

Route-Based Report

The West Africa Atlantic Route

January – June 2025



UNHCR government partner CNCR interviewing asylum seekers during the registration process – July 2025.

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Introduction

This report covers the [West Africa Atlantic Route \(WAAR\)](#) with a focus on the period January 2025 to June 2025. This report is part of a series of route-based reports, prepared and issued by UNHCR. They provide protection information about the major routes used by refugees and migrants, including information on the people travelling along the routes and the situation in countries of transit and, to a lesser extent, countries of origin.

The WAAR is a major area for mixed movements from West Africa coastal countries and countries in the Sahel to other parts of West Africa, as well as to Europe. It includes overland and road journeys to and through Senegal, Mauritania, Western Sahara and Morocco, from where some people attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean to the Canary Islands, Spain. In some cases, a limited number of people have flown into West Africa from as far away as Pakistan to join the route. The WAAR is closely connected with other routes, such as the Western and Central Mediterranean Routes, with nationals from countries like Mali, Senegal, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire using both routes as well, depending on factors such as security, access and risk.










The report draws on several complementary data sources to deepen the understanding of mobility patterns and protection risks across the West Africa Atlantic route. It combines analysis of UNHCR's internal registration data, which offers insights into the onward movements of forcibly displaced and stateless people, with field-level data from Mali that continues to shed light on evolving movement dynamics amid volatile security. Project 21, a regional inter-agency cross-border monitoring initiative, contributes with route-based protection analysis, highlighting major protection challenges and risks faced by refugees and migrants along the West Africa Atlantic Route.

Key highlights

As of June 2025, there is a reduction of arrivals in Europe (via the Canary Islands) of over 40 per cent along this route compared to the same period in 2024. Malians, Senegalese and Guineans remain the primary nationalities arriving in the Canary Islands along the route.

The protection environment across the region remains uncertain. In Mauritania, evolving government policies and operational dynamics affect access to protection, assistance and movement dynamics along the route. In Mali, the security crisis continues to shape displacement and onward movement. Morocco remains central to regional mobility as a country of origin, transit and destination. Increased border controls in the countries of departure, and patrols at sea have reduced irregular departures. Arrivals and movements of nationals of Sub-Saharan countries, as well as other nationalities, are being closely observed, as these flows may signal shifting regional routes and emerging protection concerns.

Key trends

Categories	2025 Q1-Q2 Comparison	Q1 Change from 2024 to 2025	Q2 Change from 2024 to 2025
Maritime Departures	 75% decrease From 9,756 to 2,595	 40% decrease From 16,326 to 9,756	 70% decrease From 8,536 to 2,595
Disembarkations	 20% increase From 694 to 840	 80% decrease From 3,776 to 694	 65% decrease From 2,356 to 840
Sea arrivals to Europe	 80% decrease From 9,424 to 2,014	 30% decrease From 13,297 to 9,424	 70% decrease From 6,180 to 2,014

Source: UNHCR.

The route

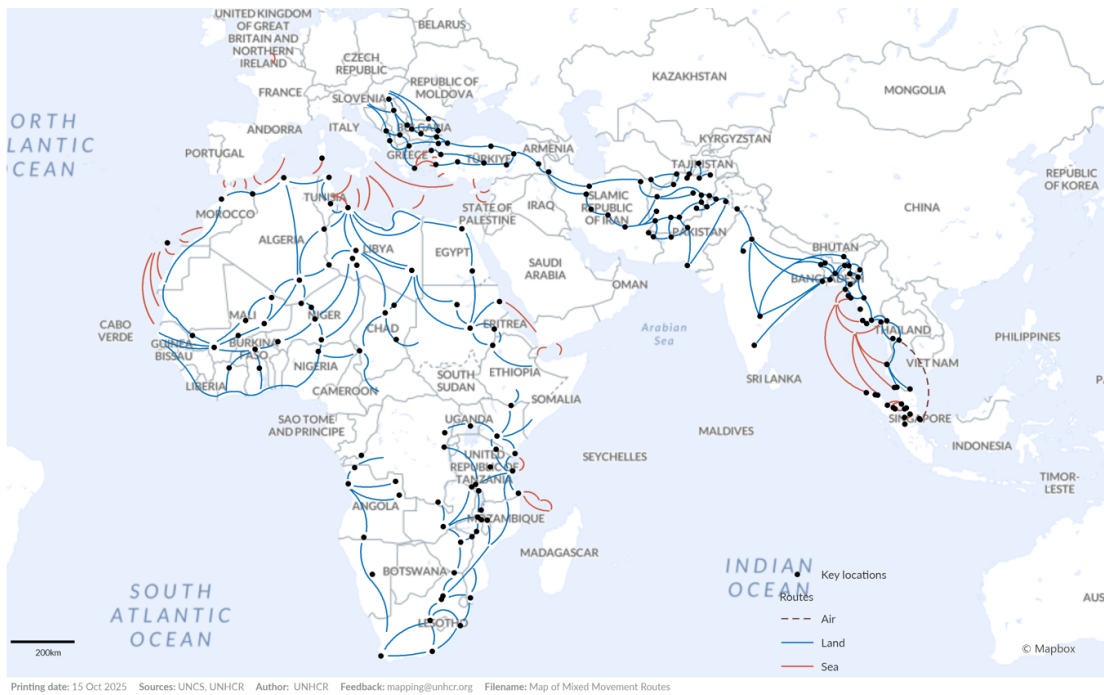
Geographical scope

The West Africa Atlantic route runs from West and North Africa to the Canary Islands, Spain. It comprises several primary sea departure points including Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal, and Western Sahara. The numbers of sea departures through the Atlantic follow a seasonal pattern, with fewer people using the sea crossing in the months from March to August (spring and summer) with higher numbers from September to February (see Figure 3 below).

In recent years, the West Africa Atlantic Route (WAAR) has become a preferred pathway for refugees and migrants from Sub-Saharan West Africa to Europe, often replacing Mediterranean routes for some nationalities such as Senegalese and Malians. Lower smuggling fees and organised networks made this maritime route more accessible.¹ Overland corridors from Senegal, Mali, Guinea and the Gambia connect to coastal departure points, with people moving along the routes adapting to the changing conditions in specific areas of the region. Senegal and the Gambia serve as key crossroads—some people depart directly across the Atlantic, while others continue overland through Mauritania to Morocco. Others move inland through Mali to join the Central Mediterranean Route via Algeria and Libya, reflecting how changing risks and restrictions quickly reshape movement patterns. Together, these evolving patterns illustrate a system in constant evolution—shaped by opportunity, restriction, and resilience—where efforts by States to close one route often lead to the opening or reactivation of another.

¹ Why the deadliest migration route in the world is becoming more popular, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, accessed November 2025

Map 1 | Map of mixed movement routes | 2025



Source: UNHCR.

Map 2 | West Africa Atlantic Route | 2025



Source: UNHCR.

Humanitarian and displacement context

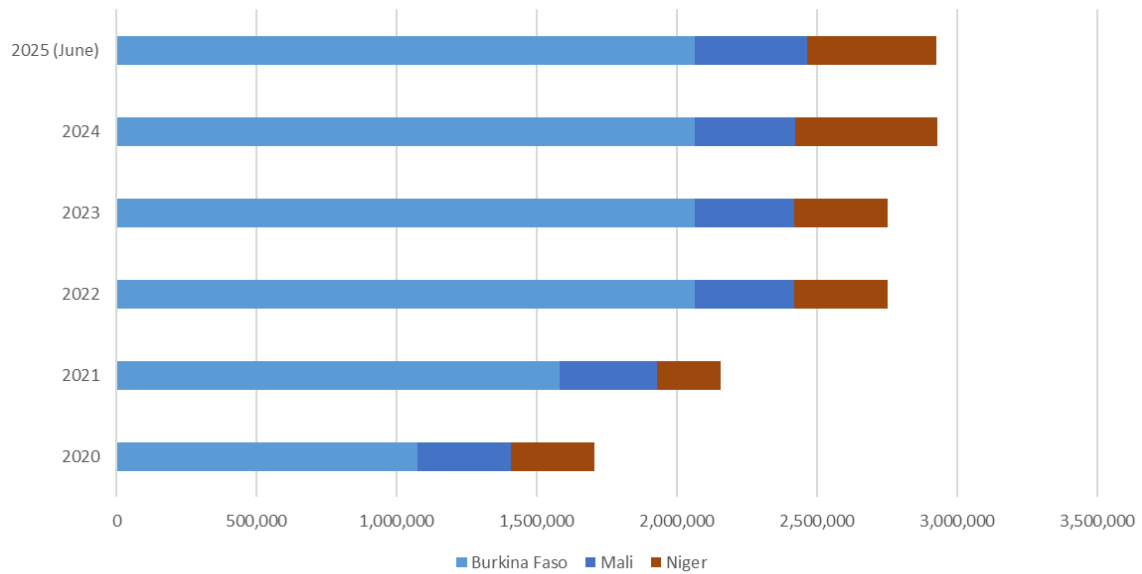
West and Central Africa face overlapping socio-economic and environmental pressures. Factors such as violent extremism, youth unemployment, economic insecurity, political instability, and climate change drive the movement of refugees and migrants within and beyond the region. Displacement is expected to persist, fuelled by security crises, persecution, weak public services, and economic hardship. Stories of successful migration and expectations from families and communities encourage people to move despite the risks. Meanwhile, shrinking international support is straining governments and humanitarian actors in the region, increasing vulnerability and limiting durable solutions.

In 2024 and 2025, countries already affected by the security crisis—Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger—also faced major natural disasters. The deteriorating situation in the Sahel continued to lead to forced displacement. The worsening situation in Mali continues to drive refugees into Mauritania and increase pressure along the West African Atlantic Route, with some opting for land routes through Mali into Algeria or Libya to reach the Central Mediterranean. Between 2020 and 2024, IDP numbers in the region continued to rise, while Chad's refugee population nearly tripled—from about 500,000 to 1.3 million. Sudanese refugees continued to arrive in eastern Chad, fleeing renewed violence in Darfur.

Despite large-scale displacement, most refugees remain within the region, reflecting favourable legal protection frameworks, the resilience of host communities and the potential for local solutions. However, refugees and migrants continue to have limited access to public services, which highlight persistent structural and resource constraints. Protection monitoring shows internal displacement sometimes later results in people crossing borders, with IDPs becoming refugees when safety cannot be ensured at home. Although most displaced people prefer to stay near their homes, worsening conditions and declining assistance push some to seek safety and opportunity abroad.

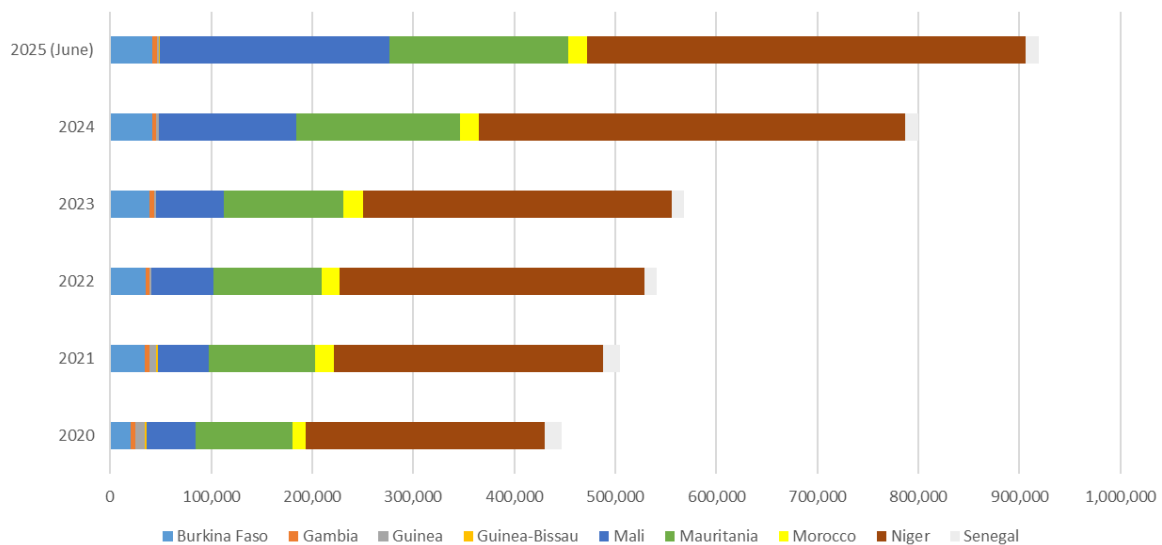
These situations underscore the need for integrated approaches linking internal and cross-border responses, and for stronger national systems and regional cooperation that support humanitarian and development action as well as long-term stability. UNHCR structures its advocacy and response around these situations through strategies that address root causes, the protection environment, and opportunities for solutions across the affected countries.

Figure 1 | Internally displaced people in WAAR countries | 2020 - 2025 (June)



Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder, RBWCA Monthly report June 2025.

Figure 2 | Refugees and asylum-seekers in WAAR Countries | 2020 - 2025 (June)



Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder, RBWCA Monthly report June 2025.

Political and economic context

The situation is unlikely to improve soon due to complex regional dynamics. Continued violence, including in Sudan, continues to push people into Chad, neighbouring countries in East and North Africa and beyond in search of protection and safety.

At the start of 2024, Mauritania was the main departure point for those arriving in the Canary Islands. Following large numbers of departures, primarily by Malians, and a new EU migration partnership in March 2024, Mauritania increased border controls, immigration raids and

removals, affecting many refugees. Legislation passed in September 2024 increased the penalties for unauthorized entry or stay, though intended to align with international refugee law. Challenges and high fees for renewing residence permits, along with raids, prompted many non-nationals previously resident to attempt crossings to the Canary Islands.

On 2 June 2025, Mauritania and Senegal signed bilateral agreements on combating irregular migration and regulating residence conditions, requiring those intending to stay over three months to have permits. Permits can be issued without a work contract or proof of income for one year, potentially reducing irregular departures from Senegal by enabling legal entry and stay in Mauritania.

Morocco's role in the West Africa Atlantic Route reflects regional dynamics and evolving migration governance. Demographic and environmental shifts make Morocco a stable transit point for refugees and migrants en route to Europe. Cooperation with the EU and Spain has strengthened border control and migration management, while highlighting the protection of vulnerable groups, including Sub-Saharan migrants. In December 2024, Morocco signed a bilateral agreement with Côte d'Ivoire to combat smuggling and trafficking. Morocco maintains an open approach to hosting refugees and asylum-seekers, improving documentation, inclusion to social protection, and human-centred border management. Institutional commitment to provide access to services for refugees is growing, especially for unaccompanied children and trafficking victims, but structural challenges like unemployment and skill mismatches persist.² Over 45 per cent of refugees and asylum-seekers lack valid documents, limiting access to services and local integration, while broader socio-economic constraints continue to affect displaced populations' autonomy and inclusion.

According to the World Bank,³ low-income economies are defined as those with a **GNI (Gross National Income) per capita**, calculated using the World Bank Atlas method, of USD 1,135 or less in 2024; lower middle-income economies are those with a GNI per capita between USD 1,136 and USD 4,495; upper middle-income economies are those with a GNI per capita between USD 4,496 and USD 13,935; high-income economies are those with more than a GNI per capita of USD 13,935.

Based on definition and methodology above, for the West and Central Africa region, half of the countries (Burkina Faso, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone, Togo) are classified as Low-Income (less than or equal to USD 1,135). 44 per cent of the countries (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco) are classified as Lower-Middle Income (greater than USD 1,136 and less than or equal to USD 4,495). Only Cape Verde is classified as Upper-Middle Income (greater than USD 4,496 and less than USD 13,935).

² *Mixed movement dynamics on the Northwest Atlantic and Western Mediterranean Route toward Spain, July 2025, Mixed Migration Centre, accessed November 2025.*

³ *Country and lending groups: low-income economies, World Bank, accessed November 2025.*

Map 3 | Classification of income levels in WAAR countries | 2025



Source: World Bank.

Movements

Over the first two quarters of 2025, departures from Mauritania reached nearly 9,000 persons, a 40 per cent decrease from the same period in 2024 (see Figure 4). The decrease is linked to restrictions on movement in Mauritania, increased patrolling of sea departures and removal of an estimated 30,000 people from Mauritania, mostly Malian nationals.

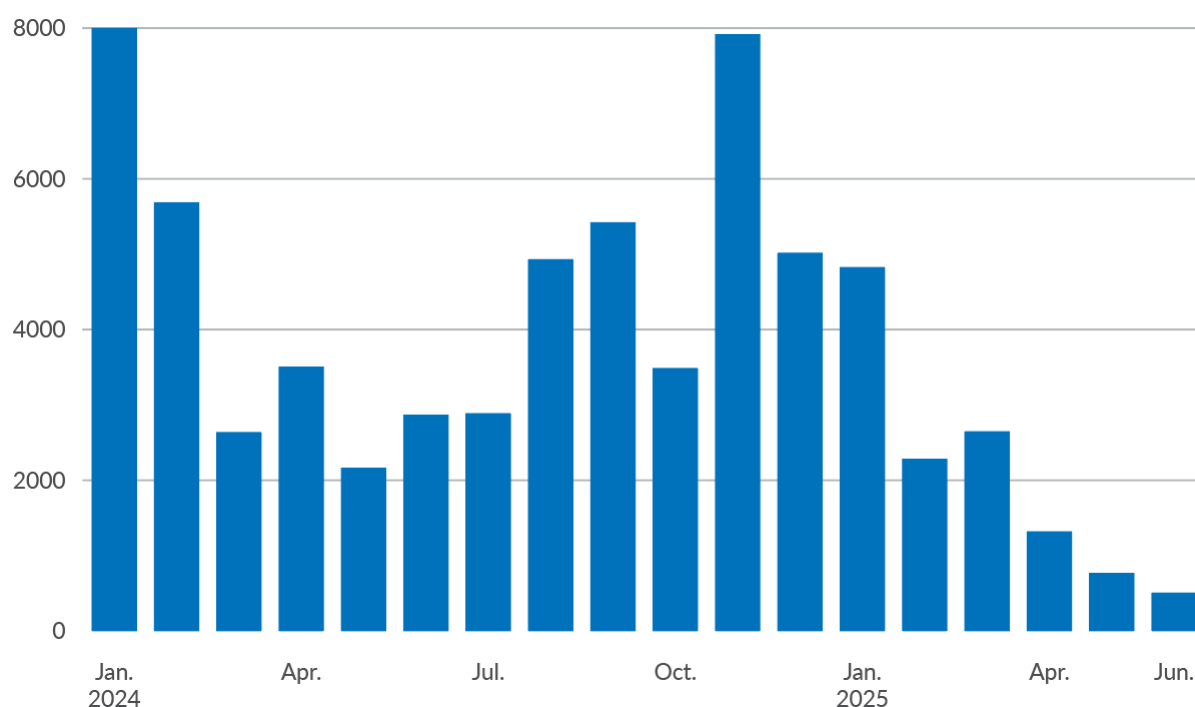
The decrease of departures from Senegal could be explained by intensified preventive actions and apprehension raids conducted by law-enforcement, and a shift of departures to both Guineas and The Gambia

Over 1,500 people were intercepted or rescued and disembarked back in Mauritania, a 57 per cent decrease from the same period of the previous year. The sea crossing from West Africa to the Canary Islands is one of the most dangerous maritime movement routes, marked by long distances, hazardous sea conditions, and limited search and rescue capacity. Refugees and migrants often travel several hundred kilometres in overcrowded traditional pirogues that are not suited for such journeys. The types of vessels used vary, often according to the departure point. The route is shaped by the powerful Canary Current and persistent Trade Winds, which can push vessels far off course in case of engine failure or poor navigation. Although the brief

calm period between September and October offers slightly safer conditions, most of the year is defined by strong currents and unstable weather.⁴

The crossing also spans multiple Search and Rescue Regions (SRRs) with uneven state response capacities, often insufficient to meet the growing number of emergencies. Data from the NGO *Caminando Fronteras* reported that for the first five months of 2025, the West Africa Atlantic Route was one of the deadliest, with 1,482 people reported dead—80 per cent of all deaths recorded during this period, 38 boats disappeared, and 112 women and 342 children died. Departures from Mauritania proved the most lethal, with 1,318 victims, while there were 110 victims who departed from Senegal and the Gambia, and on the coastal stretch between Agadir and Dakhla there were 54 victims. Meanwhile, departures along the Western Mediterranean route resulted in 328 deaths in this period.⁵

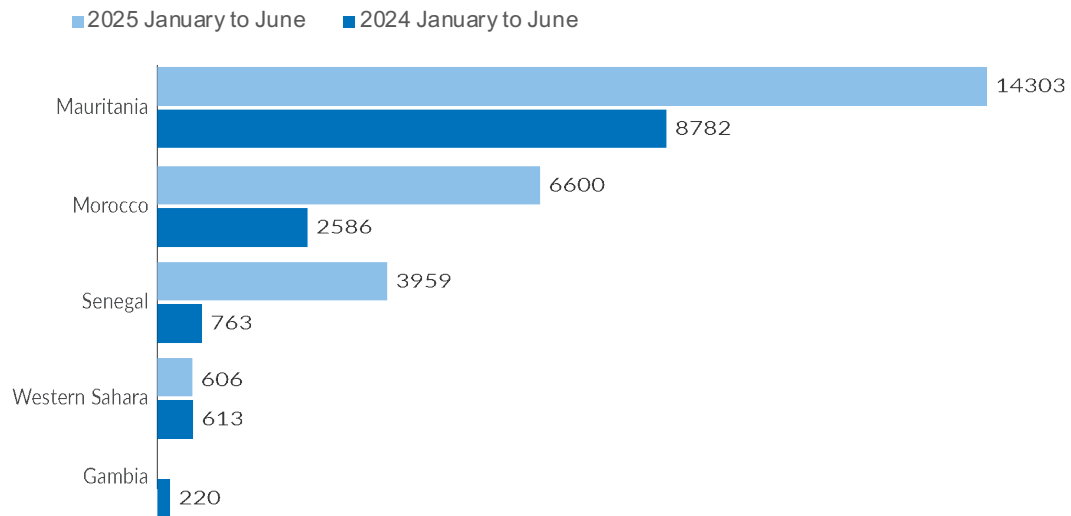
Figure 3 | Monthly departures on the WAAR | January 2024 - June 2025



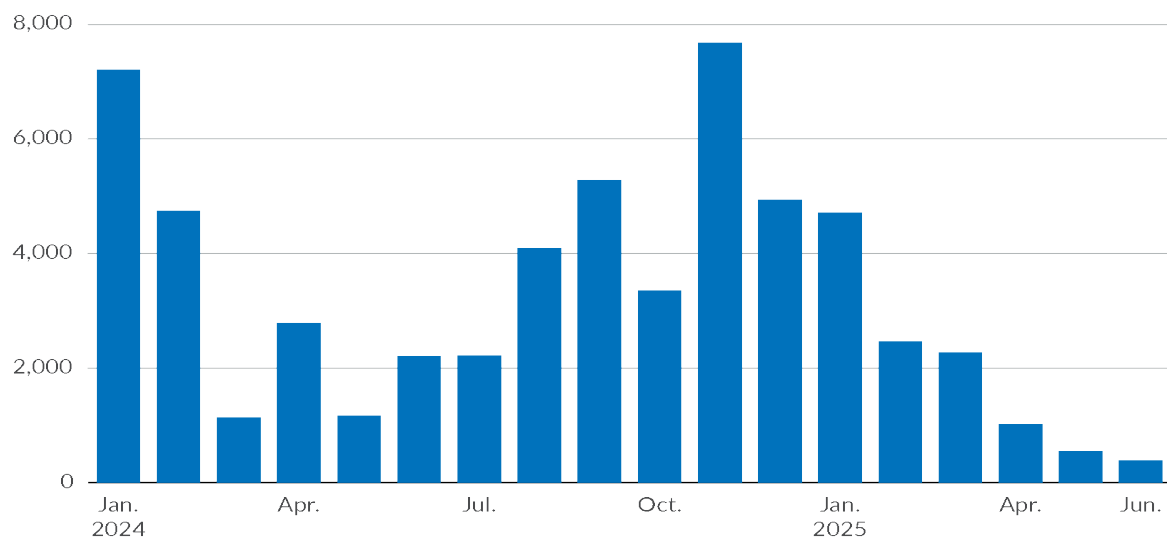
Source: UNHCR.

⁴ Civil MRCC, *The Forgotten Route of the Atlantic*, <https://civilmrcc.eu/uncategorized/2594/>, accessed November 2025.

⁵ Caminando Fronteras, *Monitoring the Right to Life: First Five Months of 2025*, <https://caminandofronteras.org/en/monitoreo/monitoring-the-right-to-life-first-five-months-of-2025/>, accessed November 2025.

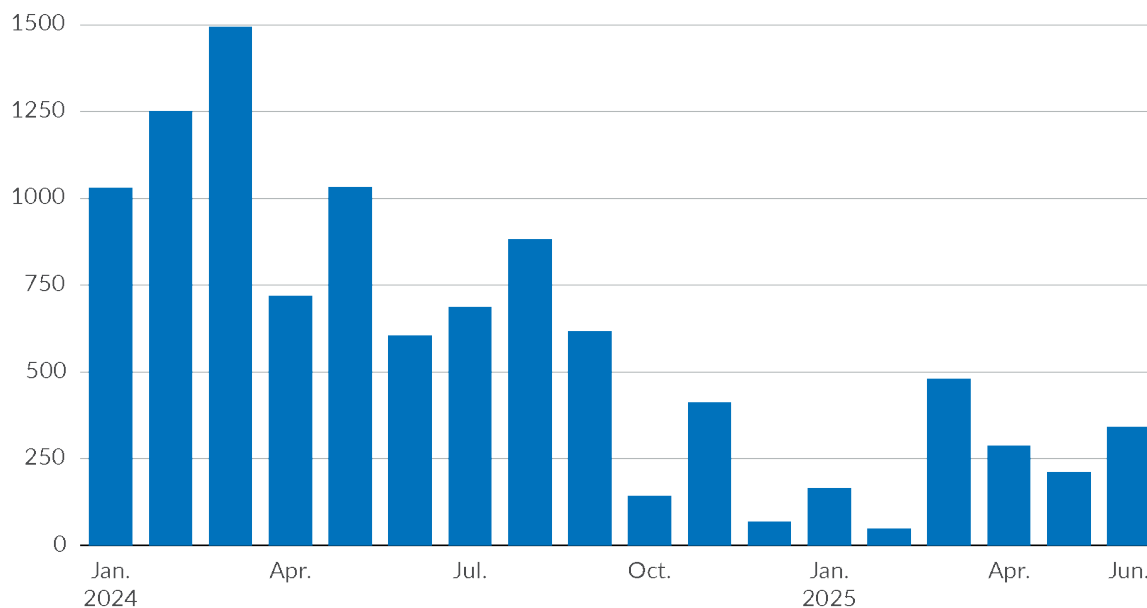
Figure 4 | Departures by country | Quarter 1 2024 – Quarter 1 2025


Source: UNHCR.

Figure 5 | Monthly arrivals by sea in Spain | January 2024 - June 2025


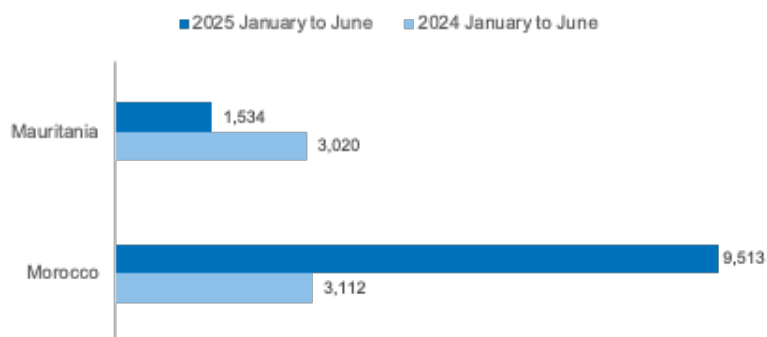
Source: UNHCR (Operational Data Portal).

Figure 6 | Monthly disembarkations in Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal and the Gambia | January 2024 - June 2025



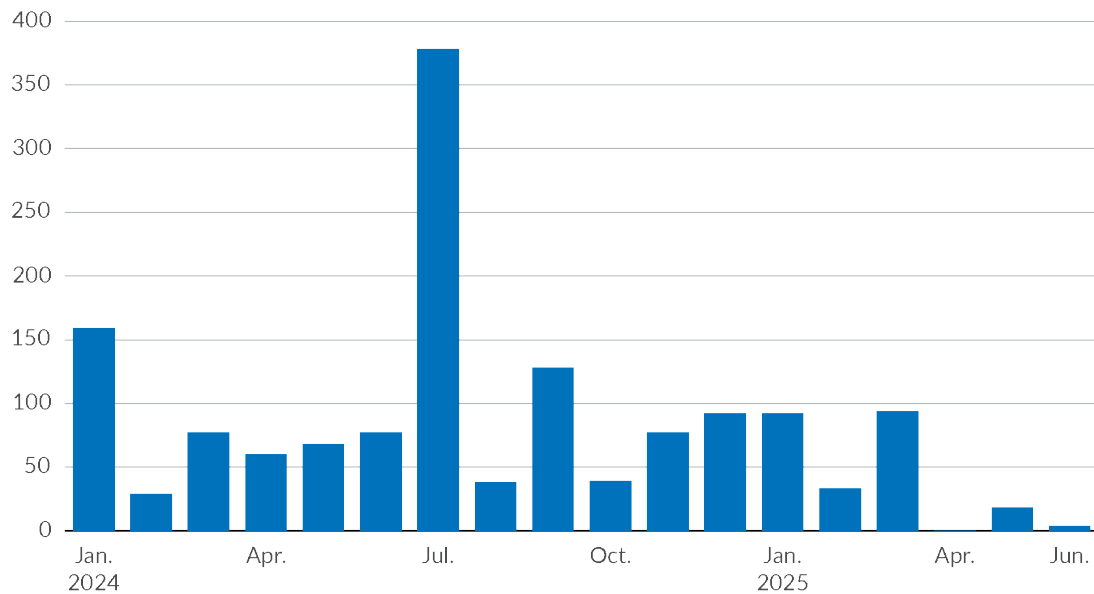
Source: UNHCR.

Figure 7 | Disembarkations by country on WAAR | January - June 2024 and January – June 2025



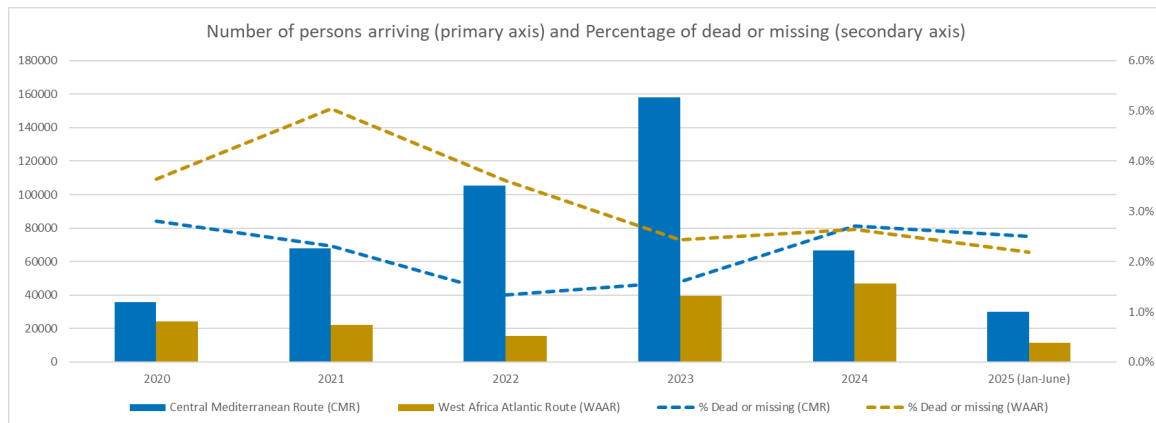
Source: Maritime Movements Dashboard (Mauritania), UNHCR and the Moroccan Ministry of Interior.

Figure 8 | Monthly dead or missing on WAAR | January 2024 -June 2025



Source: Dead and missing, IOM.

Figure 9 | Dead or missing on the WAAR and the CMR | 2020 -2024 (Full Year) and 2025 (January - June)



Source: Dead and missing, IOM.

Table 1 | Dead or missing on the WAAR - IOM and NGO | 2020 – 2025 (as of June)

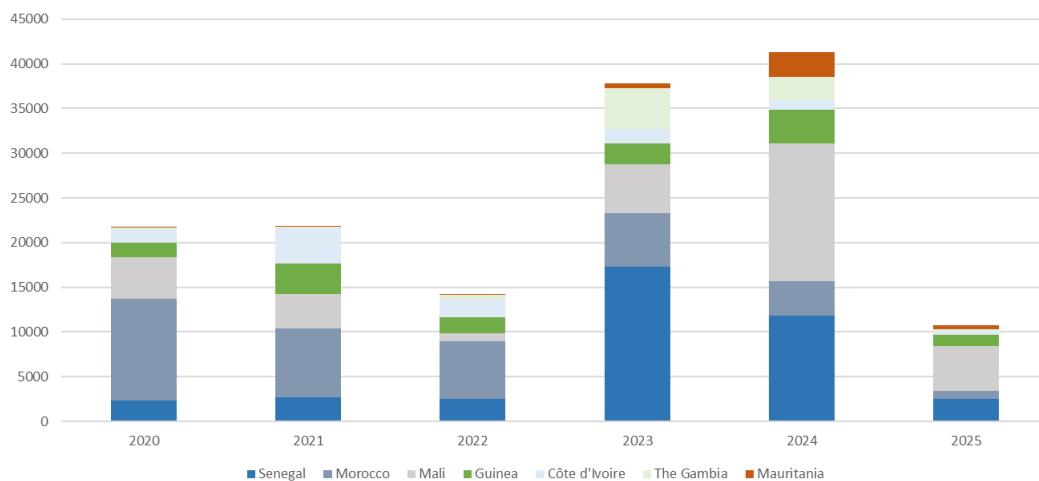
Year	West Africa Atlantic Route (IOM)	West Africa Atlantic Route (NGO)
2020	877	1,800
2021	1,126	3,900
2022	559	1,784
2023	967	2,000
2024	1,239	9,800
2025 (January – June))	250	1,482

Sources: *Dead and missing*, IOM, *Border methodology, including survivor and family testimonies*, Caminando Fronteras (Spanish NGO) and *Conflicting Realities: Mapping Discrepancies in Migrant Deaths Data on the Atlantic Route*, Border Criminologies Blog, Oxford University, 7 April 2025, Stierl, Maurice, and María Sol Dionis.

Population profile

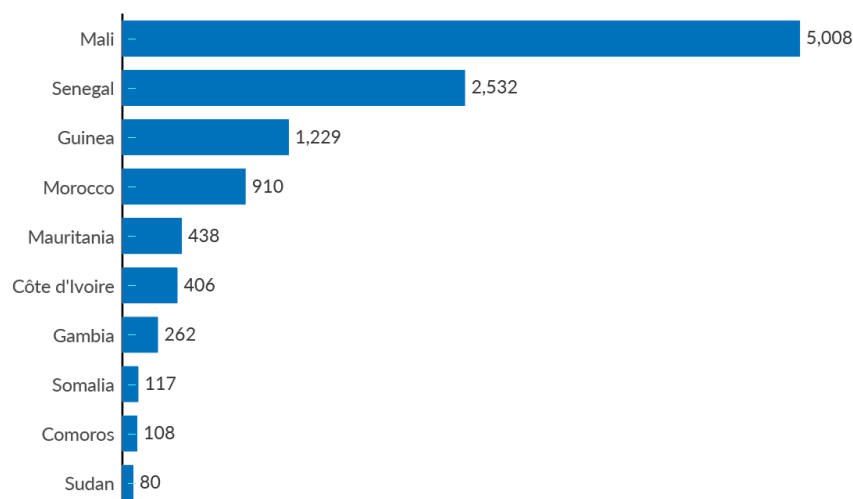
Of the **11,400** people who reached Spain between January and June 2025, the largest number of arrivals was Malian nationals (5,008). 96 per cent of all Malian asylum-seekers are granted international protection in Spain. Malian nationals were followed by nationals of Senegal (2,532), Guinea (1,229), Morocco (910), Mauritania (438), Côte d'Ivoire (406), and the Gambia (262). In the Canary Islands, around 1,200 unaccompanied children arrived during this period.

Figure 10 | Nationalities arriving in Spain on the WAAR | 2020 -2024 (Full Year) and 2025 (January - June)



Source: *Monitoring and risk analysis migration map*, Frontex.

Figure 11 | Main nationalities arriving via the WAAR in Spain | January - June 2025



Source: *Monitoring and risk analysis migration map*, Frontex.

Spotlight: UNHCR data analysis of onward movements

2,906 TOTAL NUMBER OF DETECTED ONWARD MOVEMENTS IN 2025

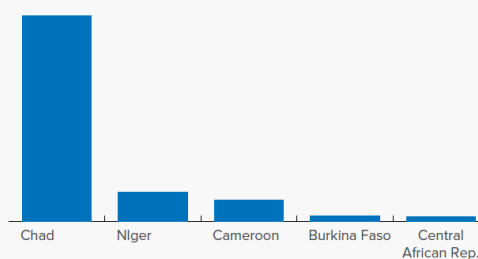
1,349 OUTWARD MOVEMENTS
(From West & Central Africa to other regions)

580 ONWARD MOVEMENTS
(Within West & Central Africa region)

977 INWARD MOVEMENTS
(From other region to West & Central Africa)

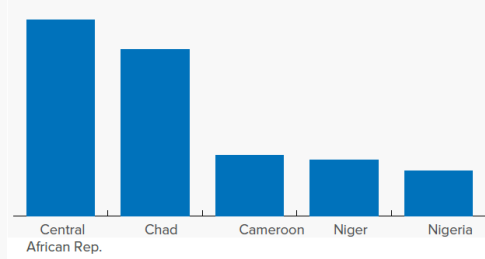
FIRST COUNTRY OF ASYLUM

January to June 2025

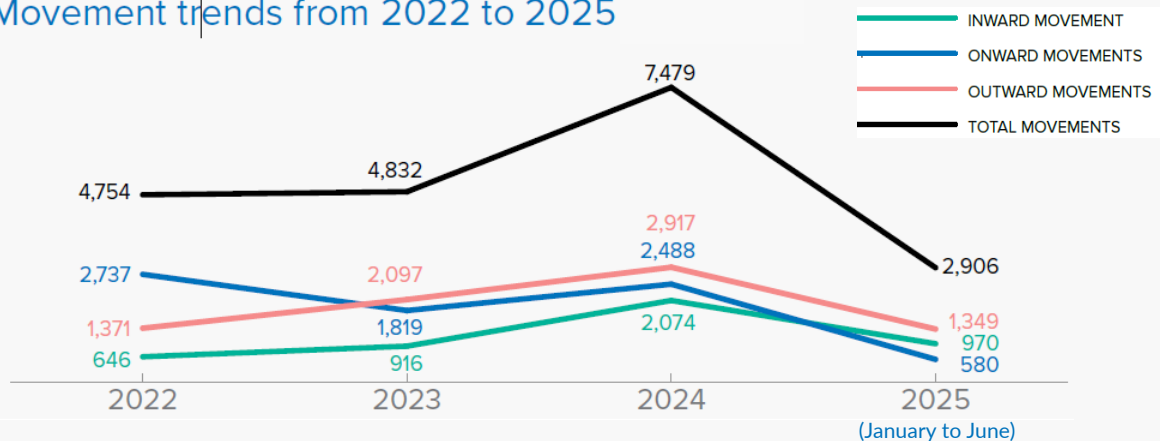


DESTINATION OF ONWARD MOVEMENTS

January to June 2025



Movement trends from 2022 to 2025



An analysis conducted by the Regional Bureau for West and Central Africa of UNHCR registration records for the first half of 2025 indicates that a small number of refugees and asylum-seekers have moved outside their country of first asylum and subsequently re-registered with UNHCR, with 3,000 being recorded as onward movements by UNHCR offices, representing a 16 per cent decrease compared to the same period in 2024.⁶ The top five countries within the region from which refugees and asylum-seekers departed are Chad, Niger, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic. According to UNHCR records, some 130 refugees and asylum-seekers went to Mauritania, Morocco, and Senegal as secondary

⁶ Note that this analysis does not include all onward movements. It is only indicative as it includes only those refugees and asylum-seekers that have been registered in more than one country where UNHCR conducts registration. Others may not have re-registered in these countries or may have moved onwards to other countries where UNHCR does not conduct registration.

countries of asylum, with the most significant nationalities being Malian and Sudanese. Some 700 refugees and asylum-seekers re-registered with UNHCR in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia with the predominant nationality being Sudanese (90 per cent).

Spotlight: Mali – In-country data collection

Analysis of the data collected by UNHCR and its partners in 2025

Mali continues to be a country of origin, a refuge space for those fleeing conflict and a transit country for onward movement. Expulsions from Mauritania, Algeria and Libya also contributed to sudden inflows into the country. However, flows are not homogenous: they include economic migrants, asylum-seekers, returnees, and expelled persons. Better demographic disaggregation (age, gender, vulnerability) remains necessary to assess differentiated protection needs.

This section presents data collected and analysed by UNHCR Mali and CIAUD Canada (International Committee for Emergency Relief and Development) focusing on the protection situation of persons in mixed movements. CIAUD Canada and UNHCR undertake protection field response and monitoring activities for mixed movements in several countries along the route including Mauritania, Senegal, and Niger, in addition to Mali. In Mali, such data collection and analysis have been conducted since 2019, providing a substantive and unique resource of disaggregated protection-based information about persons in mixed movements in Mali.

UNHCR and CIAUD monitor movements across borders between Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania, Guinea, and Senegal, with key entry/exit points such as Gogui, Koury, Benena, Labbezanga, and Heremakono. The monitoring also includes assessing the security and access conditions in these locations. Security incidents in Sikasso, Mopti, Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal, and Kayes (including expulsions from Mauritania) show how conflict dynamics shape displacement trends.

Movement patterns and corridors

From January to June 2025, mixed movement flows to and from Mali comprised multiple nationalities. Malians represented half of some 3,000 observed departures, followed by Guineans and Nigeriens. Burkinabè made up about 70 per cent of those observed entering the country during the same period, followed by Nigeriens and Guineans. Most Burkinabè remain in Mali, as shown by the low numbers of people of this nationality arriving in other countries along the route or in Europe.

Patterns show three main groupings of routes, some with significant overlap with areas of insecurity and exposure to risks:

- **Southern corridors** (Burkina Faso–Sikasso) for mixed reasons including security; (Guinea–Koulikoro/Kourémalé) for economic migration.
- **Western corridors** (Kayes–Mauritania/Senegal) for both onward transit to North Africa/Europe and returns (including deportations) from Mauritania and Senegal.
- **Northern corridors** (Gao, Kidal, Taoudénit) for crossings toward Algeria, Morocco or Libya.

The main reasons for moving cited by refugees and migrants were:

- **Security crisis and violence** in countries of origin
- **Economic pressures** and lack of livelihood opportunities
- Accessibility and affordability of routes
- Established migration networks

The intended destinations included:

- Europe (Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Belgium) and North Africa (Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco)
- Americas (rarely)
- **Regional return flows** to Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Senegal, Niger and Côte d'Ivoire.

Quantitative data is limited but despite the increase on the West African Atlantic Route between 2023 and 2024, most movements remain intra-regional, as shown in many studies.⁷ In 2024, only around 14 per cent of the persons interviewed in the mixed movements monitoring had Europe as a destination.

During the period, 9,711 potential asylum-seekers were identified and referred for further assessment of international protection needs (38 per cent Nigeriens and 63 per cent Burkinabè). This trend reflects, in part, the impact of the Burkinabé crisis into Mali. However, a clearer distinction is needed between refugees/asylum-seekers and other migrants with specific vulnerabilities.

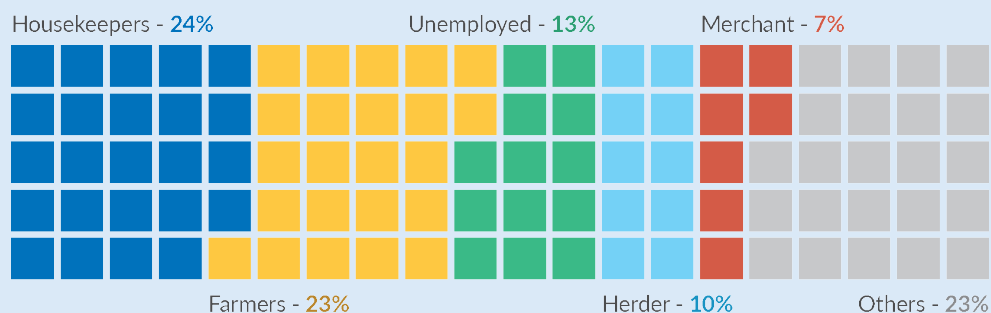
Migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers face multiple, overlapping risks along the journey:

- Extortion, theft, trafficking, GBV, refoulement, and statelessness.
- **High incidence of violations:** 42 per cent of the 12,477 interviewed persons reported abuses.
- **Over three quarters of those expelled and refouled** persons interviewed reported violations of basic rights or protection threats.

Mali's border monitoring and reporting provides valuable data on flows, risks, and expulsions. However, additional data needs to be added to further refine the analysis of trends or protection outcomes. The **Route-Based Approach** adds value by better linking field protection responses with border monitoring, early warning and cross-border dialogue. These results could be improved through stronger data disaggregation, better harmonization across coordination structures, and fuller implementation of legal frameworks.

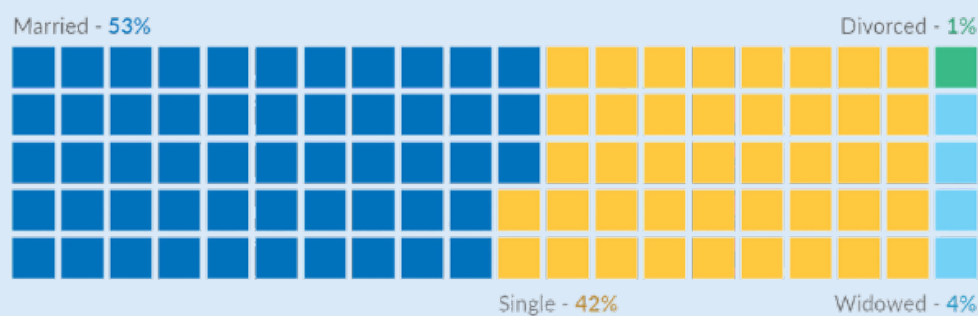
⁷See *Africa Migration Report*, 2nd edition, IOM Publications Platform, International Organization for Migration (IOM), accessed November 2025.

Figure 12 | Type of occupation among refugees and migrants surveyed in Mali | 2025



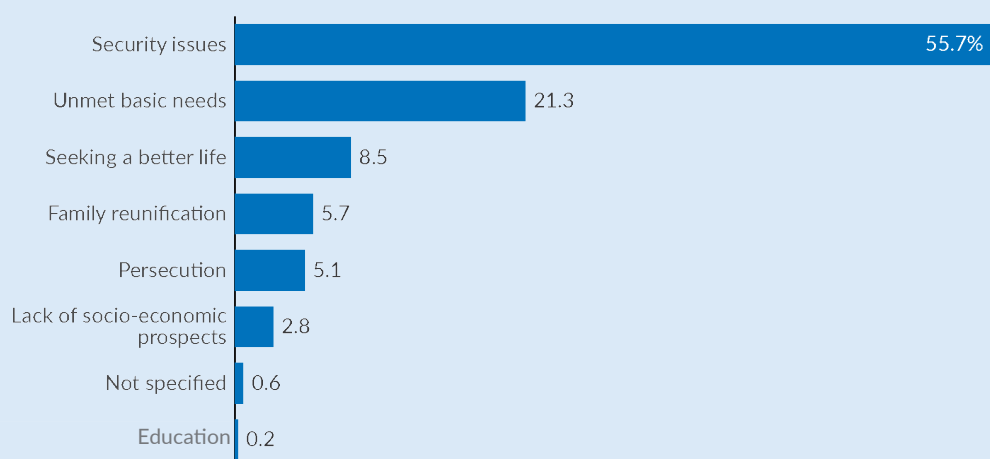
Source: UNHCR and CIAUD.

Figure 13 | Marital situation within refugees and migrants surveyed in Mali | 2025



Source: UNHCR and CIAUD.

Figure 14 | Reasons for mixed movements in Mali | 2025



Source: UNHCR and CIAUD.

Changes in route use in the past decade

Both the WAAR and the Western Mediterranean route are influenced by broader geopolitical and economic conditions, with changes in the situation in countries of origin, as well as the evolving security or policy conditions along one route often triggering increases along another. The WAAR—connecting West Africa to the Canary Islands—illustrates this evolution clearly.

The first significant increase in the use of this route was in the early 2000s, culminating in 2006 with the arrival of some 31,000 people in the Canary Islands from Senegal.⁸ Numbers declined over the next few years following the 2006 peak including due to increased partnerships between countries of destination and countries from which most were departing, with slightly more than 2,200 persons arriving along the route in 2009.⁹

During the period 2010 – 2019 annual arrivals to the Canaries rarely exceeded 3,000, averaging fewer than 1,000 per year. However, arrivals surged dramatically to over 24,000 in 2020, and then nearly doubled to more than 46,000 in 2024. This marked a profound shift not only in scale but also in the composition of those arriving. While most arrivals were Moroccans in earlier years—making up nearly 70 per cent of arrivals in 2018—the proportion of nationals of Sub-Saharan African countries grew sharply from 2019 onwards, reaching between 40 and 60 per cent of the total arrivals. More reliable data from 2023–2024 shows the proportion of Malian nationals tripled, rising from 14 per cent to 35 per cent, while those of arrivals from Senegal, Guinea, and Morocco each declined slightly.¹⁰

The increase observed between the period from 2019 to 2024 has been attributed by researchers¹¹ – in part - to the change in security conditions in northern Mali, formerly used as a route by both those on move and smugglers to reach Algeria. The increased violence and insecurity, as well as restrictive policies in Algeria, rendered the WAAR route a safer and faster alternative, with the sea passage from Morocco the shortest and least perilous of the different departure countries along the route. As most departures from northern Mauritania technically took place across the border, Mauritanian border and coastal officials did not systematically intervene to halt the often organised and significant departures.

This situation evolved in early 2025 with changes in Mauritanian practices towards foreigners, including those perceived as wishing to move onward, resulting in a significant drop in departures and subsequent arrivals along the route. This includes interceptions, mass deportations to Senegal and Mali, increased patrolling by coastal, marine and civil protection services, and restrictions on freedom of movement. As noted elsewhere, the number of arrivals in the Canary Islands was over 40 per cent lower for the first half of the year and subsequently reduced further between August and early October 2024.

⁸ *A Gateway Reopens*, February 2021, Mixed Migration Centre, , accessed November 2025.

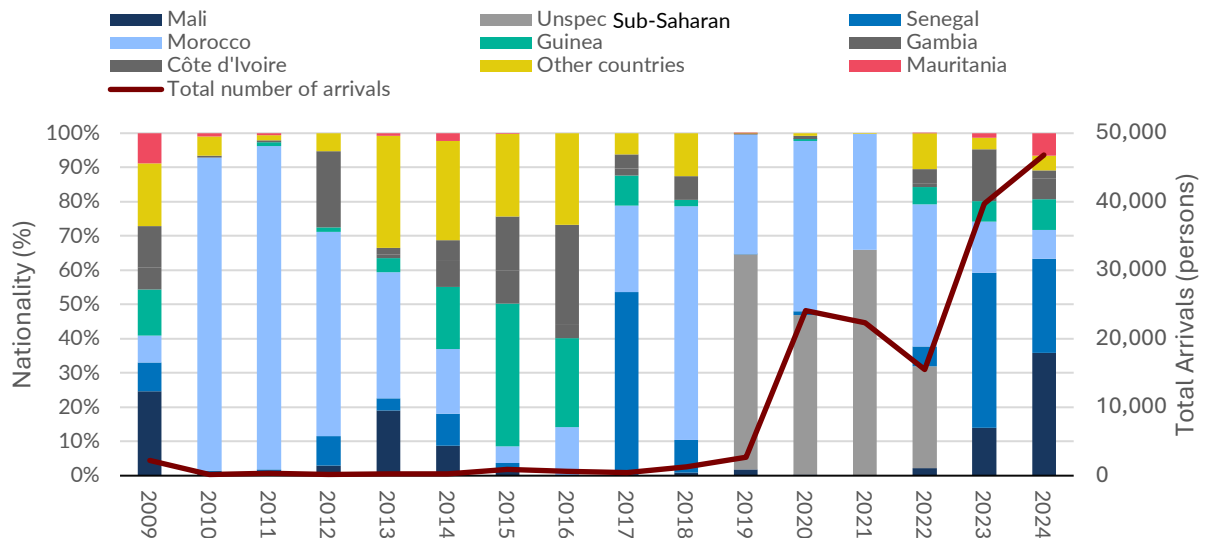
⁹ *Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime*, 2022, accessed November 2025.

¹⁰ Source: Frontex.

¹¹ *Seeking Safety, Facing Risks: MMC Research Report*, July 2025, Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), accessed November 2025 and *From Pakistan to Spain via the Canaries, smugglers are using longer, more dangerous migration routes*, 7 June 2025, AP News, accessed November 2025.

For the first half 2025, the distribution of nationalities using the route was similar to the same period in 2024, and most of the arrivals were Malians (44 per cent), Senegalese (22 per cent), Guineans (11 per cent), and Moroccans (8 per cent). Based on observations in August – October 2025, this distribution may change during the second half of 2025.

Figure 15 | Nationality using the WAAR | 2009 - 2024



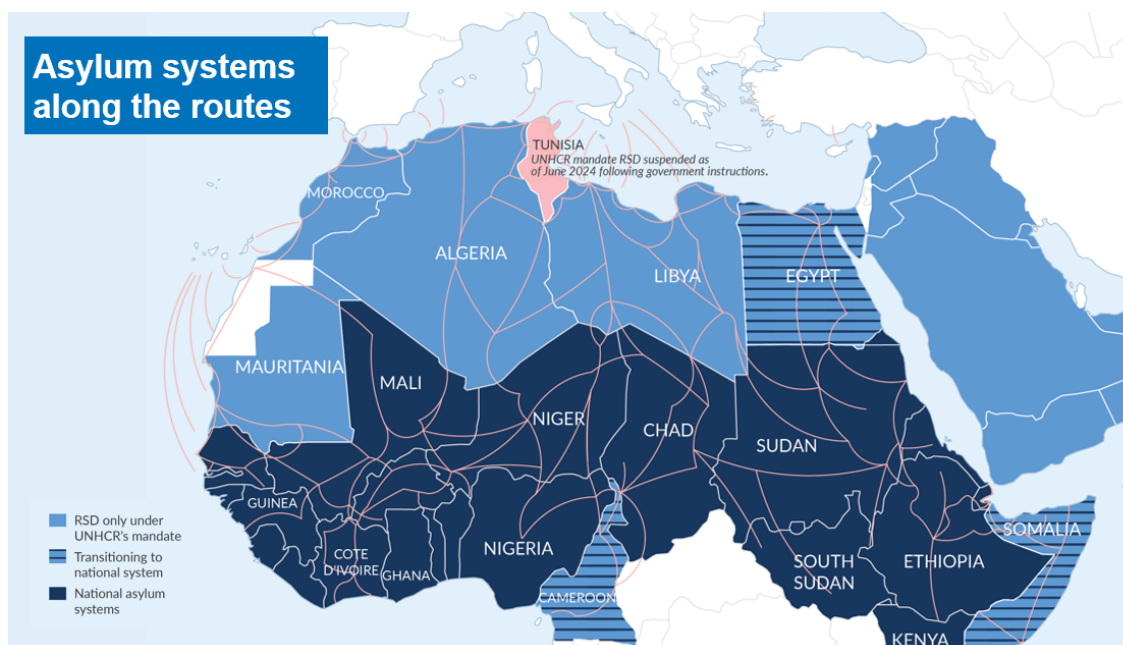
Source: *Monitoring and risk analysis migration map, Frontex.*

Protection environment

Legal framework

In several countries along the route, in the absence of national asylum systems, UNHCR conducts refugee status determination under its mandate in coordination with State authorities. This is the case in Mauritania, Morocco, and Algeria where those issued with refugee or asylum-seekers' documentation by UNHCR are usually protected from removal to varying extents.

Map 4 | RSD process arrangement in Africa | 2025 ¹²



Source: UNHCR.

In **Morocco**, asylum-seekers can only be pre-registered by UNHCR in Rabat and in four Multi-Purpose Hubs (MPH) *Antenne de Protection* in different parts of the country. There is no access to asylum at the border, neither at the airport nor in the disembarkation zone. UNHCR proceeds with registration in its office in Rabat, remotely, or on mission in the MPH. UNHCR conducts RSD under its mandate and issues UNHCR certificates that facilitate access to partner services for the UNHCR-recognized refugees. UNHCR-recognized refugees, with the exception of some categories, are scheduled in front of the *Bureau des Réfugiés et Apatrides* (BRA) and heard during bi-weekly sessions in the presence of UNHCR as an observer. Refugees may receive a residency permit following confirmation of their refugee status by the BRA. In most cases, they will be issued an official refugee card, which will then enable them, under certain conditions, to obtain a residency permit for “asylum” motive.

¹² In December 2024, the Government of Egypt enacted its first national asylum law—Law No. 164 of 2024—establishing a national legal framework for the management of refugee affairs, including registration, documentation, and refugee status determination. As of November 2025, UNHCR Egypt continues to conduct mandate RSD processing on behalf of the Government based on the 1954 MoU, while supporting preparations for the transition of these responsibilities to national authorities.

In **Algeria**, following the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in 2023, where the Algerian government pledged to adopt a national asylum law, UNHCR is engaging with the authorities to support the development of asylum capacity. In the meantime, UNHCR continues to register asylum claims and conduct Refugee Status Determination (RSD) under its mandate. Individuals holding UNHCR-issued documentation are able to access services provided by partners.

In **Senegal, the Gambia** and **Guinea**, well-established and functioning national asylum systems exist. The refugee status determination is conducted by a specialized government body in each country, except for some cases considered “sensitive”, which are processed by UNHCR. The asylum system in these countries is centralized in their capital cities, and it is impossible to lodge an asylum application at the border. UNHCR is supporting national asylum institutions through capacity development, helping to bring these institutions closer to international standards.

Mali’s response is guided by a strong policy and legal framework supported by international commitments. At the national level, the National Migration Policy (PONAM) and its accompanying action plan—currently under review—form the cornerstone of the government’s migration management approach. The 1998 law on the status of refugees provides the legal basis for asylum and protection. Complementing these are national mechanisms to combat trafficking and organised crime, including the National Committee for Combating Trafficking in Persons and Related Practices (established in 2011) and the Coordinating Committee of the Integrated National Program to Combat Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime (2021), supported by the National Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons (2023–2027).

Mali’s framework is further reinforced by adherence to key international and regional instruments such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees, which together emphasize coordinated, protection-sensitive approaches to migration. While frameworks exist and keep strengthening, implementation challenges remain acute due to limited humanitarian / State actors (CNCR) presence and weak operationalization of protection-sensitive border management.

In **Mauritania**, refugees in Mbera Camp receive a national identification document from the national authorities and there are plans to expand this also to urban areas.

Access to rights and services

In **Mauritania**, refugees have the right to work in most professions, in accordance with national legislation. They also have access to health care, education and social security on the same basis as citizens (despite resource challenges) and children have access to national child protection services.

In **Morocco**, refugees can access free primary health care and primary education. They need to pay for secondary and tertiary education, as well as any medication. Refugees with a residency permit can work legally and access social security.

During the last edition of the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in 2023, **Morocco** submitted six pledges focused on socio-economic inclusion, humanized border management, health, education and data. These pledges were related to the following multi-stakeholder commitments: "Inclusion of forcibly displaced persons and stateless persons in national statistical systems and surveys," "Inclusion in the national health system," "Economic inclusion and social protection," and "Towards shared responsibility to ensure the right to education and include refugee children in national education systems."

Morocco's social protection reform aims for universal coverage by 2025. While the legal framework does not exclude refugees and asylum-seekers, their access remains limited in practice due to administrative barriers. A key challenge is the requirement of a valid residency permit to register in the National Registry of Population (RNP, from French *Registre National de la Population*) and Unified Social Registry (RSU, from French *Registre Social Unifié*). Even with valid documentation, some refugees face rejection based on nationality, reflecting inconsistent local interpretation.

In **Algeria**, refugees and asylum-seekers have access to public education and primary health services, but several obstacles have been reported including limited capacity of public services, language barriers and instances of discrimination. They do not have formal labour rights and face limited access to livelihood opportunities, which translates into poor economic conditions and heightened protection risks.

In **Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, the Gambia** and **Guinea**, asylum-seekers and refugees have access to basic rights and services: access to labor market with possibility to work in most professions, access to health and education. However, there is a lack of awareness about refugee documents among employers and a certain reluctance to hire refugees. Access to residency permits remains challenging due to bureaucracy, long and cumbersome procedures, and lack of required documents.

In **Mali**, access remains constrained by a combination of factors in some locations.¹³ These include insecurity, including the presence of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), armed attacks, and checkpoints, continues to impede humanitarian operations. The limited presence of state services and NGOs at border points further limits assistance, while recent funding cuts—

¹³ These locations include: Douentza region, Gossi and Lere in Timbuktu region, Danderesso in Sikasso region and Ansongo in Gao region.

particularly following funding freezes—have reduced service provision across several sectors. These challenges are compounded by widespread socio-economic hardship, which disproportionately affects women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities. Despite these constraints, information and sensitization activities on the risks associated with mixed movements and on basic human rights, including the right to asylum, are regularly conducted for people on the move and for host communities. In addition, asylum-seekers and some other persons returned from abroad receive food, transportation, and registration support, though overall coverage remains uneven and inconsistent across different regions.

Risks

What are the conditions along the journey?

Refugees and asylum-seekers on the move are known to face multiple risks, including due to reliance on smugglers. Physical abuse, including sexual violence by smugglers or criminal gangs along the route, has been reported. High numbers of deaths continue to be reported along the sea route to the Canary Islands. Between January 2023 and August 2025, data shows that at least 2,300 deaths were recorded. However, NGOs have reported that the true numbers may in fact be far higher due to boats going missing after being washed into the Atlantic – some have subsequently been recovered on the coast of countries in the Americas. NGOs have reported more than 17,200 deaths between 2023 and May 2025, with some 9,700 of these deaths occurring in 2024.

In addition, immigration control measures, including raids, have heightened the risk of expulsion to neighbouring countries, for example, over 60,000 people were sent back to Mali and Niger in the first half of 2025, most of whom were Nigerien or Malian nationals. Refugees and asylum-seekers have been among those expelled, identified upon their arrival in Senegal, Mali and Niger. In many countries, including in Senegal, there is no possibility to claim asylum at the border.

Spotlight: Project 21 (P21)

Project 21 is a regional, cross-border, inter-agency protection monitoring system that surveys communities affected by displacement and conflict using standardized tools. Partnering with over 30 organizations—among which 66 per cent are local and national—P21 collects, analyses, and disseminates protection data. Since 2021, P21 has helped to unify protection monitoring systems in the Central Sahel and address data and analysis gaps, providing robust and comparable information on protection issues in the region.

Trends in reported protection incidents along mixed movement routes in the Central Sahel and associated protection risks

Map 5 | P21 intervention areas within WAAR countries | 2025



Source: Project 21, UNHCR.

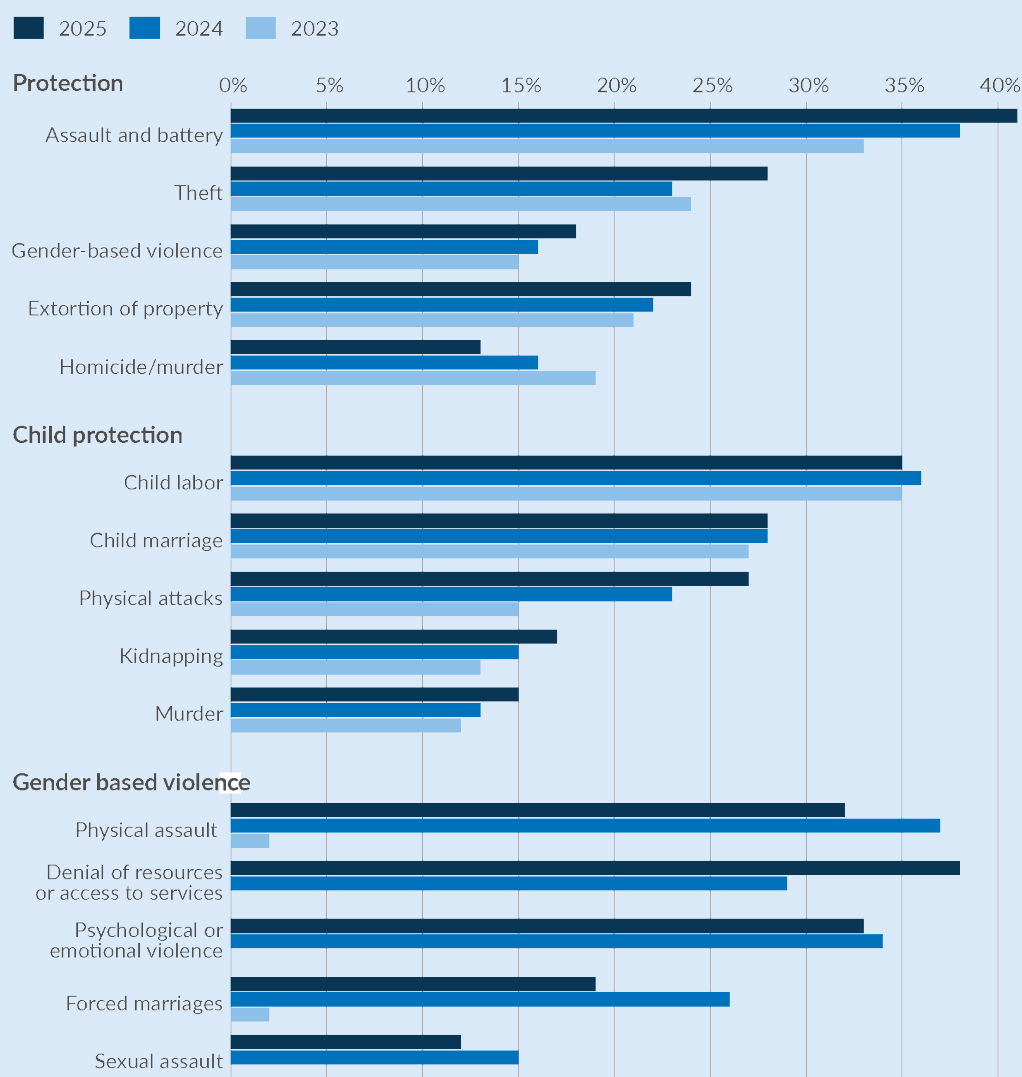
Several routes traverse the Central Sahel, an area in which people are particularly vulnerable to multiple protection risks. In 2025, Project 21 (P21) data revealed that these routes continue to be marked by insecurity, violence, and exploitation. In their answers, respondents described situations that they had experienced directly or were aware of along the route. The most frequently reported incidents include physical assaults (41 per cent of respondents)—a notable increase compared to 2024—and theft (28 per cent of respondents), a figure that has also risen. These figures illustrate intensifying banditry, conflict-related violence, and overall insecurity in key transit areas, making them increasingly dangerous for people on the move.

Denial of access to resources and opportunities (38 per cent) has sharply increased as well, pointing to worsening humanitarian conditions for migrants, refugees and other forcibly displaced people. Limited access to food, water, shelter, and essential services is

compounding existing vulnerabilities and forcing many to rely on informal or exploitative survival mechanisms. This restriction also signals growing competition over scarce resources in areas already affected by instability and climate stress.

Children remain among the most affected groups. Alarming levels of child labour (reported by 35 per cent of respondents) and physical assaults of children (27 per cent) have been reported in 2025. The proportion of respondents highlighting such incidents of direct violence against minors has grown compared to the previous year. Child marriage (27 per cent) and early marriage (19 per cent) persist as survival mechanisms, reflecting social and economic pressures along routes in the region. Gender-based violence (GBV) remains pervasive, with psychological violence (34 per cent) and early marriage (19 per cent) underscoring the extreme vulnerability of women and girls, who often depend on informal protection networks and lack access to institutional support or justice mechanisms.

Figure 16 | Most commonly reported protection incidents in WAAR countries | 2023 -2025



Protection response and gaps

Response

In **Mauritania**, UNHCR and partners are working with national and local authorities to strengthen protection responses to people in mixed movements, including for those disembarking after rescue or interception at sea. In May 2025, a decree was passed to implement standard operating procedures for disembarkation thus setting out a coordinated response between government authorities and humanitarian actors including for the provision of medical assistance and humanitarian needs, identification of those with international protection needs or other specific needs, and for referrals to additional services and support. Procedures were developed for new reception facilities to be established in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. UNHCR and partners increased capacity development activities for government counterparts and worked to strengthen access for refugees and asylum-seekers to protection and multisectoral services, including health, shelter, cash, legal aid, and community support.

In **Morocco**, UNHCR and partners are working with national authorities to support the implementation of the Humanized Border Management concept, involving improved reception, protection and assistance for refugees and asylum-seekers, identification and referrals of the victims of trafficking. This includes efforts to strengthen the identification and referral of people in need of international protection and victims of trafficking. Linked to this, UNHCR has partnered with OMDH to establish five Protection Antennas in Agadir, Casablanca, Nador, Oujda and Tangier as a means of bringing services closer to where refugees and asylum-seekers live. In parallel, Morocco has taken steps to address trafficking in persons through Law 27.14 and the establishment of the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Persons (CNCLT). While a National Referral Mechanism was launched in 2023, gaps in its implementation persist, particularly in the non-judicial identification of victims.¹⁴ Under this referral mechanism, UNHCR refers to IOM the identified victims of trafficking who will then be referred to CNCLT and relevant services. Two centres for victims of trafficking have been established and run by civil society in close collaboration with the CNCLT.

In **Algeria**, UNHCR is working with partners to increase the identification of those in need of international protection, strengthen the protection of children on the move and women and girls at risk, and enhance responses to trafficking. Through continuous engagement with local partners and refugee communities, UNHCR strives to strengthen community-based protection and promote localised humanitarian solutions. UNHCR also works with authorities on capacity-building initiatives, including training judicial and law enforcement personnel on international protection and refugee law, and advocating for the inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers in the national protection system.

In **Senegal**, UNHCR works closely with government authorities, including the National Committee for Refugees, Repatriated and Displaced Persons (CNRRPD), the National

¹⁴ To be considered as victims of trafficking one need to lodge a formal complaint, which victims do not always dare to do due to the fear of retaliation from traffickers.

Commission for Eligibility to Refugee Status (CNESR), and the Interministerial Committee to Combat Irregular Migration (CILMI), among others. A technical committee has been established to coordinate activities related to the operationalization of the route-based approach, capacity building, and strengthening responses to mixed movements. UNHCR also collaborates with NGOs and local partners to enhance the identification of persons in need of international protection, provide information on available services, monitor mixed movements, and support broader protection activities.

Although route-based approach implementation has not yet begun in the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Guinea due to limited funding, all three governments have expressed strong interest and readiness to move forward. Each has undertaken initial steps to integrate route-based approach principles and activities into their national responses to mixed movements. These include national referral mechanisms, training immigration officers, developing memorandums of understanding and pledges at the Global Refugee Forum for developing comprehensive responses to the protection challenges faced by refugees and migrants moving by sea.

In [Mali](#), UNHCR maintains close dialogue with the Ministry for Malians living Abroad, the CNCR, and regional authorities to institutionalize a national task force on mixed movements. The Office continues to advocate for formal referral systems, improved access to documentation, and stronger protection for individuals at risk of refoulement or arbitrary detention. Engagement with civil society and local NGOs is reinforcing community-based protection, with ongoing efforts to connect mobile populations to training, legal pathways and livelihood opportunities where feasible.

In Mali, registration, food, shelter and transport support—particularly for Malians returned to country—is provided through a combination of government actors, including the Ministry of Malians Abroad (MMEIA), the National Committee for Refugees (CNCR) and local authorities, alongside humanitarian organizations. UNHCR plays a central role in supporting the authorities in delivering international protection services, including technical and financial support for the strengthening of the asylum system, ensuring that individuals at risk receive appropriate support.

At the borders, UNHCR and CIAUD are engaged in monitoring movements, referring to asylum-seekers and advocating against refoulement. Livelihood programmes targeting vulnerable groups are also implemented to enhance resilience and provide alternatives to precarious or dangerous migration routes. IOM, UNHCR and ICRC further support expelled individuals through family tracing, humanitarian assistance, and reintegration support, addressing immediate needs while facilitating safe and dignified returns.

Special attention is given to child protection, with UNICEF, IOM and the Malian Ministry of Family, Women, and Children ensuring that children's rights and safety are prioritized. Health and gender-based violence services are delivered by MSF, ICRC, IRC, UNFPA and the Ministry of Health and Social Development, addressing urgent medical needs and supporting survivors of GBV. In parallel, the National Committee to Combat Trafficking in Persons (NCCTPRP), ENDA, and other partners support the investigation of trafficking cases, provide protection and assistance to victims, and pursue the prosecution of traffickers.

Coordination among actors has improved in recent years; for example, Khabou-Gadiaga has been agreed upon as a single reception site for expulsions, although adherence is not yet consistent. Despite these advances, protection-sensitive responses remain uneven, highlighting the ongoing need for strengthened, comprehensive support to vulnerable populations along routes.

Gaps

Significant protection gaps remain along the route. Across the region, the number of displaced persons continues to rise while investments in protection, services and solutions decline. This gap between needs and resources risks protracted displacement and compels more people to move onward for survival, dignity and stability. Limited infrastructure, particularly temporary accommodation along routes, strains local authorities. Many faced traumatic experiences and lack psychosocial support or effective reintegration programmes. One key gap remains adequate search and rescue capacity in response to situations of distress at sea. The vast distances involved, the strong sea currents and the limited capacity to conduct proactive search and rescue contribute to high numbers of deaths along this route.

In several countries along the route, strict immigration control measures are in place that can result in the arrest, expulsion or deportation of non-nationals without the necessary safeguards for those with international protection or other high-risk needs, including victims of trafficking.

Children are increasingly among those moving along the route, many of them unaccompanied. More than 4,000 unaccompanied refugee and migrant children are living in the Canary Islands as of mid-2025. As children move along mixed movement routes, they face the same risks as adults, including abuse by smugglers, risks of trafficking, physical and sexual violence, and risks associated with expulsions.

While several countries along the route have taken steps to provide access to essential services for refugees and migrants, in some, such access is more challenging in practice, due to barriers such as language, administrative requirements or lack of knowledge about the legal rights of refugees and migrants.

In **Algeria**, some individuals remain vulnerable to arrest, detention and deportation, with limited procedural safeguards. UNHCR continues to work closely with authorities to strengthen the recognition of persons in need of international protection and to operationalize protection mechanisms. Refugees and asylum-seekers often face unsafe living conditions and heightened exposure to exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence, with children and women particularly at risk. These gaps underscore the urgent need for stronger identification and referral mechanisms to protect individuals with specific vulnerabilities, as well as enhanced collaboration with the authorities to ensure effective safeguards along the route.

In **Senegal, the Gambia** and **Guinea-Bissau** the inability to lodge an asylum claim at the border contributes to refoulement and often forces people on the move to seek alternative ways to enter the country, including illegally. The lack of accommodation and emergency services,

insufficient information and referral services, and lack of inclusion options are the main gaps in these countries.


Despite some progress, **Morocco** has yet to establish a fully functioning national asylum system, leaving refugee protection partly reliant on UNHCR's mandate-based interventions of pre-registration, registration and Refugee Status Determination. Due to current funding constraints, UNHCR has accumulated a backlog in registering prioritized asylum-seekers (passing from two month waiting period in June 2025 to six months in September 2025). While the Bureau des Réfugiés et Apatrides (BRA) recognizes individuals granted refugee status by UNHCR and facilitates access to residency permits, the overall framework remains limited in scope and implementation. Certain nationalities (e.g. Syrian refugees) and profiles (e.g. LGBTIQ+) will not receive a refugee card. Refugees and asylum-seekers—particularly women, children, LGBTIQ+—often face precarious living conditions, barriers to accessing services, and heightened risks of exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence. Services for people with mental health needs or suffering from traumatic experiences are also lacking, even for the Moroccan population.

In **Mali**, significant gaps remain in the protection of people on the move. Asylum procedures are slow, and the national asylum authority has a weak presence in border regions, while insecurity in key transit areas limits both humanitarian access and state control. The absence of an integrated national framework for managing mixed movements further undermines coordinated responses. Thorough protection assessments of people that have been forced to return from neighbouring countries have also not been conducted, raising concerns about refoulement. Access to basic services for people on the move remains insufficient, leaving many vulnerable populations without essential support.


Significant protection gaps persist along the West Africa Atlantic Route, where rising displacement and declining investment in protection, services, and solutions leave many people at risk. The Route-Based Approach (RBA) offers a framework to address these challenges by strengthening protection-sensitive border management, improving inclusion and access to asylum and emergency protection needs, and fostering coordinated action across countries. Through regional cooperation, data-driven analysis, and joint advocacy, the RBA helps identify and respond to gaps along the route—ensuring more consistent protection, access to services, and durable solutions for people on the move.

Annex 1

Movements out of the Region								As of July 2025
Country of Origin	IDPs	Refugees	Total Forcibly Displaced	Arrivals in Europe 2023	Arrivals in Europe 2024	Arrivals in Europe 2025 (Jan-Jul) <small>Source: Frontex</small>	Arrivals in Europe 2009 - 2025 (Jan-Jul) <small>Source: Frontex</small>	% Totals
Burkina Faso	2.06 mil	278,000	2.3 mil	8,410	662	42	16,398	0.7%
Cameroon	969,000	98,000	1.06 mil	6,309	1,570	22	34,832	3.2%
Central African Republic	447,000	472,000	919,000	50	29	1	5,957	0.6%
Mali	402,000	368,000	770,000	12,251	19,224	5,049	95,477	12.3%
Nigeria	3.5 mil	401,000	3.9 mil	3,146	1,152	25	115,905	2.9%
Sudan	10 mil	1.1 mi	11 mil	7,648	4,284	80	53,481	0.5%
Total	17.3 mil	2.4 mil	20 mil	37,814	26,921	5,253	320,050	1.6%



More people in the Sahel are crossing borders, from internal displacement to refugee movements and engaging in mixed movements.



Source: UNHCR.

Contact

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