

OVERVIEW

In 2021, some 32,400 refugees and migrants crossed the sea from Libya to Europe (Italy and Malta), more than twice as many as in 2020, but far fewer than in recent years such as between 2014 and 2017. It is worth reminding that, as of end June 2021, 73 per cent of the world's refugees and Venezuelans displaced abroad were living in countries neighbouring their countries of origin.¹ As in previous years, many of those taking this route had international protection needs or other specific needs on account of their personal circumstances or experiences during the journey, including in Libya, due to being unaccompanied children or survivors of trafficking, gender-based violence, torture or shipwrecks.



32,400 refugees and migrants crossed the sea from Libya to Europe in 2021 vs. **15,300** in 2020

In addition, some 32,400 refugees and migrants who departed from Libya by sea in 2021 were also disembarked in Libya, mostly following interceptions or rescues by the Libyan Coast Guard.² UNHCR continues to call on States to refrain from returning to Libya any persons rescued at sea and to ensure their timely disembarkation in a place of safety.³

In Libya, UNHCR and partners continue efforts to provide alternatives to dangerous sea journeys, including through provision of humanitarian assistance and increasing access to safe and legal pathways.⁴ Further support for these efforts is critically needed.

ARRIVALS IN ITALY AND MALTA

Some 31,600 refugees and migrants arrived in Italy from Libya in 2021, more than double the number who arrived last year. Of these, some 10,600 persons arrived in the last quarter of 2021 (October through December). In 2021, 47 per cent of all sea arrivals in Italy had departed from Libya.⁵

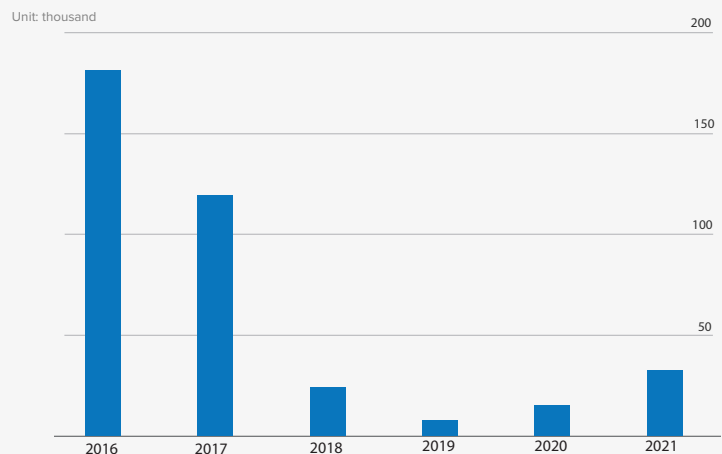
Additionally, some 800 refugees and migrants disembarked in Malta in 2021, a 64 per cent decrease compared to last year. Most of these persons arrived in the last quarter of 2021.

NATIONALITIES AND DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

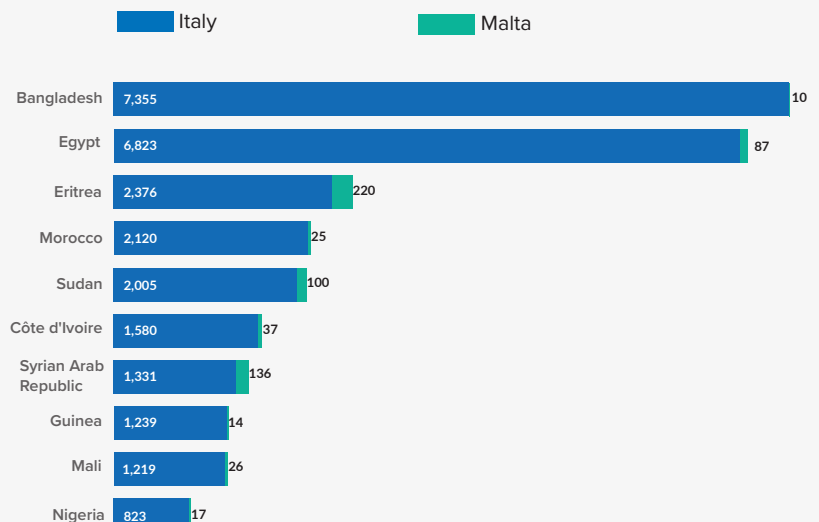
According to available information, Bangladeshis, Egyptians and Eritreans were the primary nationality groups of arrivals in Italy and Malta from Libya in 2021. Some 74 per cent of all arrivals were men, 21 per cent children (most of them unaccompanied) and 5 per cent women.

This, however, does not always accurately represent the primary nationalities departing from the Libyan coast as, for instance, Sudanese, Malians and Bangladeshis were the primary nationality groups disembarked in Libya this year.⁶

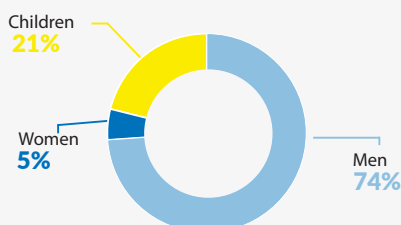
Arrivals by sea in Europe from Libya (January to December)



Most common nationalities arriving in Italy and Malta after departing from Libya (January to December 2021)



Demographic breakdown (January to December 2021)



RESCUE AT SEA

UNHCR is concerned about the loss of life and limited search and rescue capacity in the Central Mediterranean. For example, in the Libyan Search and Rescue Region (SRR),⁷ the vast majority of interventions have been performed by the Libyan Coast Guard with few alternatives available. This means that most refugees and migrants rescued or intercepted in this region are disembarked in Libya and subsequently transferred to detention centres, including shipwreck survivors, in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. The gaps in search and rescue capacity also entail risks that refugees and migrants may not be rescued and could potentially perish at sea.⁸

Of all persons rescued or intercepted in the Libyan SRR in 2021, only 16 per cent were disembarked in a place of safety, mostly after rescues by NGOs. Meanwhile, some 84 per cent were rescued or intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard and General Administration for Coastal Security, resulting in their disembarkation in Libya.

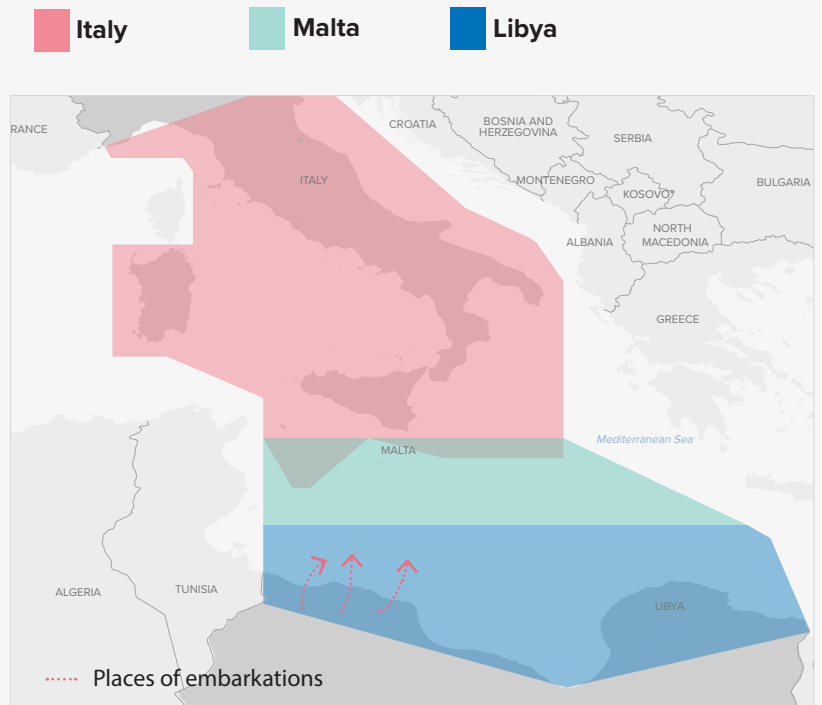
In 2021, in addition to those rescued by NGOs or merchant vessels in the Libyan SRR, 82 per cent of refugees and migrants who reached Europe from Libya travelled some 140 nautical miles to reach the Italian SRR, compared to 63 per cent last year. This means that people are travelling much farther and spending more time at sea than in previous years when more search and rescue capacity was available in international waters off the Libyan coast.

DEAD AND MISSING AT SEA

In 2021, some 1,100 refugees and migrants died or went missing at sea after departing from Libya, compared to 750 in 2020.⁹ Of these, the large majority (82 per cent) were reported to have died or gone missing within the Libyan Search and Rescue Region.

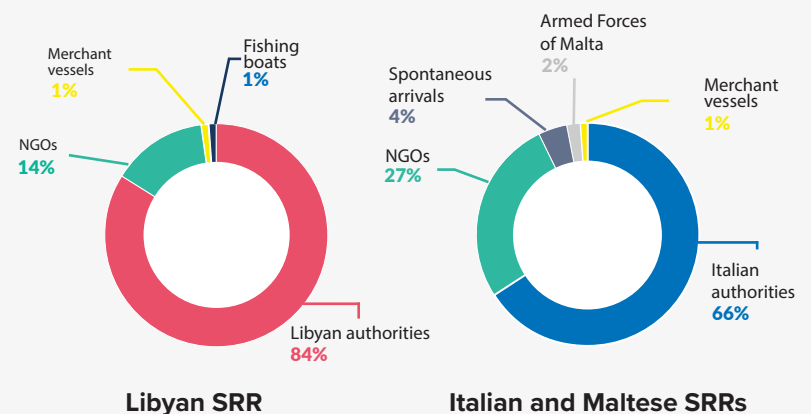
More needs to be done to save lives in the Central Mediterranean, including by enhancing search and rescue capacity, strengthening protection in countries along routes to Libya, addressing root causes of displacement and increasing access to safe and legal pathways.

Search and Rescue Regions



The search and rescue regions depicted are as per the coordinates listed by the International Maritime Organization – (<https://www.imo.org/>). Includes Serbia and Kosovo (S/RES/1244 [1999]). The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Rescues or interceptions in SRRs by type of actor (January to December 2021)



¹ UNHCR MYSR 2021: Most people forced to flee prefer to remain close to their country or region of origin. Nearly three-quarters of people displaced across borders stay in neighbouring countries.

² <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/211?sv=0&geo=0>. In addition, some 3,727 refugees and migrants were disembarked in Tunisia after rescue by Tunisian authorities.

³ <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5f1edee24.html>

⁴ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/11/618547c04/libya-first-evacuation-flight-niger-year-brings-172-asylum-seekers-safety.html>;

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/10/6171e8414/unhcr-calls-libya-urgently-develop-plan-asylum-seekers-refugees-welcomes.html>; <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/89654>

⁵ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90906>

⁶ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/211?sv=0&geo=0>

⁷ The establishment of an SRR means that, in line with obligations arising from international maritime law, a State commits to coordinating search and rescue operations within the region and exercises primary responsibility when the rescue takes place within its SRR to ensure cooperation and coordination for disembarkation. However, international maritime law does not prescribe where persons rescued in that region must be disembarked as long as the port is safe and disembarkation is effected as soon as reasonably practicable.

⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/4/6083054d4/mounting-death-toll-central-mediterranean-calls-urgent-action.html>

⁹ Figures included as dead and missing are compiled from a variety of sources, of which the quality and reliability can vary. Every effort has been made to ensure that all statistical information is verified, and figures on dead and missing at sea represent conservative estimates of a number that could possibly be higher than reported. The numbers of dead and missing in the UNHCR data relate to the incidents for which UNHCR has received a sufficient level of detail.