

# HUMANITY AT A CROSSROADS

Migrants' journeys on the Central Mediterranean Route



Refusing to ignore people in crisis

## Summary



An exhausted 14-year-old boy waits for help in a dusty refugee reception area. He has open sores on his arms where he has been deliberately burnt with cigarettes. An 11-year-old girl has left school, too depressed and withdrawn to continue after being raped three times in a matter of months. A woman of 23 cradles her eight-month-old baby in a reception centre in Italy. She is waiting to hear whether she can stay, or whether the culmination of a seven-year journey during which she was raped, stabbed and imprisoned five times, will be a return to a country where she has no family, no money and no prospects.

These are just a few of the people encountered during a brief study conducted on the journey to Europe along the Central Mediterranean Route. Unlike those who take the route from Turkey to Greece, the majority of people arriving in Italy are not Syrians, Iraqis or Afghans, but Africans from a wide range of countries in East and West Africa. They are moving for diverse reasons: some are fleeing conflict and persecution, some move because of poverty, loss of livelihood or lack of opportunity, others due to social and societal pressures. Many of them are children travelling alone.

Whatever the reasons they left their homes, many of the people who travel this route will spend years making their way to Europe. Substantial periods of time will be spent living as invisibly as possible in large cities and towns, often working illegally to earn money to continue the journey. During these periods, many will find fellowship and support from fellow travellers and local residents. Most, however, will also live in fear of raids and round-ups, fall prey to exploitation and abuse, or suffer from discrimination or violence motivated by racism.

The periods that people spend on the move tend to be shorter, but far more dangerous. To reach Europe, most people will have to travel through remote areas such as the vast Sahara desert, where they will face both extreme physical conditions and heightened risk from armed groups and organised crime. To help them navigate these dangers, most travellers will entrust themselves to the hands of smugglers at least once during their journey. Too often this trust will be misplaced, and people will be starved or dehydrated, beaten, abandoned, trafficked into forced labour or sex work, or held for ransom.



Irrespective of why people undertake their journeys, no one deserves the kind of abuse that so many migrants endure. Wherever they are, people must be protected from exploitation, abuse and violence, have access to due process of law, and not be arbitrarily deprived of life. They must not be forced back to countries where their lives and safety are at risk.

Instead of making efforts to keep people safer, however, international responses have often focused on reducing their ability to move. This has included erecting fences, increasing security at borders, cracking down on smugglers and increasing co-operation between countries to detect and prevent movement.

The process of moving towards Global Compacts to improve protection and support for both refugees and migrants launched at the UN General Assembly in September 2016 could hardly be more timely. This process offers an opportunity to reset the dialogue around refugees and migrants and reject xenophobia and racism. But it must be embarked upon in good faith and with a true spirit of responsibility-sharing by an international community that puts the needs of vulnerable people first.

### Better protection and support for vulnerable migrants must begin now.

- > Ensure that vulnerable migrants have effective access to assistance and protection, irrespective of their legal status. For the safety of all, governments must ensure that victims of violence, crime, abuse or exploitation are not afraid to report their experiences or to seek assistance, including mental health care.
- > Ensure that search and rescue operations are adequately resourced and supported. For some people at grave risk, the seas are the only means of escape.
- > Respect the principle of non-refoulement by refraining from sending people back to countries where their lives and safety are at risk. Government policies and international or regional agreements must not restrict people's right to seek and enjoy asylum.
- > Ensure that systems are in place to manage irregular migration in a fair and humane way, giving people adequate opportunities to claim asylum. Such systems should avoid force and take a victim-centred approach to trafficking. Detention should be used only as a last resort, and never for children.
- > Invest in understanding the complexity of movement within and across continents, including through dialogue with migrants. Reliable information provided at the right time in the right way can help reduce irregular movement, but people must feel it is in their interest, and not merely in the interest of preventing them from crossing borders.
- > Governments must lead the way in stamping out racism and xenophobia. Negative language and discriminatory policies can create a permissive environment for violence and exploitation of vulnerable migrants. Shifting the way that societies speak to and about migrants shows not weakness and inability to manage borders, but courage and humanity.

## I Introduction

Over the past year, Europe has become aware as never before of a humanitarian crisis of immense proportions. It is not the crisis of conflict or persecution that provokes flight; nor the crisis of people displaced for prolonged periods of time, though these are contributing factors. It is the exposure of millions of people to privation, violence and abuse in the course of long, traumatic journeys.

The people who have sought to enter Europe over the past year represent but a small proportion of people on the move across Africa and the Middle East. Whilst many are entitled to international protection, it is not their reasons for travelling that are the primary concern of this report, but the suffering that they undergo during their journeys.

This study, undertaken from May to July 2016, aimed to look more closely at the risks of the so-called Central Mediterranean Route. Although the dangerous sea crossing to Italy is perhaps the best known feature of this route, for most it is but the final feat of endurance in a journey that will put them at

risk of death numerous times. In order to understand these dynamics better, we traced the most common journeys backward from Italy, through North Africa to East and West Africa.

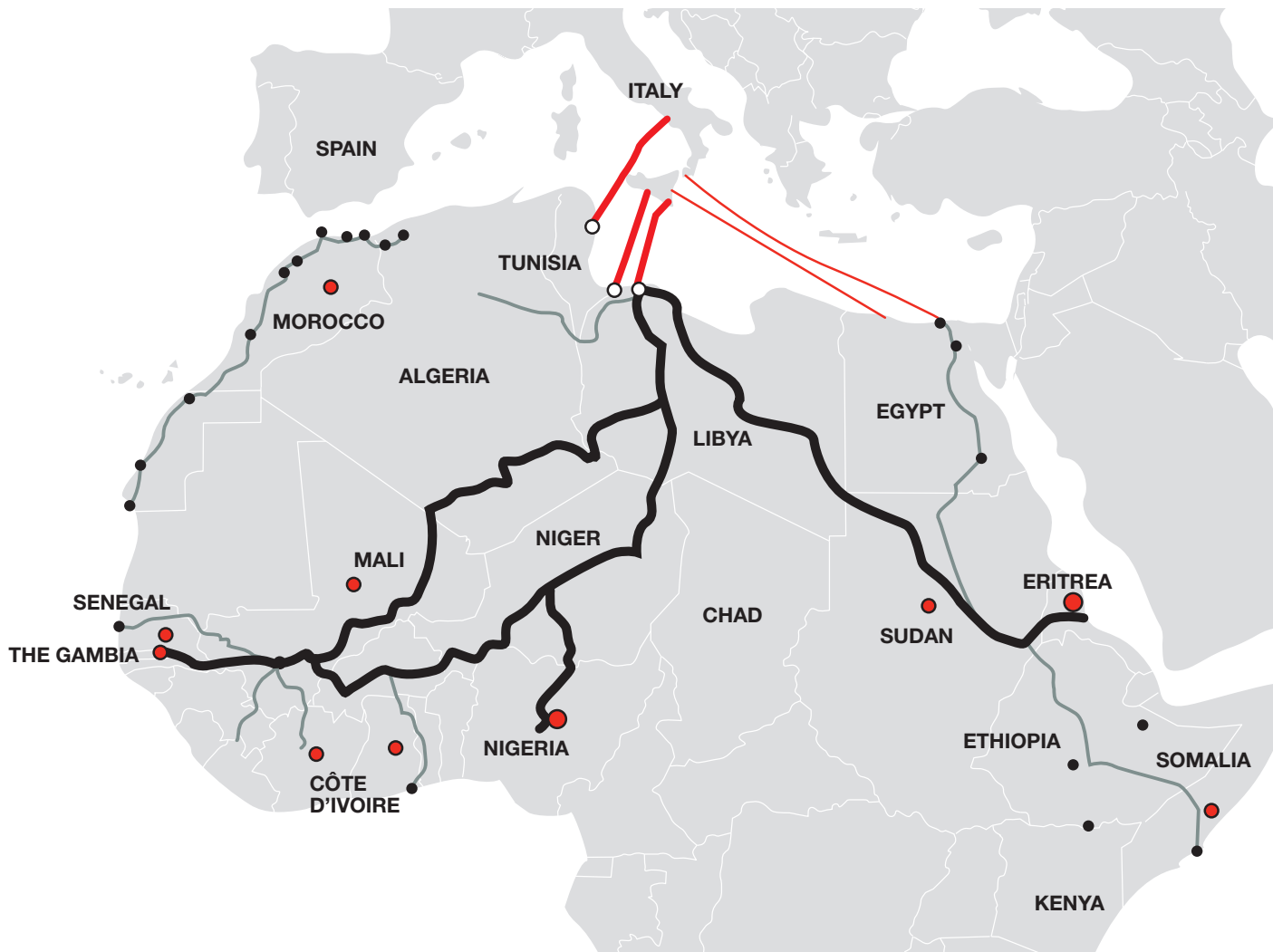
What we found was that the majority of people spend not weeks or months, but years on the move. They suffer racism and discrimination, sometimes including violence. The people we spoke to almost all had a story that included being beaten, abused, exploited and detained or imprisoned. Many had been held for ransom or suffered sexual exploitation and abuse. Virtually all had seen someone die. On this route an estimated 15 per cent were unaccompanied minors, making a total of 10,000 children that arrived in Italy between January and July 2016.<sup>1</sup> It is unknown how many did not make it through.

We also heard expressions of empathy and kindness from local communities – often themselves living in precarious circumstances – and government officials. We saw examples of community-led initiatives that have saved lives and restored dignity. We talked to



<sup>1</sup>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2016). Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean. Available: [data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php](http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php)

## The Central Mediterranean Route



service-providers from national and international organisations who, despite extremely challenging environments, have worked tirelessly to provide the best possible protection and assistance to vulnerable people on the move.

The reasons people are impelled or motivated to move are diverse. Their choice of destination is often shaped by a wide range of social, cultural and economic determinants. The different reasons for departure have an impact on people's physical and emotional state when they embark on the journey and on their entitlement to international protection if they reach a place where they can seek it. Their treatment along the way, however, is likely to be shaped by the colour of their skin and the perception of their relative wealth or poverty, age and sex. The dichotomy of 'good refugee' and 'bad migrant'

that has sometimes dominated the debate in Europe melts away along the routes that migrants travel, replaced by a much more primal hierarchy of weak and strong, vulnerable and protected.

Addressing the real migration crisis requires targeted solutions that help reduce both the risks that people on the move face, and the factors that make them more vulnerable. Regular migration will always be the safest way for people to move across borders, but sustainably reducing irregular migration cannot be done through simply closing borders. It requires a human-centred approach that considers not only the fact of movement, but also its drivers, including people's needs and aspirations. This is particularly important because, for many, irregular migration is the only way to escape a situation where their life or safety is at risk.

## II Methodology

This study involved desk research, calls with people working in Libya and Niger, and field visits to Italy, Egypt, Nigeria and Sudan. Qualitative interviews were conducted with representatives of government and intergovernmental bodies, UN and NGO service-providers, both national and international. Valuable insights were also provided by Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies, the IFRC and the ICRC. Although every effort was made to talk to as many people as possible, the sample is nonetheless quite small and made up largely of people referred by service-providers. As a consequence, we may not always have been in contact with the most vulnerable.

The aim of the study was to understand the main risks to and vulnerabilities of migrants in key countries of origin, transit and destination. It describes some of the most serious issues raised by migrants and service-providers. We have tried to give a sense of the dynamic and fluid nature of the journeys that people take, and the cumulative impact of the physical and emotional shocks they incur.

A note on terminology: the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement considers migrants to be persons who leave or flee their habitual residence to go to new places – usually abroad – to seek opportunities or safer and better prospects. Migration can be voluntary or involuntary, but most of the time a combination of choices and constraints are involved. Our use of the term ‘migrant’ thus includes labour migrants; stateless migrants; migrants deemed irregular by public authorities; migrants displaced within their own country; and refugees and asylum seekers.

The word protection is used in this report to refer to the entitlement to asylum or other forms of legal status, but also to the broader rights that people have to be protected from harm. Risks can include the lack of access to health care or other support, restriction of movement, seizure or confiscation of belongings, disappearance, lack of family contact, and violation of the principle of non-refoulement including the stranding of people in countries affected by conflict and other situations of violence.

## III Embarking on the journey

By the end of July 2016, more than 3,000 people had died or gone missing attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea since the beginning of the year. Research conducted by the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) suggests that even more people may die before they reach the Mediterranean, particularly those who cross the Sahara desert.<sup>2</sup> Those who survive cannot be considered unequivocally lucky, however; in Italy migrants described having experienced a wide range of abuse along the route, including imprisonment, forced labour, beatings and other forms of violence, including sexual violence. A number of the people we spoke to had experienced all of these.

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What drives people to embark upon such dangerous journeys? Some may not know how risky it is, but most people we spoke to said they are aware. Many, having survived it, told us that if necessary, they would do it again. When asked why, the wording varied but the answer was the same: there is no choice. In the words of one refugee from Darfur, “we have nothing left to lose.”

Some people travelling these routes have been driven from their homes by conflict or persecution. Some have lost their livelihoods due to climate change or economic shocks. Some are simply seeking a better life. Irrespective of their reasons for leaving, the vast majority of people stay close to home, or within their region. Some people who go to Europe do so as a result of a series of smaller choices or, as with one person we encountered, for lack of a safe place to stop.<sup>3</sup> For the majority, however, Europe

<sup>2</sup>RMMS (27 June 2016) Forgotten fatalities: the number of migrant deaths before reaching the Mediterranean. Available: [regionalmms.org/FeatureForgottenFatalities.html](http://regionalmms.org/FeatureForgottenFatalities.html)

<sup>3</sup>In this case, a border crossing to Nigeria was prevented by the destruction of a bridge by Boko Haram. This resulted in a detour to Chad that was short-lived due to fighting in Ndjamena. Seeking safety in Libya, the traveller managed to narrowly escape with his life to Italy after 15 months of forced labour.



was the destination of choice from the beginning, and returning is not an option. In the words of one service-provider, “the journey goes in only one direction: forward. There is no going back.”

A complex history of social and cultural ties often drives the choices people make. For example, although 17 per cent of arrivals to Italy between January and July 2016 were Nigerians, it is reportedly relatively affluent people from Edo and Delta states who make the journey, rather than those from the conflict-affected northeast, who tend to remain close to their villages. Remittances are only part of the draw; for young men in particular, the journey to Europe is seen as a badge of honour. A long history of movement from Nigeria’s southeast to Italy has created a culture of migration. As one government representative put it, “it is not what one does in Europe, [but] getting and being there that is important.”

By contrast, departures from the northeast are said to be deterred by the absence of such ties, the connection of people with their region and a lower

socioeconomic status that makes people fearful of both the journey and the challenges of living in a society very different from the one they know.<sup>4</sup> The numbers of people remaining close to home are far higher than those who travel to Europe, and despite the relatively high proportion of Nigerians arriving in Italy, this represents only about five per cent of Nigerians on the move.

These figures are interesting, but only useful in understanding the migration crisis to the extent that they illustrate how very complex these patterns of movement are. Efforts to increase development assistance and improve conditions for those in situations of protracted displacement are a positive step, but these take time to have an impact on people’s lives. In the meantime, as one service-provider said of Eritreans in the camps in Sudan, “these kids – they aren’t willing to wait.” This is all the more true when they represent the main hope for their families and communities, and face enormous pressure to continue their journey.

<sup>4</sup>RMMS (14 June 2016) *Out of sight, out of mind: Why South Sudanese refugees are not joining flows to Europe*. Available: [regionalmms.org/FeatureSouthSudanese.html](http://regionalmms.org/FeatureSouthSudanese.html). A recent piece of work by the RMMS drew similar conclusions in looking at the low numbers of South Sudanese and Yemenis moving from the region, relative to the amount of displacement overall. This was echoed by our encounter with two Yemeni men who, despite having barely survived a bombing in Taiz, were determined to return, saying: “Our city, our family is there.”

## IV Crossing borders

For the majority of migrants, risk begins to increase from the moment they cross the first border. They are made more vulnerable as language and culture begin to change, and the security of a familiar environment, with understood rules and social norms, begins to slip away. The physical risks of the journey are high and smugglers and traffickers are notoriously indifferent to the safety or well-being of their charges.

For those who lack papers or permissions to leave the country, the border crossing itself may be an illegal or unlawful act that could result in imprisonment, detention or other penalties. This is particularly true for people from countries where outward movement of nationals is controlled. Even those whose papers are in order may be harassed at borders, but clandestine or unofficial crossings carry additional risks from opportunistic or organised crime, militias or armed groups.

This section outlines some of the most common risks reported to us by migrants.

### Physical risks

The risk to life posed by the Mediterranean Sea crossing is well-documented. Efforts to reduce such journeys by targeting smugglers and destroying their vessels may actually have exacerbated the problem, as smugglers opted to reduce their losses by using flimsier craft, increasing the risk of drowning.<sup>5</sup> Death and sickness have also resulted from inhalation of or burns from spilled fuel, exposure, and lack of food and water.<sup>6</sup> One person interviewed for this study recounted: “Many people died but I was smart, and drank my urine to survive.”

Before they even reach the Mediterranean, however, many people have traversed vast deserts, forded rivers and crossed through territory controlled by militias, armed groups or subject to lawlessness. Survivors tell of people falling off trucks and being left to die, of sickness and wounds – including gunshot wounds – left untreated, and of loss of life from hunger and thirst. A service-provider in Khartoum described the poor condition of 42 Nigerians who sought assistance in early 2016. Abandoned by the smugglers they had paid, they were forced to complete their journey on foot. With no food, water or supplies, they were physically depleted and in need of medical care.



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<sup>5</sup>House of Lords (May 2016) *Operation Sophia, the EU's naval mission in the Mediterranean: an impossible challenge*, p.16. Available: [publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldcom/144/144.pdf](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldcom/144/144.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>Reuters (July 2016) *Bodies of 21 women, one man found on migrant boat in Mediterranean*: [MSF reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-italy-casualties-idUSKCN1002QI](https://www.msf-reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-italy-casualties-idUSKCN1002QI)





Accidents pose a serious risk, particularly as vehicles are often of poor quality and heavily overloaded. A representative of the Sudanese Red Crescent highlighted this, describing the aftermath of one incident in the vast desert area on the way to the Libyan border: “38 migrants of many nationalities – Sudanese, Eritreans, Bangladeshis and others – had been put into one Land Cruiser and tied on to prevent them from falling out. After the accident, 13 people died immediately and 11 the next day.”

### Facilitators, smugglers and traffickers

People embarking on the journey to Europe may leave home with or without a smuggler, but everyone we spoke to in the course of this study had eventually paid someone to facilitate part of their journey. In some cases, smugglers are the only means available for leaving a situation of great danger or for navigating risky, unknown terrain.

Reliance on smugglers creates its own risks, however. The people we spoke to reported harsh treatment at the hands of smugglers, and minimal attention to their safety. Two young Eritrean women interviewed in Italy described their two-week journey:

“We were 26 or 27 people in a pick-up truck with many people demanding and taking money along the way. It was not comfortable – hot, with no food and very little water; just a mouthful from time to time. If we complained, we were beaten. We were treated very badly. We heard stories of women being raped, but we were not.”

A similar description was given by a Nigerian woman, who added that travellers were beaten if they did not provide money to the people who accosted them along the way. Sometimes girls who had no money were taken, raped and married off to local men.

There is an important distinction between smugglers and traffickers. Smugglers are willingly contracted to facilitate travel, whilst traffickers use coercion or false promises to entrap people, often for labour or sex work.<sup>7</sup> Smuggling can turn into trafficking when people are already on the move, but others are trafficked from the start of their journey, enticed by stories of wealth and opportunity. Nigerian and Ethiopian women are reported to be particularly targeted for sex trafficking on this route.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>There are also some indications that people are being trafficked for trade in human organs. RMMS (2016) *Regional Mixed Migration in the Horn of Africa and Yemen in 2016: 1st Quarter trend summary and analysis*, pp.6-8. Available: [regionalmms.org/fileadmin/content/monthly%20summaries/RMMSQ1Trends2016.pdf](http://regionalmms.org/fileadmin/content/monthly%20summaries/RMMSQ1Trends2016.pdf)

<sup>8</sup>EASO (2016) *Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the European Union 2015*, p.68. Available: [easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/public/EN\\_%20Annual%20Report%202015\\_1.pdf](http://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/public/EN_%20Annual%20Report%202015_1.pdf)

### Crossing borders (continued)

The term trafficking is also often used to describe the situation of people kidnapped and held for ransom. Victims may be entrapped by people claiming to be smugglers, may be sold on, or may be abducted. Abductions are particularly common between Eritrea and Sudan and in Libya, but have been reported from other areas as well. Money is extorted from families by forcing them to listen to their relative being tortured over the telephone. Those without family members willing or able to pay may be subjected to forced labour.

In Sudan, the government is increasingly cracking down on these activities, including through conducting rescue operations. Those released are referred to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and supported in safe houses run by the Sudanese Red Crescent Society in the country's east, where they receive medical care and psychological and emotional

**Over 92 per cent of the 7,567 children who made the crossing to Italy between January and June 2016 were unaccompanied.**

[UNICEF]

Efforts to reduce the flow of migrants across continents, in part by cracking down on smuggling and trafficking, have perhaps exacerbated risks

at borders. Increased border presence, such as the joint patrolling that has been instituted at Sudan's border with Chad and Egypt, may cause smugglers to take increasingly risky routes to get through. Apprehension can lead to detention, and there are often no facilities specifically for migrants, particularly women and children. As a result, people may be held in inappropriate or ill-equipped facilities for indeterminate periods of time.

Protection agencies, such as UNHCR, work with authorities to help obtain the rapid release

of registered asylum seekers in Egypt and Sudan. Organisations such as International Organization for Migration and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement advocate for the release of migrants or for access to monitor detention facilities. The success of such efforts, however, often relies on informal agreements or personal relationships.

Recently there have been increased efforts by states to tackle trafficking, including through regional co-operation. The extent to which a victim-centred approach is taken to this type of initiative can determine whether it will ultimately have a positive or negative impact on the safety of vulnerable people.



support. Of nearly 100 cases verified by UNHCR in the second half of 2015, roughly 18 per cent were minors and 47 per cent were women; 95 per cent reported severe physical abuse and 42 per cent reported gender-based violence.<sup>9</sup>

### Border officials

When border officials do their jobs well, people may simply be prevented from crossing if they lack the required documentation. There are numerous stories, however, of corruption and abuse at official border crossings, including extraction of fees and physical abuse.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>From an interview with UNHCR in Khartoum, Sudan.

<sup>10</sup>Service-providers in Agadez reported that nationals from a variety of West African countries described having money extorted from them, including through the use of beatings, despite having the legal right to travel freely across the region.

## V Living on the margins

Migrants will often stop for months or even years as they look for a place to settle down or make money for their onward journey. In the meantime, they must navigate complex legal, social and cultural contexts that can exclude or marginalise them. Countries that see very high levels of human movement often end up with complex legal and regulatory systems to accommodate refugees and asylum-seekers, regular and irregular migrants and their own citizens, including those who may have been internally displaced by conflict or natural disaster.

Sudan, for example, hosts refugees from places such as Eritrea, Syria and Yemen, and groups of South Sudanese. Some South Sudanese were recently displaced, some were displaced years ago and never returned, while others have been displaced a second time by the renewal of conflict in South Sudan. Meanwhile a wide range of migrants from the Horn of Africa and West Africa remain in the country for periods of varying duration. Sometimes they intend to remain for education and employment, but often they are merely passing through, trying to put together enough money to continue their journey north to Europe or East to the Gulf. The situation is further complicated by substantial numbers of people internally displaced by conflicts within the country. Egypt, too, hosts an extraordinary range of people with different needs and entitlements. An indicative – not exhaustive – list includes Palestinians, Syrians, Libyans, Yemenis, Iraqis, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Eritreans, Somalis, Ethiopians, Nigerians, Ivorians, Cameroonians and Ghanaians.

Both countries find themselves with a complex legal patchwork that may benefit some while disadvantaging others. In Sudan, for example, most Arabs, including Syrians and Yemenis, are viewed as 'brothers' and are therefore entitled to live and work freely in the country but are not granted refugee status as such. This provision also applies to South Sudanese. It does not apply to Eritreans, however, who are subject to Sudan's official policy of encampment and can be charged under Article 30 of Sudan's Refugee Act if found outside of mandated areas.<sup>11</sup> This policy, whilst generous in one sense, results in different treatment for refugees

of one nationality from those of another, which is fundamentally discriminatory. Moreover, this type of policy can prove a double-edged sword even for those who benefit from it, if groups fall out of favour or government policy changes.

This highlights the need for migrants of all kinds to have access to up-to-date information about their options. For a Syrian who was regularly resident in Egypt prior to the conflict, for example, it may be difficult to determine whether it is in his or her best interest to try to renew that status or to apply for asylum. Such decisions are even more complicated for other groups. Palestinians displaced from Syria, for example, fall into a mandate gap between the extremely limited presence of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) – the Palestinian refugee agency – and UNHCR, while Libyans are allowed to remain on the territory, but not to register as refugees.<sup>12</sup>

Even where such distinctions by nationality do not exist, it is often difficult for people to determine where their best interest lies. In Italy, for example, migrants who hope to go elsewhere in Europe may resist applying for asylum, as many have been told that a claim in Italy will prevent them from moving on. Government officials and service providers attempt to provide correct information, but the systems are confusing, and correcting pre-conceived notions is challenging when time is short, people are confused and resistant, and language is a substantial barrier.

The situation is less complex for migrants without a claim to international protection. In many countries, their presence is tolerated – even overlooked – because they play an important part in the local economy. Living and working illegally, however, limits migrants' access to services, and carries high risks of exploitation and abuse. There is also a constant fear of being detected by authorities. Round-ups are routine in Khartoum, for example, and take a serious toll on migrants and refugees, both financially and emotionally. More serious yet are reports of Eritreans being deported to Eritrea, allegedly without being given the opportunity to claim asylum or consult with UNHCR.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Sudan has ratified the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, but made a reservation to Article 26 which sets out terms for freedom of movement.

<sup>12</sup>Centre for Refugee Solidarity. Available: [refugeesolidarity.org/publication/report/egypt](http://refugeesolidarity.org/publication/report/egypt). The situation of Palestinians in Egypt, many of whom have been resident in the country for decades, is additionally complicated by their inability to obtain permits for longer than six months. As the process of obtaining them can be difficult, Palestinians in Egypt often live with irregular status, despite entitlement to refugee status.

<sup>13</sup>Information obtained from interviews in Sudan and Human Rights Watch (30 May 2016) *Sudan: Hundreds Deported to Likely Abuse*. Available: [hrw.org/news/2016/05/30/sudan-hundreds-deported-likely-abuse](http://hrw.org/news/2016/05/30/sudan-hundreds-deported-likely-abuse)

### Living on the margins (continued)

Italy also has its share of undocumented migrants living on the margins of society. In principle, people who do not claim asylum, whose claim is rejected, or who do not receive some form of protection are returned to their country of origin. In practice, it is difficult to return people to their country if their government is not willing to receive them. As a consequence, people are often simply released from detention or turned out of reception centres with a notification to leave the country within seven days, but with no means or desire to do so, and no source of assistance.

Life for people in these circumstances is very difficult. Even basic assistance is often unavailable or inaccessible, let alone access to care for chronic conditions, to mental health support or to education. Migrant communities often support one another, as with one Eritrean child we spoke to whose journey to Khartoum had been paid for by friends, and who relied on a series of friends and acquaintances for advice and accommodation. It is a precarious existence, however, and many resort to negative coping strategies such as crime or prostitution to survive. Crucially, fear of being arrested or deported means that people rarely seek protection from authorities or redress for exploitation and abuse.

### Zones of lawlessness

If legal regulations and constraints can put people at risk, the absence of law and order is far more dangerous. There are many pockets of lawlessness on the routes from East and West Africa to Italy, but parts of Libya, and particularly its border areas, were described as particularly dangerous. Descriptions of the journey through Libya by migrants we spoke to included: “Everyone has a gun and is willing to use it”, “I had no protection or peace of mind” and



“We were treated like animals”. Their descriptions of constant harassment and abuse tally with other reports from the country.<sup>14</sup>

The Libyan Red Crescent, with support from the ICRC and IFRC, is one of the few organisations able to provide assistance in Libya, as insecurity has forced most service-providers to leave. In a telephone interview, they emphasised how overstretched they are, attempting to assist internally displaced people, the host population and migrants, all in an increasingly difficult security environment. They highlighted that the situation is difficult in areas where the authorities are able to exert some small measure of control, but that a “humanitarian tragedy” is unfolding on the country’s southern borders. Here there is no authority or rule of law, and criminals and armed groups take advantage of the flow of vulnerable people to extort, traffic and abduct for ransom.

Detention, both by authorities and armed groups, is highlighted as one of the biggest risks in Libya. Virtually everyone we spoke to had been detained for some period of time, and all described witnessing one or more of the following: beatings, torture, sexual exploitation, sexual violence and forced labour. There is very little outside access to formal detention centres, and none at all to those run by armed criminal groups.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Amnesty International (2015) *Libya is full of cruelty*.

Available: [amnesty.eu/content/assets/Reports\\_and\\_Briefings\\_2015/Libya\\_is\\_full\\_of\\_cruelty.pdf](https://www.amnesty.eu/content/assets/Reports_and_Briefings_2015/Libya_is_full_of_cruelty.pdf)

<sup>15</sup>For more information on conditions of detention in Libya, see: SAHAN/IGAD (February 2016) *Human Trafficking and Smuggling on the Horn of Africa-Central Mediterranean Route*.

Available: [igad.int/attachments/1284\\_ISSP%20Sahan%20HST%20Report%20%2018ii2016%20FINAL%20FINAL.pdf](https://www.igad.int/attachments/1284_ISSP%20Sahan%20HST%20Report%20%2018ii2016%20FINAL%20FINAL.pdf) MHub (July 2015); *Detained Youth: The fate of young migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Libya today*.

Available: [mixedmigrationhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/MHUB\\_2015\\_Detained-Youth.pdf](https://www.mixedmigrationhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/MHUB_2015_Detained-Youth.pdf)

## VI Vulnerability

One fact often cited about the Central Mediterranean Route is how many of the people travelling it are young men. This masks another truth, which is how very young many of them are. Witnessing the disembarkation of the search and rescue boats at a port in Sicily, it is impossible not to be struck by the youth of the new arrivals. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that over 92 per cent of the 7,567 children who made the crossing to Italy between January and June 2016 were unaccompanied.<sup>16</sup>

A substantial number of unaccompanied minors are Eritrean youths, who often flee conscription to the military. There is an increasing trend of unaccompanied minors travelling from Egypt,<sup>17</sup> and anecdotal reports suggest that this may be encouraged by the fact that, unlike Egyptian adults, children cannot be deported.

Whatever the reason for their departure, authorities and service-providers in every country we visited highlighted that unaccompanied children are among the most likely to fall prey to traffickers or to end up in exploitative situations. Organised criminal networks provide a regular flow of young women from Nigeria's Edo state to Italy, for example. Not all of these girls are minors, nor are all of them unaware of the sex work that most likely awaits them. A substantial proportion, however, have been enticed from their homes with promises of wealth that they can remit to their families. They are impeded from reporting their situation to authorities or seeking help by threats to themselves or their families, sometimes invoking the use of 'juju' or black magic against them.

Whilst it is easier to quantify the number of unaccompanied minors on arrival in Italy than in many other countries, it is important to note that this is because special efforts are made to detect and protect them. Such protection is far less available in other countries or along the route to Italy. Although the trafficking of Nigerian women and girls to Europe is a well-established phenomenon, for example, so too is trafficking within Nigeria and throughout the region, accounting for a much higher proportion of the overall numbers.<sup>18</sup> In Egypt, too, unaccompanied minors

were identified as one of the most at-risk groups, particularly Eritreans and Ethiopians. Unlike in Italy – which has established, though strained, systems for guardianship of young people – systems in Egypt are unequal to the task of providing identification, protection and support.

Ethiopians were also identified as an at-risk group in Sudan, with Ethiopian girls identified as a particular concern. Representatives of an Ethiopian community centre in Sudan said that young Ethiopian women were more likely to make the journey to Sudan than boys due to fewer educational and livelihoods opportunities at home, and better opportunities to find work as domestic labourers. While many are treated well by their employers – one interviewee described her employer as being "like a mother" to her – it is nonetheless a life on the margins of society, often exploited, and without adequate protection. A provider of gender-based violence services in Khartoum reported one current case of a girl of 11 or 12 years of age who, lacking adequate protection, had been raped three times in the area where she lived. With each successive attack, she became more depressed, withdrawn and afraid.

The vulnerability of girls like this one is substantially increased by racism and discrimination, which is pervasive all along the migrant route. While any 'outsider' may potentially be targeted, the risk to sub-Saharan Africans was highlighted as ubiquitous, particularly in countries in the Arab world. Perceived as powerless and without protection, sub-Saharan Africans are frequently exploited in work and targeted for abuse. We encountered a 14-year-old boy who showed open wounds on both arms and described how the men who burned him with cigarettes told him he had no rights.

If abuse fuelled by racism and discrimination is pervasive in societies with strong, functional governments, it is even more common – and can be deadly – in the absence of controls. Libya is described as particularly dangerous in this regard, and one of this study's interviewees reported constant harassment including at home, where armed militias and street gangs extorted money through intimidation and violence.

<sup>16</sup>UNICEF (June 2016) *Danger Every Step of the Way*, p.5.

Available: [unicef.org.uk/Documents/Campaign-documents/UNICEF%20CHILD%20ALERT%20Refugee%20Journey.pdf](http://unicef.org.uk/Documents/Campaign-documents/UNICEF%20CHILD%20ALERT%20Refugee%20Journey.pdf)

<sup>17</sup>MHub (May 2016) *Monthly Trend Report*, p.2. The number of Egyptian unaccompanied migrant children arriving in Italy was reported to have surged to 638 between January and April of 2016, compared to 18 in the same period the previous year.

Available: [mixedmigrationhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/MHub-Monthly-Trend-Bulletin-May-2016.pdf](http://mixedmigrationhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/MHub-Monthly-Trend-Bulletin-May-2016.pdf)

<sup>18</sup>EASO (October 2015) *Country of Origin Information Report, Nigeria Sex trafficking of Women*, pp. 12-13.

Available: [refworld.org/pdfid/5631cf0a4.pdf](http://refworld.org/pdfid/5631cf0a4.pdf)

## VII Assistance and protection

Irrespective of the reason for their journey, migrants require basic assistance (food, water, shelter and medical care), an environment that protects them from exploitation and abuse, and access to information, advice and support. All too often, these are unavailable or inaccessible.

Providing assistance to people on the move can be an enormous challenge. People are often afraid to access assistance, even if it is on offer, as they fear detection by authorities. This, in turn, drives people to take more and more dangerous and inaccessible routes, often in areas where law and order are poorly or not at all enforced. Many of these areas are inaccessible to service-providers because they fear for the safety of their own staff and volunteers.

As in any humanitarian crisis, the first providers of assistance to migrants are often the communities through which they travel. Migrants encountered in the course of this study often described discrimination, exploitation and abuse at the hands of people in host communities, but also acts of compassion and empathy. This is sometimes through organised services, but often through individual acts of kindness and charity that many are ill able to afford. But because migrants are, by definition, on the move, the needs are never-ending: the people helped today are not the people who will need help tomorrow. In these circumstances, empathy and fellow-feeling from local communities can turn to resentment and hostility. In seeking to support migrants, investing in host communities and ensuring that their contribution is recognised is a vital first step.

Programmes that provide assistance to people in need, irrespective of their nationality or legal status, are therefore extremely important. There are organisations or groups in virtually every society that provide assistance to vulnerable, destitute and homeless people. Humanitarian service-providers can partner with, mentor or support them in their work. This can help ensure that migrants have access to assistance, and contribute to reducing resentment and discrimination toward all kinds of migrants.

That said, many migrants will have particular needs and specialised services must be available to them. This includes cultural interpretation, orientation to their environment and to what services may be available to them, counselling and advice on their legal situation and, critically, psychological and emotional support or mental health care for those who have suffered

violence or abuse. Assistance is particularly crucial for victims of violence, particularly sexual violence. Shame and stigma prevent most survivors of sexual violence from seeking assistance, but migrants are additionally deterred by the fear of being brought to the attention of police. A victim-centred approach is particularly vital in these cases.

***Fear of being arrested or deported means that people rarely seek protection from authorities or redress from exploitation or abuse.***

This study saw a number of examples of good practice in providing assistance to migrants along the route, but these need to be built upon and expanded. One example is Safe Points provided by the Italian Red Cross. Established in parts of Italy where migrants tend to congregate or transit, staff and volunteers provide advice, support and facilitate access to services in a welcoming, social environment. IOM's Migrant Resource and Response Centre in Khartoum is another positive example, providing legal advice, referral and basic medical treatment to people in need. Community initiatives like those provided by the Ethiopian community in Khartoum should also be supported. In many places, UNHCR is supporting legal assistance to people arrested or detained and services to survivors of violence, including sexual violence, but service-providers sometimes felt constrained or directed by the agency's refugee mandate. These services should be available to all vulnerable migrants and, indeed, to other vulnerable people in need.

One of the most critical needs of people on the move is safety. Many of the migrants we met or heard about in this study were made most vulnerable because they had nowhere to stay and no one to trust. This is stressful and exhausting and makes them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. In some countries, safe houses and shelters can save lives but there are simply not enough of them.

The overwhelming need for protection cannot, of course, be met by service-providers, no matter how well-meaning. Efforts to rescue people who have been abducted in Sudan are an example of a good practice that can save lives, but such abuses will continue to flourish as long as people are obliged to put themselves in the hands of smugglers to continue their journeys. Legal frameworks that recognise smuggling and trafficking as crimes – which are not universally in place – are one part of the answer, as is better regional co-ordination, but this must also include provisions that protect and support victims.

People must have access to targeted information to help them make decisions. There is general agreement that information campaigns are not effective in deterring people from taking risky journeys, but our interviews indicated that some people are open to receiving information and advice providing it is perceived to be in their interest. Reliable information that comes from a trusted source can help make people aware of the laws that affect them and the services and protections of which they can avail themselves.



Finally, those who do return home, whether voluntarily or not, should receive assistance and support in the process of reintegration. Currently, reintegration is offered as a 'carrot' to those who decide to return voluntarily. For those who resist return, there is only a stick. Yet these people have often been subjected to violence, abuse and privation and have depleted their financial and social resources. Home societies, often already beset by problems of poverty, governance and social exclusion, are more likely to flourish if these people are given support.

## VIII Conclusion

Mixed migration poses a challenge to all societies. Today Europe is struggling with an increased scale of movement; it would do well to learn from other countries and regions where this has long been the norm, rather than the exception. It is vital that in doing so, however, Europe takes the best examples and eschews the worst. It is increasingly vital that states work together to reinforce protection, reduce discrimination and provide meaningful assistance to the most vulnerable people, irrespective of their legal status.

This study showed that xenophobia and racism were among the greatest and most pervasive risks to individuals and communities. Over the past year, language used to describe migrants arriving in Europe has tended to the pejorative, and often summons up images of an invading force. The reality is that the vast majority of people on the move today pose no threat to the countries and societies that host them. Whilst a handful of incidents of a disturbing and frightening nature have taken place, these have arguably received a disproportionate amount of attention by Europe's media. Behind these headlines are hundreds of thousands of people already making a positive and meaningful contribution to the communities that have welcomed them. Xenophobia, racism and discrimination must be confronted wherever they are found.

In seeking to find safety or improve their lives, people are subjected to such extreme trauma and risk that the impact of these journeys constitutes a humanitarian crisis in its own right. Without prejudice to the right of states to manage and control their borders, more humanity and compassion must be shown to vulnerable people in transit. People fleeing conflict and persecution must be given the opportunity to seek and enjoy asylum, both reactively through access to legal processes on arrival, and proactively through the offer of safe, legal routes to countries where they can integrate and start a new life. But the risks and privations of the journey itself must be taken into account when dealing with all migrants. Humanity dictates that even those who have no legal claim to residence or nationality be treated with respect, dignity and compassion.

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Most importantly, we thank the migrants who shared their time and stories with us, even when these stories were difficult to recount. In sharing their testimony, we hope to help reduce the risks that others will face.

## The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and its work with migrants

The British Red Cross is one of 190 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. These National Societies, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) work individually and collectively to address the humanitarian concerns of migrants in need throughout their journeys. Together the National Societies, IFRC and ICRC strive to provide assistance and protection for migrants, uphold their rights and dignity and empower them in their search for opportunities and sustainable solutions, as well as promote social inclusion and interaction between migrants and host communities.

Working with and for vulnerable migrants is a long-standing role of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This work is rooted in the Movement's Fundamental Principles and universal character as well as in its volunteer and community bases. With its presence in 190 countries, the Movement is well-placed to help prevent migrants from falling into destitution, isolation and danger in the course of their journeys.

Through key programmes such as Restoring Family Links, the Movement helps reunite people with their families when they have become separated, and also helps inform families when deaths occur. National Societies such as the Libyan Red Crescent and the Italian Red Cross have played a crucial, but heart-breaking role, in collecting the bodies of those who have died at sea and providing dignity at the end of life.

The Movement neither encourages nor discourages people to move but aims, in the name of humanity, to provide neutral, independent, impartial assistance to those who need it most.

### **British Red Cross**

44 Moorfields  
London  
EC2Y 9AL

Tel 0344 871 1111  
Fax 020 7562 2000

[redcross.org.uk](http://redcross.org.uk)

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