

## ANNUAL REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Asia Pacific

January - December 2021

### OVERVIEW

In 2021, at least 788 people lost their lives during migration in Asia,<sup>1</sup> with the vast majority of deaths (72.5%) being recorded in its second half.<sup>2</sup> This illustrates not only the realities of people migrating irregularly to seek safety and/or better livelihood opportunities amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the risks faced by people who are forcibly displaced by conflicts and statelessness. There were 495 people reported to have died while migrating in Southern Asia, while another 76 lives were lost during migration in South-Eastern Asia, deeming these locations the deadliest documented subregions in the second half of 2021. In Southern Asia, more than 95 per cent (472) of these deaths were documented during the migration of Afghan nationals from Afghanistan, while another 23 lives were lost during Rohingya's onward journeys from Bangladesh's Bhasan Char Island. In South-Eastern Asia, 14 people from neighboring countries died during migration to Thailand, while the Indonesia-Malaysia maritime route claimed the lives of at least 61 Indonesians, and one Rohingya died en route to Indonesia. While these numbers are indicative of the high-risk migration routes in Asia, they are not representative: the fatalities recorded by IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP) face various data challenges discussed below, meaning that more deaths certainly remain unknown.

### DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES DURING TRANSIT WITHIN ASIA

#### Southern Asia

Although the majority of the 1,595 deaths recorded in Southern Asia since the inception of the MMP in 2014 were of Afghan nationals (75.9%), the second half of 2021 saw a steep increase in deaths during migration in comparison to all the previously recorded six-month periods. At least 472 Afghan nationals died attempting to leave the country from July to December 2021, though – given the lack of official data on this issue – many more deaths likely remain undocumented. With more than half (55.6%) of the total fatalities of Afghan nationals recorded since 2014 took place in 2021 (673), the available data suggests that movement out of Afghanistan has become deadlier than ever.

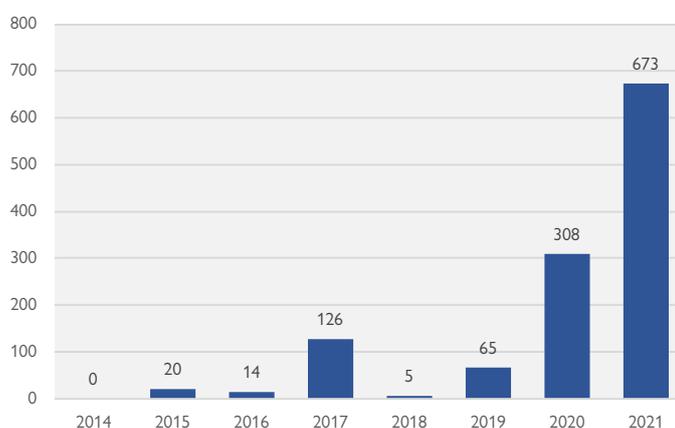


Figure 1: Recorded deaths and disappearances of Afghan nationals in Southern Asia by year

<sup>1</sup> Excluding Western Asia. For more information about regional classifications used by Missing Migrants Project, [click here](#).

<sup>2</sup> For the data recorded between 2014 and June 2021, see: [Deaths during Migration in Asia: what is known based on missing migrants project data](#) (January 2014-June 2021)

Most deaths of Afghan nationals recorded between July and December 2021 occurred in the bordering state of the Islamic Republic of Iran (282). Vehicle accidents were the cause of death for 178 people (63.1%) recorded in the Islamic Republic of Iran, while another 34 people (12.1%) died due to sickness and 28 people (9.9%) died in accidental deaths such as falls. The second location in which most deaths were recorded was Afghanistan's capital city of Kabul (174), linked to military and political changes in August 2021. Violence was the cause of death for 169 people (97.1%) documented in Kabul, including the many deaths linked to bombings near the Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) and shootings. At least four people also died in vehicle accidents, while attempting to reach HKIA to leave the country. In Afghanistan's provinces, the deaths of another 14 individuals were recorded. This included eight people who died in stampedes at the borders, and four other women<sup>3</sup> who were killed after attempting to leave the country. Among the 673 Afghans who died during migration in 2021, at least 33 were women, 421 were men and 38 were children between one and 17 years old.

Data on these fatalities should not be viewed as representative of all deaths of Afghan nationals during migration in 2021, as they are strongly limited by the lack of any official data across the region and the difficulties of data collection in the context of humanitarian emergencies.

Zaki Anwari, a 17-year-old Afghan footballer, used to play for the Afghan national youth team. After the rapid political transformations in August 2021, he decided to move out of the country so that he could continue his dream of being a professional football player. With no travel documents, Zaki joined thousands of Afghan nationals pouring into the Kabul international airport on Monday 16 August, hoping for evacuation. "I'm close to the airplane now, they'll register our names after they put us in the plane, and then I'll lose [the] phone signal. I'm going to throw my phone away," he said to his brother Ahmad on the phone. Ahmad tried to talk him out of his attempt to leave the country, but to no avail. Twenty minutes later, Zaki called his mother and sought her blessings. That was Zaki's last interaction with his family. Amid the chaos, many people clambered onboard the outside of a military plane evacuating people from Kabul as it taxied on the runway. Several videos captured images of at least two bodies falling from the airplane, followed by reports on human remains found within the wheel wells. Zaki was among at least seven people who died attempting to leave Afghanistan from the Kabul airport that day.<sup>4</sup>

Between July and December 2021, a boat carrying Rohingya refugees was reported to have capsized en route from Bangladesh's Bhasan Char, a remote island where nearly 20,000 Rohingya refugees have been relocated by the Bangladeshi government.<sup>5</sup> At least 18 people died, and a further four people remain missing at sea. Eight children are known to be among the deceased. In a separate boat, one Rohingya woman died due to sickness while migrating this route. These mark an emerging trend of an apparent increase in attempts to leave Bhasan Char: no deaths were documented on this route since the start of relocation of Rohingyas to this island in December 2020. Considering that only large-scale incidents are likely to be reported and cases involving smaller boats may remain unrecorded, it is likely that many more deaths occurring in smaller incidents remain undocumented.

<sup>3</sup> Information on the gender of people in MMP records are based on a third-party interpretation of the victim's gender based on information available in official documents, autopsy reports, witness testimonies, and/or media reports.

<sup>4</sup> The Guardian, 2021. Available at <https://archive.vn/Q4Ewv>, and The Asahi Shimbun, 2021. Available at <https://archive.ph/Qvrcv>.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on Bhasan Char Island, see: [Bangladesh: End Restrictions and Protect Rohingya Refugees](#), and [UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar](#).

## South-Eastern Asia

Although countries in South-Eastern Asia delayed plans to ease mobility restrictions owing to the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>6</sup> people continued to hazard dangerous migration across international borders by land or sea in search of safety and better economic opportunities. In 2021, MMP documented the deaths and disappearances of 77 people along migratory routes in this subregion, with the peak being recorded in December (63). The second half of 2021 saw the death of Rohingya migrating en route to South-Eastern Asian countries and witnessed a significant increase in deaths during migration in Thailand and Malaysia compared to late 2020 and early 2021. On land routes, at least 14 lives were lost during migration to Thailand, in comparison to one being recorded in the first half of 2021 and none in the second half of 2020. Six of them came from Myanmar and eight were from Cambodia, and six women, six men and two children were among the dead. All were killed in car accidents, which is the most recorded cause of death for people migrating to Thailand by land since 2014. Although Thailand has the highest rates of vehicle-related deaths in South-Eastern Asia and among the highest in the world,<sup>7</sup> people migrating irregularly may be at more risk due to riding in overloaded vehicles and/or drivers trying to circumvent the authorities.



Figure 2: A board showing photos of missing people from Indonesia ©IOM 2005

At sea, at least 33 people died and another 28 were documented as missing and presumed dead on the maritime route between the coasts of Indonesia and Malaysia in the second half of 2021. Two boats carrying more than 50 Indonesians each were reported to have capsized on 15 December and 25 December, resulting in dozens drowning, including 28 people who went missing at sea. The remains of another two people, presumed to have died from drowning in a separate, unknown shipwreck, were found on the beach of Malaysia's Selangor earlier in October. There were at least six women and 15 men among the deceased on this route in 2021. Although this maritime route is a pathway that has been used by people migrating irregularly between Indonesia and Malaysia for many years, the second half of 2021 marked a dramatic increase in the documented death toll on this route. No deaths were recorded in the first half of 2021 and six were documented in the second half of 2020. On another maritime route, there was one Rohingya woman reported to have died from sickness during her boat journey to Indonesia, as part of the group of over 100 people arriving at Aceh at the end of December 2021.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA QUALITY

IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP) counts fatalities only at the external borders of a state or during the process of migrating towards an international destination. Collecting data on deaths and disappearances during migration remains challenging due to the lack of systematic reporting on the deaths of non-nationals in transit, and when available, data are often incomplete. MMP collects data through official sources such as the coast guard and local authorities; nongovernmental civil society organizations and focal points in IOM country offices; and media monitoring. However, media sources can have incomplete or incorrect coverage, which poses an additional challenge on routes with limited official reporting.

<sup>6</sup> The Diplomat, 2021. Available at <https://archive.ph/nUX3z>, and Reuters, 2021. Available at <https://archive.ph/2h2qg>.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on Thailand's road safety, see: [Death on the roads: Based on the WHO Global Status Report on Road Safety 2018](#).

This data collection methodology presents some limitations in terms of consistency and comparability of data given the availability of sources of data and information, but this does not diminish the value of the reported analysis.

In Asia, there are no systematic official sources of data on deaths and disappearances during migration; as such, the MMP in Asia relies largely on information collected by organizations working on specific populations of interest and media. Nevertheless, the presence of humanitarian workers and journalists are lacking in many locations, including in the case of Myanmar, where thousands of people were reported to have been displaced internally and large numbers migrating irregularly to neighboring countries since the military coup on 1 February 2021.<sup>8</sup> Contexts of conflict and humanitarian emergencies also reduce the capacity of aid workers and journalists on the ground to thoroughly record deaths during migratory journeys.

Region/Route	Official Sources	Civil Society Organizations/ International Organizations	Multiple Media Sources	Single Media Source
Land routes from Afghanistan	0%	70.13%	27.34%	2.53%
Naf River between Myanmar and Bangladesh	0%	0%	100%	0%
Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea	27.27%	3.03%	69.70%	0%
Maritime routes between Indonesia and Malaysia	0%	0%	100%	0%
Land migration to Thailand	0%	0%	100%	0%

Figure 3: MMP data sources by route and by source for 2021

It is also worth noting that there was a stark increase in media reports on fatalities during migration from Afghanistan in the second half of 2021, after the situation in mid-August focused international attention to the country. The change in proportion of recorded incidents of Afghan nationals’ fatalities by MMP is documented below.

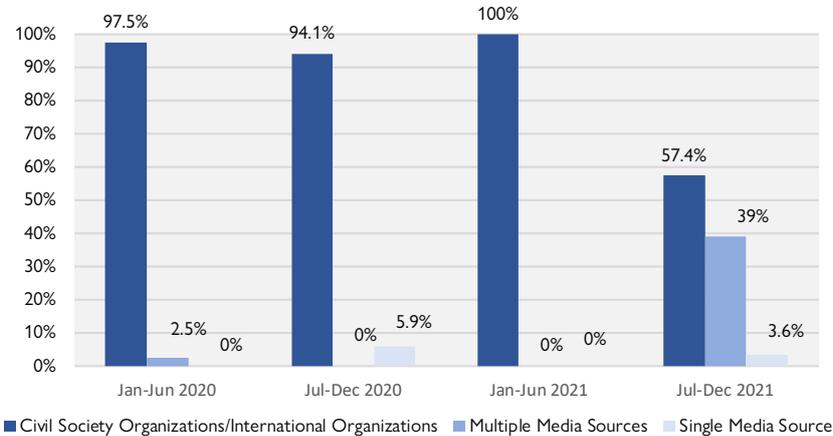


Figure 4: Recorded data on Afghan deaths and disappearances in Southern Asia by six-month period and by source

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the displacement and border crossings driven by the situation in Myanmar, see: [Myanmar Emergency Update as of 17 December 2021](#).

## CONCLUSION

In 2021, the MMP documented the cases of at least 788 people who died or disappeared along migratory routes in Asia, most of whom were people seeking international protection. With mobility restrictions in place in the wake of COVID-19 and other data collection challenges, the real death toll is unknown. Nonetheless, with 4,501 deaths and disappearances recorded over the years and many more likely go undocumented, these clearly reflect a real humanitarian crisis in the region. The lack of official data sources in Asia in the MMP dataset also indicates that more efforts from government actors are urgently required to address the problem. With better quality data on risks and fatalities along migratory routes, policymakers will have information they need to implement evidence-based migration policies and programmes. Beyond these recorded numbers are countless of families – mother, father, loved ones – suffering ambiguous loss and endlessly searching for answers. Meaningful actions by states are therefore in urgent need to prevent more lives loss and uphold their commitment to work towards promoting safe migration under both the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Compact for Migration (GCM).



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