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## Middle East & Africa

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Africa's do-or-die boat people

# West Africans are dying trying to reach the Canary Islands

Some mistakenly believe that deaths from covid-19 have created job openings in Europe



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MBOUR

IN THE DEAD of night Abdou Aziz Thiaw and Malick Niang, two brothers, recently squeezed into a battered wooden boat in Mbour, a fishing town in Senegal. Along

with some 50 others they hoped to evade police patrol boats and survive the voyage of 1,500km to the Spanish Canary Islands—and, once there, to go on to Europe. Weeks later their mother, Amimarr, got a call. Abdou Aziz had made it. But—her voice falters—Malick died at sea. “No mother in the world wants to see her sons go through that ordeal,” she whispers. “But we must not stop them. There is no alternative.”

This year at least 529 migrants are known to have died trying to reach the Canary Islands from Africa. Almost 400 more, in nine missing boats, are presumed dead. The true total is probably higher still. Migrants are casting off in boats along the whole coast, from Morocco to Guinea (see map). The risk of dying on the Canarian route may be six times higher than making the shorter trip to Europe across the Mediterranean. Despite such danger, more than 18,000 migrants have arrived in the Canary Islands this year, ten times more than in the comparable period last year. About 9,000 have arrived in the past 30 days.

Some are fleeing terror. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reckons that up to mid-October almost 30% of those crossing were from Mali, a country beset by jihadist violence. In the comparable period last year Malians were only a tenth of the total. People from Guinea and Ivory Coast, both hit recently by election-related violence, account for another 14% of arrivals, says the UNHCR. But since mid-October arrivals from Senegal and Morocco have shot up, too.



Most Senegalese migrants leave in the hope of finding a job and sending money back home. “Barça ou barzakh,” they tell each other: “Barcelona or death.” Many are fishermen, like Amimarr’s boys. Moussa Sall, a fisherman in Mbour, says that five years ago he could fill two big boxes with the fish he caught in a day. “Today it’s not even certain I will get half a box,” he says.

At least half of west Africa’s main fisheries are overexploited and illegal fishing is widespread. Yet Senegal’s government has renewed a fishing agreement with the EU, which lets 45 powerful European vessels fish for tuna and hake in Senegalese waters. The EU wants Senegal’s fish but not its migrants, says Greenpeace, an environmental NGO.

Covid-19, too, has made things worse for fishermen, many of whom were restricted to working only three days a week. The virus has generally clobbered west African economies, so other jobs are scarcer, too. And some migrants erroneously think that deaths from covid-19 in Europe will have opened new employment opportunities there. Border closures in north Africa and tougher European anti-migration measures along the coast have made the Mediterranean route harder.

In the Canary Islands thousands of migrants have been sleeping on the wharf in the town of Arguineguín. The authorities have put more than 5,000 migrants into hotels and is building a tent city for 6,450 people. The Spanish government has largely refused to have them transferred to the mainland for processing. Some Canarians fear that their islands may be turned into an open-air prison.

To stop the influx, the Spanish government says it is planning to more than double the number of boats and aircraft patrolling the west African coast—and to bump up the rate of repatriation flights, which were halted because of the virus. This month one once again left the Canary Islands for Mauritania. In recent years almost all such flights from the islands were to the country, even though few of the migrants were from it. This is because Spain has an agreement that allows it to send to Mauritania nationals of any country if they are “presumed”—a flexible term—to have passed through it.

### **On a road to nowhere**

Most of the migrants flown to Mauritania are then promptly bused to the border of

Senegal or Mali and dumped there. This may break international law. The UNHCR has urged countries not to send refugees from many parts of Mali back because it is unsafe. In some cases, says Laura Lungarotti of the International Organisation for

Migration, migrants who wanted to request asylum in Spain have been deported without being given a chance to do so.

Senegal, by contrast, has received no repatriation flights from the Canaries since 2018, according to Frontex, the EU's border agency. The migration issue is politically sensitive. The government in Dakar, Senegal's capital, is nervous about the prospect of boat people being forcibly returned. Protests are mounting in Senegal against the government's perceived silence about the hundreds who have drowned. Yet European governments are frustrated because only 8% of Senegalese migrants who have been ordered to leave Europe have actually been returned to Senegal. Spanish ministers have recently visited Senegal and Morocco to persuade the governments of those countries to let repatriation flights resume—and to try harder to stop the migrants from setting off in the first place.

That will be hard. Many migrants are still prepared to risk death for a better life in Europe. "I want to leave to earn a living to look after my mama—to show her the love I have for her," says Beytir, a 31-year-old fisherman in Mbour who has tried the journey twice—and is thinking of trying again. <sup>7</sup>

*This article appeared in the Middle East & Africa section of the print edition under the headline "Africa's do-or-die boat people"*

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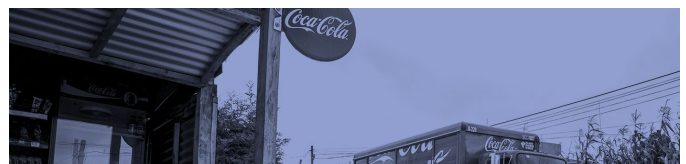
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