

ANNUAL REGIONAL OVERVIEW

West and Central Africa

January - December 2021

OVERVIEW

Many migrants report disappearances or deaths along migratory routes, including those from and within West and Central Africa (WCA) while attempting to cross the Sahara Desert and on the maritime route to the Canary Islands. While these anecdotal reports indicate that the death or disappearance of men, women and children along these routes is a daily reality, documenting these deaths is extremely challenging and data is highly incomplete in this part of Africa.

Despite many limitations in data collection, in 2021 IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP) recorded 110 deaths/disappearances during migration on routes in WCA: off the coasts of Mauritania, Cape Verde and Senegal en route to the Canary Islands and in Nigeria following a car accident. Senegalese, Guineans and Ivorians were among the few people with known information on nationalities who perished on these routes. This number of deaths in 2021 is lower than in 2020 when 429 deaths/disappearances on WCA routes were documented.

Overall, these figures should be considered a real underestimate of the number of people who would have perished on the roads of WCA. Media coverage following these types of incidents is infrequent, and reports from authorities on deadly incidents involving nationals in transit in other countries simply do not exist. The rare data MMP possesses come from humanitarian partners who are in the field or are involved in search and rescue missions, as is done in Niger in collaboration with the governmental Directorate of Social Protection.



Figure 1: A migrant assisted by an IOM staff member in Séguédine. © IOM 2017

DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES DURING TRANSIT WITHIN WCA

Overseas route to the Canary Islands

A key trend observed since 2020, the year of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, has been the departure of many people from Western African countries on the Western Africa-Atlantic Route (WAAR) to the Canary Islands. According to the Spanish Ministry of the Interior, 22,316 people arrived irregularly at the Canary Islands in 2021, a slight decrease compared to 2020 (23,023). The increase in departures along this dangerous route has been accompanied by an increase in deaths and disappearances. Eighty-two shipwrecks were recorded along the WAAR in 2021, resulting in the death of 1,109 people at sea, half of whom were presumed drowned as their remains could not be recovered after a shipwreck. By way of comparison, 38 shipwrecks caused the death of 849 migrants in 2020. The data on irregular migration to the Canary Islands does not concern only the coast of Western Africa: many people leave from the West and North African coasts from Guinea to the coasts of Morocco en route to the Canary Islands.

In 2021, 1,109 people died or disappeared along the WAAR on their way to the Spanish Canary Islands, 143 of which occurred after confirmed departure from Western African countries.¹ Among these fatal maritime accidents, four incidents occurred off the coast of Western Africa in Mauritania, Cape Verde and Senegal that caused no less than 87 deaths suspected of drowning or dehydration during long overseas journeys.

In addition, MMP has recorded many cases of shipwrecks involving the deaths of nationals of WCA countries on the WAAR after departures from North African countries (Morocco and Western Sahara). In 2021, the main West African nationalities of those who died in shipwrecks on this Canary islands route among those with available information on nationalities are Senegalese (109), Ivorians (61) and Guineans (6). However, the vast majority of those whose deaths are documented on this route remain unidentified: 75 per cent of those who died on the WAAR in 2021 (831 individuals) are listed with an unknown country of origin.

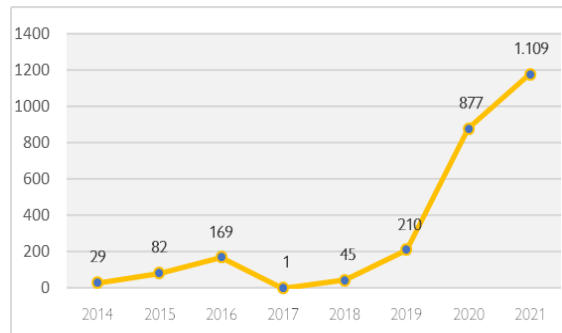


Figure 2: Number of deaths and disappearances of migrants on the West Africa-Atlantic Route leading to the Canary Islands from 2014-2022

This breakdown is far from representing the reality on this route. Many deaths occur without any identification of those who die, and the long and hazardous overseas journey means that many disappearances at sea may occur without ever being documented.

“He told me he was going on a trip, but I didn’t know he was going to Spain. I found out when a friend in Casamance told me he had gone to sea,” says Khady, 45 years old resident of the village of Gandiol, 30 km from Saint-Louis, in northern Senegal. Without news of her husband, she spent a month “looking for him everywhere”, then finally resigned herself to his death.... “Even today, it hurts me to talk about it.”
 -[AwareMigrants](#), 2019, own translation

Deaths on land in WCA

In Western Africa, there are also other cases of deaths and disappearances recorded on land routes, often due to violence or car accidents. This is the case of 23 people who perished on a road in Nigeria attempting to reach the border with Niger.

However, it is likely that far more deaths occur than are currently recorded, particularly as the Sahara Desert crossing is widely reported to pose significant risks for those who attempt to cross irregularly. The poor data can be explained on one hand by the lack of any official reports on migrant deaths or disappearances in the region. Until 2020 surveys conducted with migrants as part of the 4Mi initiative of the Mixed Migration Centre were a key source of data for the MMP in Western Africa, filling the gap left by the lack of official data on this issue. However, 4Mi has stopped collecting data on dead and missing persons along migration routes given the ethical challenges linked to such reports. To fill this gap, IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix is piloting a data collection module on missing migrants, ensuring that adequate referrals to support for people who have witnessed a death are in place in all survey locations.

¹ For an overview of deaths on the WAAR including departures from Northern African countries and main countries of origin from Northern Africa, see MMP’s MENA regional overview for 2021 here: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/sitreps/missing-migrants-project-annual-regional-overview-2021-mena>.

DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES OF WCA NATIONALS ABROAD

While data on deaths during migration within and from WCA is lacking, the MMP has been able to document many incidents since 2014 involving people who originated from the WCA region on other routes, particularly during Mediterranean Sea crossings. In 2021, more than 250 nationals of WCA countries were documented on Mediterranean Sea routes, though many more likely remain unidentified. Of the 2,048 deaths recorded during attempted Mediterranean crossings in 2021, the nationalities of 1,374 people are unknown.

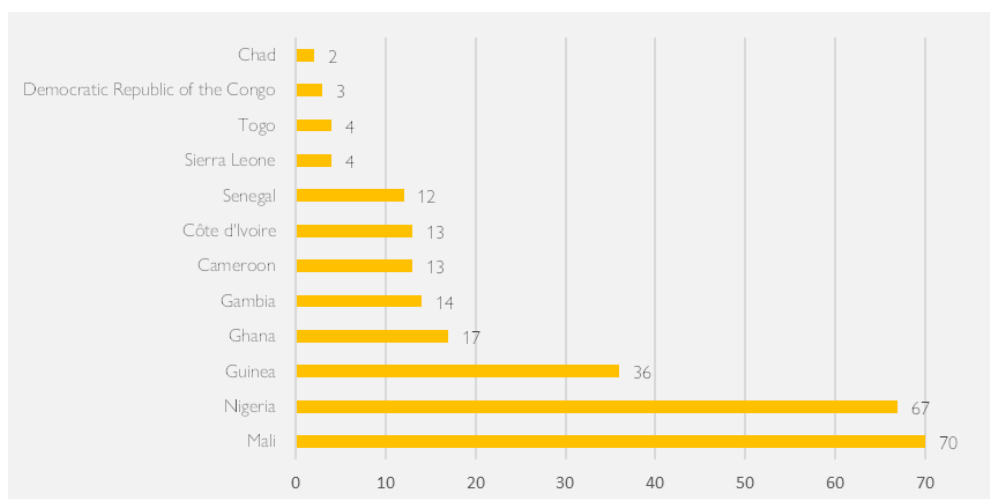


Figure 3: Number of WCA nationals recorded dead missing on Mediterranean routes in 2021

METHODOLOGY AND DATA QUALITY

The Missing Migrants Project (MMP) records the deaths and disappearances of migrants in transport accidents, shipwrecks, attacks, or medical complications during the migrants' journeys. Data is collected from a variety of sources, such as official documents – including from coastguards and forensic authorities – NGO and media reports, as well as surveys and interviews with migrants.

Data is shared with the MMP focal point at the Regional Data Hub, who also performs daily media monitoring and assembles all reported incidents into a database. This database is sent to the GMDAC team in Berlin, which verifies and assesses the quality of the data source(s) for each incident through the 'source quality' variable before producing a clean, publicly available dataset of incidents.

The data available on migrants who have died or are gone missing are incomplete due to the hazards of irregular journeys, including the remoteness of some migratory routes in the WCA region. In addition, a lack of official data on missing migrants means that hard-to-access eyewitnesses are often the only source of information on migrant deaths. The data presented in this report are mostly collected by IOM missions and the authorities following search and rescue activities.

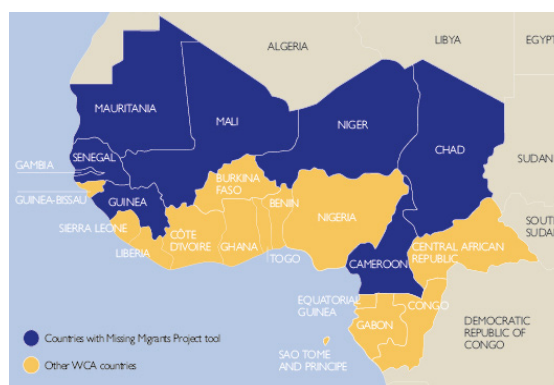


Figure 4: The Missing Migrants Project tool is active in eight countries in West and Central Africa (Cameroon, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Gambia) and is supported by IOM missions, several States and Non-Governmental Organizations on data collection.

Many other cases of deaths or disappearances on the migratory routes likely go unreported. The data presented in this report are therefore not entirely exhaustive and probably underestimate the reality of these deaths and disappearances along the migration routes from West and Central Africa toward North Africa and Europe.

Region/Route	One Media Source	Multiple Media Sources	Civil Society Organizations	One Media Source
WAAR	11%	35%	39%	15%
Land Routes	-	100%	-	-

Figure 5: MMP data on WCA routes by source in 2021

There are many sources that the MMP could contact to collect data. However, for incidents on the West Africa-Atlantic route, most incidents are reported by civil society organizations (39%) and sometimes relayed by multiple media sources (35%). However, there is no shortage of official sources releasing a press release to this effect (15%). Rarely, only one press agency is aware of the incident (11%) and tries somehow to relay the incident in its channels. On the other hand, when the incident happens inside the region, we see that almost 100% of the coverage is done by multiple media and never from official sources.

CONCLUSION

As a result, data on the risks of dying or going missing during migration and migrant deaths within and from West Africa are still insufficient. Between 2014 to 2021 MMP recorded 3,136 migrant deaths and disappearances on routes within from West and Central Africa, including around 430 females and almost 250 children. Half of these deaths occurred in attempts to cross the Sahara Desert towards Northern Africa and one in ten took place on the maritime route to the Canary Islands after departing from West Africa. The implementation of safe, humane migration policies must be prioritized to prevent further deaths, ensure the secure and free movement of migrants while protecting their human rights. Thus, developing the active commitment of state entities at the technical and financial level in the face of these challenges is paramount.

However, it is likely that many deaths and disappearances have gone undocumented, and that the quality of the available data is deficient. Namely, the identities and demographic characteristics of most people who have died or gone missing during migration in WCA are unknown, thus preventing policymakers from targeting the most vulnerable. The lack of data also extends to the impact of migrant deaths and disappearances on families and communities left behind. Apart from one study conducted by the ICRC with families in Nigeria and Senegal "[Searching for missing persons and meeting their families' needs](#)", there is scarce information on how the families of the missing are affected, the barriers they face while searching for their loved ones and the impacts of their absence on different aspects of their lives.



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