



MISSING MIGRANTS

TRACKING DEATHS ALONG
MIGRATORY ROUTES



Migrant deaths on maritime routes to Europe in 2021

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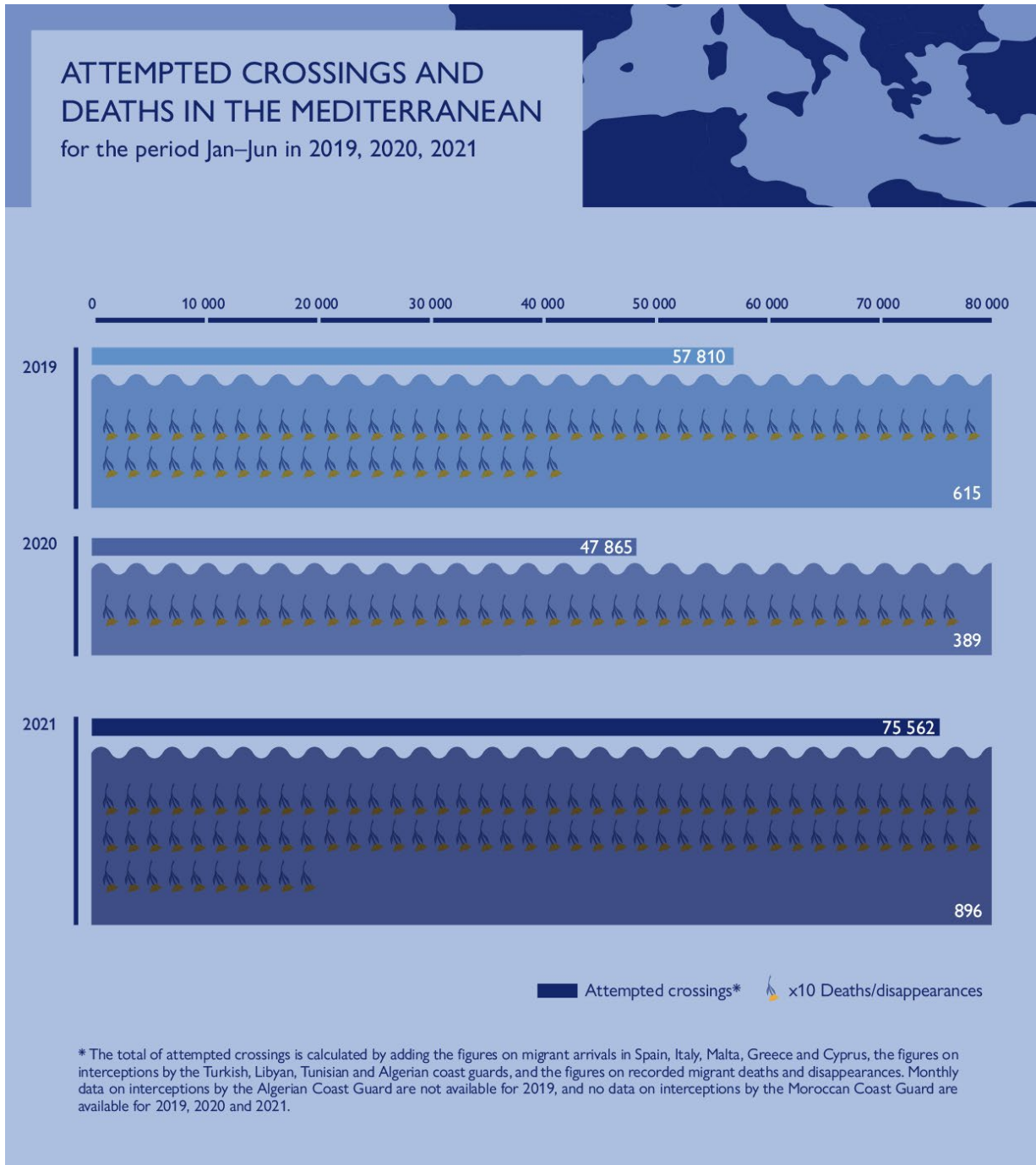
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MIGRANT DEATHS ON MARITIME ROUTES TO EUROPE DOUBLE IN THE FIRST HALF OF 2021

Figure 1: Attempted crossings and deaths in the Mediterranean for the period Jan–June in 2019, 2020 and 2021



Source: Missing Migrants Project, Spanish Ministry of the Interior; Italian Ministry of Interior; Hellenic Coast Guard, Turkish Coast Guard, Libyan Coast Guard, Algerian Ministry of Interior, Tunisian National Guard, Tunisian Ministry of Interior, FTDES.

MORE DEATHS RECORDED ON MARITIME ROUTES TO EUROPE IN 2021 THAN IN 2020

In the first half of 2021, at least 1,146 people lost their lives on maritime routes to Europe.¹ This is a substantial increase compared to the fatalities recorded in the same period in 2020 (513) and 2019 (674). The Mediterranean Sea was the main site of these fatalities: 896 people are known to have died attempting to reach Europe across this body of water from January to June 2021, representing a 130 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2020. The most lives lost were recorded on the Central (741) and Western (149) Mediterranean routes, whereas six people died taking the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece.² In the same period, at least 250 people died attempting to reach Spain's Canary Islands on the Western African/Atlantic Route. The available data show that out of the 1,146 people who lost their lives on maritime routes to Europe, 409 were men, 104 were women and 50 were children. For the rest, there is no information on their sex or age. Most of them were nationals from Northern Africa (139), followed by Western Africa (120), and other regions (10). However, the nationality of 872 individuals remains unknown.³

Meanwhile, the number of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe in the first six months of 2021 increased by 58 per cent compared to the same period in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic and the mobility restrictions put in place to contain its spread may explain the lower number of people attempting to migrate on maritime routes to Europe in the first half of 2020 (47,865), which was also 17 per cent fewer than

in the same period in 2019. COVID-19 related measures also impacted search and rescue efforts, with new imposed restrictions on the operations of civilian (NGO-run) vessels and denying or delaying disembarkation at safe ports in multiple instances.⁴

In the first half of 2021, search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea and on the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands have been insufficient to end the continuing loss of life in maritime migration routes to Europe. Civilian search and rescue organizations continued to face significant obstacles to their operations, with the majority of their boats blocked at European ports due to administrative seizures and ongoing criminal and administrative proceedings against crew members. This led to limited deployment – if any, at all – of civilian search and rescue ships during the first half of 2021.⁵ Most of the time, only one boat was present at sea, while nine were blocked in ports pending legal proceedings (as of June 2021). Additionally, instances of pushbacks of boats carrying people attempting to reach Europe have even been documented.⁶ There is currently no EU-led operation in place dedicated to search and rescue, and the responsibility has been left to states to patrol their territorial waters.⁷ Commercial vessels assist with search and rescue missions when directed to by maritime authorities.

CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN CROSSING: INCREASE IN INTERCEPTIONS AT SEA OFF THE COAST OF TUNISIA AND LIBYA IN 2021

At the same time, the data show an increase in North African states' maritime operations: 31,565 people were intercepted⁸ by North African authorities in the first half of 2021, compared to 23,117 in the first six months of 2020 and 17,971 in the equivalent period of 2019.

¹ The analysis in this briefing includes maritime routes to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea and from Morocco and the Western coast of Africa to Spain's Canary Islands. The analysis does not include other maritime routes to European territories, such as to Mayotte or Curaçao. Nor does it include deaths on Europe's land borders, such as between Turkey and Greece. Data on deaths on these routes can be downloaded here: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/downloads>.

² The "Western Mediterranean route" includes the sea journey from Morocco and the western coast of Algeria to the Spanish mainland and the Balearic Islands as well as the crossing into Ceuta and Melilla, two autonomous Spanish exclaves located in North Africa. The "Central Mediterranean route" is considered to be the migration route from the north coast of Africa to Italy and Malta, while the "Eastern Mediterranean route" is used to describe the sea crossing from Turkey to Greece and Cyprus. Although the Central, Eastern and Western Mediterranean routes are the most frequented migration passages across the Mediterranean Sea, not all people take these routes as they are defined, and there is evidence that these routes overlap. For example, in 2020, 12 per cent of people who arrived in Italy by sea departed from Turkey (IOM, 2021. Available at bit.ly/3AEZfD9). The numbers of deaths and disappearances recorded by IOM's Missing Migrants Project are a low count of the true number of deaths. For information on the challenges collecting data on deaths and disappearance on migration journeys, see, for example: IOM, 2017. Fatal Journeys Volume 3 – Improving Data on Missing Migrants, Parts 1 & 2. Available at bit.ly/3flKegN.

³ Identifying information (such as age, sex, and nationality) of the dead and missing is collected whenever available. However, given the challenges to collect data on people who die or go missing at sea, these are not representative.

⁴ OHCHR, 2021. Available at bit.ly/2V9lv7L.

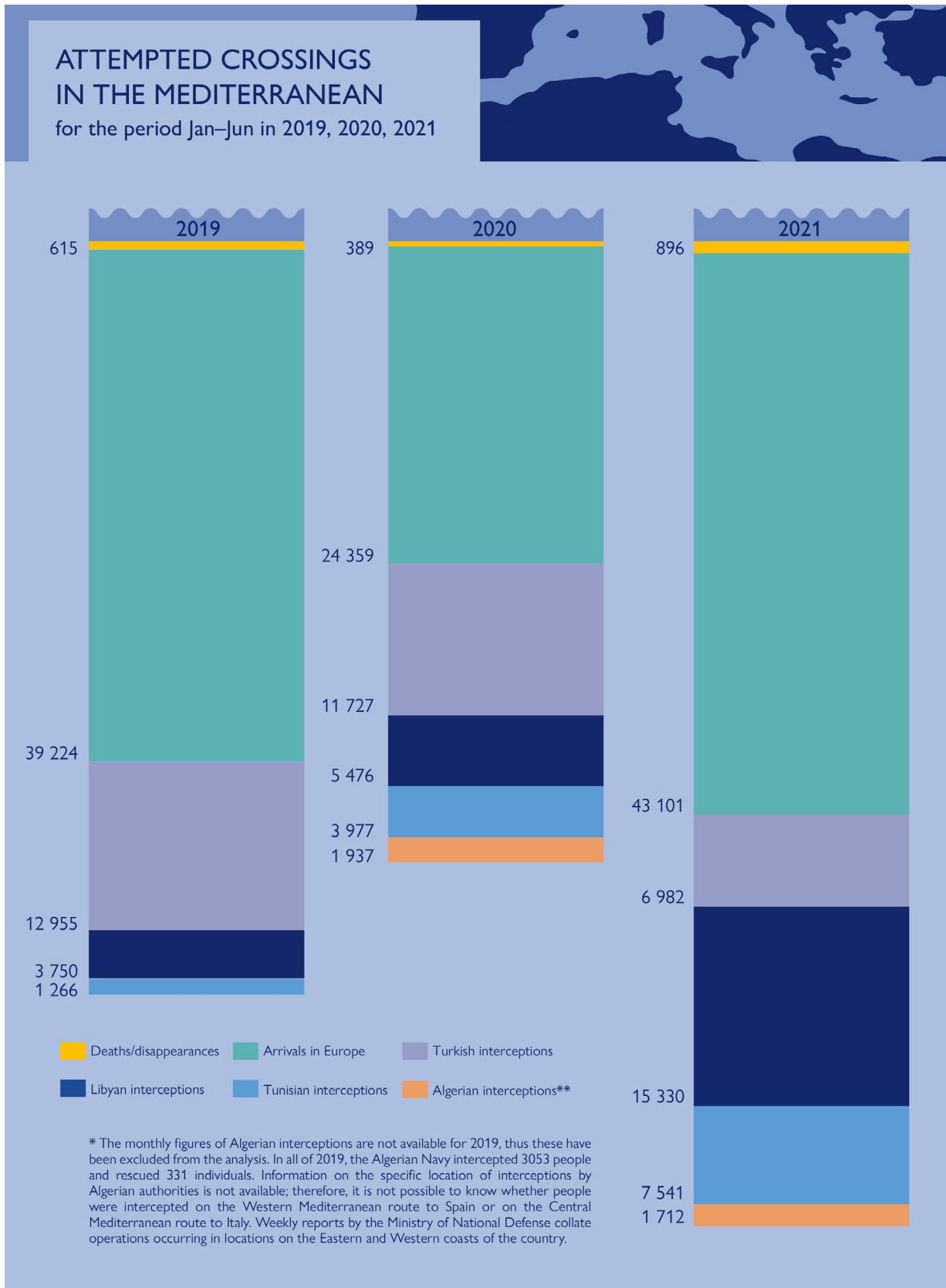
⁵ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2021. Available at bit.ly/3yqINo2.

⁶ IOM, 2021. Available at bit.ly/3uK3VTY.

⁷ Radjenovic, A., 2021. Search and rescue in the Mediterranean. European Parliamentary Research Service, Brussels. Available at bit.ly/36d2rla.

⁸ North African authorities do not disaggregate their publicly available data by interceptions and rescues and this puts limitations on the analysis of the data. A rescue at sea is defined as "an operation to retrieve persons in distress, provide for their initial medical or other needs, and deliver them to a place of safety" (IOM, 2019). An interception is understood as "any measure applied by a State, either at its land or sea borders, or on the high seas, territorial waters or borders of another State, to: (i) prevent embarkation of persons on an international journey; (ii) prevent further onward international travel by persons who have commenced their journey; or (iii) assert control of vessels where there are reasonable grounds to believe the vessel is transporting persons contrary to international or national maritime law. In relation to the above, the person or persons do not have the required documentation or valid permission to enter." IOM, 2019, bit.ly/3chdMKL. Throughout this briefing, the term 'interception' is used to refer to refer to maritime operations of North African authorities, however some of the figures for Tunisian and Algerian interceptions may include rescues.

Figure 2: Attempted crossings in the Mediterranean for the period Jan–June in 2019, 2020 and 2021



Source: Missing Migrants Project, Spanish Ministry of the Interior, Italian Ministry of Interior, Hellenic Coast Guard, Turkish Coast Guard, Libyan Coast Guard, FTDES, Algerian Ministry of Interior.

The number of individuals intercepted by the Tunisian Coast Guard increased by 90 per cent in January to June 2021 compared to the same period in 2020, and during this time at least 220 migrants lost their lives off the coast of Tunisia. On March 9, when two boats capsized off Kerkennah Islands, around 25 nautical miles from Sfax, the Tunisian Navy rescued 165 people and retrieved the remains of another 39 who drowned. On April 15, another boat sank approximately 2.2 nautical miles off the coast of Sidi Mansour, Sfax, taking the lives of 41 people, including at least nine women and one child; the Navy was able to rescue 3 survivors. In March and April, the Tunisian Navy conducted more than half (52%) of its total interception operations around Sfax, the same area where these two tragic events took place. At least five boats which capsized off Tunisian coasts in the past two months, specifically near the Governorate of Médenine, had reportedly embarked from Zuwara, Libya. Three of these boats in distress were initially assisted by workers at an oil platform in the Gulf of Gabès, according to media reports.⁹

There has also been a large increase in the number of migrants intercepted at sea by Libyan authorities: 15,330 people were returned to Libya in the first six months of 2021, almost three times as many as in the same period of 2020 (5,476 people). This is particularly worrying, given that migrants who are intercepted at sea and returned to Libya are subjected to arbitrary detention, extortion, disappearance, and torture. At least 454 people have lost their lives off the coast of Libya between January and June 2021, compared to 130 in the equivalent period of 2020.¹⁰

In the early hours of April 22, at least 130 people lost their lives in the largest shipwreck recorded in the first six months of 2021. Their boat is presumed to have embarked from the port city of Al-Khums, Libya on the night of April 20. The next morning, the people on board contacted the civilian-run hotline for migrants in distress in the Mediterranean Sea, Alarm Phone,¹¹ who informed relevant authorities about the boat. What was left of the inflatable boat, and the lifeless remains of some of the people on board, were found on April 22 by the crew of the civilian search and rescue vessel, the Ocean Viking,¹² approximately 73 nautical miles northwest from Al-Khums, Libya. According to testimonies of friends and families of the deceased, many of the victims were reportedly young men who came from the same district in Sudan. Libyan and European authorities were repeatedly alerted of the imminent danger for the passengers for two days before the boat capsized, leaving nobody

alive. In an earlier instance, on April 4, two boats that had departed from Libya carrying approximately 100 and 60 people were in distress for three days before eventually being rescued by the Italian Coast Guard, despite passing through the Maltese SAR zone.¹³ Delays and failures to launch search and rescue operations, as exemplified by these cases, continue to be common in the first six months of 2021.

WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE: DEATHS EN ROUTE TO CEUTA AND MELILLA INCREASE

At least 149 people have died on the Western Mediterranean route in the first five months of 2021: 76 people died on the crossing from Western Algeria to Spain, 47 people died on the route between northern Morocco and Spain,¹⁴ and 26 people died attempting the crossing to the Spanish territories of Ceuta and Melilla. In particular, the number of people who died attempting the crossing between the cities of Ceuta and Melilla and Morocco was significantly higher than in the same period in 2020 (when one person died) and 2019 (when 7 people are known to have died).¹⁵ On 24 and 25 April, more than 100 people attempted to swim from the Moroccan city of Fnideq to Ceuta, and at least 5 Moroccan migrants died during the crossing. Likewise, between 17 and 19 May, an estimated 9,000 people crossed into Ceuta, Spain by land and sea and at least 3 people lost their lives.

⁹ Al Jazeera, 2021, [bit.ly/3xiN1hu](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/03/09/tunisia-numerique); Tunisie Numerique, 2021, [bit.ly/3Aw9Srj](https://www.tunisienumerique.com/news/2021/03/09/tunisie-numerique); The Associated Press, 2021, [bit.ly/36csgbe](https://www.associatedpress.com/news/2021/03/09/tunisie-numerique).

¹⁰ IOM, 2020. Available at [bit.ly/34jNPVl](https://www.iom.int/news/2021/03/09/tunisie-numerique).

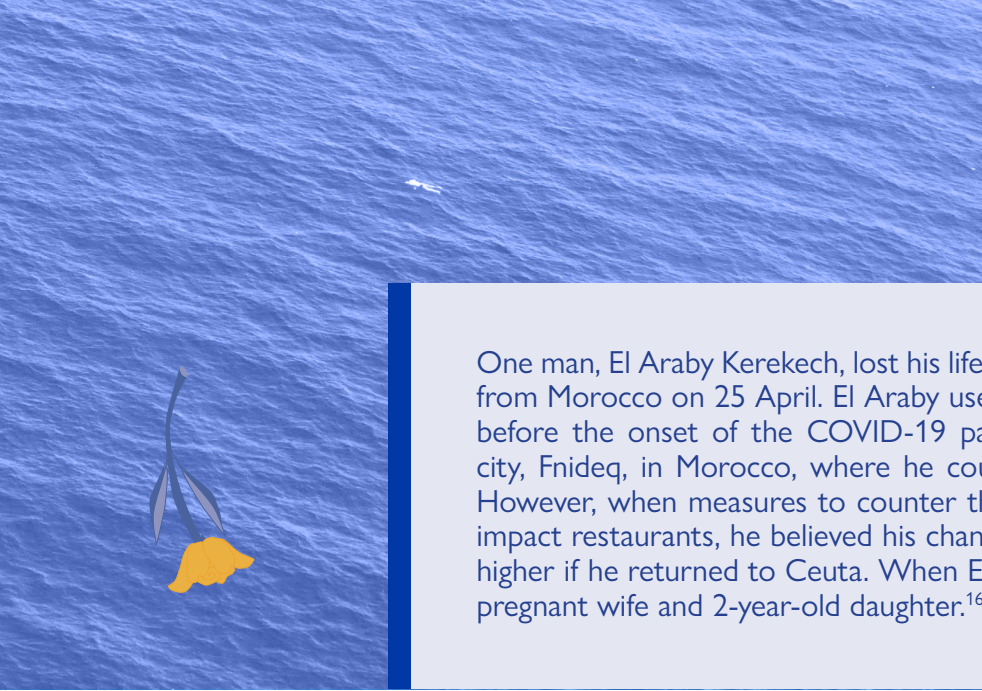
¹¹ Alarm Phone, 2021. Available at [bit.ly/3AwQR8G](https://www.alarmphone.org/news/2021/03/09/tunisie-numerique).

¹² The NGO SOS MEDITERRANEE operates the Ocean Viking. Available at <https://sosmediterranee.com/>.

¹³ Alarm Phone, 2021. Available at [bit.ly/3yFdyGL](https://www.alarmphone.org/news/2021/04/04/italian-coast-guard-rescues-two-boats), [bit.ly/3fnOA73](https://www.alarmphone.org/news/2021/04/04/italian-coast-guard-rescues-two-boats), [bit.ly/3w-G1i7f](https://www.alarmphone.org/news/2021/04/04/italian-coast-guard-rescues-two-boats).

¹⁴ Calculated based on incidents occurring off Hoceima, Tangier, Morocco; Gibraltar, UK and Motril, Spain. Incidents off Mojácar, Almería, Spain are excluded from this count since boats are presumed to have embarked from Algeria.

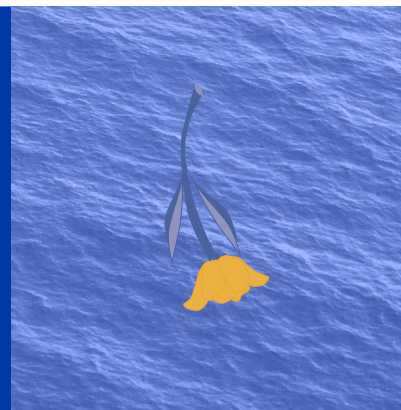
¹⁵ In the first half of 2019, 2,788 people arrived in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, in the same period in 2020, 1322 people arrived and in the same period in 2021 the arrivals increased to 9,790.



One man, El Araby Kerekech, lost his life while attempting to swim to Ceuta from Morocco on 25 April. El Araby used to work in a restaurant in Ceuta before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when he returned to his city, Fnideq, in Morocco, where he could work in a fast-food restaurant. However, when measures to counter the spread of COVID-19 started to impact restaurants, he believed his chances of earning an income would be higher if he returned to Ceuta. When El Araby drowned, he left behind his pregnant wife and 2-year-old daughter.¹⁶

The trend of migrants going missing without a trace on the Western Mediterranean route to Europe has continued in the first six months of 2021. Some of the most significant evidence of this has been the human remains recovered on the Algerian coast (mostly near Aïn Témouchent, Oran, Mostaganem) signaling possible invisible shipwrecks.¹⁷ In the first six months of 2021, 76 fatalities were recorded en route from Algeria to Spain, but posts on social media by families and activists indicate that the numbers could be drastically higher.¹⁸ For example, several families looking for their loved ones – who are presumed to have sailed from Oran months ago and have not been heard from since their departure – have published calls on social media platforms seeking information. There has also been a call for an intensified search by families of 11 young men who sailed from Mostaganem on 14 May, none of whom have appeared since.¹⁹ The same goes for the Eastern coast of Algeria, where the families of eight young Algerians told the media that their sons departed from El Taref on April 1, but since then, none of them have contacted their families.²⁰ During the first six months of 2021, 1,712 migrants were intercepted and rescued by the Algerian Navy. This is a 13 per cent decrease compared to the same period in 2020 (1,937). Most of these operations occurred on the Western Mediterranean Route, specifically in Aïn Témouchent, Chlef, Oran, Mostaganem and Tlemcen.

Twenty-two-year-old rapper Sohail Al Sagheer went missing on March 24 when he left with 9 friends from Oran, Algeria, hoping to reach Spain. His family conducted a frantic search for information about what happened to him, torn with rumors that he was among the victims of a shipwreck off Almería, Spain. His remains were finally recovered on April 5, off the coast of Aïn Témouchent, Algeria. His father said: *“Thanks God. I prayed to God to bring back my son, alive or dead, and he has answered me. My liver [heart] is gone, and I have only one liver [heart] in this world.”*²¹



¹⁶ Aljazeera, 2021. Available at bit.ly/3fSskRM.

¹⁷ Invisible shipwrecks are cases in which boats at sea disappear without leaving any survivors. They are usually reported by NGOs in direct contact with those on board and/or with families searching for missing people. Often, no search-and-rescue operation is known to have occurred in response to distress calls, and those on board are presumed to be lost at sea.

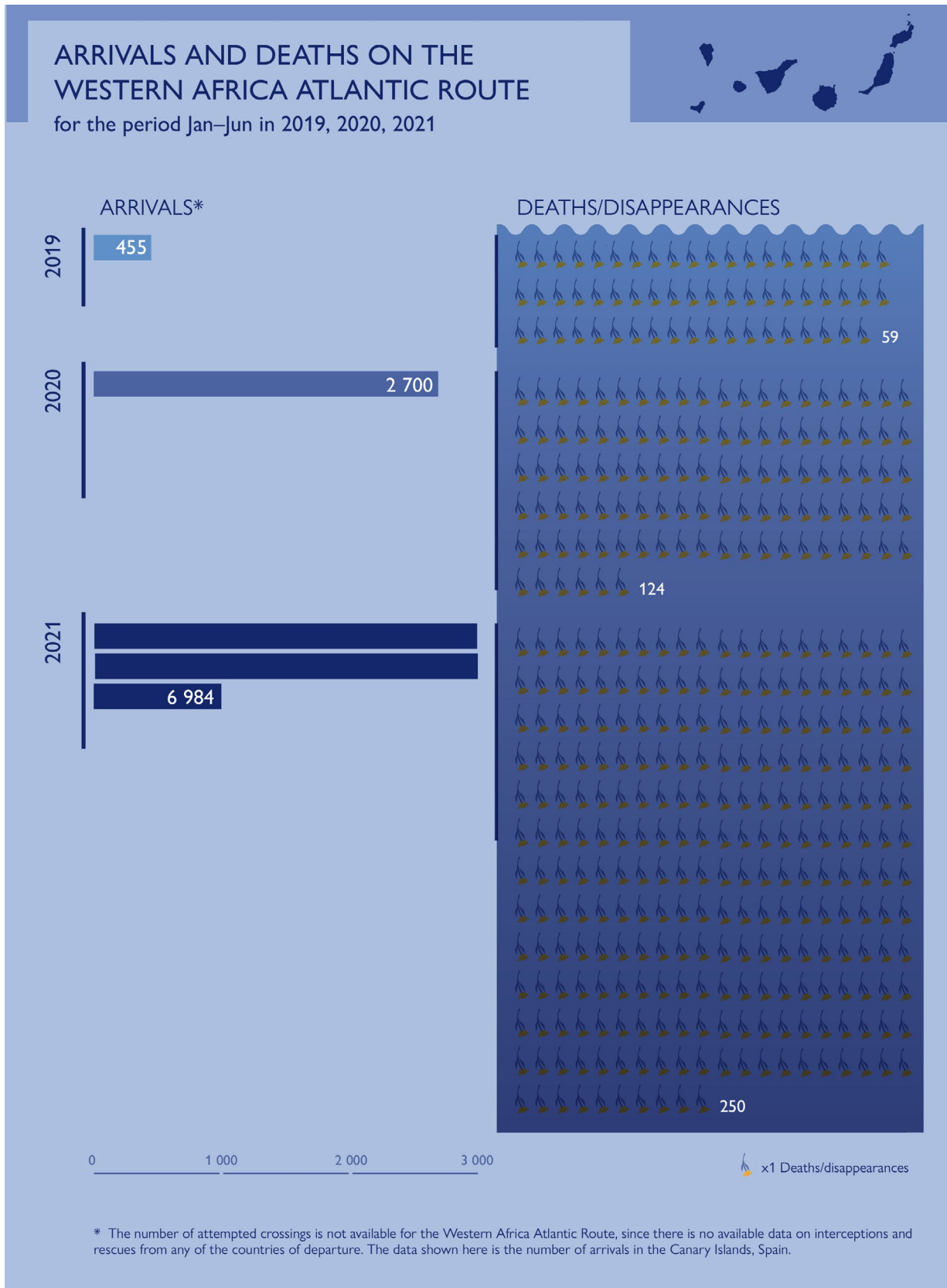
¹⁸ The Missing Migrants Project records deaths in its database when there is enough evidence for it to be sufficiently verified. This can be very difficult in cases of invisible shipwrecks however, as deaths at sea are usually verified when human remains are recovered or when multiple sources report the disappearance of a person whose remains are not found. The Project rates each record on a verification scale to indicate the quantity and quality of the information sources.

¹⁹ Echorouk Online, 2021. Available at bit.ly/3hrQaGI.

²⁰ Echorouk Online, 2021. Available at bit.ly/3hkaYz9.

²¹ Sky News Arabia, 2021. Available at <https://archive.vn/ZZ4rM>.

Figure 3: Arrivals and deaths on the Western Africa Atlantic Route, for the period Jan–June in 2019, 2020 and 2021



Source: Missing Migrants Project, Spanish Ministry of the Interior

RECORDED DEATHS ON ROUTES TO THE CANARY ISLANDS DOUBLE IN 2021 COMPARED TO 2020

In the first six months of 2021, the deaths of 250 people attempting to reach the Canary Islands were recorded. However, it is believed that many more people have drowned, given the repeated reports from civil society organizations of boats going missing on this route.²² Similar to the Western Mediterranean route, the trend of invisible shipwrecks – boats of people that disappear with no survivors – which began in 2020 has continued into 2021.²³ The number of deaths recorded en route to the Canary Islands in the first half of 2021 (250) is double the number of recorded deaths between January and June 2020 (124). The 850 deaths documented in full year 2020 represent the highest documented number of lives lost since IOM began collecting data on missing migrants in 2014, thus far.

Data on irregular migration by sea to the Canary Islands are highly incomplete, as data on the number of departures from the African coast (such as the number of people intercepted by Moroccan, Senegalese, or Mauritanian authorities) are not available. This makes understanding the complexities and risks on this migration route more difficult.²⁴ With that said, a large increase in the number of people arriving to the Canary Islands in the first half of 2021, compared to previous years, has been documented, which can indicate an increase in attempted crossings. Between January and June 2021, 6,555 people arrived via sea to the Canary Islands, compared to 2,700 in the first half of 2020 and 455 in the equivalent period of 2019. The increased use of this route started around July 2020, with 12,569 people arriving in the Canary Islands in the second half of 2020. This trend has continued into the first half of 2021.

Aicha, a 17-year-old girl from Côte d'Ivoire, was one of the three survivors in a boat that sailed on 4 April from Nouakchott, Mauritania towards the Canary Islands, the remaining 56 passengers perished onboard.

“Two days later we had no water left, no food. On the fourth day, no more petrol. There were men who could no longer stand up and who screamed out of thirst. We used a shoe to give them some seawater. At the beginning, we'd say a prayer. At the end, no prayer. Not even the strength to throw a body in the water”; Aisha said.

They were drifting asea for 22 days, far away from any merchant vessels route, before the Spanish Air Force spotted and rescued them on 26 April, 490 kilometers South of El Hierro, Canary Islands.

“It was a mass grave in the middle of the sea”, said Spanish Corporal Juan Carlos Serrano, one of the Spanish Air Force crew members who located the boat and rescued the three survivors.²⁵



Italian Coast Guard rescues migrants and refugees bound for Italy. © IOM/Francesco Malavolta 2014

²² For example, the Spanish collective Caminando Fronteras alerted that during the first six months of 2021, 42 boats that departed from the Western Africa coast towards the Canaries disappeared and all the passengers died at sea. Available at bit.ly/3keHtAO.

²³ For more information on the reactivation of the Western Africa/ Atlantic Route and migrant fatalities on this route, please see: Black, J., 2021. Maritime Migration to Europe: Focus on the Overseas Route to the Canary Islands. IOM, Geneva. Available at bit.ly/3ueoec8.

²⁴ For information on the challenges involved in calculating mortality rates in the context of migration, see: Dearden, K. and M. Sánchez Dionis, 2020. Calculating “Death Rates” in the Context of Migration Journeys: Focus on the Central Mediterranean. IOM, Geneva. Available at bit.ly/3bEiU7A.

²⁵ BBC, 2021. Available at bbc.in/3ytU6f4.

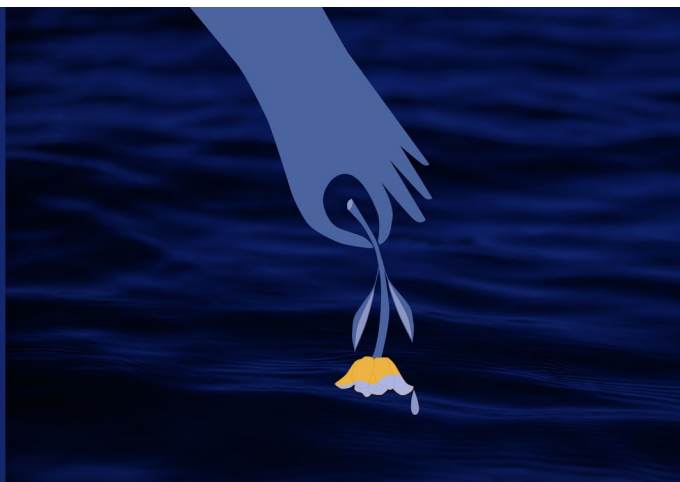
CONCLUSION: THE URGENT NEED FOR LIFESAVING RESPONSES TO MIGRANTS AT SEA

Since the Missing Migrants Project started documenting deaths and disappearances during migration in 2014, at least 23,720 people have lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea and migrating from the coasts of Africa to the Canary Islands. This includes 1,146 deaths recorded in the first six months of 2021 and 3,165 since March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic began. It is worth noting that people dying on maritime migration routes to Europe was not common or recorded before the early 1990s, yet since then, the loss of life has accounted for thousands of people each year.²⁶ Meanwhile, many more are likely to have died out of sight or their deaths have gone unrecorded. Every one of these people has left behind a family who may never know what has happened to their lost loved ones.²⁷

This briefing highlights the significant gaps in data on irregular maritime migration to Europe, these data are urgently needed to support humane responses to Mediterranean migration. Still in 2021, little is known about those who die at sea, and the families they leave behind. The COVID-19 pandemic has made data collection even more challenging, particularly amid the lack of public official data, as access to survivors and other sources of information has been limited.²⁸ Better data can help states urgently address their commitment under Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Migration to “save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants.” It can also help States address their commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 10.7, which calls on States to “facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration,” so that people are not compelled to take perilous journeys to reach other countries.

Alongside these commitments, States are required to uphold international human rights obligations. This includes the obligation to protect the right to life and to effectively investigate deaths when their cause is uncertain, as well as to recover and identify the deceased, and to appropriately inform their families. Furthermore, all human rights obligations must be upheld in a nondiscriminatory manner, irrespective of a person’s race, ethnicity, national origin, gender or other status. When it comes to missing migrants, these all require international cooperation. The loss of thousands of lives on maritime routes to Europe represent a failure of States to uphold these obligations.

There is an urgent need for States to **increase search and rescue efforts**, establish predictable disembarkation mechanisms and ensure access to **safe and legal migration pathways**.



²⁶ Please see www.missingmigrants.iom.int for data on deaths during migration since 2014. Since the early 1990s, efforts by NGOs and journalists documented these deaths in the context of migration to Europe, for example, UNITED for Intercultural Action. Available at bit.ly/3hjY1FR.

²⁷ IOM’s Missing Migrants Project recently completed a study on the challenges faced by the families of missing migrants in four countries (Spain, the United Kingdom, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe). The forthcoming final report will be published on www.missingmigrants.iom.int.

²⁸ IOM, 2021. Available at bit.ly/3hI9QV0.

