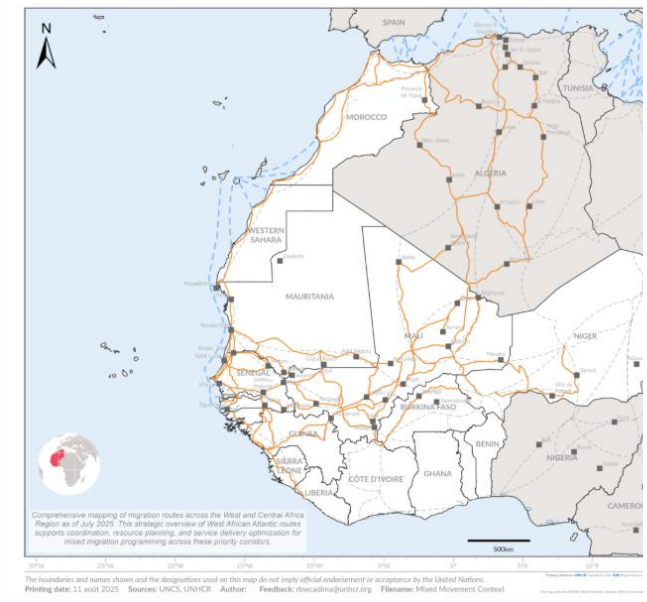
Route-Based Approach in Mauritania

The Route-Based Approach (RBA) is a strategic, cross border response framework developed by UNHCR and IOM to better understand and address mixed movements along key routes. It aims to provide protection earlier, enhancing the resilience of populations and reducing reliance on dangerous journeys and irregular movements. In order to achieve these objectives, the approach is structured around six core pillars, supported in the context of the enablers. Mauritania is located on the West African Atlantic Route (WAAR), along with: Morocco, the Western Sahara, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Senegal and The Gambia, the destination being Spanish territory via the Canary Islands.

CORE PILLARS OF THE RBA

1. Protection sensitive entry and admission
2. Asylum systems and migration management
3. Protection and assistance, anti-trafficking
4. Inclusion and development
5. Safe, regular, and complementary pathways
6. Return, voluntary repatriation and reintegration



UNHCR KEY PARTNERS

- International Organization for Migration (IOM)
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
- French Red Cross
- Mauritanian Authorities

1. Strengthen access to protection and assistance along key routes through enhanced identification and referrals.
2. Improve data and analysis regarding international protection needs amongst those in mixed movements.
3. Strategic communication and transparency to raise awareness about the risks and alternatives to irregular onward movements.
4. Increase partnership legal actors (e.g. legal clinics, law faculty, Bar Association) to promote equal access to information and legal counselling

Operational Context

Mixed movements from Africa to North Africa and onward to Europe continue to be dominated by government efforts to prevent and reduce movements. In North Africa, these measures include an **increase in arrests and detentions**, **expulsions**, and disembarkations in many instances affecting people with international protection needs. Against this background, the **protection space has further deteriorated in Mauritania and neighbouring countries**. The acute humanitarian needs and limited access to basic services and socio-economic opportunities exacerbate the vulnerability of migrants, asylum-seekers, refugees and other people on the move.

In 2024, sea movements to the Canary Islands from North Africa and West Africa more than doubled compared to the same period in 2023 (46,056 individuals). A noticeable change has been the increase in Malians, with some 12,895 Malians arriving in the Canary Islands that year. This trend has continued in the first months of 2025, with some **24,447 people arriving to the Canary Islands** as of 31 August 2025. However, the number of departures from Mauritania has recently decreased, with 7% (1,913 individuals) arriving in the Canary Islands after having departed from Mauritania in the period April-August, as opposed to 75% for the first four months of the year. Most of these individuals are Malians fleeing communal violence and conflict and therefore likely to be in need of international protection. Some 730 deaths at sea were recorded in 2024 compared to 400 in the same period in 2023, and 201 so far this year. However, NGOs indicate thousands more deaths are taking place along this route with boats disappearing at sea. To date, **over 2,100 individuals have been disembarked in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott, and 750 were assisted on arrest related matters.** UNHCR and partners have conducted screening at ports and detention centres while awaiting the operationalization of Temporary Reception Centres (CATES). These efforts have been supported by the training of 200 officials on protection and mixed movements, including members of the National Instance Against Trafficking in Persons, law enforcement, coast guard, and other relevant authorities. In May 2025, a joint Route-Based Approach mission was conducted with participation from UNHCR, IOM, and other stakeholders, laying the groundwork for inter-agency coordination and national ownership of the RBA framework.

Since the adoption of Law No. 2024-038, which amended key provisions of Law No. 65-046 of 23 February 1965 concerning penal measures related to immigration, UNHCR has increasingly received reports of arrests and deportations in Mauritania. Although the government has assured that asylum-seekers and refugees are not targeted by these operations, UNHCR and its legal partner intervened to facilitate the release of over 700 refugees and asylum seekers arrested between February and July 2025. During the same period, UNHCR documented 74 instances of confirmed or possible refoulement to Mali and Senegal. In response, UNHCR and its legal partner have implemented rapid legal interventions to secure the release of individuals at risk of deportation and have engaged directly with detention authorities to facilitate access and referrals. UNHCR has also strengthened its field presence, developed tools to improve referral pathways and case tracking Regular community consultations are conducted to ensure that interventions are informed by the lived experiences and recommendations of affected populations. UNHCR continues to support the Mauritanian government to meet its international obligations as signatory of the **OAU Convention** Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (1969), the **Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees** (1951), as well as the pledges made during the **2023 Global Refugee Forum**. These pledges include the development of national asylum legislation, the inclusion of refugees, or the ratification of the Convention related to the Status of

Stateless Persons (1954) and the Reduction of Statelessness (1961) among others. Mauritania has also signed a **Joint Declaration Establishing a Migration Partnership Between the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and the European Union** to enhance management of migration flows and ensure access to asylum. Mauritania's cooperation with the European Union and FIAP (International and Ibero-American Foundation for Administration and Public Policies) has been instrumental in advancing protection-sensitive approaches to migration management.

Main Activities

In response to the movements on the West African Atlantic Route, UNHCR has been implementing a route-based approach with the objective of enhancing access to protection, especially State-based protection, for forcibly displaced and stateless persons.

In accordance with the IOM/UNHCR Framework of Engagement, UNHCR works closely with IOM and other organizations such as the Resident Coordinator's Office (RCO), OHCHR and UNODC. UNHCR prioritizes the support to government ministries engaged in the management of migration flows and socio-economic development, as well as civil society, local and community-based organizations. In Nouadhibou, UNHCR also participates in the Mixed Movements Working Group, aimed at coordinating a multi-stakeholder response to disembarkation, jointly with IOM.

Pillar 1 – Protection sensitive entry and admission

To ensure the adequacy of its protection response, UNHCR monitors refugees' access to the Mauritanian territory, via cross-border missions along the WAAR to monitor trends and identify gaps and solutions with IOM and other actors such as OHCHR; as well as the prevention and response to detention and refoulment through awareness raising, protection monitoring and identification of individuals in need of protection. This works contributes to the improvement of data and analysis to better understand profiles and changing movement dynamics, and to adjust responses accordingly.

Pillar 2 - Asylum systems and Migration Management

As part of its ongoing technical support to the Government of Mauritania, UNHCR also focuses on the development of governmental capacities on asylum, and advocates to increase access to people who many need international protection. This includes joint UNHCR-ANRPTS registration and documentation activities, as well as the capacity development of the National Consultative Commission on Refugees and other people in need of protection (CNCRPP), including through participation in commission sessions and the organization of trainings at local, regional and central level. Additionally, in alignment with the MoU signed by UNHCR and the Ministry of Interior in 2022, UNHCR conducts refugee status determination (RSD) on behalf of the government, with 891 RSD decisions delivered between January and August 2025. Lastly, in May 2025, the government of Mauritania adopted new Standard Operational Procedures relative to search and rescue and the treatment of migrants during disembarkation, providing a legal basis for coordinated responses to mixed movements. These SOPs recognise the role of IOM and UNHCR and allow both organisations to access people recently disembarked to ensure correct identification of people in need of international protection. These developments are complemented by the planned opening of Temporary Reception Centres (CATES) in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott, in October 2025, which will serve as key infrastructure for the initial reception and screening of people disembarked along the Atlantic route.

Pillar 3 - Protection and assistance, anti-trafficking

As part of its duty to protect, UNHCR works on adjusting case processing modalities to movement patterns and a shrinking protection space and warns of the dangers associated with irregular onward movements.

To enhance safe identification and referrals to multisectoral services and legal pathways, and strengthen referral processes among partners, UNHCR provides support to community outreach volunteers and community-led initiatives in the country through small grants and training targeting children, youth, women at risk and people with specific needs. Additionally, UNHCR coordinates the Community Protection Networks to support safe identification and screening of people with international protection needs along the route. Special attention is given to people with specific needs such as unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), survivors of violence (including GBV), and victims or people at risk of trafficking. To ensure access to life-saving services, a 24h hotline available to refugees and asylum seekers was established in 2021. Between January and August 2025, 2,039 calls were answered.

Lastly, UNHCR developed a mapping of existing services and community protection Networks in all locations, as well as communication products to raise awareness on the risks and alternatives to irregular movements in English, Arabic and French.

Pillar 4, 5 and 6 - Inclusion and Development; Safe, Regular, and Complementary Pathways and Voluntary Repatriation

Lastly, as part of its Route-Based Approach, UNHCR invests in durable solutions. These include:

- Peaceful coexistence and access to basic services, for which UNHCR works with partners and the government to facilitate refugee inclusion in social protection, employment, education and health services in alignment with Mauritania's pledges at the Global Refugee Forum. For instance, in 2025, 88 students benefit from DAFI scholarships;
- Resettlement, with the identification of refugees with acute needs unable to access sufficient protection in Mauritania. This may include GBV survivors, people with disabilities, and others at high risk of marginalization. In 2024, 75 refugees departed for resettlement: 68 to the United States, one to the Netherlands, one to Canada, and five to France. In January 2025, 4 refugees departed for resettlement to the United States. However, 156 individuals already accepted for resettlement to the US remain in pending departure status, as the US resettlement program has been suspended under the new administration. During the same year, three additional cases (4 individuals) were submitted under the Regional Bureau's unallocated quota, resulting in the acceptance of two individuals-one by France and one by the Netherlands. As of August 2025, 96 individuals in need have been identified as meeting the eligibility and are waiting for a resettlement opportunity;
- Complementary pathways, via support to access education abroad, family reunification and labour mobility schemes, and
- Voluntary Repatriation, in collaboration with IOM.

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