ON THIS JOURNEY NO ONE CARES IF YOU LIVE OR DIE

VOLUME 2

Abuse, Protection and Justice along Routes between East and West Africa and Africa's Mediterranean Coast

A route-based perspective on key risks

UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency

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Mixed Migration Centre

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Cover photo: Pickup packed with refugees and migrants heading to Libya crosses Agadez on its way to Tourayat, a Nigerien village. The town of Agadez in the Sahara is a hub for West Africans travelling to Libya, Algeria and Europe. The trip on this type of truck from Tourayat to Libya can take more than two days. © IOM 2016/Amanda NERO

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Foreword

The mixed movement of refugees and migrants on the African continent is often reduced to its more mediatized aspect – the perilous crossings of the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. While some of the movements take root in North Africa, many include multiple legs through several countries in an attempt to reach safety and/or better opportunities.

The protection risks and extreme forms of violence and exploitation refugees and migrants are confronted with on land are much less documented. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) decided to work together to map them out and have an updated and more precise understanding of where these risks and different forms of violence are perceived to be more acute and who are reported to be the perpetrators. To do so, many different sources of information were employed including 4Mi interviews with over 31,000 refugees and migrants between 2020 and 2023 by the MMC, the Missing Migrants Project and Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative of IOM, and UNHCR Protection Monitoring.

The first edition of this report issued in 2020[1] uncovered patterns of widespread human rights violations and abuses along the routes from East and Horn of Africa and West Africa to North Africa. It highlighted the gap between smugglers' narratives and the dramatic realities people faced on these dangerous journeys, where human life is just the mere subject of a commercial transaction. It provided clear data for States and their partners to enable them to design routes-based solutions and move services and prevention/response mechanisms to where protection problems occurred.

Unfortunately, three years later, the findings of the first report are reconfirmed and in some places surpassed. As the data suggest, the risks and the list of unimaginable horrors people face in some countries along the route have not disappeared, on the contrary. New conflicts erupted in the Sahel, bringing the displaced population to almost 5 million, double from the time of the previous report. In the East and Horn of Africa, droughts and floods generated by climate change are having a dramatic impact on new and protracted emergencies, while the number of displaced people due to the conflict in the Sudan reached 8.8 million as of May 2024.

The deteriorating situation in many countries of origin and host countries is leading an increased number of individuals to embark on dangerous onward journeys towards the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, with many of them ending up in extremely vulnerable situations. While there are no comprehensive statistics on land arrivals across the many countries of transit and initial destination, evidence points to an increased number of refugees and migrants moving to North Africa. In Tunisia for instance, UNHCR registered 209 per cent more refugees and asylum-seekers in 2023 than it did in 2020. During this post-COVID period, the presence of refugees and migrants in a number of countries was also politically instrumentalized, leading to more visible expressions of racism, generating protection incidents and fear among refugees and migrants and consequent onward dangerous movements, including across the Mediterranean Sea.

1 UNHCR and MMC, 2020.

Despite some progress, this new report suggests a degraded protection environment along the Central Mediterranean routes with insufficient protection-centred responses. Unfortunately, experience has taught us that increased risks will not prevent refugees and migrants from moving irregularly. The increased risks will continue to be downplayed by smugglers and traffickers, and people will resort to what they think might be the most effective individual risk mitigation strategy. As a young Somali refugee named Saeed said: "They [the smugglers] lie to the youth. They have workers everywhere and make *tahriib* [the journey to Europe] look easy […], but you will wake up when you face the dangers."

Sadly, this second version of the report may not be the last documenting violations and abuses of human rights of refugees and migrants along these routes. Critical protection safety nets remain lacking in key areas as highlighted by the second iteration of a report mapping protection services along the routes that will be published in 2024. In addition, many interlocutors have become accustomed to the prevalence of protection risks, abuses and the inexorable erosion of hope, as if nothing can be attempted to address them. A dangerous sense of resignation has paralysed States-led response along these routes despite the commitment to save lives and address vulnerabilities they have assumed under international law and other instruments, such as the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

As data depend on access to refugees and migrants, gaps exist for some locations, especially for the Sahara Desert, and may distort part of the analysis. However, many ultimately move out from these out-of-reach places and tell their story. They include the tens of thousands of refugees and migrants who told their stories upon which this report is based. Accordingly, we will no longer be able to say that we did not know about the extreme and unacceptable forms of violence they face.

We hope, and expect, that this report will help to inform increased and concrete routes-based protection responses to reduce the suffering associated with the desperate journeys refugees and migrants undertake. We also hope it will generate a push to address the root causes of displacement and drivers of irregular migration through positive action on peace, climate change, governance, inequality and social cohesion, as well as the creation of safe migration pathways.

We should never accept or get used to the horrors experienced by refugees and migrants nor leave unquestioned the significance of the grossly negative human rights indicators emerging from the countries where violations and abuses occur.

These violations and abuses will continue to represent a stain on our collective conscience that we cannot afford to ignore.

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Director of MMC

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Director of the Coordination Office for the Mediterranean, IOM

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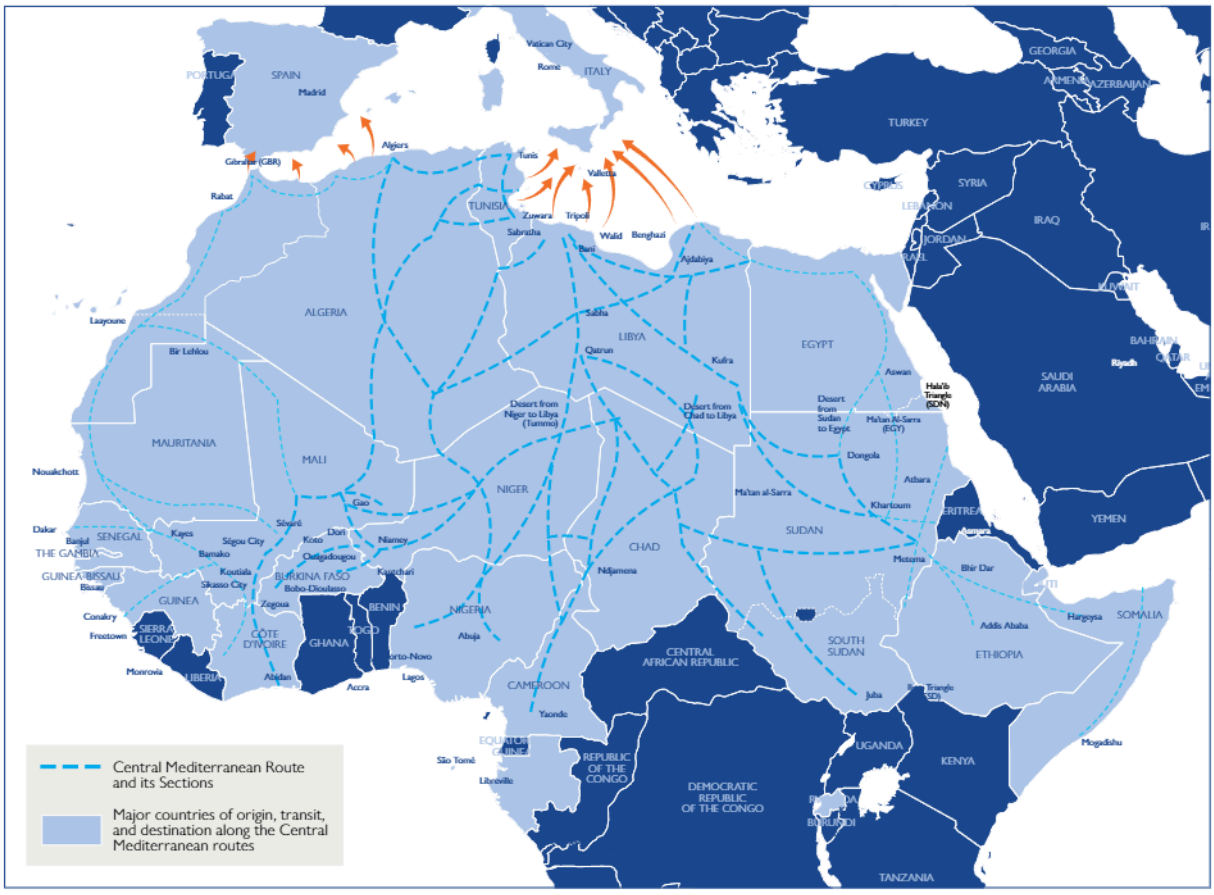
Figure 1. Central Mediterranean mixed movement routes



Source: UNHCR Geneva, 2023.
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AVRR	assisted voluntary return and reintegration
CTDC	Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative
DCAF	Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EUR	euro (currency)
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LYD	Libyan dinar
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
MMP	Missing Migrants Project
NAPTIP	National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons
NGO	non-governmental organization
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OMCT	Organisation Mondiale Contre la Torture (World Organisation Against Torture)
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGBV	sexual and gender-based violence
UNHCR	(Office of the) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

Executive summary

Scan the QR code to watch Saeed's story.

Frankly, I had no clue about the journey. Had I known about the hardship, I would have stayed in my country. I would rather die in Somalia than anywhere else. My father and my two brothers were killed by Al-Shabaab. I left because there was no security, no education, no opportunities. Those things combined made it difficult to stay. My life was in danger. The smugglers have a huge network around the world from Libya to Somalia and other countries. They lie to the youth. They have workers everywhere and make tahriib *[the journey to Europe] look easy. They tell you, you are going to Ethiopia and the Sudan, then you cross the desert to Libya and at the end, you are crossing the Mediterranean to Europe. You go to Europe to start a bright future. It is easy to say, but you will wake up when you face the dangers.*

– Extract from the story of Saeed from Somalia, January 2022 (UNHCR, n.d.a)

In June 2022, the remains of 20 people who got lost in the Libyan desert had been discovered by a truck driver (Africanews, 2022; *The Libya Observer*, 2022; InfoMigrants, 2022a). In December of the same year, the bodies of 27 refugees and migrants, including 4 children, were found in the Chadian portion of the Sahara Desert. It is believed they left Moussoro in West Central Chad 17 months before on a pickup truck that got lost and had a mechanical failure. Then on 18 April 2023, 109 people were reported dead in four shipwrecks off the coast of Libya and Tunisia (IOM, n.d.a and n.d.b).

The bodies of 20 migrants discovered in the Libyan desert. © Kufra Ambulance Service/ Ibrahim BELSAN

In total, 1,180 persons are known to have died while crossing the Sahara Desert for the period January 2020 to May 2024 (IOM, n.d.c), but the number is believed to be much higher (Grillmeier et al., 2023).[2] During the same period, around 7,115 people on the move were reported to have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean Sea. Crimes against humanity (United Nations, 2023a) death, SGBV, torture and

2 Please see also *infra* under "Deaths along the route".

physical violence, kidnapping for ransom, trafficking in persons, robbery, arbitrary detention, collective expulsions and refoulement; this is the non-exhaustive list of "unimaginable horrors" that refugees and migrants experience along the routes extending from the East and Horn of Africa and West Africa towards the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and onward to Europe (United Nations Support Mission in Libya and OHCHR, 2018). More recently, the security situation has further deteriorated in several countries,[3] generating increased displacement and cross-border movements of persons in need of international protection and of migrants.

This joint report builds on the data collected by IOM, MMC and the UNHCR during the period from January 2020 to March 2023.[4] It is a new iteration of a joint UNHCR and MMC report issued in 2020 covering the period 2018–2019 (UNHCR and MMC, 2020). Its main purpose is to identify and map risks, as well as draw attention to the serious violations of human rights and abuses experienced by people moving in search of safety or a better life.[5] Based on the mapping, the report serves to further develop and improve the vastly insufficient or non-existing programmatic response to the problem faced by those on the move along the Central Mediterranean route.[6]

The data collected by different enumerators along the routes, through interviews with people on the move and other data sets and sources of information,[7] have been analysed to identify risks, perpetrators and dangerous locations including as perceived by refugees and migrants.

Crossing the Sahara Desert – including locations such as Sabha in Libya, Agadez in the Niger and Tamanrasset in Algeria – is doubtless recognized as a dangerous segment of the journey.[8] Other dangerous areas include Tripoli in Libya, Khartoum in the Sudan, Bamako in Mali and several other places along the route. Téra in the Niger was identified as a much more dangerous place if compared to the previous report, while Douentza in Mali and Humera in Ethiopia emerged as new risky locations. After the conflict broke out, the Sudan is becoming an even more difficult place to cross, with people becoming more reliant on smugglers for safe passage through and around conflict zones, leading to increasing fees and potentially more exploitative arrangements (Bonfiglio et al., 2023). In a recent interview, two smugglers operating from the Sudan to Libya reported that depending on conditions at the time, they used informal tracks that run parallel to the road to avoid checkpoints. The price charged varies greatly and for the Sudanese, it fluctuated between LYD 700 and LYD 1,000 (approximatively EUR 128 to EUR 180) for each person (GI-TOC, 2023:21).

As a development from the previous report, further risks have been investigated, including arbitrary detention, bribery and extortion, robbery, trafficking in persons, collective expulsions and refoulement. Collective expulsions have been taking place from Algeria to the Niger,[9] from Libya (OHCHR, 2021:16) to Egypt, the Sudan, Chad and the Niger and reportedly, more recently from Tunisia to Libya and Algeria (Human Rights Watch, 2023a and 2023b).

3 See for instance, UNHCR, 2023a.
4 Depending on the data set analysed, the data have been collected in different temporal segments, that is 2020–2021 for trafficking in persons and 2021–2023 for the others. Please see under the "Methodology" section.
5 For the purpose of this report, *human rights violation* includes governmental transgressions of the rights guaranteed by national, regional and international human rights law and acts and omissions directly attributable to the State. *Human rights abuse* is used as a broader term and includes violative conduct committed by non-State actors. Please see OHCHR, 2001:10.
6 Please see the paragraph on "The Central Mediterranean route and its sections", clarifying which countries/land routes are covered by this report.
7 Including the 4Mi by MMC; MPP, DTM, Counter Trafficking and Migrant Management Operational System Application (MiMOSA) and CTDC by IOM; and Protection Monitoring report, surveys and Telling the Real Story by the UNHCR. Please see under "Methodology" section.
8 This is based mostly, but not exclusively, on the responses to the MMC survey. It should however be noted that, at the time of the interview, not all respondents have had direct experience of the Mediterranean crossing.
9 See for instance UNHCR, 2023b:6.

At sea, de jure or de facto authorities continue to intercept/rescue people in distress at sea, returning them to places that are not considered safe for disembarkation.[10] Even though all the countries along the three section of the route have signed the Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (Organization of African Unity, 1969), some have not developed an asylum system and consider irregular stay as a criminal offence.[11]

IOM, UNHCR, partners and governments have stepped up life-saving protection services and assistance, as well as identification and referral mechanisms along the routes (UNHCR, 2022a). However, these remain largely insufficient.

Insecurity and lack of authorizations by competent authorities prevent humanitarian organizations from accessing key roads, areas, arbitrary detention centres and holding facilities, while inadequate resources hamper operations (UNHCR, 2023c). An increased programmatic and strategic "all of route" [12] or route-based approach, spanning country of origin to first country of asylum/transit to country of destination, is needed, including collaboration with local actors to overcome accessibility issues and develop local safety networks, safe houses, support services and referral systems. In addition, continuous efforts are needed to provide reliable information to those planning to move, debunk "fake news" (UNHCR, 2021b) posted by smugglers, counter the role of social media in idealizing irregular movements or life in destination countries (Radio Télévision Suisse, 2023), and investigate and prosecute those responsible for crimes against refugees and migrants, including human traffickers. Finally, it is fundamental to address the root causes of displacement (UNHCR, 2018:para. 8) and minimize the adverse drivers of irregular migration (Objective 2 in United Nations, 2019) through renewed efforts on climate action, other SDGs (United Nations, 2015) and the New Agenda for Peace (United Nations, 2021a:paras. 88–89).

Refugees and migrants moving in the desert in the Niger. © IOM 2016/Miguel ALMARIO

10 Libya should not be considered a place of safety within the meaning of the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue. Please see UNHCR, 2020a. Please see also UNHCR, 2021a.

11 Libya's Law no. 19 of 2010 on Combating Irregular Migration includes a provision for persons found in an irregular situation to face imprisonment with labour.

12 For elements of the "all of route" or route-based approach, please see Grandi, 2023.

Recommendations

For international organizations

- Further develop and implement the concept of route-based approach, allowing a 360-degree response to mixed movements of refugees and migrants, in line with the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.[13]
- Identify more clearly existing data gaps in understanding the nature and extent of protection risks along the routes and improve data collection and sharing to better inform policy and programming.
- Further develop and expand community engagement and communication mechanisms such as Telling the Real Story (UNHCR, n.d.b) that through dialogue with communities, outreach networks, engagement with diasporas, and through work with social media and other communication channels, debunk disinformation and misinformation published by smugglers, counter the idealization of irregular movements or life in destination countries, and provide reliable data to those planning or undertaking the journey including on pathways for regular migration and complementary pathways for admission to third countries, availability of protection, assistance and legal support. In collaboration with governments, establish information programmes to be included in school curricula.
- Record and maintain an updated mapping of protection and essential services along the route. Where gaps are identified, establish safe houses, accommodation and spaces where assistance to meet basic needs, including hygiene, dignity and nutrition, and psychological first aid is available, along with safe referral pathways to address specific needs, counselling and information, in partnership with local and community-based organizations. Disseminate information on such services with migrants, refugees and related diaspora communities, as well as with local authorities to enable more effective referrals from places where these services are not available or cannot be established.
- Set up or strengthen mechanisms for systematic monitoring and reporting of rights violations and ensure qualification of specific patterns of abuses such as trafficking in persons.
- Support accountability efforts by establishing safe mechanisms for information-sharing for investigation and prosecution purposes, in full respect and observance of data protection and confidentiality standards, as well as the do-no-harm principle.

For States along the Central Mediterranean route, donors and the international community

- Where possible, in the context of the Call to Local Action for Refugees and Migrants (n.d.) and the Lampedusa Charter (United Cities and Local Governments, n.d.), establish partnerships with and direct funding to municipalities and local authorities along the route to create reception and referral systems and promote inclusive access to services and integration.[14]
- Establish and enhance bilateral and multilateral agreements to expand complementary pathways for admission to third countries for refugees (UNHCR, 2018:paras. 94–96), and pathways for regular migration (Objective 5 in United Nations, 2019), for education, family reunification, employment and humanitarian purposes.
- Support access to justice including through counselling and free legal assistance to victims, and development of practical measures to protect victims/witnesses and prevent secondary victimization. Consider when individual circumstances require access to witness protection programmes.

13 For elements of the "all of route" or route-based approach, please see among others, Grandi, 2023.
14 On the protection role of cities along the Central Mediterranean route, please see MMC and UNHCR, 2022.

- Reinforce judicial cooperation to investigate economic flows generated by illicit activities, such as trafficking in persons, smuggling of refugees and migrants, and kidnap for ransom, with a view to investigate, prosecute and hold accountable alleged perpetrators.
- Further enhance measures to identify victims of trafficking and other abuses, including through capacity-building of immigration and asylum officials, law enforcement officials, and through establishing or strengthening National Referral Mechanisms and coordination between those actors, NGOs and other key stakeholders.[15]
- Establish safe shelters or other flexible safe accommodation for victims, make information accessible on how victims of trafficking can seek help, and provide assistance for children, SGBV and trauma survivors to support their recovery.
- In the Sahara Desert, establish a robust and predictable search and rescue cooperative and coordinated mechanism led by local authorities and States respectively, in collaboration with international organizations and civil society.
- Develop fair and functional asylum systems along the route and inform those on the move of the possibility and the requirements in order to be able to seek international protection in countries along the route.
- Ensure that all expulsions are carried out in line with international law including the principle of non-refoulement, procedural guarantees and due process.
- Discuss the key findings of this report in relevant forums, such as the Rabat Process (ICMPD, n.d.), Khartoum Process (European Union/ICMPD, n.d.) and Roma Process (Italy, Government of, n.d.), with a view to further develop awareness and collective ownership to address existing gaps.
- Access to refugees and migrants should be granted in line with international refugee and human rights law, including to those in detention and those disembarked after an interception/rescue operation.
- Review the impacts of human mobility-related policies and laws to ensure that these do not raise or create risks for refugees and migrants, including by identifying dangerous transit routes through working with other States, as well as relevant stakeholders and international organizations to identify contextual risks and establishing mechanisms for preventing and responding to situations in which refugees and migrants are at risk. Consolidate and harmonize existing databases on trafficking in persons identified by governments, international organizations, local actors and other stakeholders to monitor trends and statistics on the identification of victims and their profiles, as well as the investigation, prosecution and conviction of alleged perpetrators.
- Establish mobile connectivity, through charging stations in key transit locations, and ensure access to communications in detention centres, while noting that immigration detention should be non-arbitrary, a measure of last resort, that alternatives should be prioritized and that work to end immigration detention of children should be undertaken.
- Address root causes of displacement and adverse drivers of irregular migration including through finalizing arrangements for the establishment of the loss and damage fund (United Nations Environment Programme, 2022) and renewed efforts towards the SDGs.
- Balance the overall attention given to the tragedies happening in the Mediterranean Sea with the horrors faced by refugees and migrants in the Sahara Desert and other land portions of the route. Establish an effective and well-resourced programmatic response to risks of migration on land involving governments, local authorities and communities, civil society and international organizations.

15 On National Referral Mechanisms, please see among others, IOM, 2019a and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, n.d.

- Subject any assistance provided to countries along the Central Mediterranean route to conditionality requirements, including clear and effective measures to mitigate the risk of human rights violations.[16]
- Increase resettlement quotas for refugees in Libya and those evacuated from Libya to the Emergency Transit Mechanisms in the Niger and Rwanda. Resettlement quotes for refugees in other countries along the route should also be increased.
- Persons rescued or intercepted at sea should only be disembarked to a place of safety (UNHCR, 2020a).
- Countries that have not yet done it should ratify the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the Protocol thereto and transpose it in national legislation along with the Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.
- Ensure that domestic legislation is amended to fully align with international law including by introducing the need to consider alternatives to detention in light of an assessment of the necessity, reasonableness and proportionality of detention.
- Ensure that appropriate care arrangements for children, families and other vulnerable individuals are provided upon disembarkation.

16 For Libyan entities involved in human right abuses, please see United Nations, 2023a. Please note this recommendation was firstly made in the first iteration of the report but few years later, it is still relevant.

Introduction

For the purpose of this report, the Central Mediterranean route is understood to extend from the East and Horn of Africa and West Africa towards the shores of the Mediterranean where, for some, the journey continues onward to Europe through the sea. It is travelled by people from different countries of origin moving for different reasons. It is a mixed movement composed of refugees and migrants with different needs and profiles.[17] Many have international protection needs, some move to adapt to or flee the effects of climate change; others seek a better life including employment and study opportunities; and others are compelled to seek a livelihood elsewhere out of desperation.

Among the top ten nationalities[18] arriving in Italy through the Central Mediterranean route during the period 2018–2022, several had a high asylum application acceptance rate. These included Syrians (95.23%), Malians (60.32%) and Sudanese (83.25%). By contrast, the protection rate of other nationalities such as Tunisians and Bangladeshi was lower (12.26% and 13.40% respectively).[19] This indicates the extent to which the movements across the Mediterranean are mixed, including refugees who, for lack of access to safe channels, see no other choice than to join other migrants along these dangerous sea crossings in order to apply for protection in Europe. Journeys across the Sahel, North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea continue to be extremely perilous. In many instances, to avoid border control or other checkpoints by State and non-State actors, or active conflict zones, smuggling routes shift towards more remote areas where people on the move are subject to more risks (Border Forensics, 2023; UNODC, 2022:6). In Chad, Libya, Mali, the Niger and the Sudan, refugees and migrants increasingly cross areas where insurgent groups, militia and other criminal actors operate, raising the risk of trafficking in persons, kidnapping for ransom and forced labour, including exploitation in informal gold mines (Micallef and Herbert, 2022). Crossing the desert through isolated roads further exacerbates the danger of road accidents after which smugglers often abandon people to die. Smugglers also leave people alone in the desert if they develop illness during the trip (IOM, 2023a:37). According to some reports, when intercepting refugees and migrants moving through the desert, official and unofficial patrols often extort fuel, money and mobile phones as payment to let them continue their journey (Micallef and Herbert, 2022:23).

COVID-19-related restrictions had various impacts on mixed movements along these routes, as well as on the smuggling business, and generally led to an overall reduction in the number of people on the move. However, currently mixed movements of refugees and migrants are reaching pre-pandemic levels (IOM, 2022a:45).

Testimonies gathered by IOM, MMC, UNHCR and many other humanitarian organizations highlight atrocities, violations and abuses perpetrated by criminals, militia and de jure or de facto government authorities. Tales of rape, torture to extract ransom from the families and long periods of arbitrary detention in shocking conditions are recurrent. Despite the risks, refugees and migrants continue to undertake these dangerous journeys (Frontex, 2023), including many who flee conflicts from countries on

17 For a definition of mixed movement please see *mixed movement* in UNHCR, n.d.c and MMC, n.d.a.

18 Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Guinea, Mali, Pakistan, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia.

19 The protection rate is calculated based on UNHCR data. It reflects persons recognized as needing international protection (refugee status and complementary protection) at first instance or on appeal in the European Union+ countries (meaning all European Union member States, as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom). Please see also European Union Agency for Asylum, n.d.

which the UNHCR has issued non-return advisories, such as Burkina Faso, Mali and the Sudan (UNHCR, 2023d, 2022b and 2023e),[20] and places where civilians are killed and properties destroyed (UNHCR, 2023f). While many people on the move seem to be aware of the risks of irregular migration, they continue to take the risk (IOM, 2023a), overestimating the chances of reaching their intended destination country (IOM, 2023b).

Given the political and geographical complexity and the enormous area covered, there is inadequate comprehensive data and research on the risks faced by refugees and migrants, especially on their journey across the Sahara. Thus, while this report cannot claim to be exhaustive, refugees and migrants interviewed by the MMC identified the desert and several specific places within the desert, such as Sabha, Agadez or Tamanrasset, as very dangerous to cross. They also put emphasis on the dangers they face in Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, the Niger and the Sudan.[21] This highlights the need to balance the overall attention given by the international community to the tragedies happening in the Mediterranean Sea and the deaths and atrocities that refugees and migrants face in the desert and other land portions of the route. It underscores the need to establish an adequate programmatic response on land involving governments, municipalities, local authorities and communities, international organizations and civil society.

After indicating its geographical scope and the methodology adopted, this report describes the major risks refugees and migrants face when moving along the Central Mediterranean route and maps the locations where such risks are perceived to happen or are happening. It describes who the respondents see as perpetrators of abuses, gives an overview on accountability for perpetrators, and proposes some recommendations for action.

Finally, while this report covers the period 2020 until the first quarter of 2023 – before the outbreak of the war in Sudan – in 2024, there is no end in sight to this war, while other conflicts and instability (such as in the Sahel) as well as poverty and inequality, climate change and other environmental factors continue to drive internal and cross-border displacement (although have a limited impact on international migration). Amidst insufficient mitigation, preparedness, resilience and adaptation measures (United Nations, 2019), and many where European countries are facing labour shortages due to ageing societies driving a demand for migration labour, such mixed movement is set to continue and in some contexts increase, where high numbers of refugees and migrants will continue to face the risks identified in this report.[22]

20 Please see also UNHCR, 2022c.

21 It should however be noted that, at the time of the interview, not all respondents have had direct experience of the Mediterranean crossing. Out of 16,890 refugees and migrants interviewed in Italy, Libya and Tunisia, who may have had close or direct experience with sea crossing including because of rescue/interception at sea by Libyans and Tunisians, 4 per cent identified the Mediterranean Sea as dangerous. The percentage increases to 38 per cent considering only those interviewed in Italy that certainly had direct experience with sea crossing.

22 See for instance, UNHCR, 2020b; OHCHR, 2022.

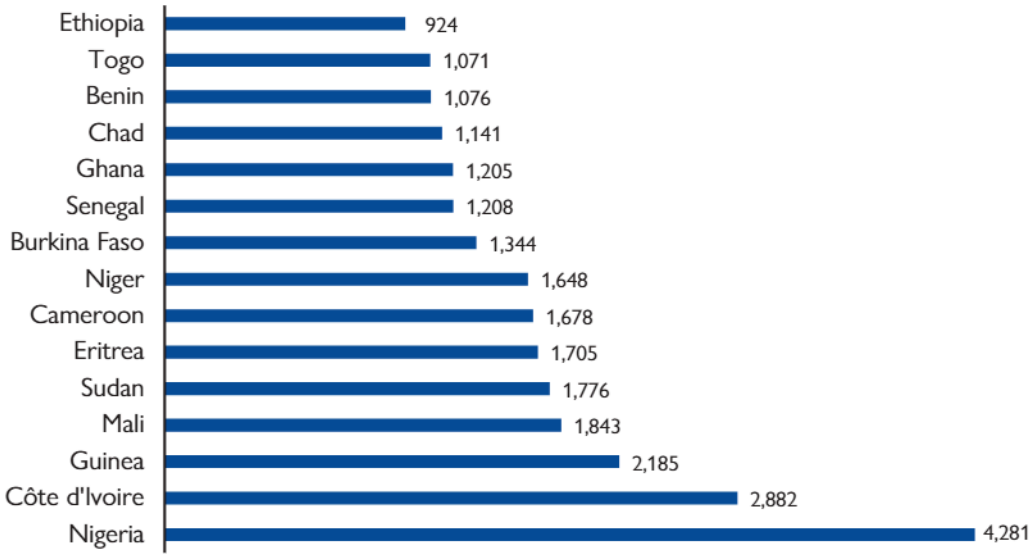
Methodology

The aim of this report is to map the risks incurred by refugees and migrants moving along the Central Mediterranean route based on data collected by IOM, MMC and UNHCR. The main risks investigated relate to the following: deaths and disappearances; SGBV; physical violence; kidnap for ransom; arbitrary detention; bribery and extortion; robbery; trafficking in persons; and collective expulsion or refoulement.

The data set from MMC's 4Mi data collection programme was used for the first seven types of risks mentioned above. It contains 31,542 records of interviews administered by MMC enumerators in West Africa, North Africa, East Africa and Europe between 2020 and the first quarter 2023. Of the interviews conducted, 28 per cent were in person and 72 per cent by phone.[23] Refugees and migrants[24] who travelled along the Central Mediterranean route were present in 217 different locations[25] (Figure 3) at the time of interview in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Italy, Libya, Mali, the Niger, the Sudan and Tunisia. Enumerators identified eligible participants through the following methods: (a) personal approach in selected geographic locations (gathering points for refugees and migrants); (b) key informants who are well connected to the refugee and migrant population; (c) social media; and (d) referrals (snowball sampling). Note that the age, sex and nationality composition of each group varies.

A total of 59 different nationalities of refugees and migrants moving along the route were interviewed. The top 15 that make up 82 per cent of the sample are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Top 15 countries of origin of respondents



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).

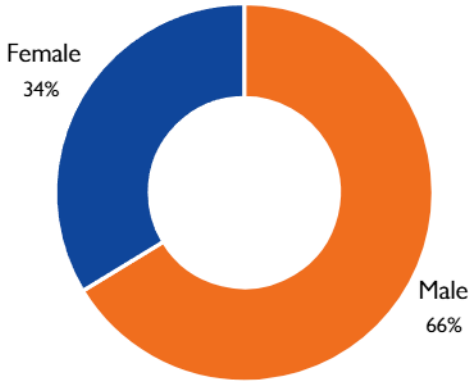
23 MMC prioritizes face-to-face survey interviews, but during the COVID-19 pandemic adjusted its methodology to phone interviews. 4Mi currently only uses phone interviews when security conditions do not permit face-to-face interviews.

24 Please note that for the purpose of this data set, only international migrants have been considered.

25 The high number of different locations is because of remote interviews during COVID-19, meaning contrary to normal practice of 4Mi, enumerators and respondents were not necessarily present in the same location at the time of the interview.

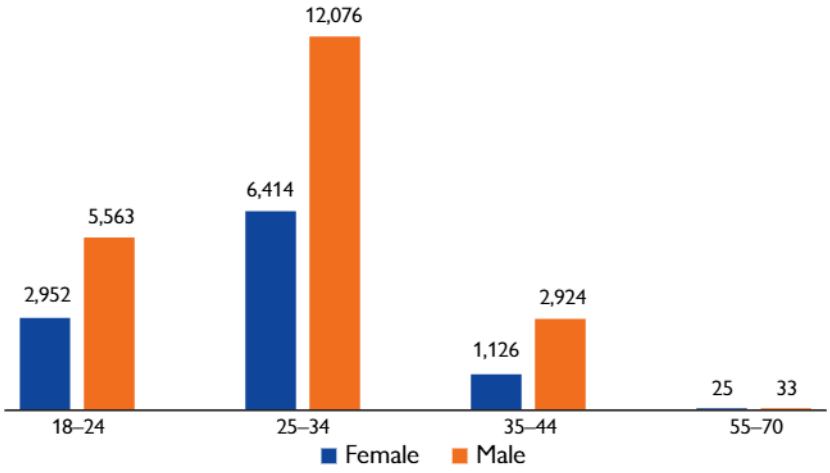
Respondents were all adults and thus, the report does not reflect the experience of children on the move, although according to several sources, they experience similar incidents.[26] Out of all the respondents, 66 per cent are men and 34 per cent are women (Figure 3). The age bracket of persons interviewed is presented in Figure 4.

Figure 3. Breakdown of respondents by sex



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).

Figure 4. Breakdown of respondents by age bracket



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).

The MMC 4Mi survey is standardized and structured with almost exclusively close-ended questions providing measurable data that can be used in statistical analysis. In line with the do-no-harm principle, and because enumerators could not provide responses to reported incidents, (either through referral or assistance), refugees and migrants were asked about perception of dangers, that is, places they consider to be dangerous noting the response had not to be based on hearsay. Only responses related to the 20 countries[27] and places along the route were considered and countries of origin were excluded to distinguish between incidents that may have contributed to departures or displacement and those that occurred while in transit. Respondents could name up to five locations (including more than one in the same country), the types of dangers perceived for that location, and who they considered to be the perpetrators. For each location, they could indicate multiple risks and perpetrators. It was not possible to link specific criminals/perpetrators to specific incidents.[28] It is important to note that the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea were also included at the country level. While the survey considers detention and kidnapping as separate categories, the distinction between the two may not have been always so

26 See for instance the following: Park et al., 2023; MMC, 2021a; MMC, 2022a:2; Save the Children, 2022.

27 Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Libya, Mali, the Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan, Togo and Tunisia.

28 For more on the methodology used by the MMC, please see MMC, n.d.b; MMC, 2023. Please see also MMC, 2021b.

clear to respondents, despite clarification from the enumerators, given that kidnapped persons are also held with no freedom of movement, and it is not always clear who is responsible (perpetrator).[29] Also, while IOM and UNHCR adopt the definition of smuggling provided by international law (United Nations, 2000a), MMC uses a broad interpretation of the terms *smuggler* and *smuggling*, which encompasses various activities – paid for or otherwise compensated for by refugees and migrants – which facilitate irregular mixed movements, including cross-border movements.[30] Finally, enumerators selected only respondents who had crossed the last border less than two years prior to the interview. The sampling approach means that data about dangerous locations is gathered at certain points on a particular route and not necessarily reflect the experiences along all possible routes, creating a potential bias. Where respondents are interviewed is strongly related to which route they have travelled, and MMC is not interviewing respondents everywhere: as an illustration, a participant who left Nigeria and is interviewed in Mali can only speak to dangers on the route as far as Mali, while a participant who left Nigeria and is interviewed in Italy can speak to dangers up to Italy. The data therefore can only provide indications as to the comparative severity of dangers in different locations, as there may be an under- or overreporting of particular locations as dangerous.

In relation to the number of deaths along the route, the report also makes use of data from the MMP of IOM (IOM, n.d.b), which counts refugees and migrants who died at the external borders of States, or while in the process of moving towards an international destination. The Project records only those who die during their journey to a country different from their country of residence. While more information on the MMP methodology is publicly available (IOM, n.d.d), it is important to note that the Project does not count deaths that occur in migration detention facilities, as well as deaths more loosely connected with migrants' irregular status, such as those resulting from labour exploitation. Due to the lack of systematic reporting on the deaths of people in transit, the numbers indicated by MMP are best understood as indicative of trends rather than fully representative of the true death toll in any region or route.

The main information on trafficking in persons used in this report was published by the CTDC (IOM, n.d.e), an initiative by IOM and its collaborative partners that publishes harmonized data from counter-trafficking organizations around the world. Its information comes from a variety of sources, including assistance activities of the contributing organizations, case management services and counter-trafficking hotline logs. The CTDC data set may not be exhaustive, as it does not include data from all counter-trafficking organizations in the world. The CTDC data used in this report are open source and available on the CTDC website (IOM, n.d.f). When possible, the information has been complemented from the UNODC database, which includes information on cases reported by the authorities until 2020 (UNODC, n.d.). The CTDC and UNODC data are sampled differently. The CTDC data set includes administrative data provided by civil society organizations and case management data provided by IOM, whereas the UNODC database reports official statistics provided by governments – which also informs the SDG indicator 16.2.2 "number of victims of human trafficking per 100,000 population".

Information on trafficking has also been triangulated with data coming from other sources, including IOM, UNHCR and governments. In certain instances, these sources indicate different figures and highlight the pressing need to develop a comprehensive and coherent database.[31] Among these sources feature

29 For the purpose of this report, *kidnapping* is defined as incidents involving a demand for ransom from persons not present, and not involving State authorities. In contrast, detention is conducted by State authorities. Short-term detention for the purposes of bribery was not included under either definition. However, it is important to note that this distinction is challenging and may, for a number of reasons, not always be clear to respondents.

30 These include irregularly crossing international borders and internal checkpoints, as well as providing documents, transportation and accommodation. This approach reflects refugees' and migrants' perceptions of smuggling and the facilitation of irregular movement. This interpretation is deliberately broader than the United Nations Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants' definition. However, this does not imply that the MMC considers all activities it includes in its broad understanding of smuggling to be criminal offences.

31 For instance, for the year 2020 in the Niger, the CTDC reports 44 victims, UNODC does not have data, and the website of the Niamey Declaration indicates that 232 victims were rescued (IOM, n.d.g).

Platform for Action on Cases of Trafficking and Aggravated Smuggling (also known as PACTAS), a pilot initiative jointly developed by IOM, UNHCR and UNODC, which covers four countries along the route. It collects data through a combination of media monitoring and alerts from confidential sources with the aim to detect, identify, analyse and refer cases of trafficking in persons and smuggling to competent national authorities and, when relevant, to appropriate international and regional organizations.

Traditionally, it has been difficult to identify cases of trafficking in persons because of the reluctance of the victims to denounce perpetrators. This is due to distrust, fear, shame, trauma and stigmatization by families and communities, criminalization, the hidden nature of the phenomenon and the fact that law enforcement and judicial authorities may lack capacity and/or the knowledge and understanding of the crime (United States Department of State, n.d.a and n.d.b). Proper reporting and data-sharing have also been difficult due to the highly sensitive nature of the data that, to avoid repercussions for victims, must be treated in line with the highest level of data protection and security standards. In this context, to ensure the privacy and anonymity of victims, data published on the CTDC website for downloads is anonymized using k10 anonymization. This means that the published data only includes victims who share a combination of characteristics with at least nine other victims (k minus 1). In other words, to ensure privacy and comply with data protection requirements, rare cases that could be identifiable are systematically redacted. In many instances, reporting on trafficking in persons – and thus visibility of the crime – is linked to the capacity of the actors involved in the response. This means that a low number of cases may reflect a capacity gap in a given country as opposed to a lack of or low number of victims.

Finally, although identification and protection of victims of trafficking is inadequate across the board, this is particularly true for boys and men including because of gender stereotypes.[32] However, the trend seems to be reversing, as according to the UNODC, boys and men account for a greater share of detected victims worldwide as new forms of exploitation emerge (Finding 8 in UNODC, 2023). In line with the aforementioned, the data on trafficking in persons presented in this report are by no means to be considered as exhaustive and are likely to represent just the tip of the iceberg. This is confirmed by the number of potential victims of trafficking identified in asylum procedures among those who arrived in Italy by sea through the Central Mediterranean route. Between 2018 and 2019, over 10,200 persons were identified as possible victims of trafficking, with more than 90 per cent of them originating from Nigeria (UNHCR, 2021c).

For the countries under review,[33] data are available only for 2020 and 2021. Cases of trafficking in persons have been categorized in three typologies: (a) trafficking for forced labour; (b) trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation; and (c) other forms of exploitation such as organ removal. In this context, it is important to note that despite some academic literature considering kidnapping for ransom as a form of trafficking in persons (Brhane, 2015), this report considers it as a separate risk. Finally, the data sets do not precisely report the exact place where the crime took place but indicate the country where the victims were identified.

Although collective expulsions take place from several countries along the route, including from Tunisia (Human Rights Watch, 2023a and 2023b; OMCT, 2023), coherent data are only available for Algeria but they cannot be entirely verified and are likely to underrepresent the situation. While "collective expulsion" is not defined under international law, for the purposes of this report, it is understood as "any measure compelling aliens, as a group, to leave the country, except where such a measure is taken on the basis of a reasonable and objective examination of the particular case of each individual alien of the group".[34]

32 See for instance, United Nations, 2023b:para. 20.
33 Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Libya, Mali, the Niger, Senegal, the Sudan and Tunisia.
34 Please see Council of Europe/European Court of Human Rights, 2022. Please see also UNHCR, n.d.b and IOM, 2019b:33.

The Central Mediterranean route and its sections

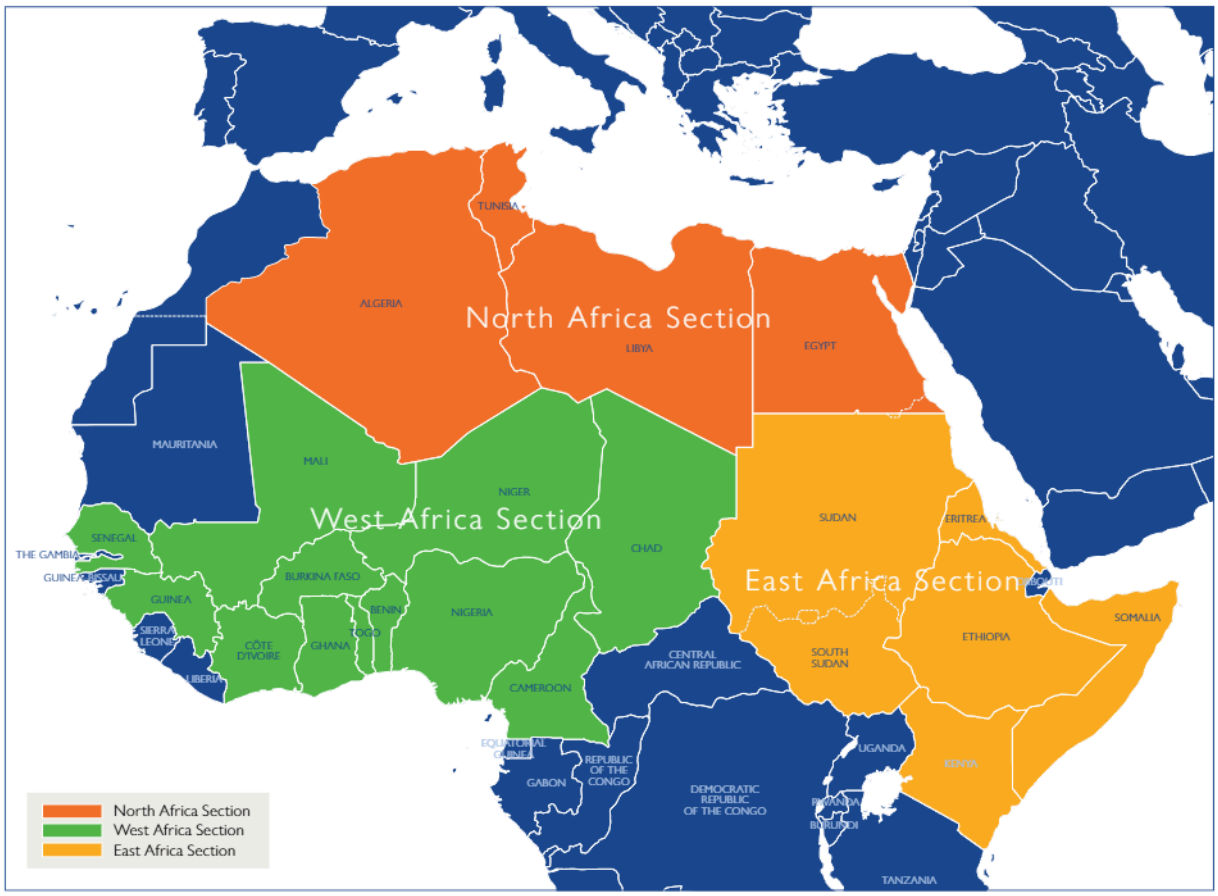
The Central Mediterranean route extends from the East and Horn of Africa and West Africa towards the shores of the Mediterranean. The path travelled is not linear, and while some people conclude their trip in one section of the route, others continue the journey trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. In most instances, people stop, some for years, in one or more locations including goldfields (Fereday, 2023a:10) along the route, to gather resources and move further (UNODC, 2021a). In these places, some register with IOM and UNHCR (UNHCR, 2022d). The route is travelled by thousands of refugees and migrants moving for different reasons, such as to seek safety and international protection, family reunification, job and study opportunities or simply a better life.[35] However, regardless of their reasons and needs, they all face similar risks, including refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Asia who travel to West or North Africa, with the aim of reaching Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea.[36]

This report refers to different sections of the Central Mediterranean route (Figure 5):

(a) **West and Central Africa section:** This section is from West Africa via Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger and Chad. In Mali, the Timbuktu route to the Algerian section of the Sahara Desert remains the most popular and is preferred to the riskier one passing through Bamako, Mopti, Douentza, Gao and Kidal (Berger, 2023). Those moving via the Niger pass through Téra on the way north to Mali or to Niamey on the way to Tahoua and Agadez. From there, they either move to Algeria via Arlit or to Libya via Dirkou and Dao Timmi. In this section of the route, the ECOWAS Protocol allows citizens of the Community to move freely through and within the territory of its member States (Figure 6), provided they have a valid travel document and an international health certificate (ECOWAS, 1979). This implies that before reaching the limit of the desert in Mali and the Niger, refugees and migrants make partial use of the services of smugglers including to cross informal border points when not in possession of ID documents, to overcome restrictions introduced following the COVID-19 pandemic (Fereday, 2022a:1), when there are security issues, sometimes due to corruption (UNODC, 2022), or when the Protocol is suspended.[37] This was the case when, after the coup d'état in Mali on 9 January 2022, ECOWAS imposed sanctions on the country, including the closure of land and air borders (ECOWAS Commission, 2022a:para. 9(b)). Then, on 3 July of the same year, the sanctions were lifted (ECOWAS Commission, 2022b: para. 12a). More recently, after the coup d'état in the Niger on 30 July 2023, ECOWAS decided to close air and land borders with the country (ECOWAS Commission, 2023:para. 10k(i)). Finally, in January 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS (with immediate effect according to the three States, and within a one-year deadline according to the ECOWAS treaty). The impact on mixed movement through these three Sahelian countries and on migrant smuggling dynamics of this withdrawal remains to be seen and closely monitored.

35 On the reasons for moving in West and Central Africa, please see among others, paragraph 1.1.1 and 3.1.2 of Digidiki et al., 2021.
36 See for instance, Baloch, 2023.
37 According to a MMC and UNODC research, respondents in Mali and the Niger who had used smugglers more frequently reported using one for only part of their journey (71% and 53%, respectively) (MMC and UNODC, 2021).

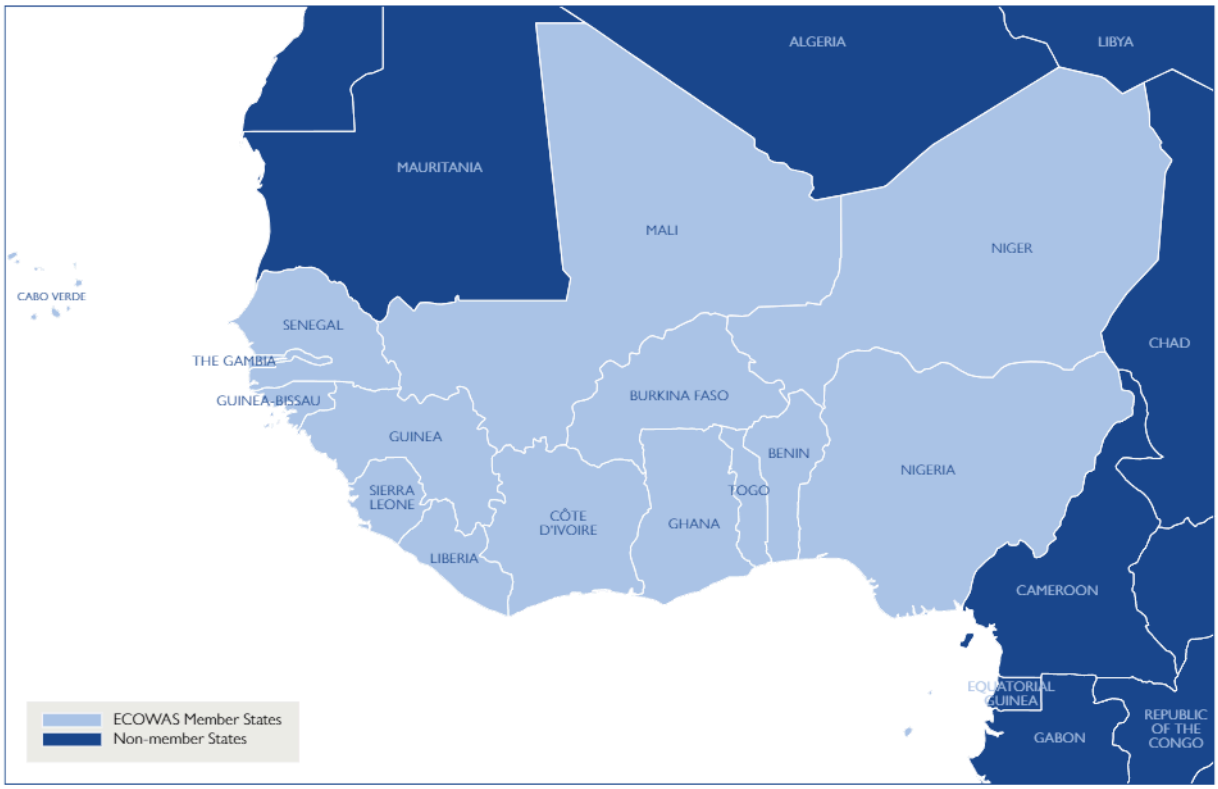
Figure 5. Three sections of the Central Mediterranean route



Source: Author's own elaboration.
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

Passengers wait to begin boarding a long-distance bus to Agadez, the Niger at a bus station in Niamey. The trip takes more than a day. © UNHCR 2019/John WENDLE

Figure 6. Member States of the Economic Community of West African States



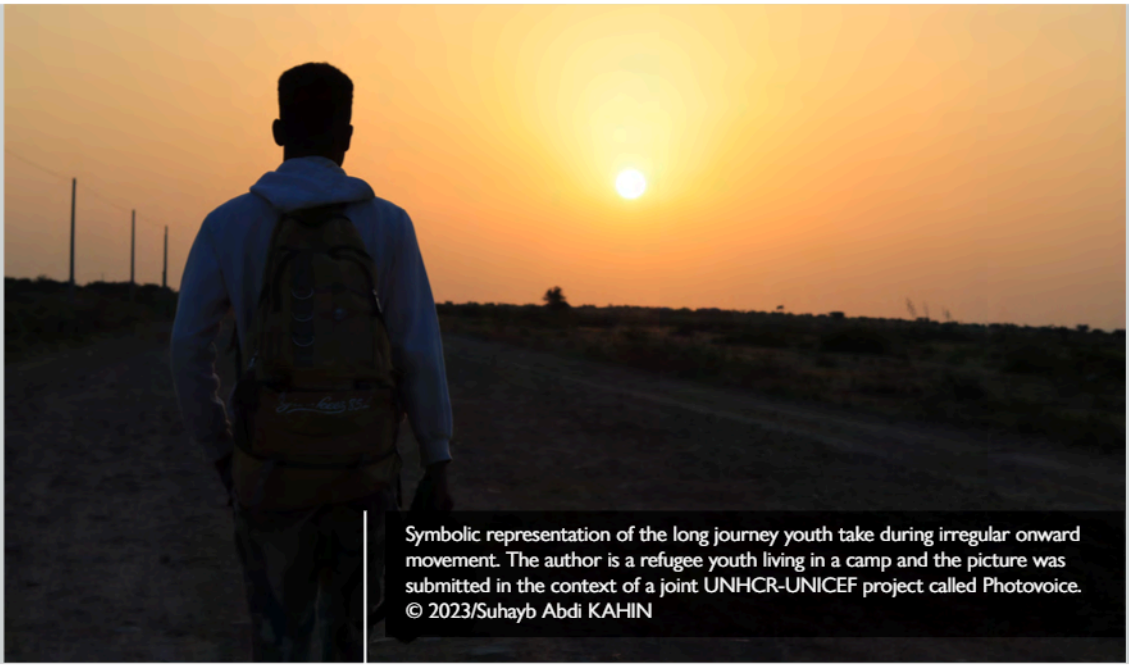
Source: Author's own elaboration.
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

The partial recourse to smuggling services could be potentially related to one of the findings of the MMC survey, which showed only 13 per cent of the respondents in West and Central Africa perceive smugglers as perpetrators of human rights abuses, as opposed to 42 per cent and 30 per cent of respondents in the North and the East and Horn of Africa sections of the route respectively. While in most instances in the ECOWAS Community people can move freely without the need of smugglers, this does not mean that they are not affected by corruption of State authorities (Frouws and Brenner, 2019). According to a Togolese migrant who passed through Dosso, Tahoua and Abalak in the Niger, there are several barriers along the route where police board the buses and identify refugees and migrants and ask them to pay (GI-TOC, 2023). Those moving towards Algeria usually meet the smugglers in Timbuktu and Gao in Mali (Tinti, 2022) or in Tahoua and Abalak in the Niger (GI-TOC, 2023), while those travelling towards Libya organize their onward movement through smugglers in Agadez, the Niger. Recently, the route through Algeria is reportedly more used and transit through Agadez – formerly the Niger's irregular-movements fulcrum and the principal gateway to Libya for refugees and migrants – is declining (Fereday, 2022a:1), although smugglers have reorganized to cater for Nigerien seasonal workers going to Libya (Fereday, 2023b:2). Additionally, following the military coup in the Niger in 2023, the military leadership in November 2023 issued Ordonnance no. 2023-16 abrogating the Law 2015-36, the European Union-supported but controversial anti-smuggling law. Shortly after the law's repeal was announced, smugglers who had taken their business underground following the original enforcement of the law in 2015 began to operate openly again, with escorted migrant convoys heading north again (Garver-Affeldt, 2023). Chad is not part of ECOWAS, but since 2016 and partly due to the anti-smuggling activities in the Niger and the Sudan, it has become

a transit hub, although the number of refugees and migrants crossing the country has remained low compared to the Niger and the Sudan. Abeché in Eastern Chad is a major smuggling hub for Chadians and Sudanese moving north towards goldmines and Libya, while Mao and Moussoro are traditional waypoints in the western side of the country. Since 2020, COVID-19, the political crisis, the security situation and the closure of the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield have reduced the passage through Chad (Fereday, 2022b). However, the crisis in the Sudan and the reopening of Kouri Bogoudi may contribute to partially revive it (Fereday and Bish, 2023:4).

(b) **East and Horn of Africa section:** This section leads from the East and Horn of Africa to the Sudan. Those moving from Eritrea either travel to Kassala, in Eastern Sudan or transit through Humera, at the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia close to the Sudanese border. Others, mainly from Somalia and Ethiopia, more commonly cross the border between Ethiopia and the Sudan in Metemme (or Metemma) to continue to Gedaref (or El-Gadarif) and eventually to Khartoum. From Khartoum, there are three main possibilities: (i) refugees and migrants can go to Egypt via Atbarah and Dongola (north of the Sudan) on the road to Aswan (Egypt); (ii) to Libya via Kosti, Al-Ubayyid and Al-Hajer (Central West Sudan), crossing the border at Ain Dua in the Sahara Desert; or (iii) continue to Chad through El Fasher and El Geneina (West Sudan). On February 2020, member countries of IGAD – of which the Sudan is a member alongside countries in the East and Horn of Africa – endorsed the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons (IGAD, 2020a and 2020b). However, the protocol still needs to be formally adopted by the Council of Ministers and as such, it is not in force. Additionally, in January 2024, the Sudan announced the suspension of its membership of IGAD. The conflict that erupted in the Sudan on 15 April 2023 has made the journey through the Sudan far more dangerous and costly. According to testimonies gathered by Telling the Real Story, the route to Egypt that used to take two to three days now can last up to three weeks, exposing people on the move to an increased risk of deaths and trafficking in persons for the purpose of organ removal. In this context, some Eritreans are moving south to Uganda either directly by air, or passing through Ethiopia and Kenya, or travelling via the White Nile State in the Sudan and Juba in South Sudan. Due to the security situation in the Sudan, Chad could potentially become a more prominent country on the way to Libya (van Moorsel and Bonfiglio, 2023). The conflict may also have the effect of increasing the number of refugees and migrants moving towards North Africa[38] and possibly to Europe, although only 5,887 Sudanese arrived in Italy in the whole of 2023 and only 497 in 2024 as of 30 April. In this context, it is interesting to observe that before the outbreak of the conflict in the Sudan, the number of people from the East and Horn of Africa choosing to move north towards Europe along this section of the Central Mediterranean route was comparatively and consistently lower than the number of those moving along the eastern route to Yemen and the Gulf, or the southern route to South(ern) Africa. In particular, from October to November 2021, East and Horn of Africa nationals in Libya accounted for less than 2 per cent of Libya's total migrant population (IOM, 2022b). Finally, the conflict in the Tigray and Amhara regions of Ethiopia also had an impact on the movement of refugees in the region generating new and onward movements.

38 As of 24 November 2023, the number of new asylum-seekers/refugees from the Sudan in Egypt amounted to 378,000, while the number of non-Sudanese asylum-seekers was 7,320 (Operational Data Portal, n.d.a).



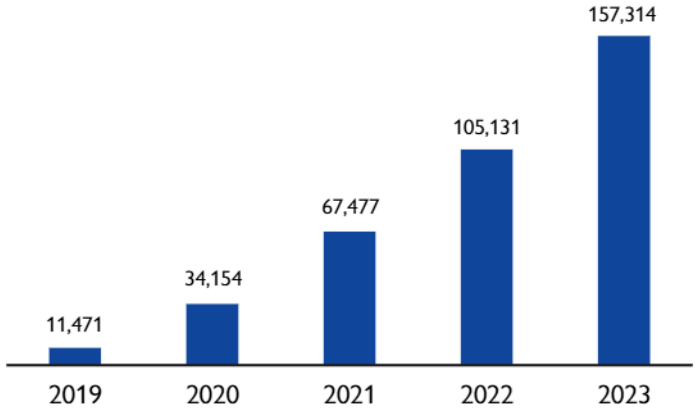
Symbolic representation of the long journey youth take during irregular onward movement. The author is a refugee youth living in a camp and the picture was submitted in the context of a joint UNHCR-UNICEF project called Photovoice. © 2023/Suhayb Abdi KAHIN

(c) **North Africa section:** This journey leads through the desert to and through Maghreb countries where people reach their destination or move onward towards the European Union crossing the sea, mainly to Italy. Refugees and migrants reach this section of the route from sub-Saharan countries and also from the Middle East, Bangladesh and other Asian countries via Dubai,[39] Istanbul or Cairo (MMC, 2022b:17). The route through Algeria passes by Timiaouine and Bordj Badji Mokhtar at the border with Mali, Tamanrasset and then to Libya either via Ghat or Gadhames or it continues to North Algeria via El Oued. The route in Libya passes by Qatrun and Sabha or Kufra/Al Jawf and then Tarzibou. From there, refugees and migrants reach Tripoli and other departing points along the Libyan coastline. Due to the lack of visa requirements, especially from West African countries, many refugees and migrants reach Tunisia by plane; although in 2022, arrivals through land borders, especially from Algeria, increased (Abderrahim, 2023).

(d) **Crossing the Mediterranean Sea:** This section leads from North Africa to Europe, mainly from Libya and Tunisia to Italy (Figure 7). Main departure points include the coastal cities of Zuwara and Misratah in Libya and Sfax in Tunisia. While traditionally people crossing the sea to Europe departed from Libya, during the first half of 2023, departures from Tunisia surpassed those from Libya, with an increase of 137 per cent compared to the same period of the previous year (United Nations, 2023c). The increasing number of departures from Tunisia is likely due to different factors including the increasing number of people from West, Central, East and Horn of Africa arriving in the country, the worsening economic situation and, as reported, the growing xenophobia and intolerance (OMCT, 2023).[40] While in 2022 the main nationalities arriving to Europe through the Northern Africa section of the Central Mediterranean route were Egyptian, Tunisian and Bangladeshi, for the period January–August 2023, the main nationalities arriving in Italy were Guinean (14%), Ivorian (13%), Tunisian (11.%), Egyptian (7%), Bangladeshi (7%) and Pakistani (6%) (UNHCR, 2023h).[41]

39 See for instance, Sansone, 2023.
40 See for instance: Business News, 2023.
41 For a comparison, please check the available data set for 2022 and mid-2023 as compiled by IOM: https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals?type=arrivals.

Figure 7. Yearly sea arrivals to Italy, 1 January 2019–31 December 2023



Source: Operational Data Portal, n.d.b.

After departure, many are rescued/intercepted by Libyan de jure or de facto authorities and brought back to Libya (UNHCR, 2020a), while others are rescued/intercepted by the Tunisian Coast Guard or Navy and disembarked in Tunisia. Those who manage to cross the sea autonomously tend to arrive in small boats on the Italian island of Lampedusa, while others rescued by civil society organizations or the Italian Coast Guard are disembarked in Sicily or, following instructions of Italian authorities, in places that are more distant from the zone of operations of vessels operated by civil society organizations. However, and most importantly, many die or go missing at sea. According to the MMP, 2,048 refugees and migrants were reported to have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean Sea (Central, Eastern and Western route) in 2021, 2,411 in 2022, 3,105 in 2023 and 817 in 2024 up until May (IOM, n.d.c).

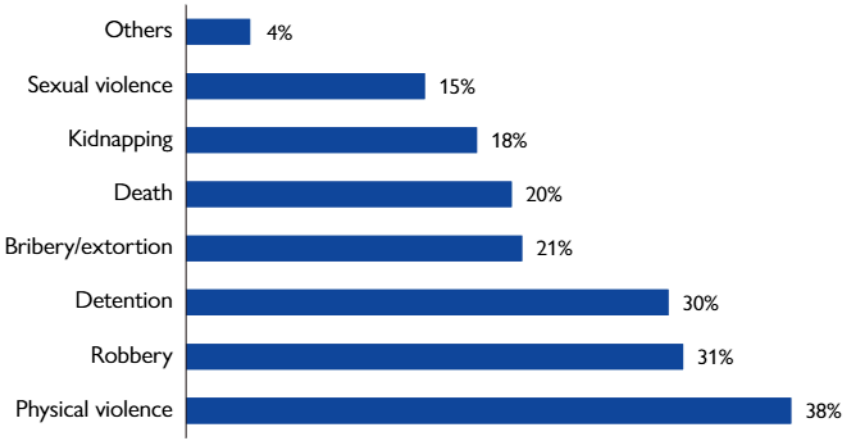
(e) **Sahara Desert**: A total of 1,277 refugees and migrants (3% of the total sample interviewed by the MMC across the route) indicated the Sahara Desert as the most dangerous place without being able to indicate a precise location or a specific country. In this context, unless otherwise indicated, the maps presented in this report visualize the desert as a place at the border between Chad, Libya and the Niger. A large number of respondents have reported many locations as dangerous that are known to be in the desert, such as Agadez in the Niger (846 respondents), Kufra and Sabha in Libya (1,567 respondents) or Tamanrasset in Algeria (378 respondents) just to mention a few, with around 30 per cent of those who made it across the Sahara reporting the Sahara in general as dangerous. This implies that the desert crossing possibly the most difficult and dangerous part of the Central Mediterranean route.

Truck packed with refugees and migrants heading to Libya crosses Agadez on its way to Tourayat, a Nigerien village. The town of Agadez in the Sahara is a hub for West Africans travelling to Libya, Algeria and Europe. The trip on this type of truck from Tourayat to Libya can take more than two days. © IOM 2016/Amanda NERO

Mapping abuses: Summary of results

Overall, refugees and migrants responding to the MMC 4Mi survey identified physical violence as the main risk they face along the route followed by robbery, detention, bribery and extortion, death, kidnapping and sexual violence (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Breakdown by type of risk identified



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: Calculated dividing the number of respondents mentioning this kind of risk at least once by the number of total respondents.

The 66 per cent of the respondents that were interviewed in or transited through Libya reported the country to be risky. It is followed by Ethiopia (62%), Algeria (55%), Guinea (33%), Burkina Faso (32%), Mali (31%), Chad (29%), the Niger, Côte d'Ivoire and the Sudan (25%), Nigeria (24%), Egypt (19%), Cameroon and Ghana (12%), Senegal (11%), Togo and Benin (10%), Tunisia (8%) and Somalia (7%) (Figure 9).[42]

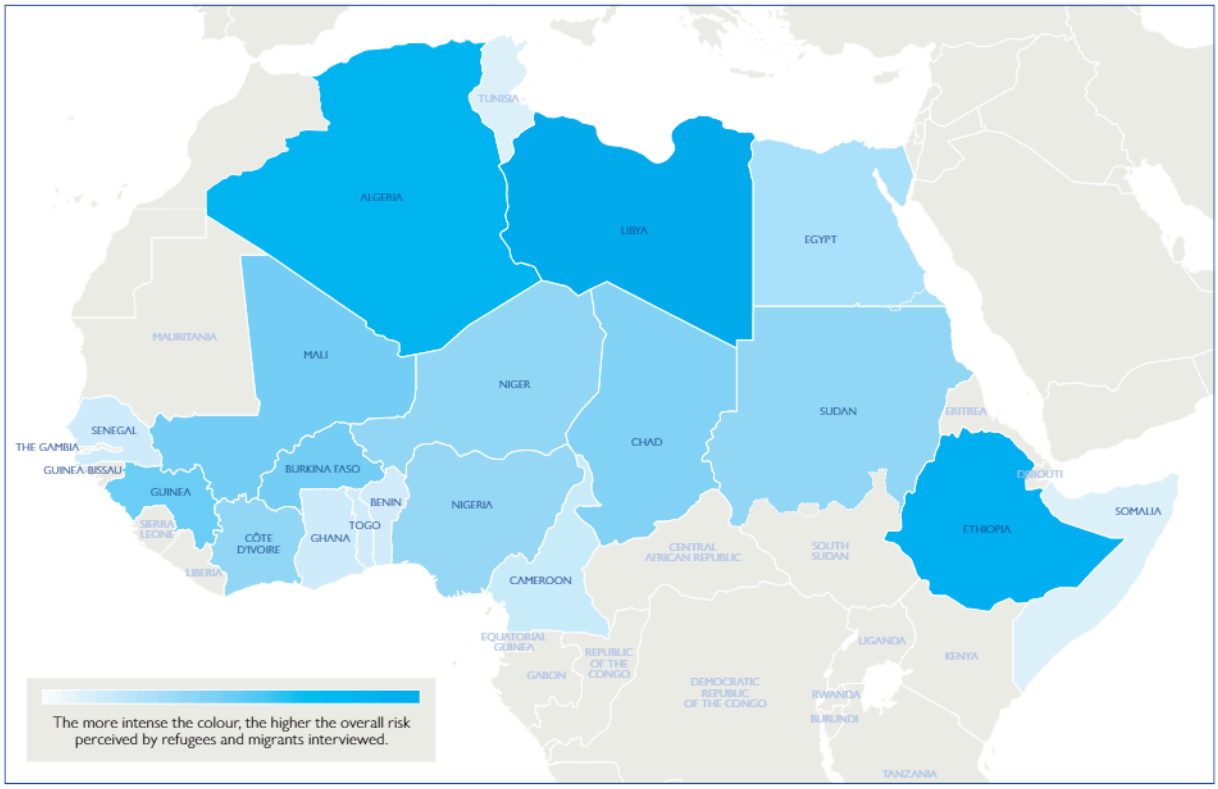
Given that 1,277 respondents identified the Sahara Desert as a dangerous location without being able to name a specific place and that, as previously specified, many of the locations identified as dangerous by respondents are in the desert – such as Agadez in the Niger (846 respondents), Kidal and Sabha in Libya (1,567 respondents) or Tamanrasset in Algeria (378 respondents) – the Sahara Desert is undoubtedly perceived as a very dangerous place to cross.

Out of 16,890 respondents interviewed in Italy, Libya and Tunisia having a possible understanding of or a direct experience with the Mediterranean Sea crossing, including because they were rescued/intercepted by Libyan or Tunisian authorities, 665 (4%) identified the sea crossing as a risk. The percentage increases to 38 per cent, when considering only the responses of the 962 refugees and migrants interviewed in Italy.[43] However, given that more people are estimated to cross the Sahara than to cross the Mediterranean, data may suggest that although largely underreported by media or governments, more incidents may be happening in the desert than at sea. According to IOM and MMC, the number of those who die in the desert may well be at least double the number of those who die in the Mediterranean Sea (Miles and Nebehay, 2017; Frouws and Sollitt, 2016). The data may also indicate that more attention should be given to the development of rescue and protection services and assistance in the desert. Further, it may

42 Please note that the sample size varies for each country.
43 On the risks of crossing the Mediterranean, please see also MMC, 2022b:21.

indicate the need for a renewed programmatic focus on community engagement and communicating with communities, to provide them with comprehensive information on the risks of the journey, including on the possibility of pathways for regular migration and complementary pathways for admission to third countries, as well as the availability of protection services and assistance.

Figure 9. Countries perceived to be the most dangerous by refugees and migrants



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

Deaths along the route

> *Abraham crossed the Sahara Desert in the back of a pickup truck with 30 people, including 8 women. There was no water at hand, only well water at various spots in the desert. "What can you do?" Abraham said about the dead bodies he saw in the wells contaminating the water. There was nothing else to drink to survive. He saw a whole truck of passengers – 20 to 30 people – dead from an accident. There was no stopping, "You just keep going. You never look back," he said. He saw hills of sand, rocks, more dead bodies. He heard ghosts. Voices crying out. A Nigerian man named John, 25 or 26 years-old, fell out of his truck and died. The desert crossing took three days.*
>
> – Extract from Kerpius, 2021.

The first quarter of 2023 was the deadliest for refugees and migrants in the Central Mediterranean since 2017 (IOM, 2023c). However, as reported by refugees and migrants and mentioned above, death could occur everywhere along the journey, not only at sea. People on the move die while crossing the Sahara Desert, following torture in the context of kidnapping for ransom, while crossing the Mediterranean Sea on board unseaworthy vessels, while in arbitrary detention or following cases of trafficking in persons.

Although incomplete, reporting of deaths following shipwrecks appears more complete than reports of deaths that occurred on land. This is due to the presence of State and private vessels, aerial surveillance, communication by satellite phone by refugees and migrants in distress at sea, and media attention on sea crossings. On land, on the other hand, due to the remoteness of the routes, challenging or lack of access to official and unofficial detention facilities, infrequent or absence of reports from authorities or media coverage, gathering information on deaths is extremely difficult and numbers are likely to severely under-represent the situation (IOM, n.d.h). Refugees and migrants crossing the Sahara Desert face risks linked to both the extreme environment and violence at the hands of smugglers, traffickers and border officials. Extreme heat, cold (*North Africa Post*, 2023), lack of shelter, dehydration (IOM, 2022b), starvation, sickness and lack of access to health care may render the journey lethal. Refugees and migrants also die as a result of vehicle accidents (Magdy, 2022a) or if they are stranded while transiting across remote parts of the desert. According to the MMP, in the period 2021–2024 (up to May), 1,031 refugees and migrants were reported to have died crossing the desert (IOM, n.d.c), 42 per cent because of vehicle accidents, 24 per cent because of harsh environmental conditions, including exposure, dehydration and starvation, and 12 per cent due to violence. During the same period, around 8,381 people were reported to have died or gone missing on the Mediterranean Sea crossing, of which 6,068 on the Central Mediterranean crossing, nearly all of whom (94%) drowned.[44]

Scan the QR code to watch Teklebrhan's story.

Most don't know what happens on the journey; you only hear about people reaching Khartoum or Libya. No one in Eritrea knows the obstacles on the way. I believed all the accidents happen at sea. The accidents are back there in the Sahara. It is full of Eritrean bodies. There you will find bones and skulls of dead people.

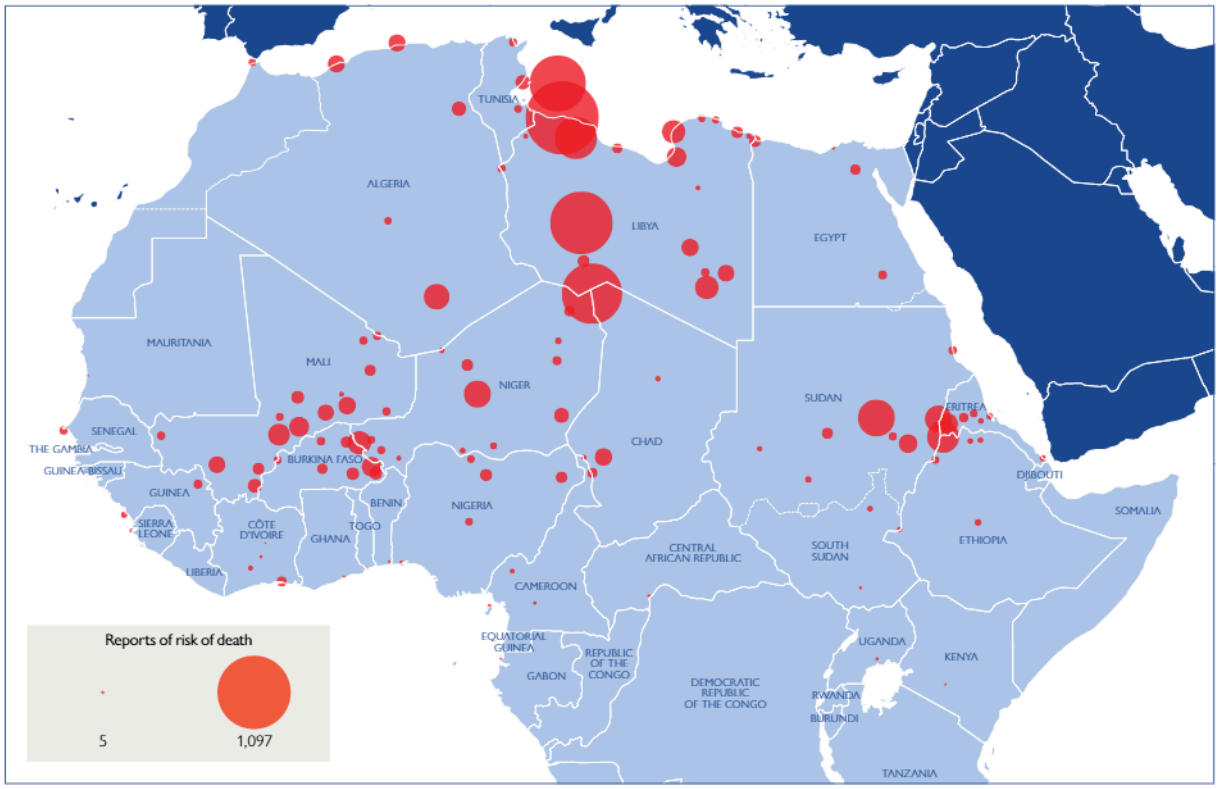
– Telling the Real Story, extract from Teklebrhan's story video, UNHCR, n.d.d.

Teklebrhan Tefamariam Tekle, an Eritrean refugee now in Sweden. © UNHCR 2023

44 The figures reported by IOM and UNHCR differ slightly. In 2021, the two organizations reported 1,553 and 1,545 respectively while in 2022, 1,417 and 1,453. Please see Migration within the Mediterranean and Mediterranean situation: Italy.

Overall, 6,441 respondents to the MMC survey (20%) perceived the risk of death to be prevalent on the Central Mediterranean route (Figure 10), out of which 29 per cent were female and 71 per cent male.[45] The risk of death was perceived to exist in Libya by 3,545 respondents, followed by the Sahara Desert with 746 respondents, the Niger (676), Mali (647) and the Mediterranean Sea (643). Those indicating the Sahara Desert as posing a risk of death could not indicate a specific country or location. However, as already previously mentioned, considering that many of the places identified by refugees and migrants as posing a risk of death are situated in the desert (such as Kufra and Sabha in Libya, Agadez in the Niger and Tamanrasset in Algeria), the Sahara emerges as a particularly dangerous and deadly area.

Figure 10. Locations where the risk of death is reported by refugees and migrants



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

45 Please note that as mentioned in the "Methodology" section, the sample included 66 per cent of men and 34 per cent of women.

Sexual gender-based violence

Scan the QR code to watch Metamorphosis.

I prepared everything carefully for the journey. I even left some money in case I was trafficked along the way. Only one thing was missing – saying goodbye to my hair. I decided to cross the border as a man. I heard a lot of terrifying stories about escaping as a woman. After the bus had arrived, two guys appeared on a motorcycle and collected the money. A few minutes later, we were packed on an overloaded pickup. I was scared to death but trying to look calm, but the driver seems to have discovered my true identity. Along the way, he kept observing me, insisting to grab my attention. I was escaping his gaze and wishing that nobody else would discover. He kept trying to offer me an unspoken deal to keep my secret. Those few hours were passing as if they were ages. When we arrived near the makhzan *(warehouse), people from all over the country were gathered. I thought I would be able to hide among the crowd, but he was tracking my every movement. When we were brought to the abandoned building, I decided to hide. I heard his footsteps getting closer. I tried desperately to stop him with all my strength. Then he left after promising not to inform anyone that I am a woman. Unfortunately, he did not keep his promise. In the morning, we continued moving, starting a longer journey with a bigger pain.*

– Telling the Real Story, Metamorphosis (UNHCR, n.d.e).

SGBV refers to any act that is perpetrated against a person's will and based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. It includes physical, emotional or psychological and sexual violence, and denial of resources or access to services. Violence includes threats of violence and coercion. SGBV inflicts harm on women, girls, men and boys and is a severe violation of several human rights (UNHCR, n.d.f).[46] Being on the move accentuates the risk of SGBV, and according to UN Women, an estimated 90 per cent of women and girls moving along the Mediterranean route are raped (UN Women, 2020). SGBV are almost an inevitable passage for migrant and refugee women[47] whom often, in addition to being raped or sexually assaulted by criminal gangs, smugglers and others, have to pay bribes through so-called sexual favours, including for entire groups of migrants (Dubow and Kuschminder, 2021a). Often, women are forced into sex work to cover for the cost of the journey (UNODC, 2021b), and there are accounts of women forced to marry and have children with their kidnappers (Dubow and Kuschminder, 2021b). Several of these situations integrate the elements of trafficking for sexual exploitation. In addition to causing inenarrable sufferance and trauma, SGBV perpetrated along the route render victims more likely to be subjects of sexual violence and rape in the destination and asylum country (Khouani et al., 2023). SGBV is mentioned both as a reason to leave the country of origin or habitual residence and as a risk incurred by girls, boys, women and men along the route. Many reported to have witnessed or experienced rape or sexual assault, and frequently mentioned exploitative relationship in exchange for access to basic needs including housing, protection and money. According to the respondents, perpetrators are reported to be criminal gangs, armed groups and militia, smugglers and in certain instances, military and government officials.[48]

While lack of access to justice, fear, shame, trauma and stigmatization by families and communities often prevents women and girls from reporting the abuses, boys and men are even less likely to do so including because of stigma and shame. Consequently, the impact and prevalence of SGBV against men

46 Please note that while this report investigates risks related to SGBV, UNHCR has adopted the Inter-Agency Standing Committee definition of gender-based violence with its UNHCR Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation, and Response to Gender-based Violence (UNHCR, 2020c).

47 See for instance, de Foucher, 2023.

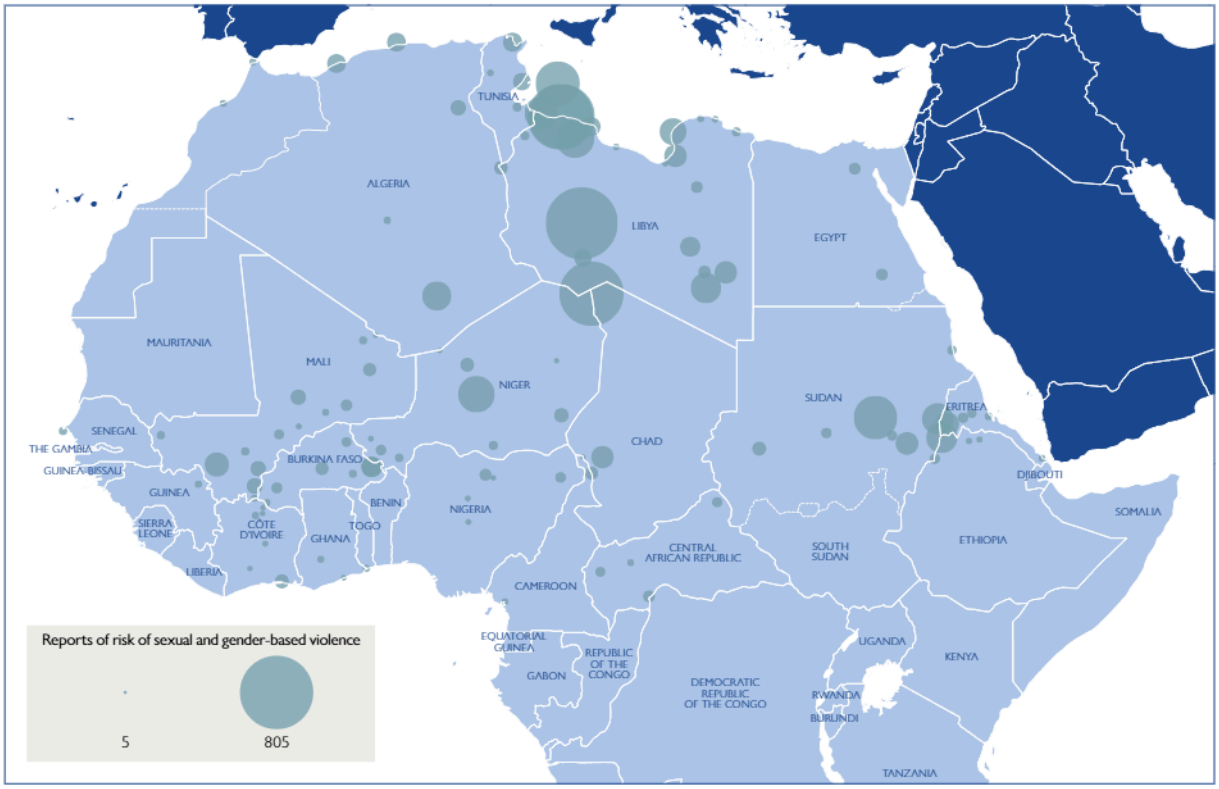
48 On perpetrators, please see also Park et al., 2023:33.

and boys including within the context of migration, has likely been severely underestimated (International Committee of the Red Cross and Norwegian Red Cross, 2022).

> *I face sexual abuse and harassment, which can be both verbal and physical. Verbal abuse happens all the time even when I am walking with my friends and physical harassment when I am walking alone. It happens especially when they realize that you are not Sudanese. This happens even after I dress and try to look like them. They will still realize you are not one of them and will not respect you.*
>
> – Testimony no. 5, November 2022 (Anonymized for safety purposes)

Out of the 4,724 persons reporting risks of sexual violence to the MMC, 58 per cent were female despite women making up a minority of participants. Among the top five countries/places, where the risk of SGBV is most often reported, Libya (2,758 respondents) is followed by the Sahara Desert (609), the Niger (506), the Sudan (482) and Mali (343) (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Locations where the risk of sexual and gender-based violence is reported by refugees and migrants



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

Physical violence

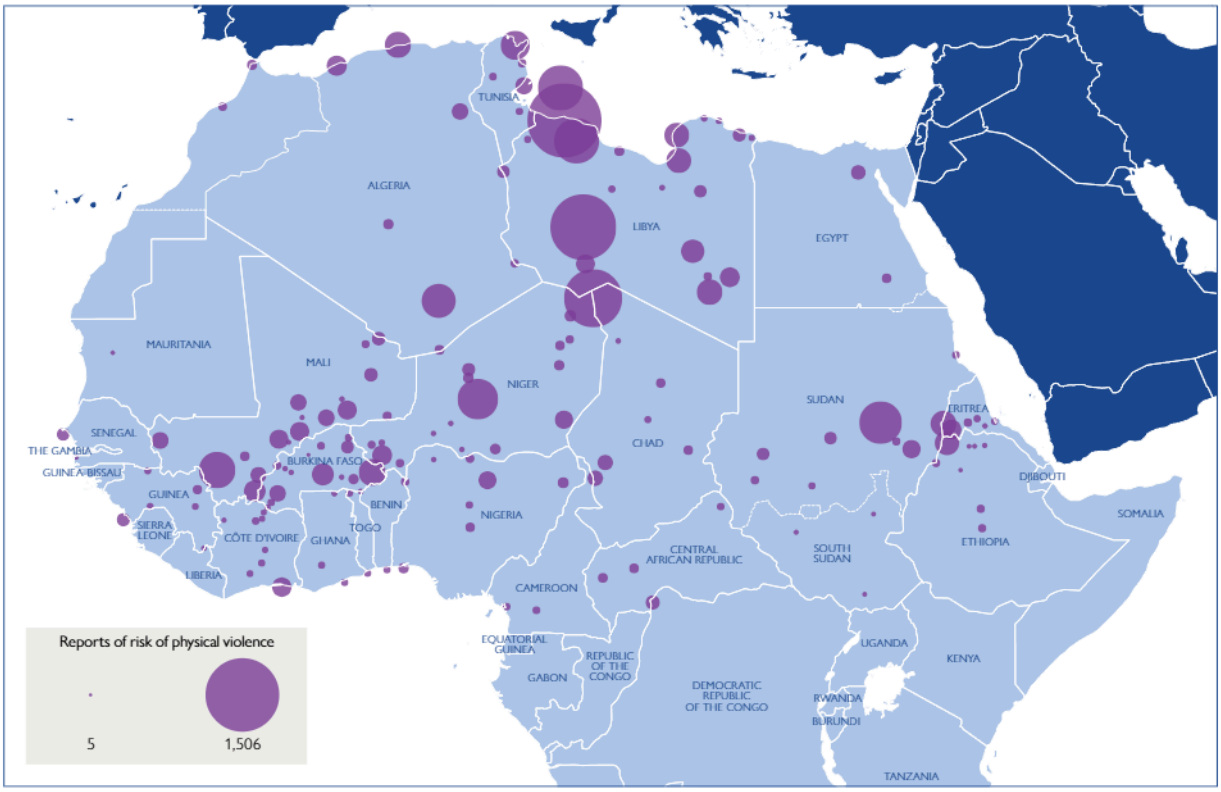
> *We travelled with the smugglers, and we were a big group; we were 48 young Somalis. We realized the problem of* tahriib *[the journey to Europe] when we arrived in Libya. That is when the beating and torture and all that started. The smuggler detention room – no one can endure the appalling conditions there: starvation, neglect and torture. You will be chained and electrocuted. You get rashes all over your body and you cannot take care of yourself; you do not get much food, just plain pasta once a day. If you are thirsty, they may give you water mixed with gasoline. They will not let you sleep at night or during the day. The situation was tough; I did not think I would survive. Thank God, one day I saw my girlfriend there. I did not expect she was going on* tahriib*. I was very happy to see she was alive. What happened to her is not anything I want to think about. Sometimes it is better for us to forget the bad memories. It was very hard for the girls. They were taken out every night by the smugglers and other men who were working with them. The situation was out of our hands, and we could not help them.*
>
> – Extract from the story of Saeed from Somalia, January 2022 (UNHCR n.d.a).

Physical violence, intended as an intentional act causing harm or physical suffering, is perceived by refugees and migrants to be the most common risk while moving or planning to move along the Central Mediterranean route. For the purposes of this report, physical violence does not include sexual violence which is covered in the previous section.

> *The smugglers we had to work for used to constantly beat us and treated us like farm animals. They would sometimes physically harass us and make fun of us. I am still suffering physically and mentally from my journey.*
>
> – Testimony no. 1, October 2022 (Anonymized for safety purposes)

Reports of physical violence are very common, if not the norm among those interviewed (Figure 12). From the total of 11,973 refugees and migrants interviewed by the MMC who perceived physical violence as a risk along the route, 68 per cent were male and 32 per cent female. Physical violence was reported as a risk in Libya by 5,442 respondents, followed by Mali with 1,445 respondents, the Niger (1,366), the Sahara Desert (947) and the Sudan (862). Physical violence was perceived to be a risk in other countries too, but to a lesser extent. These findings resonate with the results of IOM DTM Flow Monitoring Survey data gathered in Libya, where 18.8 per cent of a sample of 55,043 migrants indicated that attacks and assaults were one of the main difficulties they were facing at the time of the interview.

Figure 12. Locations where the risk of physical violence is reported by refugees and migrants



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

Kidnap for ransom

Scan the QR code to watch Jamal's story.

In the end, all they want is money. They tell you to call your family to pay the ransom. Until money or the things they want from you arrive, they torture and beat you; they scare you and want the money to arrive as soon as possible. When you are sitting in that warehouse, the only thing you wish for is to be on the other side of the door. They keep torturing you, and the pain gets very bad. You just feel you are dead anyway. Sometimes I could not walk and even when I was standing, I was shaking. It was a hard time; you can still see the scars on my body. The torture varied from one person to another. They would use sticks and guns, and they have even electrocuted some people. They used to heat rubber to burn the skin. I witnessed when they hit a woman with a stick, and she died after a few hours because they struck very hard and hit some vital organs.

– Extract from the story of Jamal from Eritrea (UNHCR, n.d.g)

Kidnap for ransom[49] is a common practice along the Central Mediterranean route where refugees and migrants are abducted, kept in deplorable sanitary conditions, enslaved[50] beaten day and night, deliberately starved to the point of life-threatening weight loss and malnutrition, and denied medical care (United Nations, 2022a:paras. 46–47) to force relatives living abroad or in the country of origin to pay a ransom

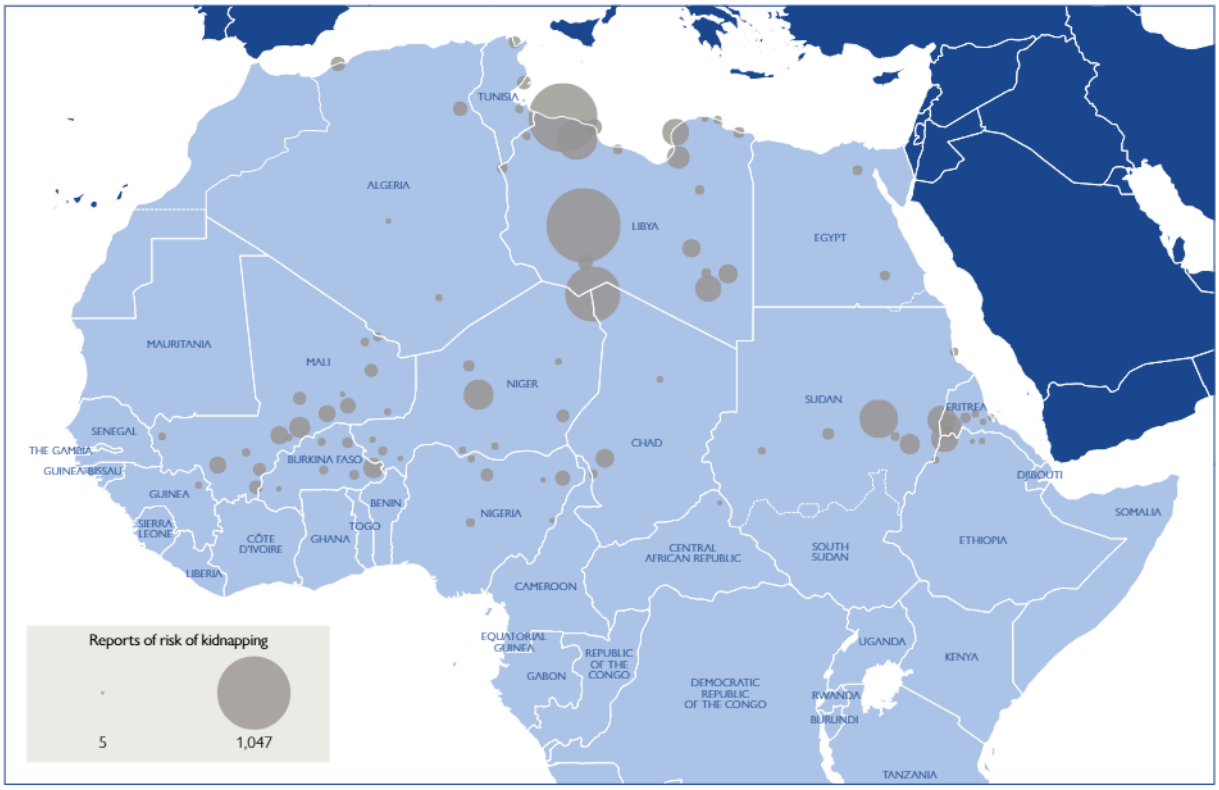
49 For the purpose of this report, *kidnapping* is defined as incidents involving a demand for ransom from persons not present, and not involving State authorities (*supra*, footnote 29).
50 See for instance Magdy, 2022b and InfoMigrants, 2022b.

(Kuschminder, 2020). Numerous testimonies speak of torture,[51] rapes and other atrocities. In certain instances, authorities manage to free the hostages and arrest perpetrators,[52] but most times ransoms are paid,[53] increasing the debt situation of family members who are forced to sell their belongings to meet the demand of kidnappers (*BBC News*, 2021).

Scan the QR code to watch Haweya's story.

Haweya plunged the family into debt to pay the ransom of her son. © Telling the Real Story 2022

Figure 13. Locations where the risk of kidnapping is reported by refugees and migrants



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Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

51 See for instance, Magdy, 2021.
52 See for instance, Middle East Monitor, 2022; Gomaa, 2021.
53 See for instance *Prothom Alo*, 2023.

Among the 5,756 refugees and migrants mentioning locations where there is a perceived risk of kidnapping for ransom, Libya (3,435 respondents) was followed by the Sahara Desert (609), Mali (573), the Niger (557) and the Sudan (497) (Figure 13). About two thirds of the respondents reporting a risk of kidnapping are male and the remaining 33 per cent are female.

Arbitrary detention[54]

For the purposes of this report, *detention* refers to deprivation of liberty or confinement in a closed place where refugees and migrants are not permitted to leave at will, enforced by governments and its associated authorities including immigration personnel.[55] Detention becomes arbitrary not only when it is unlawful (that is, not in accordance with and authorized by national law), but also when it includes elements of inappropriateness, injustice and lack of predictability.

Symbolic representation of helplessness and lack of freedom to escape when held by traffickers. The author is a refugee youth living in a camp and the picture was submitted in the context of a joint UNHCR-UNICEF project called Photovoice. © 2023/Suhayb Abdi KAHIN

Detention of refugees and migrants moving along the route is a common phenomenon. IOM research on the mental health and psychosocial well-being effects of the migration, return and reintegration experiences of migrants in vulnerable situations who were assisted by IOM to return voluntarily to Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan finds that having been detained while abroad is strongly correlated with having been subject to different forms of abuse. (IOM, 2023a).

According to a survey by the MMC, Libya is perceived as the country where the risk of detention is higher for refugees and migrants moving irregularly. Its domestic legislation foresees that anyone entering the country without permission or authorization "shall be penalized by detention with hard labour

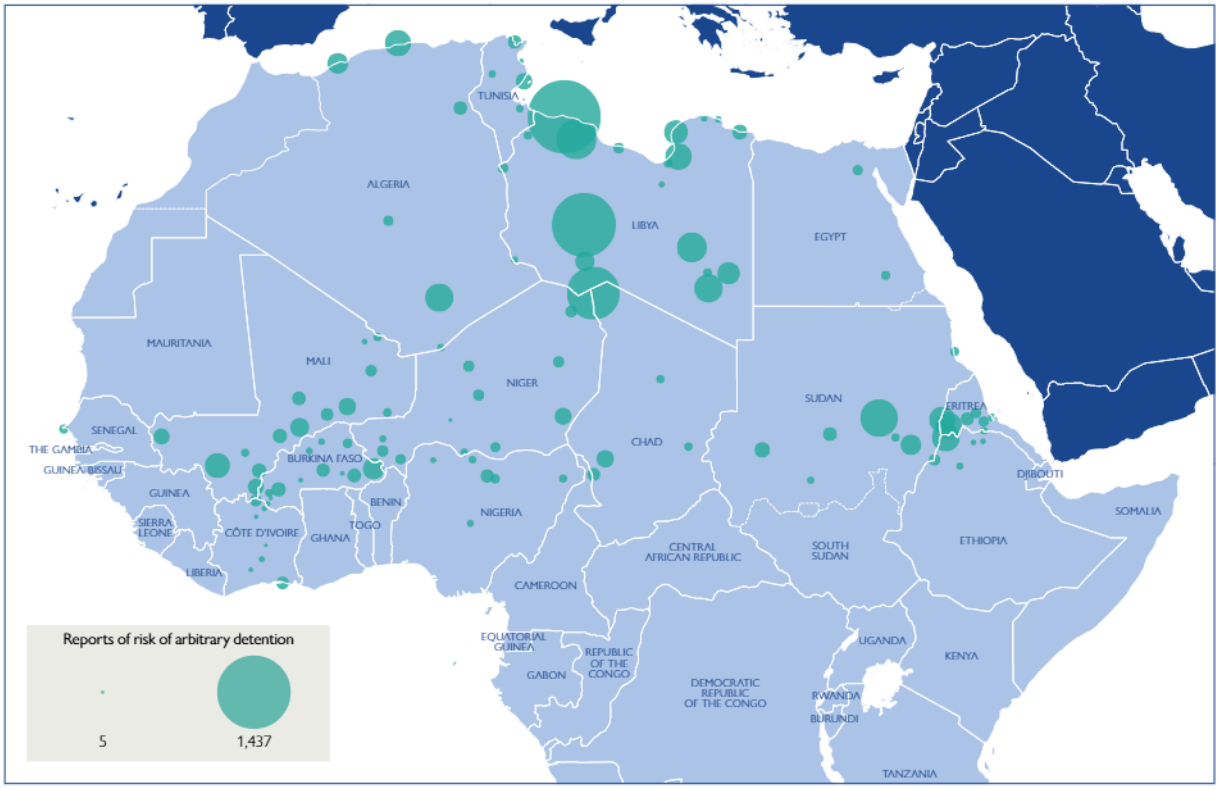
54 Please see the section on "Methodology" for the difference between arbitrary detention and kidnapping.
55 For the difference between detention and kidnapping, please see the paragraph on methodology, *supra*, footnote 29. For the definition of detention, please see UNHCR, 2012.

or by a fine not exceeding 1,000 LYD" (~EUR 190) and that the arrestees are to be referred to the competent judicial authorities (articles 6 and 10 in DCAF, 2010). Following interception/rescue at sea, those disembarked in Libya often end up in detention centres along with other refugees and migrants arrested on land, without referral to the judicial authorities (United Nations, 2023c:para. 38).

A total of 9,543 respondents to the MMC survey identified detention as one of the risks along the route. Among the countries where the risk of detention is more frequently reported, Libya (5,197 respondents) is followed by Mali (956 respondents), the Sudan (879), the Niger (863) and the Sahara Desert (721) (Figure 14). Proportionally, when comparing to other risks mentioned in the selected countries, detention stands out as a particular risk in Algeria,[56] Libya and the Sudan.

Most of those reporting risks of detention were male (71%), while 29 per cent were female.

Figure 14. Locations where the risk of arbitrary detention is reported by refugees and migrants



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: *This* map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

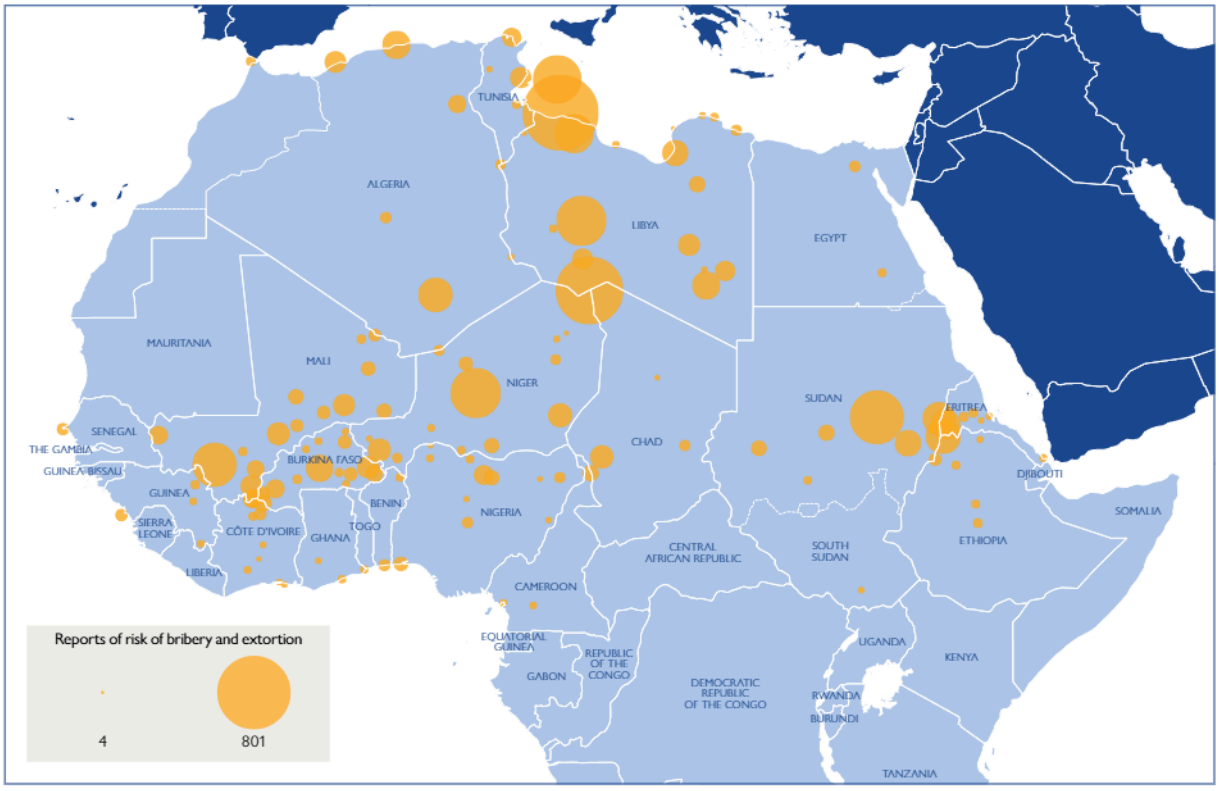
As recalled in the Methodology section, despite the difference between detention and kidnapping for ransom – including the fact that detention is defined as being conducted by State authorities – being explained both to the enumerators and respondents, it is likely that such distinction was not understood correctly by all respondents. This is highlighted by the fact that some respondents to the MMC survey mention non-State actors among perceived perpetrators of incidents of detention. The lack of clarity may also depend on the fact that in certain countries along the route, State entities and forces associated with them are detaining refugees and migrants, including for ransom purposes.[57]

56 Algeria does not feature high in terms of absolute numbers, due to the lower numbers of people interviewed by the MMC who transited through Algeria compared to other routes.
57 See for example, para. 20 in United Nations, 2023c.

Bribery and extortion

According to an interview with a man from Benin carried out by GI-TOC, at each barrier along the road, people on the move have to pay between 2,000 to 2,500 West African CFA franc (around EUR 3 to EUR 3.8) to continue the travel without problems. "At each stop, police ask people to get off the bus and settle the payment with the head of station" (GI-TOC, 2023:38).

Figure 15. Locations where the risk of bribery and extortion is reported by refugees and migrants



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

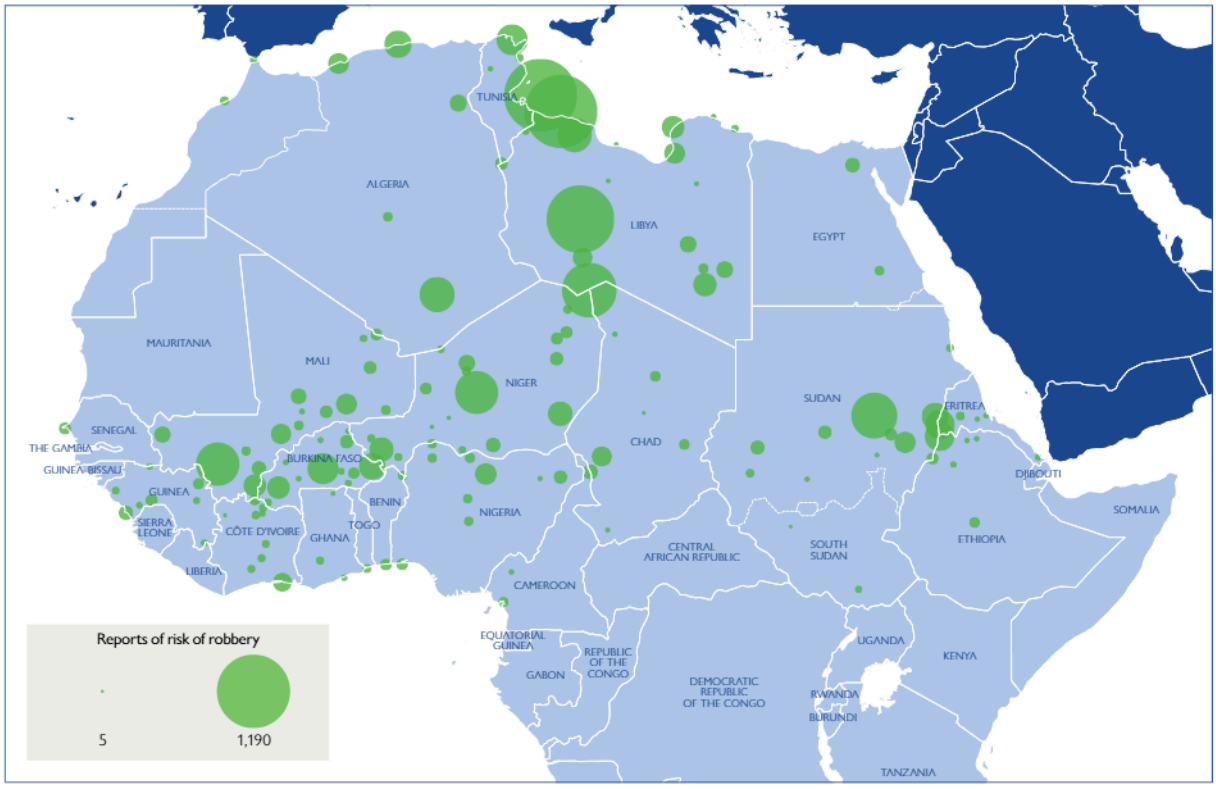
The number of refugees and migrants reporting to the MMC survey about the risk of bribery and extortion is 6,651, of which 2,615 in Libya, 986 in the Niger, 974 in Mali, 749 in the Sudan and 689 in the Sahara Desert. Proportionally, when comparing to other risks mentioned in the selected countries, bribery and extortion incidents stand out as a particular risk in Mali, the Mediterranean, the Sahara and the Sudan (Figure 15). Most of those reporting risks of bribery and extortion were men, who accounted for 4,453 individuals as opposed to 2,198 women representing 33 per cent.

Robbery

> *I was robbed, physically assaulted, and a victim of discrimination. I need assistance, as my situation is changing from bad to worse. I want to have a normal life where I can study and feel safe. The life we are living is not the life a young person should live. I cannot return home either because it is unsafe for me.*
>
> – Testimony no. 4, November 2022 (anonymized for safety purposes)

A total of 9,834 respondents to the MMC survey indicated robbery as a risk that refugees and migrants perceive to face along the route (Figure 16). Among the countries where the risk is higher Libya (3,651 persons interviewed) is followed by the Niger (1,514), Mali (1,201), the Sudan (849), Algeria (780) and Burkina Faso (751). Robbery is a commonly reported risk across the route, although Algeria and the Sudan seem to be perceived as posing a particular danger: more than two thirds of those who reported these countries as dangerous mentioned the risk of robbery. Most of the respondents reporting the risk of robbery were men, accounting for 77 per cent.

Figure 16. Locations where the risk of robbery is reported by refugees and migrants



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

Trafficking in persons[58]

Scan the QR code to watch Gloria's story.

A bit later, they came again and took me away. I went with them because in Libya, you cannot defend yourself; you do as they say. I did not know anyone, and I had no relatives there, so I went with them. They took me to a place and said I should stay there. I asked what kind of business it was, and they told me. Should I work here? They said this is the kind of work you have to do. Two weeks; I stayed there for two weeks. I refused to do that job because I was not prepared to do that. This was not what I had travelled for. Then they forced me, and I started crying. What kind of life was this? But I could not do anything, I had to pay for the trip; they had carried us on credit. So I joined them. But as they say, if you cannot beat them, join them. I stayed five to six months. I was married at an early age, so this kind of thing I had never done before. When I remember it, it makes me sad. It is not easy when different men are having sex with you one after the other.

– Extract from the story of Gloria from Nigeria (UNHCR, n.d.h)

Under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Member States committed to eradicate human trafficking (United Nations, 2015). At the regional level, governments have reiterated the commitment through different initiatives such as the Niamey Declaration (IOM, n.d.i), the Ouagadougou Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings, Especially Women and Children (African Union, 2006) or the ECOWAS Plan of Action against Trafficking in Persons. At the global level, in 2020, for the first time since the United Nations Trafficking Protocol (United Nations, 2000b) was adopted, the detection of trafficking in persons decreased, mainly because of movement restrictions put in place to counter the COVID-19 pandemic (Finding 1 in UNODC, 2023). However, following the lifting of limitations, anecdotal evidence points to the fact that the phenomenon is rebounding.[59]

Climate change (United States Department of State, 2023:36), instability, conflicts (United Nations, 2023d) and economic fragility along the route act as risk multipliers in respect of the vulnerability to trafficking (Findings 6 and 7 in UNODC, 2023). Access to justice may also be difficult due to corruption and official complicity in the crime, resulting in additional risk factors (United States Department of State, n.d.c).[60] In sub-Sahara in particular, fewer traffickers were convicted and victims identified than in the rest of the world, while more victims from this region are detected in destination countries (UNODC, 2023:18). What begins as smuggling may end up as trafficking, including in situations where refugees and migrants do not have sufficient resources to pay and are sold or subjected to labour, sexual or other forms of exploitation that constitute trafficking. The same persons hired to facilitate the movement might turn into traffickers. In the Niger for instance, *passeurs* exploit people on the move in forced labour or sex trafficking (United States Department of State, n.d.c; NAPTIP, 2023). The same happens in the Sudan where smugglers coerce refugees and migrants from West Africa into exploitation (United States Department of State, n.d.b). Regardless of whether they are boys, girls, women or men, people on the move are all at risk of violence, exploitation and abuse, including trafficking in persons. For example, unaccompanied children from West and Central Africa in Khartoum and other urban centres are exploited for begging, brickmaking, collecting medical waste, street vending and agriculture (ibid.).

58 Many of the abuses described in this report may actually also be categorized as crimes of trafficking in persons. Conducts and patterns of abuse that amount to trafficking should be recognized and reported as such to avoid a lack of accountability and failures to ensure access to justice and effective remedies for victims.

59 For instance, in 2021, UNHCR and its partners identified 1,481 victims of trafficking in Khartoum, Kassala, Gedaref and Northern State in the Sudan through monitoring and case management.

60 Please see also NAPTIP, 2023.

Collective expulsions from Libya and Algeria[61] also act as risk multiplier, expanding the vulnerability of refugees and migrants to the crime (United States Department of State, n.d.c). Further, the expansion of artisanal gold mining in the Sahel region is increasingly interacting with trafficking. While some consider the mines as a final destination, others stop to gain the necessary resources to continue the travel. The risk of trafficking in persons around these sites is high, both in respect of forced labour and sex exploitation, given the parallel sex industry that has developed (Micallef and Herbert, 2022:22).

> *According to reports obtained by the Panel of Experts on Mali, a Guinean national was picked up at the border between Libya and the Niger with the promise of work at a mine site to earn money to continue his journey. He was then deposited at a mine site between Tessalit and Kidal, in Mali, forced to work without basic services and then abandoned without pay. One of his companions died during the trip.*
>
> – United Nations, 2021b: para. 89.

Data on trafficking in persons for countries along the Central Mediterranean route are available for certain countries[62] only for the years 2020 and 2021.[63]

- There are 980 victims of trafficking in persons in these countries reported by the CTDC Global Exploitation Timeline for the years 2020 and 2021 (IOM, n.d.f). UNODC database for the year 2020 reports that 1,127 victims were identified in these same countries (UNODC, n.d.).

- According to the CTDC Global Dataset, most of the victims originate from refugee- and migrant-producing countries. For instance, out of the 1,957 victims who were reported to be exploited in Libya, 44 per cent were from Nigeria, 37 per cent from Cameroon and 4 per cent from the Sudan.
- During the years under review, the available data from the CTDC Global Exploitation Timeline[64] indicate that a slight majority of cases concerned forced labour (40%), followed closely by sexual exploitation (35%).[65]
- Globally, 2020 and 2021 saw a dip in the number of victims identified most likely due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. According to the CTDC Global Exploitation Timeline data set, in the countries concerned,[66] out of the 980 cases reported, 595 took place in 2020 and 385 in 2021.[67]
- Out of these 980 cases, the highest number was reported to occur in the North Africa section[68] of the route (527 cases or 54%), followed by the West Africa section[69] (453 cases or 46%). While no CTDC data are available for the East and Horn of Africa section, according to the UNODC, some 568 cases were reported in the Sudan. [70]
- According to available data from the CTDC Global Exploitation Timeline, for the period 2020–2021, some 60 per cent of the cases reported were perpetrated against women and around 40 per cent against men.[71]

61 Please see *infra* under "Collective expulsions and refoulement".
62 Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Libya, Mali, the Niger, Senegal, the Sudan and Tunisia.
63 These data refer to detected or reported cases only, but the scale of the phenomenon is likely to be much more extensive and pervasive.
64 The CTDC Global Exploitation Timeline reports a breakdown on forms/types of exploitation for Algeria, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Libya, Mali, the Niger, Senegal, the Sudan and Tunisia. Data for the Niger are only available for the year 2020. The percentages are calculated based on the overall average of the information available.
65 Please note this analysis only concern the CTDC data set. On the UNODC database, the breakdown by form of exploitation is only available for Tunisia, according to which forced labour accounted for the 39 per cent of the cases, sexual exploitation for the 14 per cent and other forms of exploitation for the 47 per cent.
66 Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Libya, Mali, the Niger, Senegal, the Sudan and Tunisia.
67 No 2021 data is available from the UNODC database (UNODC, n.d.)
68 Including Algeria, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia.
69 Including Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, the Niger and Senegal.
70 According to the UNODC database, 365 cases were detected in Egypt, 181 cases in Tunisia, 568 in the Sudan and 13 in the Niger (UNODC, n.d.).
71 The percentages indicated are an average of the data available for Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Libya, Mali, the Niger, Senegal, the Sudan and Tunisia.

- Throughout 2021 and 2023, the Platform for Action on Cases of Trafficking and Aggravated Smuggling recorded 400 incidents of trafficking or aggravated smuggling concerning an estimated 21,600 victims in four countries along the route. In this context, the project referred 32 cases to appropriate UN agencies, cross-regional bodies and/or national authorities.

Collective expulsions and refoulement

Collective expulsions[72] and deportations of refugees and migrants to their country of origin or third countries continued to occur (Human Rights Watch, 2023a and 2023b; OMCT, 2023). In the absence of an individual examination on the merits of each case (United Nations, 2017:para. 13), those expelled may face persecution, torture, ill treatment or other irreparable harm in violation of the principle of non-refoulement.[73] In addition, the practice raises risks of chain refoulement for individuals with international protection needs, may put people at risk, cause family separations and create dire humanitarian situations.

Between January 2021 and May 2023, local authorities in the Niger reported 74,759 individual cases of collective expulsion from Algeria to the Niger. In 2021, their number reached 27,652, it increased to 31,110 in 2022, and as of the end of May 2023, it was 15,997. Some 58 per cent (43,106) were Nigeriens, followed by 13 per cent Malians (9,448) and 9 per cent (6,541) Guineans. Many other nationalities were registered, including from Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Senegal, Sierra Leone and others, including countries for which UNHCR has issued International Protection Consideration and non-return advisories, such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Somalia, the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic (UNHCR, 2023d, 2022b, 2022c, 2023e and 2021d). Following collective expulsion from Algeria to the Niger, only 412 persons applied for asylum in the Niger between January 2021 and May 2023, representing 0.5 per cent of all persons expelled. This very low figure warrants some reflection as it may indicate that persons are unaware of the ability to apply for asylum. It points to the need for increased community outreach, better referrals between organizations of the United Nations system and NGOs to the UNHCR and the government and improving access to protection services. An additional dimension to this phenomenon is the expulsion of non-African Union nationals who are then sent back to Algeria by the Nigerien authorities.

Malian expellees camping inside the police compound in Assamaka, the Niger.
© UNHCR 2023/Jacopo GIORGI

72 Please see above under "Methodology" for a definition of collective expulsions.
73 Please see, inter alia, UNHCR, 2015; on the relevant legal framework, please see also OHCHR, 2021:15.

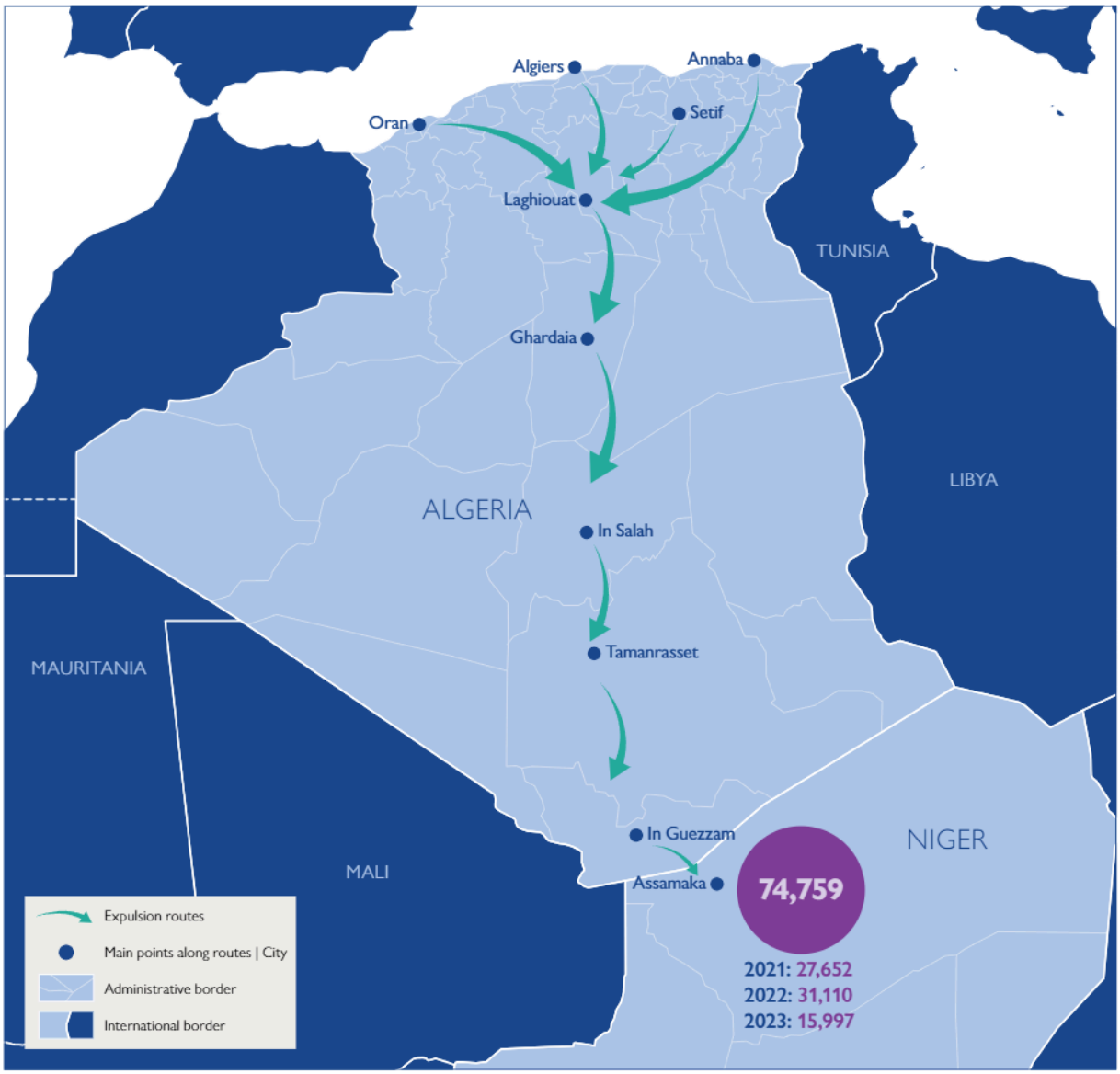
While the return of Nigeriens is implemented under the auspices of an agreement between the two countries, no agreement covers the return of third-country nationals. While there are official convoys for Nigeriens, non-official convoys include over 20 different other nationalities.[74]

After being arrested during waves of round-ups taking place in different Algerian cities (Human Rights Watch, 2020), those expelled – which include children and other people in vulnerable situations – are gathered in Tamanrasset on the Algerian portion of the Sahara Desert (see Figure 17). Subsequently, they are transported in convoys and abandoned at the "point zero" situated at around 15 kilometres from the border with the Niger (InfoMigrants, 2021). From there, they have to walk through the desert, with some reportedly dying while trying to reach Assamaka, a village of around 3,000 inhabitants in the Niger (Alarme Phone Sahara, 2022; Deutsche Welle, 2023). IOM is present and, in partnership with local authorities and other organizations, provides support, organizes AVRR and refers asylum-seekers to the UNHCR, which in turn assists them to apply for asylum with the competent national authorities while an NGO partner provides information on the right to seek asylum. Due to the magnitude of the phenomenon (IOM, 2023d) and the number of those expelled, resources are inadequate, resulting in people getting stranded in appalling conditions in an already troubled country (IOM, 2023e and 2023f; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2023; AFP, 2023a).

Alarme Phone Sahara is based in Agadez, the Niger and rescues refugees and migrants in distress in the desert. © 2023/Alarme Phone Sahara

74 See for instance Alarme Phone Sahara, 2023.

Figure 17. Collective expulsions from Algeria to the Niger



Source: Based on UNHCR data received by authorities in 2023.
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

In July 2023, a wave of expulsions was reported to take place from Tunisia to Libya after tensions against sub-Saharan Africans arose in the country, especially in the coastal city of Sfax from where many of those seeking to cross the sea to Europe depart (AFP, 2023b; Human Rights Watch, 2023a; OMCT, 2023; Refugees International, 2023). Several hundreds of people, including children and pregnant women, were reported to have been rounded up and brought to the Tunisia–Libya border in the Ras Jedir area where they were left stranded in the desert and subsequently transferred to detention centres (InfoMigrants, 2023a). Following deportations, dozens were found dead by the Libyan border guard and other actors in this border region, while several individuals were reported missing (Al Jazeera, 2023; Elumani, 2023; InfoMigrants, 2023b; OHCHR, 2023; OMCT, 2023). In August 2023, the Libyan and Tunisian Ministries of Interior reportedly agreed to address the situation following which refugees and migrants were evacuated from the area and distributed across Tunisia and Libya. In Tunisia, they were brought to Tatouine and

Medenine and provided with health and psychological care, with the help of the Tunisian Red Crescent (France 24, 2023; InfoMigrants, 2023a). Some actors also reported expulsions from Tunisia to Algeria (Bouazza, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2023b; Speakman Cordall, 2023).

According to the Libyan authorities, 5,182 collective expulsions were carried out in 2020 (OHCHR, 2021:3). Between January and March 2022, over 4,400 persons potentially in need of international protection and migrants faced pushback or expulsion, including 2,475 individuals (some of whom were children) expelled to the Niger, 1,650 Egyptian nationals expelled to Egypt and 300 individuals expelled to the Sudan (United Nations, 2022b:para. 74). On 31 December 2022, the Anti-Illegal Immigration Agency in Kufra expelled more than 400 migrants and asylum-seekers, including women and children, mainly from Chad and the Sudan, with most expelled towards the Sudan (United Nations, 2023d:para. 54).

In Libya, domestic legislation criminalizes illegal entry, stay and exit and provides for the "detention with hard labour or by a fine not exceeding 1,000 LYD" (~EUR 190), and the expulsion from the country once the sentence is completed (DCAF, 2010). Importantly, it also foresees that any expulsion should be based on a judicial order or a "substantiated decision issued by the director of the General Directorate of Passports and Nationality".[75] However, reportedly thousands of refugees and migrants were removed without due process (Amnesty International, 2020 and n.d.; OHCHR, 2021:18; United Nations, 2023c:para. 40).

The trend of expulsions from Libya to the Niger saw an uptick in late 2021 when Libyan law enforcement entities stepped up counter-smuggling and anti-trafficking operations in the south-west region, mainly Sabha.[76] Following their arrest, persons potentially in need of international protection and migrants were temporarily regrouped in Tamanhint military airbase, north of Sabha, where their belongings were reportedly confiscated (Fereday, 2023b). Subsequently, they were transported in trucks and expelled through the Al-Toum border crossing with the Niger. Upon arrival, they were received by the Nigerien authorities who transported them to a military base in Madama. From there, Chadian nationals were handed over to Chad authorities. Other expellees continued to Agadez, where upon arrival they were often taken to police stations where UNHCR partner Action Pour le Bien Être provided counselling and referral services to those wishing to apply for international protection, while local NGOs provided Nigeriens with bus tickets to return to their areas of origin. Nigerians were often supported by the Nigerian community in Agadez to go back to Nigeria, while other nationalities returned to their countries of origin at their own expense or approached IOM for AVRR programmes.

75 Article 17 in DCAF, 1987, read in conjunction with Article 13 of Law No. (19) of 2010 (DCAF, 2010).

76 For examples: on 6 March 2022, raids on drug and prostitution were carried out in Sabha, leading to the arrest of 80 undocumented women of different nationalities (Gowans, 2022a); on 10 March 2022, 407 undocumented individuals, including 80 women exploited for prostitution, were expelled to the Niger via Al-Toum border crossing point (Gowans, 2022b); and on 3 April 2022, 7 vehicles carrying more than 230 undocumented individuals were seized (Desert Patrol Company, 2022).

Text box 1. Assisted voluntary return and reintegration

AVRR programmes of IOM seek to protect migrants' rights, such as the right to return, by providing administrative, logistical and financial support, including reintegration assistance, to migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host/transit country and who decide to return voluntarily to their country of origin or a third country where they have the legal right to enter and stay, but lack the financial means to return. IOM also supports return from humanitarian contexts such as Libya, under initiatives designated as Voluntary Humanitarian Return, which apply AVRR principles in humanitarian settings and often represents a life-saving measure for migrants who are stranded or in detention. In 2022 alone, more than 69,000 migrants were assisted by IOM to return voluntarily (a 39% increase compared to the previous year). Among those assisted were 54,001 migrants assisted under the AVRR programmes, as well as 15,281 migrants assisted to return from the humanitarian crisis contexts of Libya and Yemen under the Voluntary Humanitarian Return programmes (IOM, 2023g).

AVRR concepts and practices have undergone major changes throughout the years, mainly because of the evolving implementation contexts. In 2017, IOM put forth its Integrated Approach to Reintegration (IOM, 2017), which was further reaffirmed in the Policy on the Full Spectrum of Return, Readmission and Reintegration of IOM (IOM, 2021b). These policies emphasize the attainment of sustainable reintegration[77] as the objective of return and reintegration programming, through the provision of tailored assistance that covers all dimension of reintegration (economic, social and psychosocial), as well as the coordination of interventions at the individual, community and structural levels, to better address the root causes of endangering forms of migration. Faced with the increasing demand for voluntary returns from so-called transit countries, particularly within the Middle East and the African continent, and the vulnerabilities and risks faced, as highlighted in this report, AVRR serves as an important policy and programmatic response to the protection of migrants stranded along the routes or even as a life-saving measure.

77 According to IOM, "Sustainable reintegration is achieved when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and psychosocial well-being that make their further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity." (IOM, 2019c)

Text box 2. Violence, exploitation and abuse: Refugees and migrants in Italy looking back at their journeys

The DTM programme of IOM deploys recurrent direct data collection exercises with refugees and migrants arriving in Europe through the Mediterranean routes since 2015. DTM surveys are designed to capture the main profiles of sea arrivals, their needs in the countries where surveys are carried out, and their experiences during their journey including on violence, exploitation and abuse. Provisional findings for 2023 tend to confirm previous analyses conducted on data from Italy, Greece, Spain and countries of the Western Balkan region.[a] Refugees and migrants travelling along the Central Mediterranean route and arriving in Italy tend to report the highest level of vulnerabilities to violence, exploitation and abuse as compared to other Mediterranean routes. About 70 per cent of the 219 people interviewed in Southern Italy in September 2023[b] who arrived by sea departing from Libya or Tunisia reported to have experienced at least one of the seven protection indicators included in the DTM surveys in Europe: (a) 37 per cent reported to have worked without receiving the expected payment; (b) 15 per cent to have been forced to work; (c) 21 per cent to have been held against will; (d) 46 per cent to have suffered from physical violence; (e) 4 per cent to have been forced to travel; (f) 7 per cent to have received false information and lies to motivate them to travel; and (g) about 80 per cent had no control (never had, was lost, stolen or controlled by others) of identity documents. Additionally, most migrants reported other challenges during the journey: 54 per cent were robbed, 42 per cent had no access to shelter or accommodation for the night at some point of the journey, 47 per cent had health issues while travelling, 68 per cent suffered from hunger, and 70 per cent had financial problems. Most incidents were reported to have happened in Libya (36%), Algeria (33%) and Tunisia (21%) and hence in the last part of the journey, before embarking on a boat to cross the Mediterranean: border, desertic areas as well as coastal cities are among those most frequently mentioned.

These preliminary findings suggest differences in the type of experiences reported by men and women, the high level of vulnerability to abuses by adolescents who travel alone, and a greater risk associated with transiting through Libya compared with risks experienced by those reaching Italy from other countries. At the same time, they reflect most recent trends along the Central Mediterranean route, with Tunisia being the main departure country for all arrivals by sea in 2023. While the number of migrants transiting through and departing from Libya in 2023 is comparable with 2022, total arrivals to Italy were 85 per cent higher in 2023 compared to 2022 mainly due to an increase in departures from Tunisia of refugees and migrants from Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Mali alongside Tunisians. This can be linked to political and economic changes occurred since late 2022, which also impacted on the migration context in Tunisia and Algeria, with more removals, returns and expulsions to remote desert areas at the southern borders of Algeria, Libya and Tunisia and relocations from coastal areas putting more refugees and migrants at risk of violence and exploitation during 2023 so far (OMCT, 2023).

Notes:

[a] A comparison between experiences reported by migrants travelling along Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes in 2016 is here: *Migrant Vulnerability to Human Trafficking and Exploitation: Evidence from the Central and Eastern Mediterranean Migration Routes*. For a focus on migrants arrived in Italy through the Central Mediterranean route between 2016 and 2018, please check chapter 15 (pp. 189–200) of the edited volume of *Migration in West and North Africa and Across the Mediterranean: Trends, risks, development and governance*.

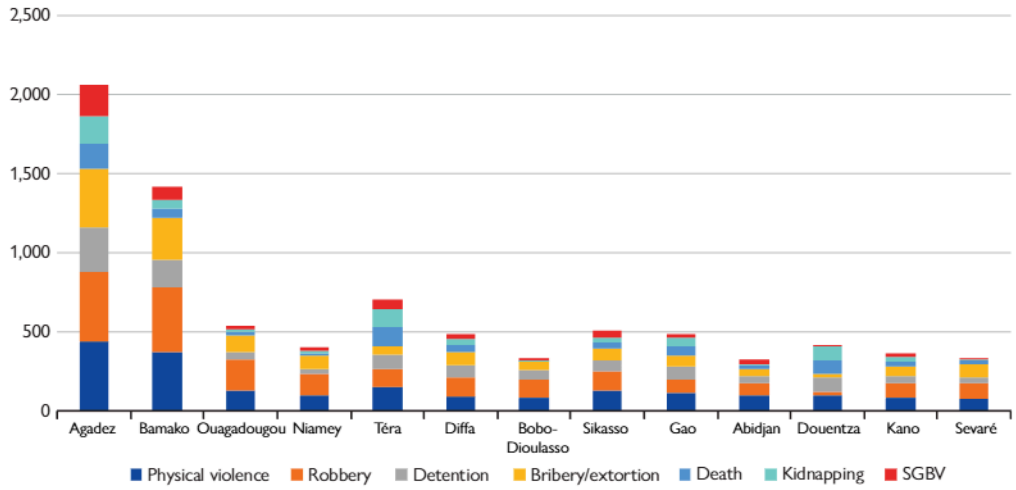
[b] In 2023, DTM Flow Monitoring Survey are deployed in Sicily and Calabria regions since September 2023. Out of the 219 surveys collected in the first month, 89 per cent are male and 11 per cent are female. Adolescents between 14 and 17 years of age are 35 per cent of the sample. The top 10 nationalities are from Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Guinea, Egypt, Mali, Pakistan and Tunisia (81% of the total).

Mapping abuses: Result by section

West and Central Africa section

- According to IOM MMP, 178 persons on the move went missing or died on land routes in the West Central Africa in the period 2021–2022 (IOM, 2021b and 2022c). However, given that these data are almost exclusively from DTM surveys that comprise a non-representative sample that is small in comparison with overall flows, the true number of deaths is likely far higher. A more illustrative figure, perhaps, is that 1 in 100 of the 12,000 migrants who were interviewed in Mali and the Niger in 2022 reported a death: a hugely concerning trend given that more than 380,000 movements of refugees and migrants were observed at the same interview locations in the last quarter of 2022 alone (IOM, 2022c).
- Data from the CTDC (IOM, n.d.f) for 2020 and 2021 report that 453 cases of trafficking in persons were identified along this route. For the same period, UNODC data show that 13 cases were reported in the Niger. There were 219 cases identified in Mali, out of which the 91 per cent were women.[78] Côte d'Ivoire followed with 83 cases, the Niger with 76, Burkina Faso with 43, Chad with 31 and Senegal with 14. Different sources indicate that in January 2020, the police in the Niger rescued 232 victims, including 46 under the age of 18 (see Main trends and figures on IOM, n.d.g).
- All risks considered, Agadez in the Niger and Bamako in Mali are more frequently reported as dangerous along the Western Africa section of the route, followed by Ouagadougou and Niamey (Figures 18 and 19).[79]
- Téra, in the Niger, on the way north to Algeria, was reported as dangerous more frequently if compared to the previous report. This may be an indication that some of the routes are shifting.

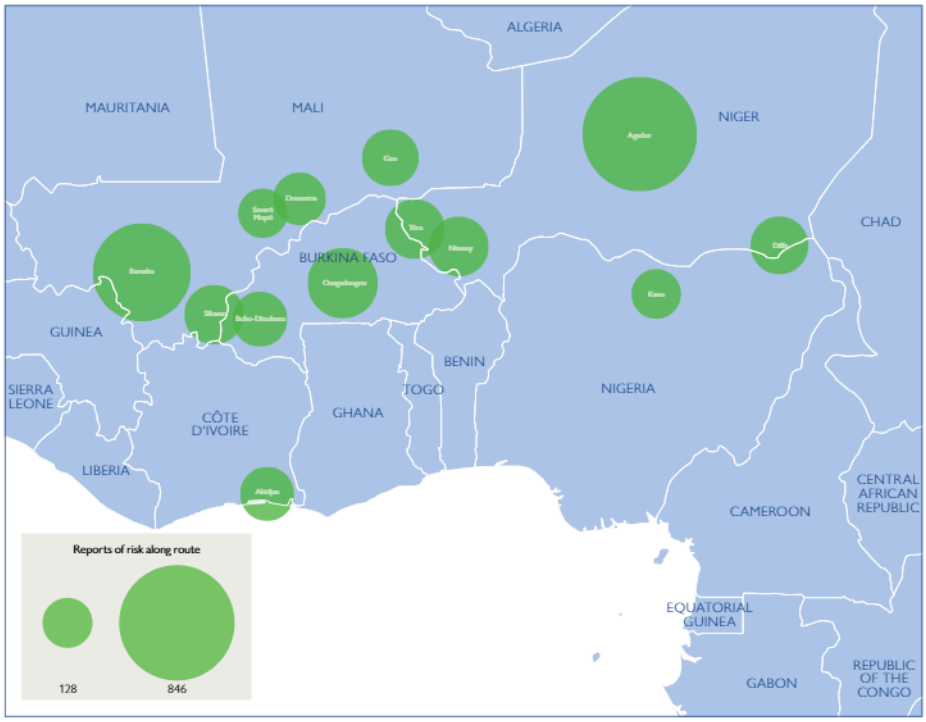
Figure 18. Places most frequently reported as dangerous – West Africa



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: Subject to sample bias; please see Methodology section.

78 The number of reported cases is as follows: Chad (31); the Niger (76); Burkina Faso (43); Côte d'Ivoire (83); and Senegal (14).
79 Note that the place of interview means that some locations can be under or overrepresented in the data.

Figure 19. Riskiest places along the West African section

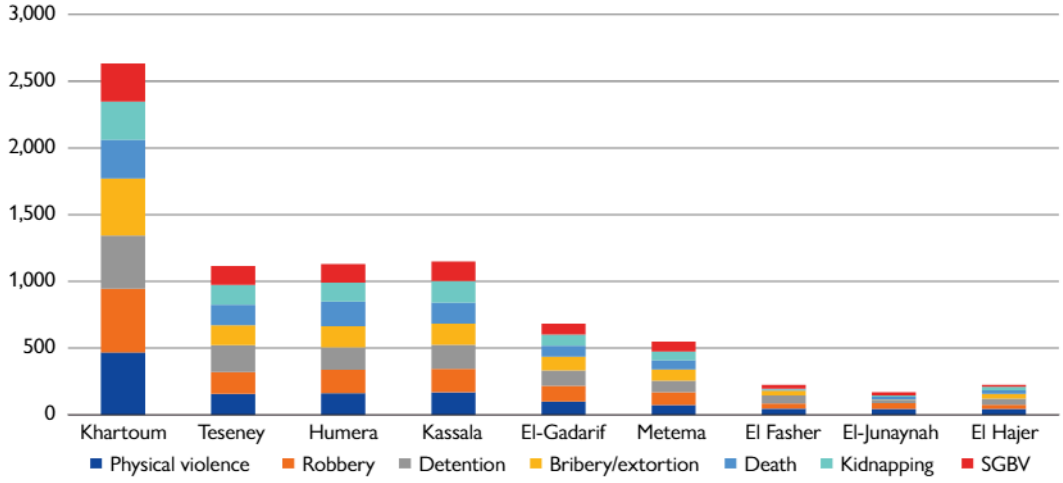


Source: Based on interviews collected for 4mi data from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

East and Horn of Africa section

In this section of the route, all the reported cases of trafficking in persons concern the Sudan where 568 instances of trafficking in persons were identified for the year 2020. Out of the total number, 438 cases regarded Ethiopians and 163 Eritreans.[80] The severity of the phenomenon in the Sudan is confirmed by UNHCR data, according to which the number of victims identified in 2021 was 1,481 and 600 in 2022 in Khartoum, Kassala, Gedaref and Northern State.[81]

Figure 20. Places most frequently reported as dangerous – East and Horn of Africa

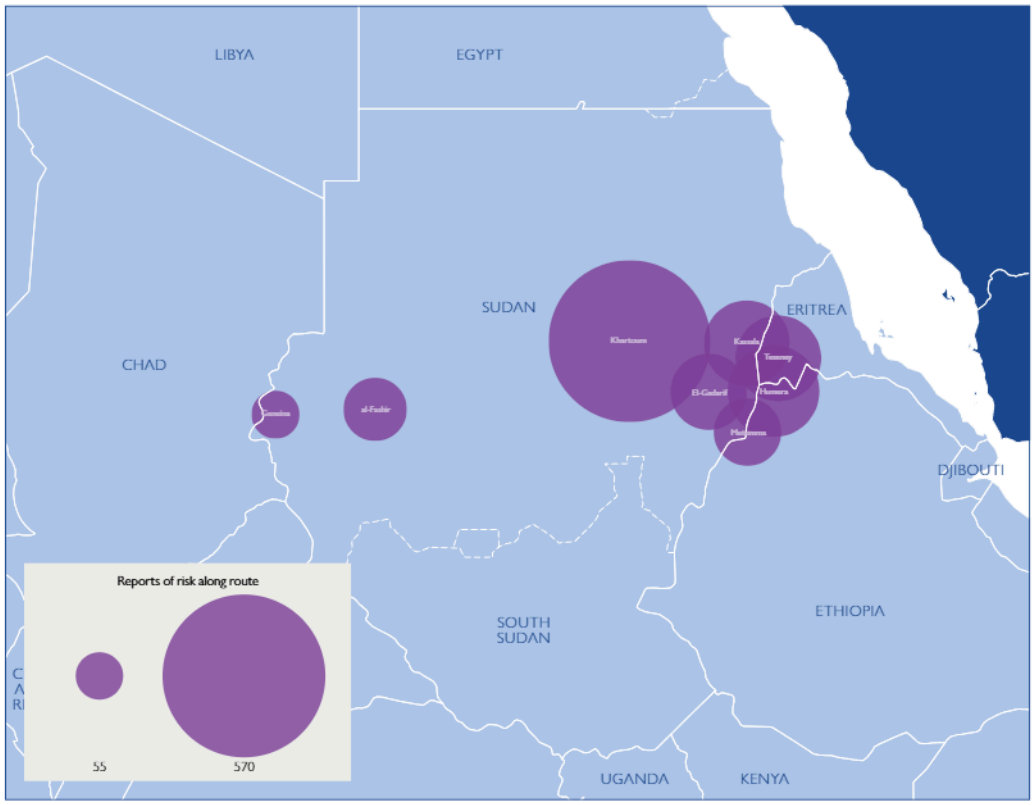


Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: Subject to sample bias; please see Methodology section.

80 All the data from the Sudan come from the UNODC database (UNODC, n.d.)
81 The data are gathered and compiled from the activities of the UNHCR and its partners, including detention monitoring, legal assistance and case management.

- Khartoum and its surroundings are more frequently reported as dangerous location on the East and Horn of Africa section of the route (Figure 20).[82] After the conflict broke out, it is becoming even more dangerous and many, including refugees and migrants, are trying to leave the areas.[83]
- The border town of Teseney in Eritrea on the way to the border area of Kassala in the Sudan is considered as the second riskiest location.
- The town of Humera in Ethiopia situated at the border with Eritrea and the Sudan, Kassala at the Eritrea–Sudan border and Metemma, also close to the Ethiopia–Sudan border, are all frequently reported as dangerous (Figure 21). These data indicate that border areas and crossing the border in this region are perceived to be particularly dangerous.

Figure 21. Riskiest places along the East and Horn of Africa section of the route



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

North Africa section

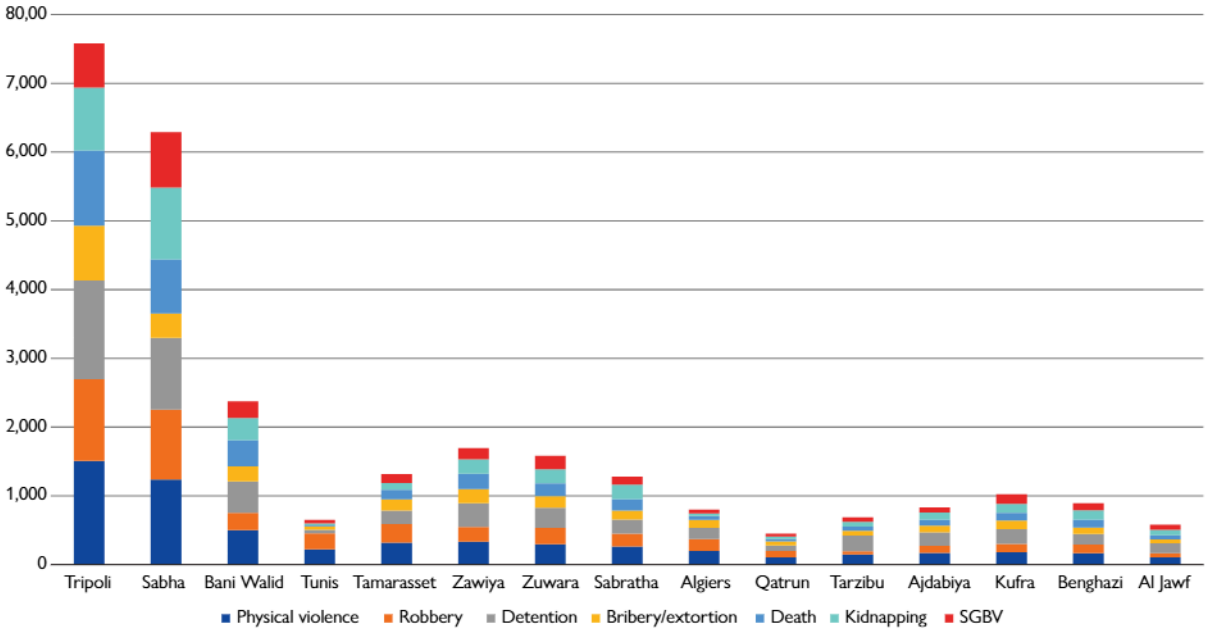
- According to IOM MMP, 721 persons on the move went missing or died on land routes in the North Africa in the period 2021–2022 and 110 during the first half of 2023 (IOM, 2023h), although this number is likely an undercount given the lack of reliable sources covering this part of the Central Mediterranean route.
- Many respondents to the MMC survey perceived this section of the route as posing a risk of death. In this context, Libya (3,545 respondents) is followed by Algeria (367), Tunisia (110) and Egypt (66). The other risks investigated follow the same trend.

82 Note that the location of the interview means that some places are over or underrepresented in the data (see "Methodology" section).
83 On the population movement from the Sudan, please see the Sudan situation operational data portal at Operational Data Portal, n.d.a.

- Many of the locations more frequently reported as dangerous, such as Tamanrasset in Algeria, and Sabha, Qatrun, Kufra and Al Jawf in Libya, are situated in the Sahara Desert. This – along with the 1,277 persons who reported that the desert is dangerous without being able to associate it with a specific location – highlights that despite unreported by media and other actors, the desert is a place where many of the human rights violations and abuses are likely to take place. It emerges as an extremely, and possibly the most, dangerous part of the journey.
- As recalled in the Methodology section – despite the difference between detention and kidnapping for ransom being explained to both enumerators and respondents – it is likely that such distinction was not understood correctly. In this context, this section of the route is identified as entailing the highest risk of kidnapping for ransom and for arbitrary detention by respectively 41 per cent and 65 per cent of the total respondents.

> *After paying USD 1,200 to go from Kufra to Bani Walid, the smuggler asked us for more money that we did not have. He asked us to call our parents for money. My parents had to collect this from the village. But the money was not enough, and he harassed us and kept us detained in Bani Walid for three months with one meal a day. He insisted we should pay USD 2,000 for the trip to Tripoli and then to Europe.*
>
> – Testimony no. 3, November 2022 (Anonymized for safety purposes).

Figure 22. Places most frequently reported as dangerous – North Africa



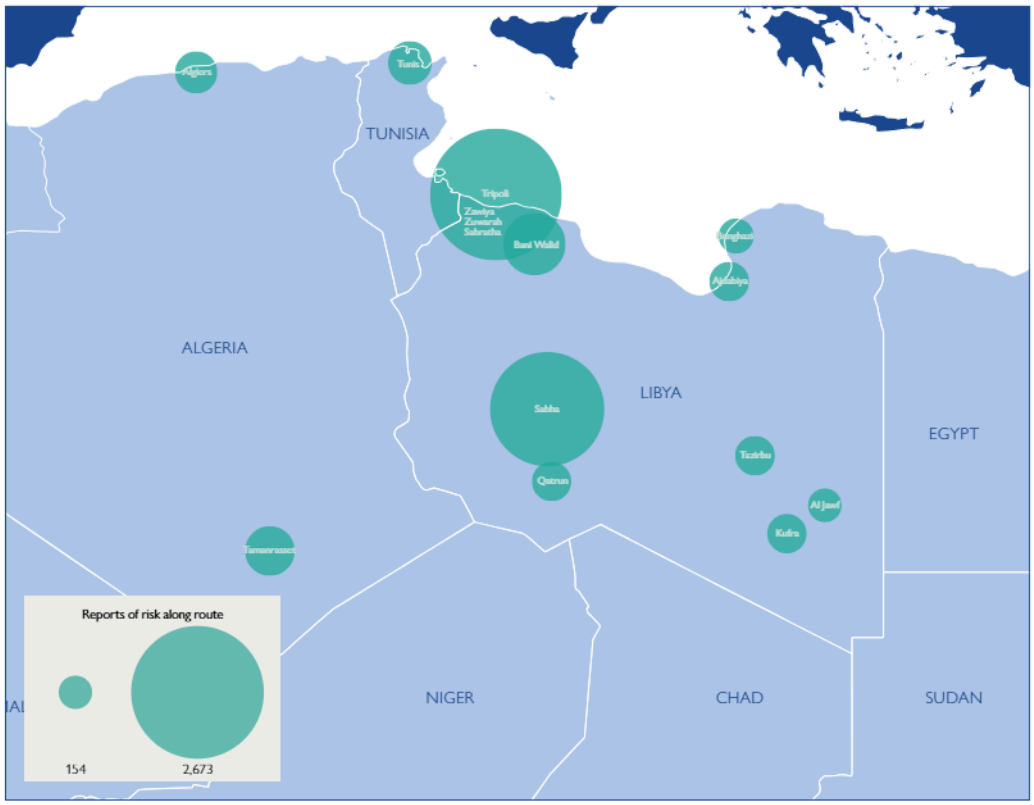
Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: Subject to sample bias; please see Methodology section.

- The locations perceived most dangerous by those interviewed by MMC include Tripoli, Sabha, Bani Walid, Tunis and Tamanrasset (Figures 22 and 23).
- According to the Libyan Anti-Torture Network, in 2020, 88 persons on the move were reported tortured to death in Libya. Lower figures were recorded in 2021 and the first trimester of 2022 with a total of 40 deaths reported. Challenges faced in documenting each case of torture during this report's time frame (2021–2022) indicate the possibility that the actual deaths resulting from torture of people on the move may be higher than the figures reported (Libyan Anti-Torture Network, 2022:9).

- Most reported cases of trafficking in persons concern this section of the route. According to data from the CTDC, 405 victims of trafficking in persons were identified during the years 2020 and 2021 in Libya. Tunisia follows with 78 cases, Algeria with 27 and Egypt with 17. Differently, UNODC reports 365 victims identified in Egypt in 2020 and 181 for Tunisia. As highlighted in the Methodology section, these data severely underrepresent the situation and are incomplete. For instance, from July 2020 to July 2022, IOM identified 1,614 victims in Libya alone (IOM, 2022d).[84] In 2020, over 60 per cent of the victims detected by the authorities were children, while women accounted for 22 per cent of the cases. They were exploited for begging, forced criminal activity and tracking for organ removal (UNODC, 2023:79).

> *In Libya, we were moving with the same smuggler who initially promised to take us for free. However, once in Tripoli, he asked us for money, but we did not have any, so he forced us to work. We were also beaten and harassed physically and sexually.*
>
> – Testimony no. 2, November 2022 (Anonymized for safety purposes).

Figure 23. Riskiest places along the North Africa section of the route



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM, UNHCR or MMC.

84 Please note that the difference of reported cases between the CTDC and IOM may depend on the fact that IOM data include the year 2022.

Gaps in assistance for survivors

A report issued in July 2022 by the UNHCR highlights that there are some key gaps in services in geographical locations along the route, which present a clear risk for people on the move (UNHCR, 2022a). For instance, specific support for access to justice for survivors of various forms of abuses or witnesses to deaths is rarely available anywhere on the routes, while in several key mixed movement locations (such as in Dongola in Northern Sudan, Ounianga-Kebit and Faya-Largeau in Northern Chad, and in areas in Mali and the Niger bordering Algeria or Libya), there are almost no protection services available to survivors of abuses. The report has been updated (UNHCR, 2024) with a view to identifying areas where further resources are needed to address gaps in existing services, and to increase refugees and migrants' awareness and use of the support available along the route.

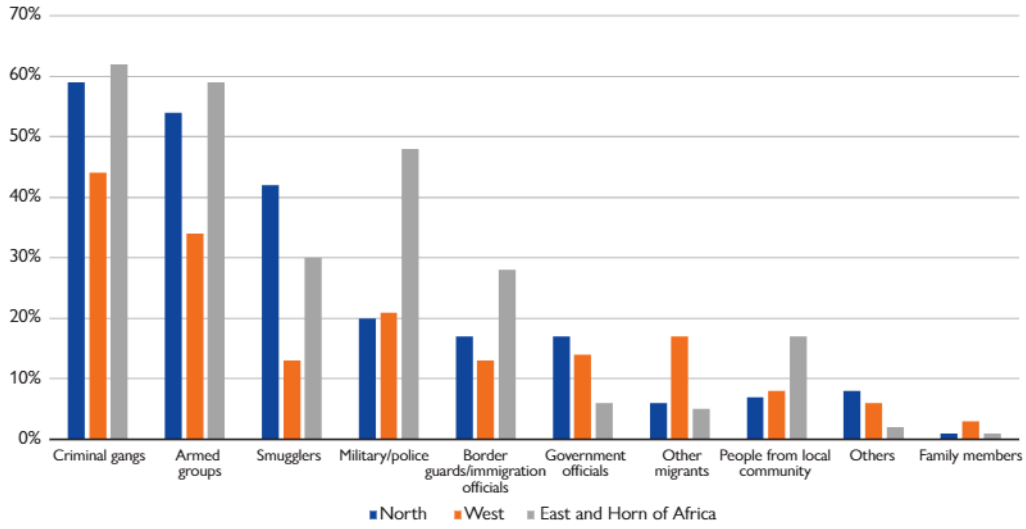
UNHCR opened a humanitarian centre in Agadez in Central Niger in 2017, scaling up its operational capacity to provide a response to those in need of international protection travelling in mixed movements northwards to Libya, Algeria and the Mediterranean. © UNHCR 2022/Romain PICHON-SINTES

Accountability for perpetrators

Perceived perpetrators

With few exceptions, the responses given to the question asking who were likely to be the perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses and exploitation identify the same trend along the three sections of the route.

Figure 24. Perceived perpetrators



Source: Based on 4Mi interviews collected by MMC from 2020 to first quarter 2023 (MMC).
Note: Please refer to the paragraph on the Central Mediterranean route and its sections for a list of countries included under each section.

As shown in Figure 24, criminal gangs are perceived as the main perpetrators followed by armed groups, smugglers, State entities, other migrants, people from local communities and family members.

The first notable exception is constituted by smugglers whom, in West Africa, are less frequently perceived to be the perpetrators; 13 per cent of the respondents see them as perpetrators as opposed to 42 per cent in North Africa and 30 per cent in East and Horn of Africa. This could be related to free movement within the ECOWAS region, meaning refugees and migrants in that region in theory can move freely without the need of smugglers. That said, many do still resort to smugglers to cross informal border points, when not in possession of ID documents, to overcome restrictions introduced following the COVID-19 pandemic, when there are security issues, to cross conflict areas or when the Protocol is suspended. In this context, the impact of the recent withdrawal from ECOWAS by Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger on smuggling dynamics will be important to monitor. It may also indicate a certain level of trust being placed by refugees and migrants in those facilitating the journey, commonly referred to as *passeurs* in West Africa. In West Africa, another exception is where other migrants were identified as perpetrators by 17 per cent of the respondents, more than double the figure compared to the other two sections on the route. By contrast, in the East and Horn of Africa, some State officials are more frequently perceived to play a particular role as perpetrators, along with people from the local community.

Initiatives to end impunity

In recent years, there have been increased initiatives aimed at ending impunity and ensuring the accountability for the crimes of trafficking, smuggling and serious human rights violations and abuses. However, the response is still insufficient, and there is less accountability and fewer convictions in countries along the Central and Western Mediterranean routes compared to some other regions of the world. In the case of trafficking in persons for instance, countries in East, West and Central Africa are convicting fewer perpetrators and detecting less victims than other States in the world, while more victims from the region are identified elsewhere suggesting that a weak criminal justice system may incentivize traffickers to operate nationally and transnationally (UNODC, 2023:18) along these migration routes. In certain cases, the response is affected by corruption[85] while in others, by lack of judicial cooperation.

Use of sanctions

Sanctions are used by the UNSC as a means to address, inter alia, massive violations of human rights. In 2018, the UNSC Sanction Committee included six persons on the list of persons subject to sanctions for engaging in trafficking, smuggling and abuses against refugees and migrants in **Libya** (United Nations, 2018). In the **Sudan**, some members of Darfurian armed groups were engaged in providing protection to migrant traffickers, in cooperation with local criminal groups in the region. However, to date, no Sudanese has been included on the sanction list because of violations and abuses perpetrated against refugees and migrants (United Nations, 2023e:para. 68).

National responses along the route

The commitment of national authorities and multilateral collaboration between law enforcement and other agencies achieved important results; some of those are mentioned hereafter. In **Italy**, for example, some of the investigations carried out by authorities have been successful (United Nations, 2022c). However, in certain cases, lack of judicial cooperation between States hampers the possibility of success (Palazzolo, 2020).

In **Libya**, according to non-verified sources, on 7 May 2023 in Kufra, the Anti-Illegal Immigration Agency, in a joint operation with the Criminal Investigation Department, raided three locations used by human traffickers. The operation was conducted following a video published by a local citizen on social networks about two Eritreans who managed to escape the traffickers. During the operation, 60 people of different nationalities were freed and 13 suspects were arrested. All those rescued were transferred to Kufra Immigration Detention and Deportation Centre, and those arrested were sent to the Security Directorate for referral to the public prosecutor. Reportedly, the traffickers used videos of tortured refugees and migrants to extort from relatives of each victim, amounting to LYD 100,000 (circa USD 21,000) (Gowans, 2023a). During the first half of 2023, an unverified source reported an increased anti-smuggling activity by the authorities, leading to the arrests of smugglers.[86] However, these arrests do not seem to have had an impact on the departures given that for the period January–April 2023, there has been a 39 per cent increase in the departure compared to the same period in 2022 (UNHCR, 2023i).

85 See for instance, NAPTIP, 2023.
86 Please see among others: Gowans, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d and 2023e.

In the **Sudan**, during a joint anti-trafficking operation coordinated by Interpol in 2021, Sudanese authorities arrested 20 persons and rescued 100 victims (Interpol, 2021). On 8 July 2021, the police freed 62 victims of trafficking in persons who were detained in a site in Gedarif (Al-Quds Al-Arabi, 2021). On 22 March 2022, the Sudanese General Intelligence Agency raided the residence of a group of traffickers on the outskirts of Khartoum, arrested them and released 25 girls that were held captive (*Ray As Sudani*, 2022). On 1 April 2022, the National Intelligence Service in Gedaref State stopped a human trafficking network and freed 18 Ethiopians in the area of Qalaa Al-Nahl (Nadab Sudan, 2022).

In **Tunisia**, on 26 May 2023, the National Guard arrested a smuggler accused of having organized the departure by boat of 20 Tunisians who died during a shipwreck (Etim, 2023; Africanews, 2023). The following days, the National Guard announced the arrest of four other smugglers in three different operations in Sbeitla, Monastir and Bizerte (Tunisian National Guard, 2023). While the press continues to report on a regular basis about the arrest of smugglers and the dismantlement of networks along coastal areas and destruction of boats,[87] it remains to be seen whether these arrests will lead to effective prosecution, sentencing or the reduction in the number of departure by sea considering that as of September 2023, the number of sea arrivals to Italy has increased significantly if compared to previous years (Operational Data Portal, n.d.b).

On 21 November 2021, the National Gendarmerie of **Algeria** in Bordj Bou Arreridj arrested 24 people, dismantling an international criminal network operating throughout the country through Libya and eventually to Europe using, among others, social media.[88]

In 2020, **Morocco** arrested 466 suspects allegedly linked to 123 trafficking networks. On 23 March 2021, five persons suspected of involvement with smuggling and human trafficking were also arrested (Kasraoui, 2021). On 22 September 2023, the police arrested four persons suspected of smuggling and trafficking in persons near Rabat (ibid.).

In February 2020, Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam, one of the most notorious Eritrean smugglers, was arrested in **Ethiopia** but after one year in prison, he escaped (Hayden, 2021). However, following multilateral collaboration between authorities of the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Interpol, he was rearrested in January 2023 in the Sudan (Interpol, 2023). In March 2020, Tewelde Goitom, known as "Welid", another Eritrean trafficker, was also arrested in Ethiopia (Girma and Hayden, 2021a). In Ethiopia, Tewelde was sentenced to 18 years for trafficking in persons along with one of his accomplices, Shishay Godefay Demoz, who was sentenced to 16 years (Girma and Hayden, 2021b). Tewelde was subsequently extradited to the Kingdom of the Netherlands where he appeared in court in the Dutch city of Zwolle (Corder, 2023). The Kingdom of the Netherlands is also seeking to extradite Kidane who is detained in the United Arab Emirates (NL Times, 2023).

87 See for instance, the following: Tunisian National Guard, 2023; Tunisie Actu, 2023; Kapitalis, 2020.
88 Please see Djazairess, 2021 and Jijel El Jadida, 2021.

Conclusion

After the first iteration of this report was issued in 2021, the limitations to freedom of movement imposed by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a significant reduction in the number of refugees and migrants travelling along the Central Mediterranean route. However, following the lifting of the restrictions and the effects of new events causing instability in sub-Saharan Africa, including various coups and the conflict in the Sudan, the phenomenon of mixed movements is rebounding significantly, and a corresponding increase in violations and abuses of human rights is also observed.

Since July 2020, some progress has been made on different fronts. On accountability, for instance, additional perpetrators have been added to the list of sanctions of the UNSC while others have been arrested, sentenced and/or extradited. On international cooperation and partnership, the dialogue has continued steadily in different forums such as the Khartoum Process (European Union/ICMPD, n.d.) and the Rabat Process (ICMPD, n.d.). However, despite the commitments undertaken by the international community – including through SDG 10.7 (United Nations, 2015), the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR, 2018), the Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (United Nations, 2019) and other important regional initiatives such as the Resolution on missing refugees and migrants in Africa and the impact on their families (African Union, 2021) – the response and the resources continue to be insufficient while the adverse drivers of irregular migration and root causes of displacement are on the rise. Due to an increasing number of emergencies and protracted humanitarian crises, the gap between available resources and needs is growing. Several operations along the Central Mediterranean route lack sufficient resources to meet even some of the basic protection and assistance needs. For instance, as of 31 December 2023, UNHCR appeal for the Western and Central Mediterranean situation was funded at 49 per cent (UNHCR, 2023c).

Amidst ongoing conflict, instability, poverty, inequality, climate change, poor governance and human rights violations in countries of origin and transit, as well as the strong need for migrant labour in many of the destination countries, people will continue to move along the mixed movement routes across Africa towards the Mediterranean coast, and sometimes onward to Europe. As becomes clear when looking over at the findings for the period covered by this report, that is, since the previous report – as well as dozens of other reports – people on the move continue to face unimaginable and unacceptable horrors. Thus, more needs to be done to provide tailored protection and assistance, as well as search-and-rescue mechanisms for refugees and migrants on the move, especially along the less visible part of the journey stretching along the Sahara Desert.

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