

# Migrant deaths and disappearances worldwide: 2016 analysis

## Summary of key statistics of migrant deaths in 2016:

- 27 per cent increase in recorded migrant deaths worldwide compared to 2015
- More than 5,000 migrant deaths recorded in the Mediterranean in 2016 – a 35 per cent increase compared to 2015
  - 60 per cent increase in migrant deaths recorded in the Central Mediterranean compared to 2015
  - 46 per cent decrease in migrant deaths recorded in the Eastern Mediterranean compared to 2015
- 83 per cent increase in recorded migrant deaths in Africa compared to 2015
- 43 per cent increase in recorded migrant deaths in the Americas compared with 2015

In 2016, migrant deaths were discussed in many fora, including the United Nations' Summit for Refugees and Migrants on 19 September. The International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Missing Migrants Project documented the deaths of 7,763 people during migration to international destinations in 2016. This figure represents a worldwide increase of 27 per cent from the 6,107 migrant deaths recorded in 2015 and a 47 per cent increase over the 5,267 deaths recorded in 2014. The increase in recorded deaths is consistent across almost all regions of the world, and most pronounced in the Mediterranean Sea, in which more than 5,000 migrants died or were lost in 2016. While the proportion of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean has increased significantly compared to the global total over the past three years, this may be indicative of the increased media attention to irregular migration across the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> Data collection challenges present in many regions of the world, discussed below, mean that

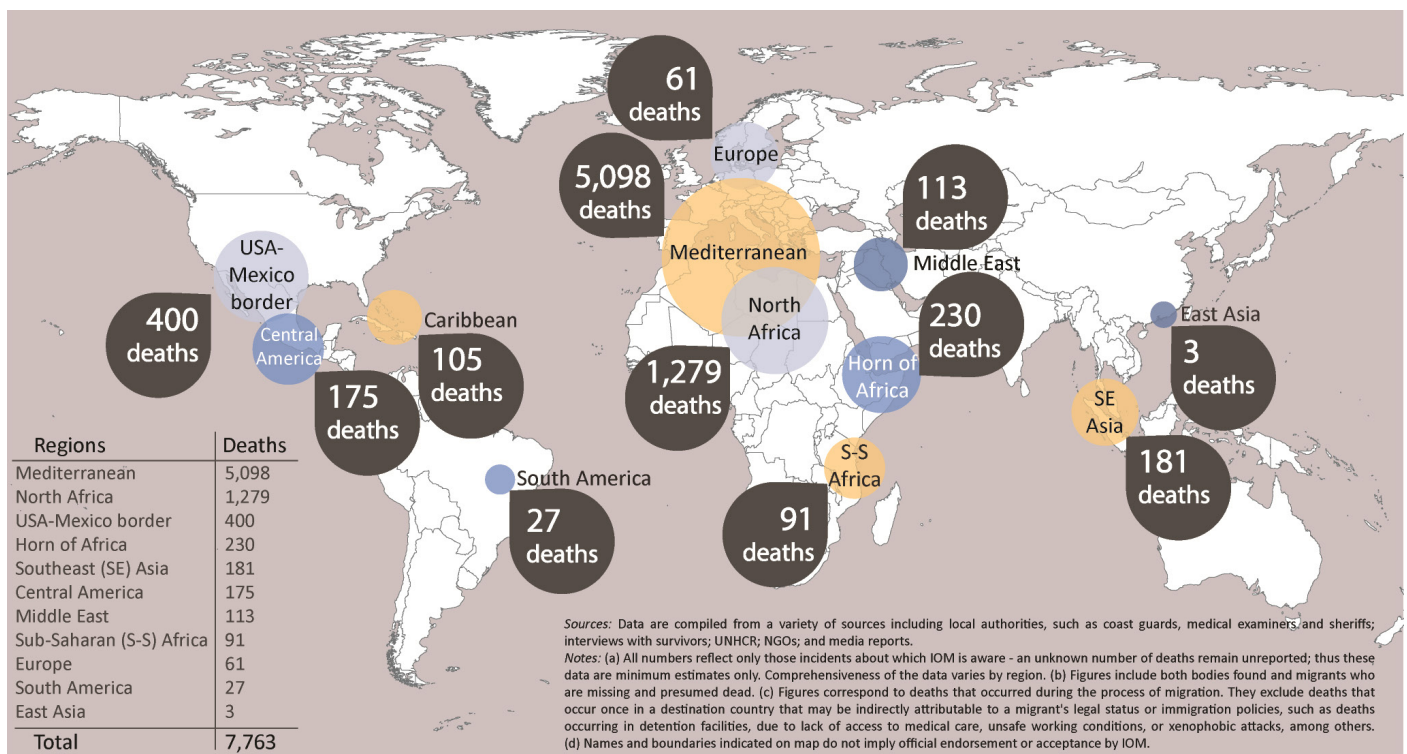
figures on migrant deaths represent minimum estimates, which nonetheless reflect the scale and trends of those who die during their journey for a better life.

This data briefing, produced by IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre, examines the available data on migrant deaths in 2016. Key figures for regions in which migrant deaths have been recorded – namely, the Mediterranean, Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and South-East Asia – are explored, and the challenges of data collection on migrant deaths in each region are discussed.

More in-depth and regional analysis of migrant deaths, identification challenges, data collection methodology and programmes to assist the families left behind, is included in IOM's annual *Fatal Journeys* reports. The next report will be published in August 2017.

1 IOM, *Fatal Journeys Volume 2: Identification and Tracing of Dead and Missing Migrants* (IOM, Geneva, 2016), p. 25. Available from [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/fataljourneys\\_vol2.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/fataljourneys_vol2.pdf)

Map 1: Migrant deaths worldwide in 2016



Source: Missing Migrants Project, 2017.

## THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

Since 2014, the number of migrant deaths and disappearances in the Mediterranean region comprised the largest proportion of global missing migrants. The 5,098 deaths recorded in 2016 are a 35 per cent increase from the 3,784 recorded in 2015 and a 55 per cent increase from the 3,283 recorded in 2014. This increase in deaths in 2016 comes despite increased search-and-rescue operations since mid-2015.<sup>2,3</sup> Similarly, migrant deaths in the Mediterranean made up more than two thirds of deaths recorded worldwide in 2016, compared to 62 per cent in both 2014 and 2015. While 88 per cent of migrants who died in the Mediterranean in 2016 drowned, 148 people died due to poor conditions on the boats they were travelling, including fuel inhalation, fires on board, hunger, dehydration and hypothermia.

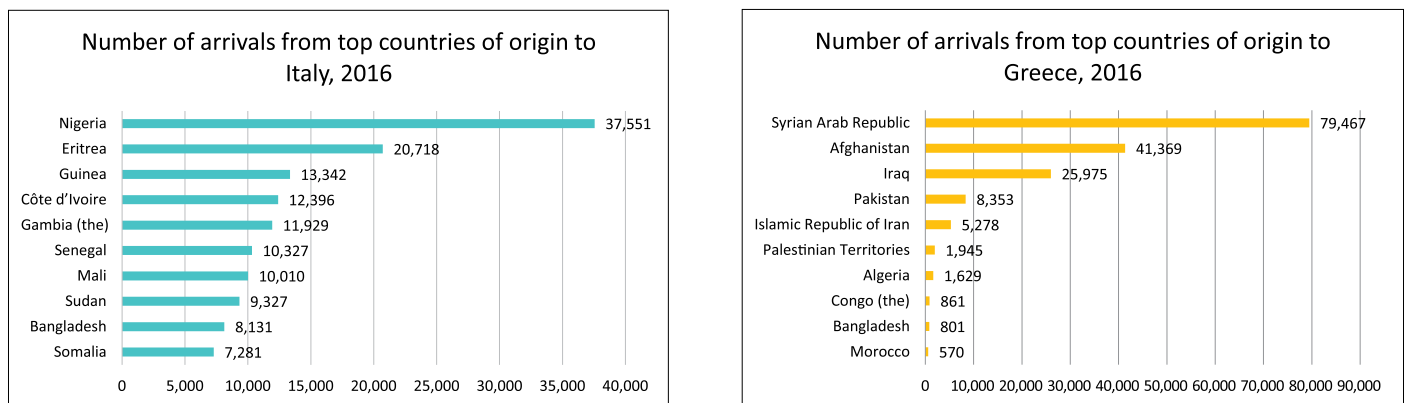
Although search-and-rescue operations conducted by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) closely monitor boats of migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea, the large proportion of people lost at sea mean that data on migrant deaths represent a minimum estimate rather than a precise figure. In 2016, for example, just under two thirds (66%) of the migrants who died in the Mediterranean were recorded as “missing and presumed dead”, which means that their bodies have not been recovered. As such, the identities of those lost at sea are most often unknown, and information such as their country of origin or age can only be estimated based on information from survivors. For example, under 2 per cent of the deaths in the Central Mediterranean in 2016 were recorded as minors;<sup>4</sup> however, as 15 per cent of arrivals in Italy in 2016 were children,<sup>5</sup> it is likely that there were many more among those recorded dead.

2 Migrant Report, Maritime Asset Infographic (2015). Available from <http://migrantreport.org/wp-content/uploads/infographics.jpg>

3 Search-and-rescue operations conducted in the Mediterranean include the Italian Coast Guard and Navy, the Libyan Coast Guard, EUNAVFORMED Operation Sophia, Frontex Operation Triton, as well as civil society and commercial vessels.

4 Minors are defined as under the age of 18, as stipulated in Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

5 Italian Ministry of the Interior, 2017.

**Figure 1: Top 10 countries and territories of origin – Arrivals in Italy and Greece, 2016**

Source: Italian Ministry of the Interior; Hellenic Police, 2017.

The figure for migrant deaths in the Mediterranean is also a minimum estimate, as it is thought that many shipwrecks may go unreported. In 2016, nearly 250 migrant bodies not linked to any known shipwreck were recovered on the shores of Libya. For instance, 120 bodies were washed up by the sea near Sabratha in the month of July, although there was no shipwreck that had been recorded in that area since May.

### Central Mediterranean

The increased number of migrant deaths in 2016 is in large part due to numerous large shipwrecks in the Central Mediterranean, despite a 52 per cent increase in search-and-rescue operations in 2016 compared to 2015.<sup>6</sup> These large shipwrecks are linked to increasingly less-seaworthy vessels being used on this route in 2016.<sup>7</sup> The average number of deaths per incident in the Mediterranean almost doubled, from an average of 12 deaths per incident in 2015 to 33 deaths per incident in 2016. This is related to the fact that the largest proportion of migrant deaths occurred in the Central Mediterranean, where migrants travel in larger vessels than in the Eastern and Western Mediterranean.

In 2016, the Central Mediterranean also saw a significant increase in not only the number of migrant

deaths but also the rate of death<sup>8</sup> and the number of incidents involving death in 2016. In 2016, 4,581 migrant deaths were recorded by IOM's Missing Migrants Project between Northern Africa and Italy, which is a 60 per cent increase from the 2,876 recorded in 2015 and a 45 per cent increase from the 3,092 deaths recorded in 2014. The proportion of migrants who died on the Central Mediterranean route also increased significantly, as 1 in 40 migrants who attempted the crossing died in 2016, compared to 1 in 55 in 2015.

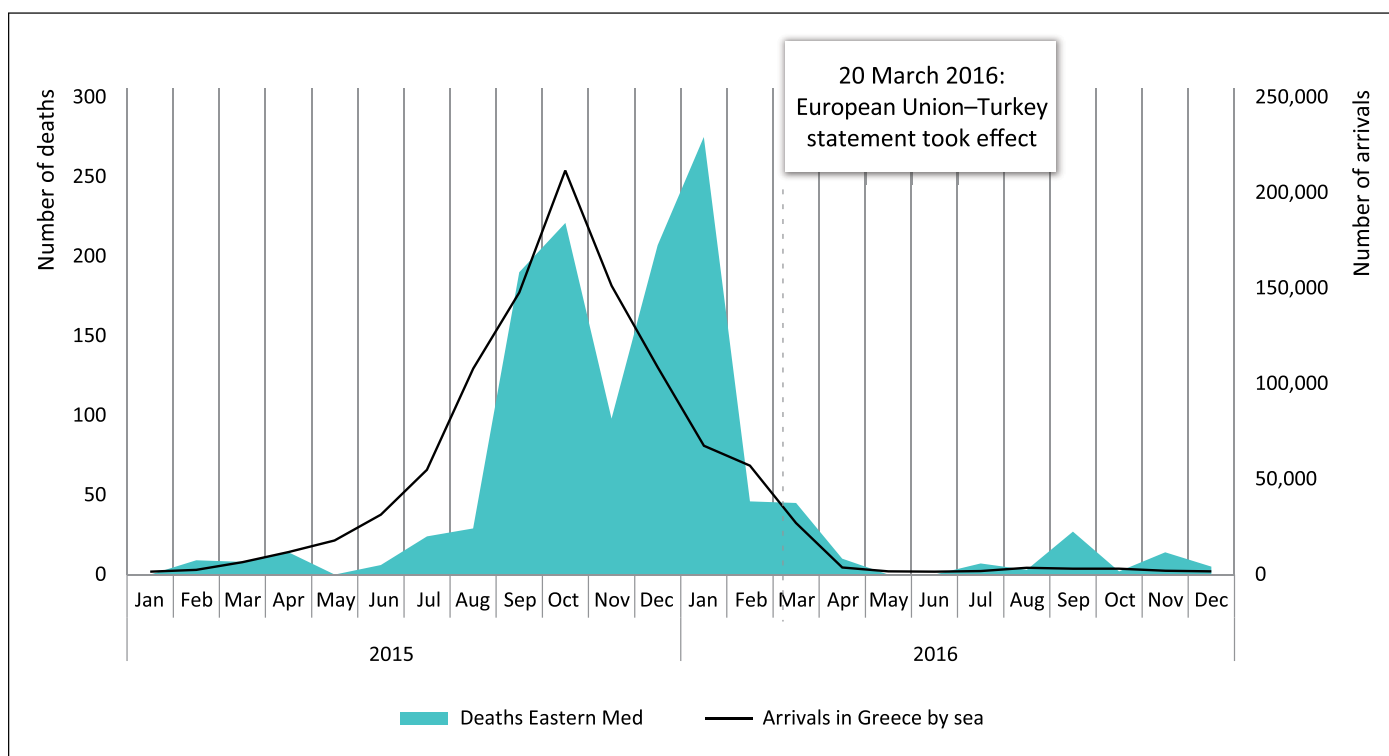
In 2016, there were many more small incidents involving migrant deaths in the Central Mediterranean than in the past two years, in addition to the large shipwrecks characteristic of this route. In 2016, 140 incidents were recorded, more than twice the number recorded in 2015 and 2014. In 2016, 43 per cent of the recorded deaths were from incidents in which fewer than 100 people died, compared to only 31 per cent of migrant deaths recorded in 2015 and 2014. In 2016, 10 large shipwrecks were recorded in the Central Mediterranean route, totalling 2,613 dead and missing, compared with 6 large shipwrecks totalling 1,986 in 2015, and 11 shipwrecks totalling 2,262 in 2014.

Although the Central Mediterranean has been the deadliest route across the Mediterranean since at least 2014 – due in large part to the length of the overseas

<sup>6</sup> Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre Roma, "Attività Sar nel Mediterraneo Centrale connesse al Fenomeno Migratorio", February 2017.

<sup>7</sup> IOM Italy, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> *Rate of death* refers to the proportion of those known to have attempted the migration route who died. It is calculated by dividing the number of missing and dead by the sum of arrivals and the number of missing and dead.

**Figure 2: Arrivals and deaths in the Eastern Mediterranean, 2015 and 2016**

Source: Hellenic Police; Missing Migrants Project, 2017.

journey – the increase in the number of deaths in 2016 is likely to be linked to increasingly dangerous smuggling strategies. IOM’s Coordination Office for the Mediterranean in Rome reports that instances in which multiple boats are launched from North African coasts have increased in 2016, making search-and-rescue operations more difficult. In 2016, migrants embarked on trips from North Africa across the Mediterranean more frequently in winter months, as indicated by the 49,393 arrivals to Italy in October–December 2016, compared to only 21,772 in the same period in 2015, and 31,304 in 2014.<sup>9</sup> Although the rough conditions at sea in the winter may deter some migrants from making the crossing, recent IOM interviews indicate instances in which smugglers in Libya force migrants on board with threats or acts of violence.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Italian Ministry of the Interior.

<sup>10</sup> IOM, “Mediterranean migrant arrivals reach 2,876; Deaths at sea: 219”, Press release, 17 January 2017. Available from [www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-reach-2876-deaths-sea-219](http://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-reach-2876-deaths-sea-219)

## Eastern Mediterranean

In 2016, 434 migrant deaths were recorded on the Eastern Mediterranean route, a decrease of 46 per cent compared to the 806 recorded in 2015. This is likely linked to the 79 per cent decrease in Mediterranean arrivals to Greece from Turkey from 2016 to 2015. Arrivals fell rapidly following the implementation of the European Union–Turkey announcement in late March 2016,<sup>11</sup> as did the number of migrant deaths on water; indeed, 83 per cent of migrant deaths recorded on this route in 2016 took place before the agreement was implemented.

Since 2014, there has been a decrease in the number of deaths per incident between Turkey and Greece. In 2016 and 2015, there was an average of less than 8 deaths per incident, while in 2014, there was an average of 12 deaths per incident. This shift, as well

<sup>11</sup> European Council, “Statement of the EU Heads of State or Government, 07/03/2016”, Press release, 3 August 2016. Available from [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/07-eu-turkey-meeting-statement/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/07-eu-turkey-meeting-statement/)

as the increasing rate of death, may reflect a change in the boats used on this route. Smaller and less stable boats may have become more popular for making the crossing, as they are able to better avoid detection by authorities.

Furthermore, the migrant rate of death on the Eastern Mediterranean was higher in 2016 than in previous years. In 2015, 1 in 1,060 migrants who attempted crossing the Eastern Mediterranean died, while in 2016, 1 in 400 migrants who attempted the crossing died.

### Western Mediterranean

In 2016, 83 migrant deaths and disappearances were recorded on the Western Mediterranean route, which encompasses migrants' journeys across the Strait of Gibraltar, as well as over the land border between Morocco and the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta. Migrant deaths on the Western Mediterranean includes both deaths at sea and the deaths of migrants on land as they enter these enclaves. The figure recorded in 2016 is a 19 per cent decrease from 2015, when at least 102 deaths were recorded along this route, but a 41 per cent increase from 2014, when 59 were recorded. The number of arrivals to Spain across the Strait of Gibraltar increased by 57 per cent, from 3,845 in 2015 to 6,046 in 2016.

Access to information on migrant deaths along this route is often both difficult to obtain and verify. The Western Mediterranean route often receives less global attention in the media due to the low number of arrivals compared to the Central or Eastern routes, which means that migrant deaths may be less well-publicized. Similarly, migrants often try to cross land borders into the Spanish enclaves individually, while migrants who try to cross the Strait of Gibraltar often do so with small rubber boats and only a few passengers to avoid detection. Although the lack of media coverage and conflicting official and NGO reports pose significant data challenges,<sup>12</sup> IOM's Missing Migrants Project has recorded more incidents of migrant deaths on this route each year it has operated, from 6 incidents recorded in 2014, to 18 incidents in 2015 and 23 in 2016.

12 For instance, *Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de Andalucía* and *Salvamento Marítimo* report different numbers of dead and missing at the Spanish border.

## EUROPE

Migrants travelling on land within Europe die in smaller numbers, and less attention is given to the dozens of deaths in Europe each year than to the thousands in the Mediterranean. An exception to this pattern of deaths, incidents and media coverage was in August of 2015, when the bodies of 71 migrants from the Syrian Arab Republic, Iraq and Afghanistan were found in a truck abandoned on a motorway in Austria.<sup>13</sup> The death by suffocation of these 71 migrants marked the largest incident of migrant deaths in Europe since at least 2000,<sup>14</sup> and makes up much of the discrepancy in the number of deaths between 2015 and 2016. Excluding this incident, 60 deaths were recorded in 46 incidents in 2015, compared to 57 deaths in 45 incidents in 2016. These numbers are much higher than the 16 migrant deaths recorded in Europe in 2014. In 2014, almost all recorded migrant deaths occurred in Calais, France. In 2015 and 2016, 27 migrant deaths were recorded along the Western Balkans route, where none were recorded in 2014.

### Calais

Calais, France was the site of informal camps of thousands of migrants and refugees from Sudan, Eritrea, Afghanistan and the Syrian Arab Republic. The camps were closed by the Government of France in late October 2016.<sup>15</sup>

People hoped to reach the United Kingdom via the Eurotunnel, and there were frequent attempts to board trains and trucks on busy thoroughfares. These hazardous conditions led to at least 34 deaths in the past three years.

The Calais camps – often called “the Jungle” – were closed shortly after the number of people living in the area rose to at least 6,000 migrants in mid-October.<sup>16</sup>

13 Al Jazeera, “Arrests made after 71 dead refugees found in Austria”, 29 August 2015. Available from [www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/austria-raises-refugee-truck-death-toll-70-150828062928406.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/austria-raises-refugee-truck-death-toll-70-150828062928406.html)

14 Missing Migrants Project, The Migrant Files.

15 M. Lima and A. Nossiter, “‘We are ready to leave’: France clears out Calais ‘Jungle’”, *The New York Times*, 24 October 2016. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2016/10/25/world/europe/we-are-ready-to-leave-france-clears-out-the-jungle.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/25/world/europe/we-are-ready-to-leave-france-clears-out-the-jungle.html)

16 IOM United Kingdom, “On the migrant trail in Calais”, 21 October 2015. Available from <http://unitedkingdom.iom.int/migrant-trail-calais>

**Figure 3: Arrivals in Western Balkan countries, 2015 and 2016**

| Country                                   | 2015             | 2016           | Change        |
|---|------------------|----------------|---------------|
| Croatia                                   | 556,830          | 102,275        | -81.6%        |
| Hungary                                   | 411,515          | 19,221         | -95.3%        |
| Serbia                                    | 579,518          | 98,975         | -82.9%        |
| Slovenia                                  | 378,604          | 99,187         | -73.8%        |
| The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia | 388,233          | 89,771         | -76.9%        |
| <b>Total</b>                              | <b>2,314,700</b> | <b>409,429</b> | <b>-82.3%</b> |

Source: IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix.

Thirteen deaths were recorded near Calais in 2016. Two deaths in 2016 were the result of stabbings, after large fights broke out in the Jungle in July and August. One death was recorded on the day of the camp's closure on 26 October. No deaths have been recorded since.

### Western Balkans

In 2015, hundreds of thousands of migrants travelled on the Western Balkan route to destination countries in Central and Western Europe. However, increased border controls across the region in 2016 led to a sharp decrease in the number of arrivals. For example, the number of arrivals in Hungary decreased by 95 per cent after border regulations were implemented in July 2016 (see figure 3). The number of stranded migrants along this route has increased correspondingly, with the number in Serbia rising from 539 in June to more than 5,600 in December 2016.<sup>17</sup>

The number of migrant deaths recorded along the Western Balkans route was the same in 2016 as in 2015. In both years, 27 deaths were recorded; however, the significant difference in the causes of death indicates that conditions for migrants travelling along this route have worsened. Many migrants travelling on the Western Balkans route walk along train tracks or roads in order to avoid more difficult terrain, and in 2015, 74 per cent of deaths recorded were due to vehicle or train accidents.<sup>18</sup> More than 85 per cent of migrant deaths recorded on the Western Balkans route in 2016 were due to violence

or harsh conditions on the journey, including five deaths due to hypothermia, ten drownings and four murders. This new trend indicates that migrants may be travelling on more dangerous routes through the region as border controls tighten.

### NORTH AFRICA

At least 1,280 migrant deaths were recorded in North Africa in 2016, nearly double the 672 deaths recorded in the region in 2015. As the evidence base available on migration in North Africa relies largely on surveys and testimonies of migrants, this increase may be indicative of improved data collection efforts in the region. However, some believe as many migrants die in North Africa as in the Mediterranean,<sup>19</sup> though due to the lack of complete data such claims cannot be confirmed. Those migrants who have travelled to and within North Africa in recent years report many instances of abuse, including torture and murder.<sup>20,21</sup> Though reports on migrant deaths are often unverifiable, they are included as they provide a general idea of the dangers migrants face within this region.

Access to information on migrant deaths in North Africa is difficult due to the nature of irregular migration, as well as environmental and security factors. Collecting

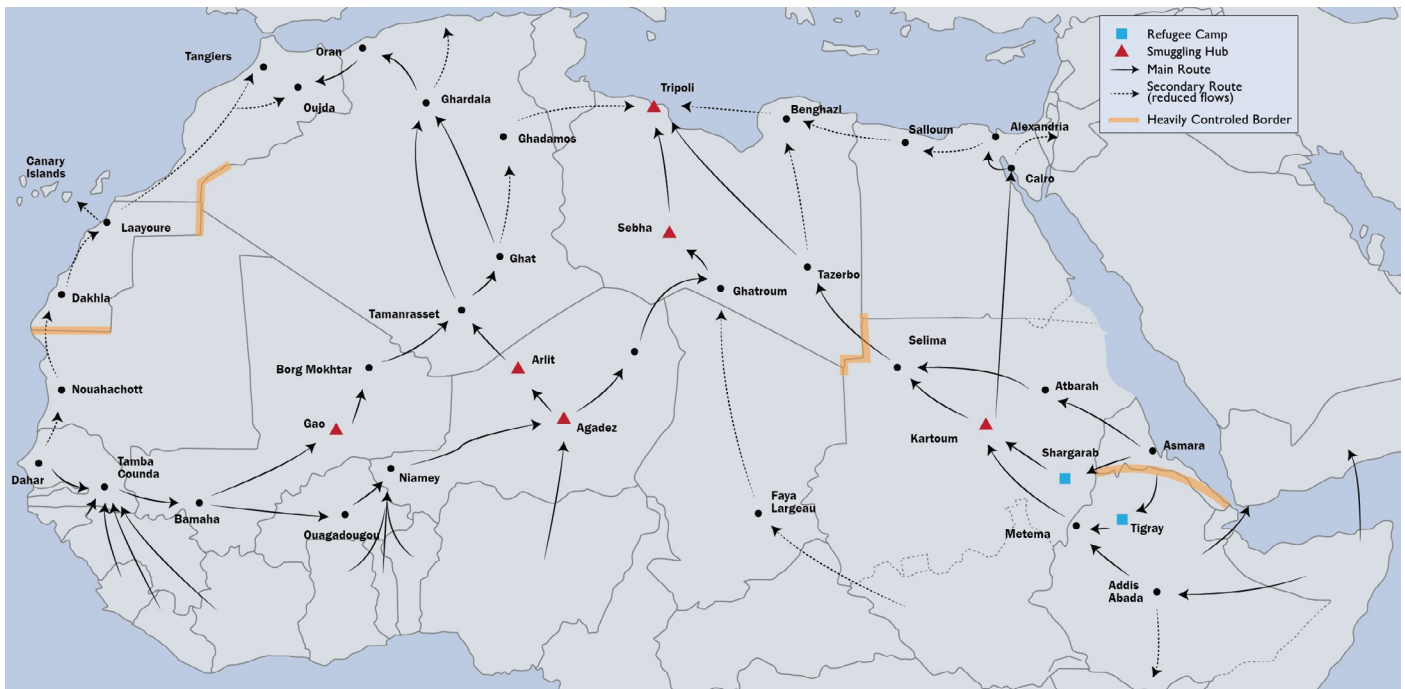
17 IOM, Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond, Flow Monitoring Compilation 2016 – Overview (n.d.). Available from [http://migration.iom.int/docs/2016\\_Flows\\_to\\_Europe\\_Overview.pdf](http://migration.iom.int/docs/2016_Flows_to_Europe_Overview.pdf)

18 In 2016, four deaths due to vehicle and train accidents were recorded on the Western Balkans route.

19 C. Sollitt, "Forgotten fatalities: the number of migrant deaths before reaching the Mediterranean", Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, 27 June 2016. Available from <http://regionalmms.org/index.php/research-publications/feature-articles/item/18-forgotten-fatalities-the-number-of-migrant-deaths-before>

20 US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2016* (US Department of State, Washington D.C., 2016). Available from [www.state.gov/documents/organization/258876.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258876.pdf)

21 A. Malakooti, *Irregular Migration between West Africa, North Africa and the Mediterranean* (Altai Consulting for IOM Nigeria, Abuja, 2015). Available from [www.altaiconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Altai\\_Consulting\\_Free\\_Movement\\_and\\_Migration\\_in\\_West\\_Africa.pdf](http://www.altaiconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Altai_Consulting_Free_Movement_and_Migration_in_West_Africa.pdf)

**Map 2: Mixed migration routes through North Africa**

Source: IOM GMDAC, 2017.

reliable data in the region is difficult due to the enormous variety in countries of origin, demographic groups and routes used.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, as many migrants travel to the region by at least partly irregular means, and are attempting to evade detection, it is likely that most data omit some percentage of migrants. The changing nature of irregular migration in North Africa also means that many researchers may not have access to those travelling on new routes. Similarly, insecurity in North Africa may limit researchers' access to areas in which migrants are most at risk, such as the south of Libya and east of Sudan. The harsh conditions of the Sahara Desert also represents a huge gap in knowledge, as eyewitness reports indicate that many migrants are left behind in this harsh environment in various states of distress, which means that many deaths go uncounted.

Though historically the majority of migration in North Africa has been intraregional, since the late 2000s,

22 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) estimates of refugee and asylum seeker movements and IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix operations are two of the more consistent reporters of migration numbers in North Africa.

an increased number of sub-Saharan migrants have migrated to and through North Africa. Though migrant populations in North Africa are difficult to quantify, interviews with migrants who spent time in the region indicate that most travel through Libya, with a smaller flow heading through Egypt. Of those migrants who travel onwards to Italy, about 88 per cent are estimated to travel via Libya, while 9 per cent pass through Egypt.<sup>23</sup>

Migrants in North Africa face significant safety risks, as their destination or transit route often crosses the Sahara Desert and involves the help of smugglers.<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to quantify the risks taken along these routes to and within North Africa, but the available data<sup>25</sup>

23 UNHCR Egypt, Detention and Mixed Migration from the North Coast of Egypt, 31 August 2016.

24 Malakooti, 2015; Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, *Going West: contemporary mixed migration trends from the Horn of Africa to Libya and Europe*, (Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, Nairobi, 2014). Available from [www.regionalmms.org/images/ResearchInitiatives/Going\\_West\\_migration\\_trends\\_Libya\\_Europe\\_final.pdf](http://www.regionalmms.org/images/ResearchInitiatives/Going_West_migration_trends_Libya_Europe_final.pdf)

25 Data is largely based on the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat's Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (<http://4mi.regionalmms.org/4mi.html>), which has conducted nearly 3,000 interviews with migrants since its inception in 2014. 4.5 per cent of incidents are from verified sources.

indicate that violence and harsh conditions are the main reasons for migrant deaths on overland routes through North Africa. In 2016, 51 per cent of deaths recorded on this route were reported as being due to sickness, dehydration, starvation or exposure, and another 24 per cent were recorded due to migrants being physically or sexually abused, shot or stabbed.

### Western Africa

For a short period in the mid-2000s, the route between North-Western Africa and the Spanish Canary Islands was the most frequented irregular entry point to Europe. Migrants on this route, mostly Moroccans and West African nationals, travelled overland from Senegal to Nouakchott, Mauritania and then up the coast to Laayoune before boarding boats to the Canary Islands. Though 2006 saw a record 32,000 migrants travelling on this route, the number has decreased since 2007, when new policies aimed at decreasing flows on this route were implemented. Though less than 1,000 migrants per year have travelled on the Western Africa route since 2010,<sup>26</sup> the journey to the Canary Islands continues to be quite dangerous, as migrants frequently use small boats to make the multi-day journey across the open ocean.<sup>27</sup> In 2016, 169 migrant deaths and disappearances on this route were recorded, nearly double the 84 recorded in 2015.

### Horn of Africa to Yemen

Migration flows from the Horn of Africa take several directions: (a) eastward, towards Saudi Arabia via Yemen; (b) southward, towards South Africa via Kenya; (c) northward, towards Israel via Egypt's Sinai Peninsula; or (d) westward, towards Libya and Egypt via Sudan. The number of migrant arrivals recorded on the eastern route, which crosses the Gulf of Aden from Somalia or the Red Sea from Djibouti, decreased after severe penalties for irregular migrants residing in Saudi Arabia were implemented in November 2013.<sup>28</sup> October through December 2013 saw the lowest number of irregular arrivals to Yemen in four years, although numbers rebounded in 2016.

26 Frontex, "Western African Route" (n.d.). Available from <http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/western-african-route/>

27 Ibid.

28 Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, 2014.

Despite the ongoing conflict in Yemen, an estimated 111,504 arrivals were recorded by November 2016,<sup>29</sup> a 21 per cent increase over the 92,466 arrivals in 2015. Migrant deaths in the oversea crossing to Yemen have similarly increased by 27 per cent on this route, with 104 recorded in 2016, compared to 82 in 2015.

### MIDDLE EAST

IOM's Missing Migrants Project recorded the death of 113 migrants in 2016, more than three times the 32 deaths recorded in 2015. This increase is partially linked to better information; in 2016, NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, reported on more than 40 incidents involving migrant deaths. These reports, which comprise more than 70 per cent of IOM's recorded number of migrant deaths in the Middle East in 2016, were of Syrians shot near the Turkish border in the first half of the year.<sup>30,31</sup> Deaths on the border to and within Turkey made up 82 per cent of migrant deaths in the Middle East in 2016, with another 14 deaths recorded in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 4 in Lebanon and 1 in Saudi Arabia. Of the deceased migrants, 85 per cent were Syrian nationals, while 14 per cent were from Afghanistan. More than 51 per cent of migrant deaths in the Middle East were due to violence, while another 23 per cent occurred in vehicle accidents, and 6 per cent died due to hypothermia.

However, these statistics are likely to be incomplete due to the often-irregular nature of migration in this region. For example, Human Rights Watch reports that because of Turkey's closure of its border to the Syrian Arab Republic in March 2015, many Syrians use smugglers to enter Turkey. These smugglers often take migrants through dangerous mountain terrain at night in order to avoid detection,<sup>32</sup> which means that further migrant deaths may go unreported.

29 See B. Frouws, "Desperate determination: A record number of migrants arrive in Yemen in 2016", Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, 15 December 2016. Available from <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/desperate-determination-record-number-migrants-arrive-yemen-2016>

30 Human Rights Watch, "Turkey: Border guards kill and injure asylum seekers", 10 May 2016. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/10/turkey-border-guards-kill-and-injure-asylum-seekers](http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/10/turkey-border-guards-kill-and-injure-asylum-seekers)

31 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

32 Human Rights Watch, "Turkey: Syrians pushed back at the border", 23 November 2015. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/23/turkey-syrians-pushed-back-border](http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/23/turkey-syrians-pushed-back-border)



## THE AMERICAS

Many migrants from Latin America, encompassing the Caribbean and Central and South America, migrate north in order to pursue *el sueño americano* – the American dream of life free from poverty and violence. However, the often-irregular nature of the routes travelled by these migrants can be deadly, with at least 707 deaths recorded in 2016, an increase of 43 per cent over the 493 recorded in Latin America in 2015.

### South America

IOM's Missing Migrants Project recorded 27 deaths in 2016 in South America, compared to only 2 deaths recorded in 2015. Of these deaths, 89 per cent occurred in Colombia, most of which occurred on the Colombia–Panama border in the Darién Gap and the Urabá Gulf.

Colombia is considered a transit country for migrants of many different nationalities who intend to reach the United States via Central America. While the majority of irregular migrants transiting in Colombia come from Cuba, migrants originating from China, Nepal, Bangladesh, India and Lebanon are also common.<sup>33</sup> In 2016, the largest proportion of migrants recorded by IOM's Missing Migrants Project in Colombia was comprised by 11 Cubans, followed by the deaths of at least 2 Haitian migrants.

In Colombia, 2 deaths on the Ecuadorian border were recorded, while another 22 were recorded near the border with Panama. Migrants travelling via the Colombian–Ecuadorian border face risks, as many walk through illegal passages near the Rumichaca International Bridge in order to avoid detection.<sup>34</sup> Migrants on the route through Panama usually travel in small boats from the northern coast of Colombia, through the Gulf of Urabá and land near the border with Panama. In 2016, 18 deaths were recorded in or near the Gulf, where both drownings and violent robberies comprised the main causes of death. The migrant route from there is onwards by foot through the dangerous Darién Gap, a region of swampland and forest spanning

100–160 km (60–100 miles).<sup>35</sup> Four deaths were recorded in the Darién area in 2016, but the true number of deaths is likely to be much higher. The Darién Gap is notoriously inaccessible, and illegal armed groups are present in the area.<sup>36</sup> Migrants who have travelled through the gap have reported the presence of heavily decomposed bodies.<sup>37</sup>

### Migration to Chile

For the first time since 2014, the Missing Migrants Project recorded three deaths on Chilean borders with Peru and the Plurinational State of Bolivia. According to the Department of Migration of the Government of Chile, since 2013, the imposition of tourism visa restrictions on citizens of the Dominican Republic has pressed migrants from this country to enter Chile using clandestine paths and human trafficking networks.\* The available data indicate that migrants travelling to Chile face both environmental and man-made threats: on the Chilean–Bolivian border, two Dominican women died of hypothermia due to extreme desert temperatures, while on the Chilean–Peruvian border, a Peruvian migrant died after stepping on a land mine.

\* C. Galaz, G. Rubilar and C. Silva, *Migración Dominicana en Chile*, Boletín Informativo N°2 (Departamento de Extranjería y Migración, 2016). Available from [www.extranjeria.gob.cl/media/2016/12/Boletín-Nº2-Migración-Dominicana-en-Chile-2.pdf](http://www.extranjeria.gob.cl/media/2016/12/Boletín-Nº2-Migración-Dominicana-en-Chile-2.pdf)

### Central America

IOM's Missing Migrants Project recorded 175 migrant deaths in Central America in 2016. This is a 77 per cent increase from the 99 deaths recorded in 2015 and a 51 per cent increase from the 116 recorded in 2014. In general, migrant deaths follow wider migration trends in the region; deaths occur along traditional migration routes north towards the United States and are generally of migrants from Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

33 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Migración Colombia, *Dimensión del delito de tráfico de migrantes en Colombia: realidades institucionales, legales y judiciales* (UNODC, Bogotá, 2012), p. 19. Available from [http://migracioncolombia.gov.co/phocadownload/Investigacion\\_trafico\\_migrantes.pdf](http://migracioncolombia.gov.co/phocadownload/Investigacion_trafico_migrantes.pdf)

34 Ibid.

35 C. McCarthy, "Silent Darien: The gap in the world's longest road", BBC News, 14 August 2014. Available from [www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28756378](http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28756378)

36 UNODC and Migración Colombia, 2012.

37 WBUR, "Stories from the Dangerous Darién Gap", 3 August 2016. Available from [www.wbur.org/onpoint/2016/08/03/darien-gap-migrants-cuba](http://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2016/08/03/darien-gap-migrants-cuba)

Map 3: Mixed migration routes in Central America



Source: IOM, 2017.

Although 61 per cent of migrant decedents recorded in Central America were from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, 2016 saw an increase in other nationalities migrating north. Reports claimed that border towns received hundreds of migrants per day from countries including Somalia, Sudan, Bangladesh and Nepal who aimed to reach the United States.<sup>38,39</sup> By July 2016, 7,882 African and Asian nationals had checked in at Mexican immigration offices, compared with 4,261 in all of 2015 and 1,831 in all of 2014.<sup>40</sup> For 59 of the deaths recorded in Central America in 2016, the country and

region of origin is unknown. Media reported some of these victims to be from African nations; however, a reliance on media reports in Central America makes it difficult to confirm these details.

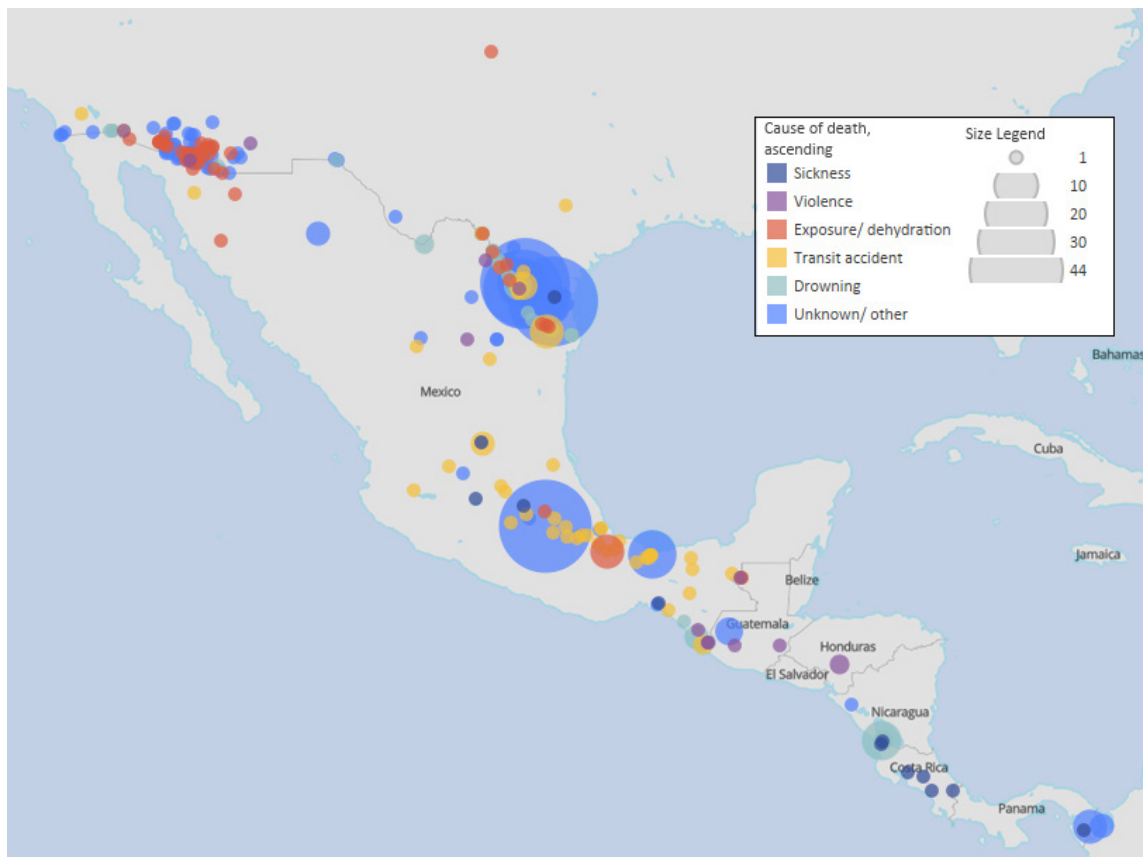
Although the specific cause of death is unknown for the majority of incidents from those for which the data is available, it is evident that migrants face several types of risks as they move through Central America. Of the migrant deaths in this region, 45 per cent are related to the rough conditions on the route, including dehydration and illness. An additional 34 per cent are due to modes of travel, including train accidents and drownings. Although only 9 per cent of deaths are attributed to criminal violence, the number is likely to be higher. Criminal gangs are heavily involved in human smuggling through Mexico to the United States,<sup>41</sup> and

38 T. Hartman and C. Chan, "From Brazil to the north", Reuters (n.d.). Available from <http://fingfx.thomsonreuters.com/gfx/rngs/USA-IMMIGRATION-MEXICO/0100217H30Z/index.html>

39 Associated Press, "Mexico sees surge of migrants from Haiti, Africa and Asia", 24 September 2016. Available from <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/d2504268a260408c82413c36be43d7a8/mexico-says-7800-haitians-crossed-through-country-year>

40 J. Bolter, "The evolving and diversifying nature of migration to the US-Mexico border", Migration Policy Institute, 16 February 2017. Available from [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/evolving-and-diversifying-nature-migration-us-mexico-border](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/evolving-and-diversifying-nature-migration-us-mexico-border)

41 BBC, "Mexico gas blast frees migrants held captive by gang", 9 February 2016. Available from [www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-35531264](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-35531264)

**Map 4:** Main causes of deaths in Central America, 2016

Source: Missing Migrants Project, 2017.

it is often difficult to differentiate murders associated with the negotiation of smuggling from others. The kidnapping and extortion of migrants by gangs in Mexico is estimated to be worth nearly USD 250 million.<sup>42</sup>

Border regions with strict controls and risks of apprehension and deportation for those without visas can be particularly dangerous for migrants, as they then take riskier routes or strategies to avoid being detected. In July 2016, three children (two from Honduras and one from El Salvador) drowned while travelling by boat with their parents across the Guatemala border with Mexico. The number of deportations of nationals from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador from Mexico each year increased from 62,788

in 2010 to 141,990 in 2016.<sup>43,44</sup> At the beginning of August, nine men and one woman drowned in Lake Nicaragua just over the Nicaraguan border with Costa Rica, where the Government of Nicaragua started to increase patrols in November 2015.<sup>45</sup> No deaths were recorded in Central America along open borders, such as those in between El Salvador and Guatemala and between Panama and

43 Instituto Nacional de Migración – Secretaría de Gobernación Subsecretaría de Población, Migración y Asuntos Religiosos Unidad de Política Migratoria (2010). *Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias 2010*. p. 121. Available from [http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/work/models/SEGOB/CEM/PDF/Estadísticas/Boletines\\_Estadísticos/2010/BoletínEst2010.pdf](http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/work/models/SEGOB/CEM/PDF/Estadísticas/Boletines_Estadísticos/2010/BoletínEst2010.pdf)

44 Instituto Nacional de Migration – Secretaría de Gobernación Subsecretaría de Población, Migración y Asuntos Religiosos Unidad de Política Migratoria (2016). *Boletín Mensual de Estadísticas Migratorias 2016* (Mexico, 2017), p. 144. Available from [www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/work/models/SEGOB/CEM/PDF/Estadísticas/Boletines\\_Estadísticos/2016/Boletín\\_2016.pdf](http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/work/models/SEGOB/CEM/PDF/Estadísticas/Boletines_Estadísticos/2016/Boletín_2016.pdf)

45 O. Rivas, “Nicaragua closes border to Cuban migrants, rebukes Costa Rica”, Al Jazeera, 15 November 2015. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/us-nicaragua-cuba-idUSKCN0T502920151116](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-nicaragua-cuba-idUSKCN0T502920151116)

42 G. Stargardter and S. Gardner, “Migrants snared in multi-million dollar kidnap racket on U.S.-Mexico border” Reuters, 12 October 2014. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-kidnapping-insight-idUSKCN0I10DJ20141013](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-kidnapping-insight-idUSKCN0I10DJ20141013)

Costa Rica (although on 5 August 2016, Costa Rica closed its southern border to all irregular migrants).<sup>46</sup>

The increase in reported migrant deaths in Central America in 2016 may reflect improving data sources in the region, yet many data collection challenges still exist. The Government of Honduras's release of data on the number of repatriated Honduran nationals and their causes of death is significant, and it is hoped that other officials will take similar steps in the near future.<sup>47</sup>

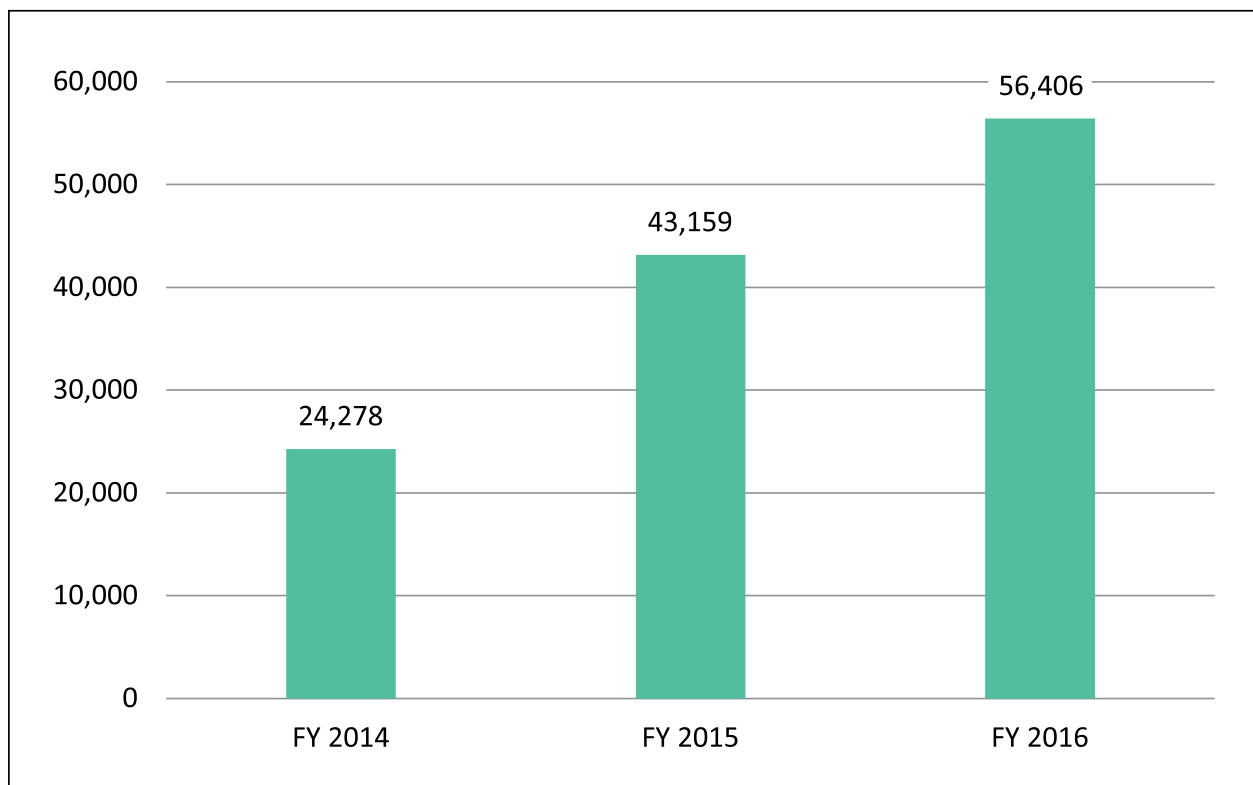
## Caribbean

The number of migrant fatalities in the Caribbean recorded by IOM's Missing Migrant Project has increased

since 2014, not only in absolute numbers but also in terms of the number of incidents involving deaths. In 2016, 105 migrants died or went missing in the Caribbean Sea, an increase of 89 per cent over the 55 deaths recorded in 2015. The total number of immigrant fatalities in 2016 was recorded in 14 incidents, while there were 8 incidents in 2015 and 10 in 2014.

In 2016, the crossing from Cuba and Hispaniola to Florida was the deathliest route in this region. Half of the recorded migrant deaths and disappearances in the Caribbean occurred in eight incidents near the shores of Florida. Despite the often-dangerous conditions of the overseas journey, Cuban migrants continue to take this route, as evidenced by the rise in Cuban arrivals to US ports (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4:** Cuban arrivals to US seaports, fiscal year 2014–2016



Source: J.M. Krogstad, "Surge in Cuban immigration to U.S. continued through 2016", Pew Research Center, 13 January 2017.

Note: The US fiscal year begins in October.

46 T. Gutierrez, "Costa Rica cerrará frontera a los migrantes a partir de hoy", CRHoy, 5 August 2016. Available from [www.crhoy.com/archivo/costa-rica-cerrara-frontera-a-los-migrantes-a-partir-de-hoy/nacionales/](http://www.crhoy.com/archivo/costa-rica-cerrara-frontera-a-los-migrantes-a-partir-de-hoy/nacionales/)

47 Observatorio Consular y Migratorio de Honduras, Homepage (2015–2016). Available from <http://conmigho.wixsite.com/subscym-conmigho/repatriaciones-fallecidos-2016>

In comparison, the majority of migrant deaths recorded in the Caribbean in 2015 occurred on the border between Haiti and Dominican Republic, while in 2014, more than one third of migrant fatalities were recorded in La Mona Passage, a route used by migrants who travel from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico.

Between 2014 and 2016, migrants from Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic comprised the largest proportion of recorded migrant decedents in the region. Migrants from other nationalities, such as Costa Rica, Brazil, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Colombia, also lost their lives in the Caribbean waters. The main cause of migrant deaths recorded in 2016 was drowning. The available data also indicate a rise in the number of incidents in which the cause of death is unknown, with more bodies recovered from boats than in previous years.

### United States–Mexico border

In the past 20 years, at least 6,330 migrant deaths have occurred in the border region between the United States and Mexico.<sup>48</sup> The number of deaths along the border is on the rise in recent years, with 400 migrant deaths recorded in 2016, compared to 348 in 2015 and 207 in 2014. Since at least 2014, many of these deaths have occurred either in the Rio Grande along the southern border of Texas or in the Arizona Desert. Indeed, in 2016, 163 migrant deaths were recorded in Arizona, and 62 occurred in the Rio Grande. Due to the high likelihood of decomposition of bodies in the hot desert environment and the limited ante mortem data available with families far away, many bodies are never identified. Correspondingly, more than two thirds of migrant deaths recorded in 2016 were due to unknown causes, with 110 skeletal, mummified or otherwise highly decomposed remains recovered in Arizona alone.

Of the 400 migrant deaths recorded by the Missing Migrants Project in 2016, the cause of death is known for only 143 migrants who died near the United States–Mexico border. Of these incidents, 37 per cent (53 deaths) occurred due to exposure or dehydration, indicating the harsh environmental conditions of migratory routes along the border. A further 45 per cent

(65 deaths) drowned in various locations on the border, 12 per cent (18 deaths) died in vehicle accidents, and three migrants died by violent means. While the origin of most migrants who die on the United States–Mexico border is unknown, about half of those identified were Mexican nationals, 13 per cent were Hondurans, and 5 per cent were Salvadoran, while 18 per cent were from other Central American nations and 4 per cent were from South American countries.

There are several challenges related to data on migrant deaths for the region near the United States–Mexico border. On the United States side of the border, annual totals of migrant deaths are available from the US Border Patrol;<sup>49</sup> this information is available only as an aggregate figure for each fiscal year, and reflects only the number of border deaths with which the agency is directly involved.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, as only a few US border counties<sup>51</sup> collect disaggregated data on migrant deaths, information on migrants' origin, gender, age, as well as location and cause of death is often unavailable.

### SOUTH-EAST ASIA

In 2014 and 2015, thousands of Myanmar and Bangladeshi migrants attempted to cross the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea to Malaysia and Thailand, resulting in 1,300 deaths at sea during this period according to IOM's Missing Migrants Project. In 2016, however, the number of people migrating on sea routes between Myanmar and Bangladesh towards Thailand and Malaysia declined sharply, likely as a result of tighter surveillance by authorities and more frequent cases brought against people involved with smuggling in destination countries.<sup>52</sup>

Correspondingly, the number of migrant deaths recorded in South-East Asia has declined from 789 total in 2015

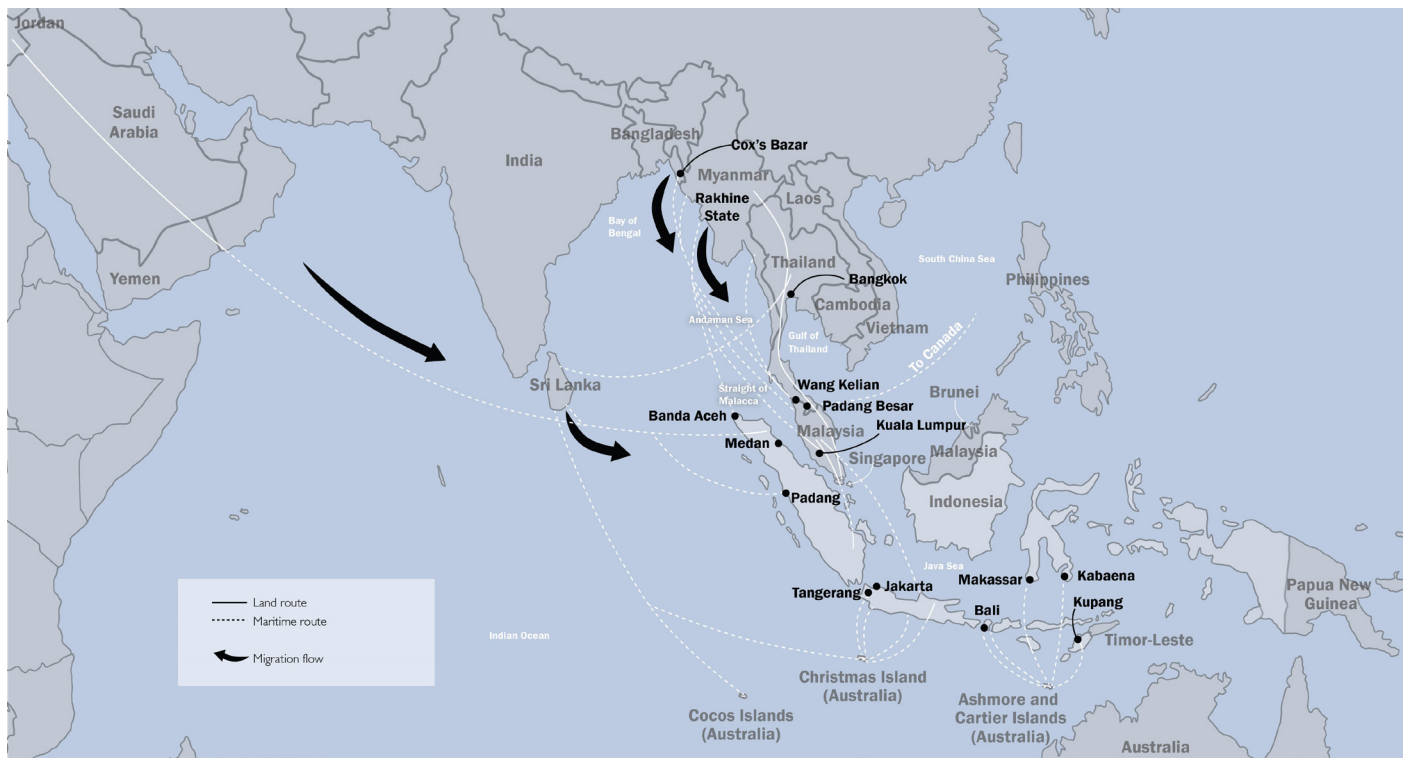
49 See [www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2016-Oct/BP%20Southwest%20Border%20Sector%20Deaths%20FY1998%20-%20FY2016.pdf](http://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2016-Oct/BP%20Southwest%20Border%20Sector%20Deaths%20FY1998%20-%20FY2016.pdf)

50 Robert Daniels, Personal communication, US Border Patrol, 28 January 2016; Michael Young, Personal communication, US Border Patrol Statistics and Data Integrity Branch, 29 January 2016.

51 See, for example, Pima County's Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants, available from [www.humaneborders.info/app/map.asp](http://www.humaneborders.info/app/map.asp)

52 C. Renshaw, "Human trafficking in Southeast Asia: Uncovering the dynamics of State commitment and compliance", *Michigan Journal of International Law*, 37(4):611–659 (2016).

48 Colibri Center for Human Rights, Factsheet (2015). Available from [www.colibricenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Colibri-Fact-Sheet.pdf](http://www.colibricenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Colibri-Fact-Sheet.pdf)

**Map 5: Mixed migration routes in South-East Asia**

Source: IOM, 2017.

to 153 in 2016. In 2016, 99 per cent of the deaths were due to drowning, with 121 occurred at sea between Indonesia and Malaysia. The large number of deaths on this route may be linked to frequent travel by migrant workers through regular and unofficial boat crossings, which remain dangerous due to overcrowding and poor conditions of boats used by migrants.<sup>53</sup>

However, the closure of the Bay of Bengal/Andaman Sea route has not meant the end of migration from Myanmar and Bangladesh. Media reports indicate at least 50,000 migrants migrated to Bangladesh between 9 October and 29 December 2016 by crossing the Naf River in small motorized boats.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> IOM Indonesia.

<sup>54</sup> AFP, "50,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar: Government", Channel NewsAsia, 30 December 2016. Available from [www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/50-000-rohingya-fled-to-bangladesh-from-myanmar-government/3401934.html](http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/50-000-rohingya-fled-to-bangladesh-from-myanmar-government/3401934.html); O. Holmes, "Nobel laureates warn Aung San Suu Kyi over 'ethnic cleansing' of Rohingya", *The Guardian*, 30 December 2016. Available from [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/30/nobel-laureates-aung-san-suu-kyi-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/30/nobel-laureates-aung-san-suu-kyi-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya)

Several thousand more migrated to China in November and December 2016 using overland routes.<sup>55</sup> It is possible that in addition to those already recorded, migrant deaths on these routes go unnoticed in the absence of well-established monitoring mechanisms.

## CONCLUSION

The available global data on migrant deaths in 2016 indicate that an increasing number of people are dying during migration. In most regions, including the Mediterranean, Africa and the Americas, more migrant deaths and disappearances were recorded than in previous years. At least 533 migrant deaths recorded by IOM's Missing Migrants Project in 2016 were due to lack of adequate food, water, shelter or medicines;

<sup>55</sup> Z. Zhihao, "Chinese delegation raises border issues during Myanmar visit", *China Daily*, 14 December 2016. Available from [http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-12/14/content\\_27669703.htm](http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-12/14/content_27669703.htm)

another 246 died due to violent means, and nearly 5,000 were due to drowning.

Though the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 10.7 calls for the facilitation of "orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people",<sup>56</sup> the available data indicate that migration has become less – not more – safe.

### NOTES ON DATA USED IN THIS BRIEFING

Collecting data on migration, especially on those who go missing or die during migration, comes with many challenges. The data used in this briefing are based on methodologies developed to maximize accuracy and timeliness. Data on migrant arrivals in Europe are collected by IOM from national sources on registrations – in this case, the Italian Ministry of the Interior and the Hellenic Police, and include local estimates from IOM staff on the ground. Data on migrant deaths are sourced from IOM's Missing Migrants Project, which, since 2014, has collated information from national and State authorities, media reports, NGOs and local estimates from IOM staff. However, all numbers in this briefing are accurate only as of the date of publication, and should be seen as approximations that nonetheless reflect the scale and trends of those who die during their journey for a better life. A more in-depth discussion of regional trends and data challenges pertaining to migrant deaths will be presented in IOM's *Fatal Journeys Volume 3*, to be published in August 2017.

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56 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Goal 10 – Reduce inequality within and among countries (n.d.). Available from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg10>

## About

### GMDAC

In response to growing calls for better data on migration, and better use and presentation of migration data, IOM has created a Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC). Located in the heart of Berlin, Germany, the Centre aims to provide authoritative and timely analysis of data on global migration issues as a global hub for data and statistics on migration.

### Data Briefing Series

The GMDAC Data Briefing Series aims to explain what lies behind the numbers and the data used in migration policy and public debates. The Briefings explain what “the numbers” indicate about movements of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, on a range of topics for policy across the globe.

The way the data are presented has an important influence on public perceptions of migration in Europe and the development of policy. The Series will serve to clarify, explain and exchange specialist knowledge in an accessible format for wider public and policy audiences, for capacity-building and evidence for policy. Briefings will be of interest to expert, as well as lay audiences, including journalists, students, local authority and city planners and lawyers.

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