country have the right to leave it, to make their way to another State and to claim refugee status once they have arrived on its territory.

In recent times, this system has come under growing pressure. On one hand, and as demonstrated by other articles in this issue of FMR, the journeys made by refugees have become increasingly dangerous, exposing them to the risk of death, injury, physical and sexual abuse, exploitation and slavery. Paradoxically, in seeking protection, refugees are often obliged to put their lives at risk.

On the other hand, States and societies in many parts of the world have become increasingly resistant to the arrival of asylum seekers, especially when they come in large numbers, in short periods of time and in an irregular manner. In many countries, especially those in the Global North, refugees are regarded as a threat to the nation's sovereignty, security and social stability. They are consequently to be excluded by any means possible, even if this requires States to violate their obligations under international refugee law.

From territorial asylum to migration management

In place of territorial asylum, the UN's member States and humanitarian organisations have increasingly espoused an alternative refugee protection paradigm, that of 'managed migration'. While this is not a new concept, it was traditionally employed in relation to the movement of labour migrants and the relocation of refugees and displaced people to countries of permanent settlement.

In its new guise, however, the notion is based on the premise that forced migratory movements can be predicted, planned and organised, especially if this is done on the basis of large-scale data collection and analysis. At the same time, the current incarnation of the migration management concept rests on the assumption that the movement of refugees, asylum seekers and other irregular migrants can be prevented or at least curtailed. In this respect, three strategies are of particular relevance: strengthening border controls; addressing the so-called 'root causes of displacement'; and implementing 'whole of route' programmes that provide protection and assistance to refugees at the early stages of their journey, so that they do not feel obliged to undertake long, intercontinental movements.

In all of these different ways, the migration management approach promises to address the perceived threat of spontaneous, unplanned and irregular population movements, bringing them under the control of States and the aid agencies that they sponsor.

Implementing the new approach

In recent years, the world's more prosperous countries have taken numerous steps to operationalise the migration management agenda. Border controls have been reinforced and supported with new forms of technological surveillance. Poorer countries have been incentivised or induced to curtail the onward movement of refugees through the process of externalisation.

And overseas aid programmes have been redesigned, so that they serve the primary purpose of 'stabilising' vulnerable populations in their own community and country. The EU has been the most enthusiastic proponent of this strategy, establishing a \$5 billion Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), the stated purpose of which is "to address the root causes of instability, forced displacement and irregular migration and to contribute to better migration management."¹

UN agencies have played an increasingly important role in the implementation of the new paradigm. With the support of donor States, both International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR have established centres for the collection and analysis of data on mobile populations. This is a key feature of the migration management agenda, and one which features prominently in the Global Compact on Refugees, as well as the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration – an especially revealing title in this context.

For the purposes of this analysis, the most

important outcome of the transition from territorial asylum to migration management can be seen in recent efforts to provide refugees with authorised routes to protection, thereby averting the need for them to embark on difficult, dangerous and often deadly journeys.

UNHCR has taken a lead in this process. With territorial asylum under growing threat in many parts of the world, it has encouraged governments to provide refugees with new and organised routes to protection, above and beyond the State-sponsored refugee resettlement programmes that the organisation has traditionally administered.

These 'complementary pathways', as UNHCR has labelled them, include community-based resettlement initiatives and family reunion programmes, as well as labour mobility and educational scholarship schemes for refugees with appropriate skills and qualifications. At the same time, refugee advocates and analysts have broadened the definition to include humanitarian visa, humanitarian corridor and humanitarian evacuation programmes, all of which enable people who are at risk in their country of origin, first asylum or transit to move in a regular manner to states that have authorised their admission.

To give just a few examples of such initiatives, in 2015 Canada established a community-based resettlement programme for 25,000 Syrian refugees, sponsored by families, neighbourhood groups, faith-based and civil society organisations. Following the Russian invasion of their homeland in 2022, the UK introduced a scheme whereby Ukrainian refugees could be admitted to the country and accommodated with families already and legally resident in Britain.

In recent years, the Catholic and Protestant churches of Italy and France have jointly

implemented a humanitarian corridors programme that has allowed vulnerable refugee families in countries such as Ethiopia and Lebanon to take up residence in Europe. During the same period, Australia, Canada, Italy and the UK have all initiated pilot programmes that allow refugees with specified skills to take up employment opportunities in those countries.

In the US, the Biden administration introduced a Safe Mobility Initiative in 2023 that enabled asylum seekers to submit their requests for admission and refugee status in a number of South and Central American countries, thereby averting the need for them to make the long journey through Mexico to the US border.

While these ‘complementary pathways’ differ considerably in terms of their scale and the selection criteria used to determine access, they have the common objective of providing managed migration opportunities to people who might otherwise be inclined to move in a spontaneous and irregular manner.

Limitations and negative consequences

The migration management paradigm has a significant role to play in sparing refugees from the many dangers they would encounter in finding their own way to a country of asylum. At the same time, there is a need to be realistic about the constraints and potentially negative outcomes of this approach.

First, historical experience has demonstrated that refugee movements often take place in an unpredictable and unexpected manner, in situations of intense chaos and confusion. It is for this reason that efforts to establish early-warning and prediction systems for man-made crises have repeatedly failed. And, as yet, there is no evidence to suggest that this situation will be changed by the advent of Artificial Intelligence.

In these circumstances, it is naïve to believe that, in the words of IOM Director-General Amy Pope, “all migration should be safe, orderly and humane.” When whole communities are fleeing from persecution and human rights violations, they are likely to move very rapidly, in large numbers and in multiple directions. In their desperation to find safety elsewhere, they will take whatever routes are available to them, irrespective of the dangers they might encounter. Rather than waiting to be admitted to an organised departure programme, they will seize whatever opportunity they have to escape.

Second, it has become increasingly clear that the task of anticipating and averting refugee movements by addressing their ‘root causes’ is fraught with difficulties and might even be fundamentally misconceived. A highly critical and official evaluation of the EUTF, for example, found that the resources devoted to ‘prevention’ in the Horn of Africa had been spread too thinly, not properly prioritised and had ignored human rights concerns. More significantly still, the review found that livelihoods programmes designed to increase the income available to vulnerable populations in the region “could have the effect of triggering more migration instead of reducing it.”²

Third, even if safe routes for refugees can be established and expanded, it seems highly unlikely that States will allow this to be done on a scale that would meet the demand for access to them. That prospect seems even more distant with the election of Donald Trump in the US, and his very rapid decision to terminate the Safe Mobility Initiative and to close other safe pathways to protection in the US. Needless to say, people who are confronted with immediate threats to their life and liberty and who are refused admission to any safe routes that exist will continue to have every incentive to seek

refuge elsewhere by moving in an irregular and unplanned manner.

Fourth, there has been a tendency amongst the most enthusiastic advocates of safe routes to use the notion as a somewhat simplistic slogan, ignoring the difficult decisions that will have to be made with respect to their implementation. How many refugees should each destination country admit by means of safe routes and over what period of time? Which countries of origin should those refugees come from and which categories of refugee would be prioritised for admission? How would the selection process be organised? Would people who are permitted to move by means of safe routes enjoy full refugee status or be given only temporary residence rights in the countries to which they are admitted? And, as indicated already, what would happen to those refugees who are denied access to such routes?

Finally, there is a need to consider the consequences of the migration management paradigm for the principle and practice of territorial asylum. In this respect, there would appear to be a serious risk that States in the Global North will use the existence of such routes, however small in scale they might be, as a pretext for the exclusion of asylum seekers who arrive in an irregular manner, arguing that they should not be allowed to ‘jump the queue’ in which so-called ‘genuine refugees’ are patiently waiting.

In a recent report, ominously subtitled ‘The end of asylum’, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) has suggested that the current international refugee protection system is “under intolerable pressure,” calling into question “the ability of nations to meet their international obligations to refugees.”³ According to the publication, there is now a need to “reorient the international protection system away from territorial asylum,” and to

replace it with “the use of safe and orderly means of entry to seek protection.” In other words, a substantial shift towards the migration management paradigm.

But there is a real devil in the detail of this proposal. To be effective, MPI acknowledges, such a reoriented system would have to “disincentivize irregular arrivals at borders” by “restricting access to asylum at the border for individuals who have had a valid opportunity to apply for asylum en route,” and offer “softer incentives such as reduced access to certain status or benefits entitlements for those who transit through a safe country or chose not to use regular channels.” Such an approach, it says, would “encourage individuals to claim protection nearer to their country of origin, rather than traveling longer distances through other countries to reach a different destination.”

As this statement reveals, while the migrant management paradigm has the potential to spare refugees from the many risks of dangerous journeys, it is also closely aligned to the deterrence and externalisation agenda being pursued by the world’s most prosperous States. Although this approach might not mean the complete ‘end of asylum’, it certainly threatens to restrict it to countries of the Global South and to specific groups of refugees whose demographic, political, ethnic or religious profile appeals to States in the Global North.

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International Online School in Forced Migration

“[The] perfect place for practitioners to take some time and space to actually think critically about the work we are doing and how we want to continue moving forward.” – December 2023 participant

The Refugee Studies Centre (RSC) at the University of Oxford offers an opportunity for policymakers, practitioners and others – wherever they are in the world – to benefit from its teaching through its International Online School in Forced Migration.

The School, which typically runs three times a year over the course of a week, offers an intensive, interdisciplinary and participatory approach to the study of forced migration. It enables participants to reflect critically on the forces and institutions that dominate the worlds of displaced people. It combines Oxford’s tradition of research excellence with stimulating, discussion-based teaching, learning and reflection.

Who is it for?

The School is principally designed for policymakers and practitioners working on refugee protection and related issues, normally with several years of work experience. Those from refugee backgrounds who work for refugee advocacy and community groups are particularly welcome. It is also intended for others whose work relates to refugee and forced migration issues, including academics and students, lawyers, journalists, commentators and activists.

What does it cover?

Content includes Conceptualising Forced Migration; The Moral Foundations of Refugeehood; International Law and Refugee Protection; and The Politics of Humanitarianism. The School also offers a range of optional modules that change from year to year.

Limited spaces may still be available for the next course, running 23-27 June. For further details, including information on entry requirements, fees and how to apply, visit: www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/study/international-summer-school

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