

OVERVIEW

This briefing paper provides an overview of the context surrounding missing migrants in the East and Horn of Africa (EHoA), including the most important routes in the region, risks experienced by people on the move, causes of death and critical data needs.¹ Worldwide, over 47,000 people have died or disappeared during migration since 2014, while 1,063 deaths and disappearances have been recorded in the EHoA region. Of the routes in this region, the Eastern Corridor is the most trafficked and visible and it continues to be where most verified reports arise of migrants losing their lives (109 in 2021, 59 in 2020, and 135 in 2019).

Due to the challenges of collecting verified data, the numbers of people who suffer such experiences and lose their lives in transit are underreported, and evidence suggests many more go unknown. In view of this data gap, IOM’s Global Migration Data Analysis Centre and the EHoA Regional Data Hub (RDH) joined efforts in 2020 to strengthen data collection and reporting on the lives that are lost in transit.

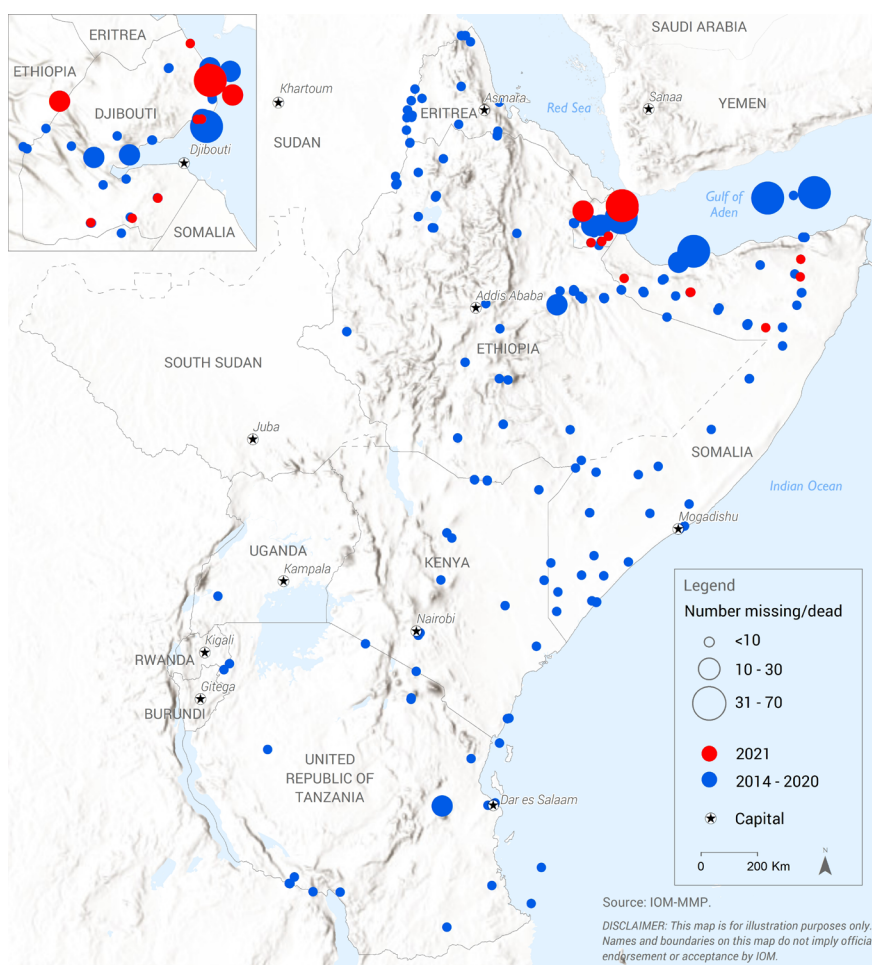


Figure 1: Number of People Recorded Dead or Missing in EHoA, 2014-2021

¹ For the scope of this briefing paper, the East and Horn of Africa region comprises Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania.

This briefing paper draws on data from the IOM Missing Migrants Project (MMP), Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), and Migration Response Centre (MRC) registrations, as well as from media monitoring, IOM interviews with field staff in areas of high mobility flows and migrant interviews conducted as part of ongoing research along the migratory corridors.² The report is structured in the following manner: The first section provides an overview of the landscape surrounding migrant deaths and disappearances in the region, proceeded by trends along the Eastern Route and Southern Route, a description of the methodology and data limitations and a concluding statement with a call to action for Member States to strengthen efforts toward safe and regular pathways to migration.

DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES DURING TRANSIT WITHIN EHOA

Eastern Route

Migrants on the Eastern Corridor predominantly travel from the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, usually with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as their intended destination. This route has two legs, with migrants travelling to either Obock, Djibouti or Bossaso, Somalia, from where they journey by sea to Yemen. Of the 674,243 movements recorded by the DTM in the EHoA in 2021, over 269,000 (40%) were along this route. Although movements along the Eastern Route continued at reduced numbers compared to pre-pandemic levels when

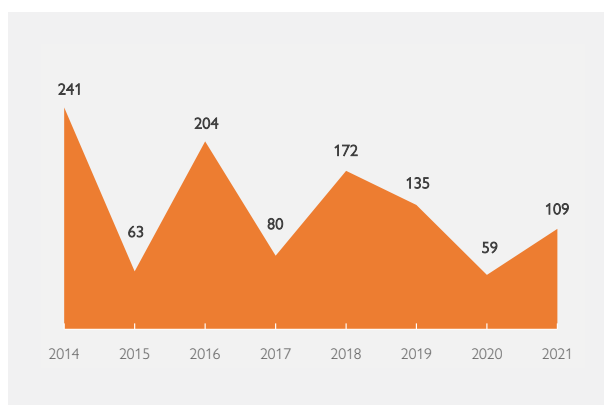
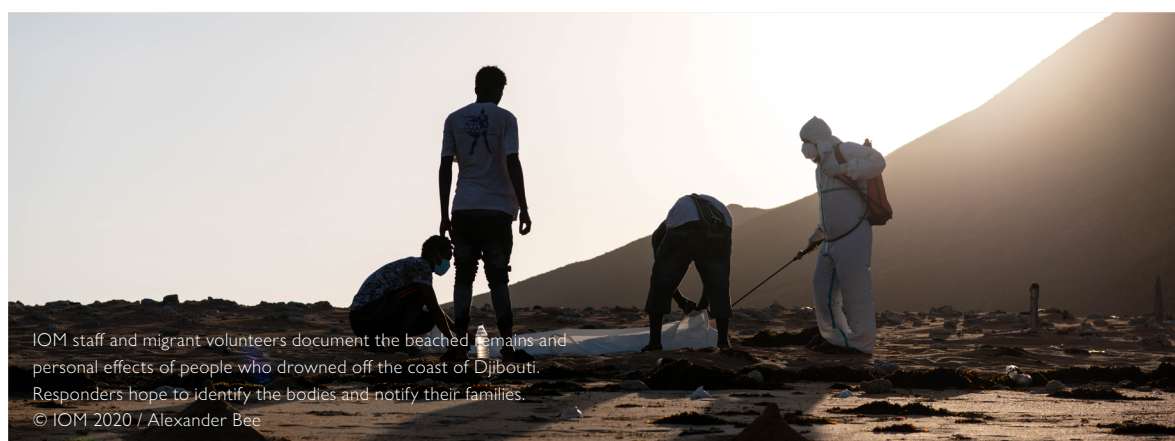


Figure 2: Number of People Recorded Dead or Missing During Migration in EHOA

almost half a million migrants were observed on this route alone (around 468,000 in 2019), the number of movements on this route increased by 70 per cent compared to 2020 when around 157,000 migrants were tracked on the Eastern Corridor. DTM data reveals that Ethiopian nationals are the largest group travelling on this corridor (85%), the majority of whom are on the move for economic reasons (96%).³ This finding is further corroborated by interviews conducted at MRCs; 92 per cent of the 10,067 migrants seeking assistance in 2021 were Ethiopians, and migrants were travelling for economic reasons (74%), educational opportunities (15%) or due to violence or armed conflict (6%).^{4,5} However,



² Publications are available at <https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/route-based-research>.

³ Survey respondents could select multiple reasons for leaving their place of origin.

⁴ MRCs on the Eastern Corridor provide migrants with critical and life-saving support, such as food, temporary shelter, and information and service referrals. For more information, see the 2021 MRC Annual Overview at <https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/resources/mrc-annual-overview-2021>.

⁵ Respondents could select multiple reasons for leaving their place of origin.



not all migrants on the move along this corridor ultimately decide to cross to the Arabian Peninsula. DTM tracks HoA migrant arrivals along the southern coast of Yemen and registered a sharp decrease from 138,213 in 2019 to 37,535 in 2020, and 27,693 in 2021.

In 2021, MMP recorded a total of 109 deaths and disappearances during migration in the EHOA region, of whom 17 were children. This marks an 85 per cent increase in the number of lives lost since 2020, when 59 deaths and disappearances during migration were recorded (see Figure 1). As there are significant limitations in capturing data on deceased and missing persons along migratory routes, these figures are largely underreported. A significant majority of recorded loss of life took place in Djibouti (101) during transit to Obock and while crossing the Red Sea to Yemen, followed by incidents that occurred in Somalia during transit to Bossaso (8). The most frequent causes of deaths and disappearances during migration in 2021 were drowning (64) and harsh environmental conditions (5). Data collected from field staff in the Obock region suggest that smugglers regularly operate boats unsuitable for sea travel and filled to overcapacity. At the same time, to avoid detection by marine patrol, many people migrating to and from Djibouti incur additional risk by travelling during rough seas.⁶ In March 2021, smugglers threw an estimated 80 passengers overboard from a boat carrying up to 200 people, resulting in at least 20 deaths and an unknown number of disappearances in the Gulf of Aden.⁷ In April 2021, 44 people drowned, including 16 children, when a returning boat capsized in the Gulf off the coast of Djibouti.⁸ Meanwhile, a similar incident took place in June 2021 with a boat carrying up to 200 passengers that capsized in the Bab-al-Mandab straight near Ras al-Ara, Yemen, resulting in 25 confirmed deaths and up to 175 people who were lost at sea.^{9,10} The number of passengers and identity of the missing and deceased are often difficult to ascertain due the lack of a boat manifest. Interviews with field staff in Somalia suggest that smugglers in Somalia have recently been transporting migrants in improved vessels in order to prevent boats capsizing, as such

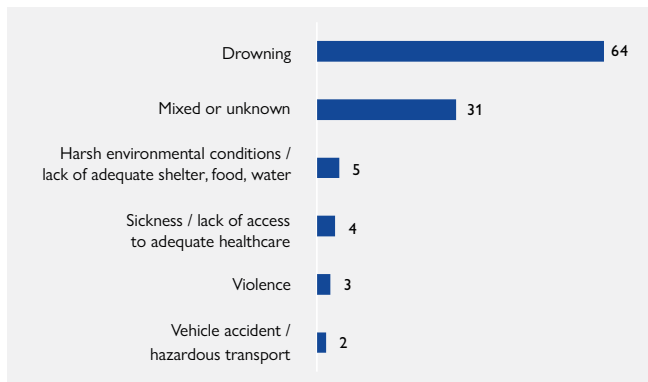


Figure 3: Causes of Death Documented During Migration on the Eastern Route in 2021

⁶ IOM Staff at the MRC in Obock.

⁷ <https://www.iom.int/news/least-20-dead-after-smugglers-force-migrants-sea-djibouti>.

⁸ <https://www.iom.int/news/44-dead-after-smugglers-boat-capsizes-coast-djibouti>.

⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57468597>.

¹⁰ The shipwreck in June is not captured in the figures reported here as the incident took place outside of the EHOA region.

incidents draw media attention.¹¹ Another trend in migrant transportation in Somalia is a decrease in the number of vehicle accidents in the past two years.¹² As much as MMP data only partially presents the magnitude of the situation, other sources this report draws from corroborates these trends.

“There was one sole underage survivor of a shipwreck. She lost her parents and was also the only survivor of the family. The protection team managed to identify the other side of her family and facilitate her return to her next of kin in Ethiopia.”

Dr. Youssouf, Migrant Health Physician in Obock, Djibouti.

In addition to deaths at sea, a key area where many migrants lose their lives on the Eastern Corridor is the particularly rough terrain leading to Obock, dubbed the ‘devil’s bathroom’ for the extreme heat, dehydration, and arduous experience commonly suffered by those who travers it.¹³ The stretch of desert from Moulehoule to Obock reaches temperatures up to 50 degrees Celsius in the summer and migrants walk long distances on foot often carrying little to no drinking water.¹⁴ The lack of sufficient drinking water and dehydration many migrants experience en route can result in adoption of dangerous coping strategies such as drinking contaminated groundwater, a key cause of migrant illness, and in some cases deaths, along this route.¹⁵

“I’m thankful to God for escaping that horrifying desert travel, and I feel lucky to be here alive. Many people died in the desert of thirst and hunger, also some people were shot dead, tortured and many became mentally ill. So, I feel so happy to have been reunited with my family alive.”

Male Returnee interviewed during a focus group discussion as part of the RDH research in communities of high emigration.¹⁶

Those attempting to travel in the opposite direction to return home often face particularly difficult journeys. Return journeys are often dangerous and result in numerous deaths.¹⁷ Moreover, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, large flows of spontaneous returns from the Arabian Peninsula to Ethiopia have been observed, which often resulted in dangerous sea crossings and migrant deaths. The state of emergency in Northern



IOM's Dr. Youssouf treats the injured foot of a man found transiting through the desert in Djibouti during a patrol by the Mobile Units. © IOM 2020 / Alexander Bava

¹¹ IOM Staff at MRC Obock and MRC Hargeisa.

¹² Number of people who died in transit by year: 2014 (0), 2015 (10), 2016 (15), 2017 (44), 2018 (37), 2019 (21), 2020 (1), 2021 (2).

¹³ IOM Staff at the MRC in Obock.

¹⁴ IOM Staff at the MRC in Obock, Missing Migrants Project Questionnaire.

¹⁵ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IOM_RDH_Eastern%20Route%20Research_Final%20Report_Obock%20Djibouti_0.pdf.

¹⁶ More information on the methodology of this research can be found at https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl701/files/documents/iom_rdh_eastern-route-research_return-migration-dynamics_ethiopia_0_0.pdf.

¹⁷ https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl701/files/documents/IOM_EHoA_RoMR_Mid-2021_0.pdf.

Two people are found under extreme exhaustion and dehydration by the IOM Mobile Unit in the stretch of desert between the Gahere landing beach and Obock. They consume water, food, and IV fluids to regain strength and receive medical follow-up at the MRC.
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Ethiopia has presented an additional challenge to returning migrants who may find their options to return to their home communities in Tigray, Amhara, and Afar limited due to the ongoing conflict, and risk becoming stranded along the journey.¹⁸ In 2021, IOM tracked 13,125 migrants returning from Yemen to Djibouti (10,547) and Somalia (2,578) on their way back to their home communities.

“We have experienced hunger, we also had no water. We haven’t eaten nor drunk anything in the last three days. Many people we were travelling with have died.”

Male Migrant from Tigray interviewed in Obock.

Missing Ethiopians Around the World

According to a household survey conducted by the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour, in August 2021, 51,098 Ethiopian migrants were missing worldwide.^{19,20} Generally, relatives reported missing by their families are male (85% male, 15% female), young, with limited formal schooling and intended to reach Saudi Arabia when they lost contact with their families. These conditions in age, literacy, and legal status render migrants more vulnerable to risks and exploitation during their travels. A separate survey by the Ministry in collaboration with the International Labour Organization reveals that the majority of Ethiopian labour migrants travel through irregular pathways (59% of respondents), placing them at greater risk when on the move.^{21,22}

18 In November 2021, Ethiopia declared a nationwide state of emergency due to the conflict in the northern region of Tigray. The conflict has been followed by a dynamic migratory environment in the region. Since the onset of the crisis, over 2 million people have been displaced.

19 https://www.statsethiopia.gov.et/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Final-2021-LABOUR-FORCE-AND-MIGRATION-SURVEY_Key-finding-Report-17AUG2021.pdf.

20 The Ministry surveyed 43,335 households in rural, urban, sedentary, and pastoralist regions, excluding the region of Tigray. Survey includes both regular and irregular labour migrants.

21 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/---ro-abidjan/---sro-addis_ababa/documents/publication/wcms_712236.pdf.

22 Survey includes both regular and irregular labour migrants travelling from Ethiopia to Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other, comprising 536 respondents, including potential migrants, migrants working in Gulf states and returnees.

Southern Route

On the Southern Corridor, migrants travel from the Horn of Africa to South Africa, typically motivated by economic reasons (65%) family visitation (14%) or conflict (6%) according to IOM's DTM.^{23,24} In 2021, DTM recorded 58,648 movements along this corridor, comprising about 9 per cent of total movements in EHoA for that year, with children making up about 15 per cent of movements tracked on this route (7% girls and 8% boys). Although migrants heading south are predominantly Ethiopian nationals (70%), this route sees significant numbers of Somali nationals as well (30%).^{25,26} The Southern Route is considered by many Ethiopian migrants to be the most dangerous to follow.²⁷

Risks on this route include harsh terrain, kidnapping, ransom, and other forms of violence.²⁸ Reported causes of death on this route are vehicular accidents or hazardous transport resulting in deaths by asphyxiation, illness or lack of access to medical care, violence and abandonment by smugglers.²⁹ However, limited official data are available on deaths and disappearances on this route, and many lost lives may never be reported.

In addition to the risk of death, people who migrate via the Southern Route face disappearance and other human rights violations through detention. According to the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, children have been sentenced en masse with adults, and detainees face limited sanitation and healthcare access, physical abuse, and overcrowding.³⁰ Interview data with Ethiopian detainees in Tanzania reveal that many migrants have witnessed the death of their fellow travellers along remote routes where registration capacity is limited.³¹

“Many migrants [are] stranded in Tanzania and some of them died due to torture by brokers, starvation, and diseases like malaria. The brokers tortured migrants to get money from their families.”

Returnee interviewed as a key informant as part of RDH research in communities of high emigration.³²

State borders are also key areas where deaths likely occur along this corridor. Research from the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat in 2015 suggests that people in transit have witnessed travellers in their group die at higher rates when travelling from Tanzania through Malawi or Mozambique to reach Zimbabwe, compared to when travelling directly through Zambia to Zimbabwe.³³ In previous years, numerous people in transit have also drowned in Lake Malawi in attempts to cross from Tanzania to Malawi, although it is unclear to what extent these patterns persist in 2022.³⁴ More recently, IOM staff in Tanzania have noted the dangers of the Kasumulu border between Tanzania and Malawi and the Tunduma border shared by Tanzania and Zambia.³⁵ The Kilambo ferry crossing from Tanzania to Mozambique over the Ruvuma River has also been noted as an area that is particularly dangerous. Other reported areas that are difficult for migrants to cross along the same river are the Matchedje border crossing and Unity Bridge connecting Mtambaswala and Negomano.³⁶

²³ IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM).

²⁴ Survey respondents could select multiple reasons for leaving their place of origin.

²⁵ IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM).

²⁶ DTM codes all southward travellers, many of whom may only travel to Kenya, as migrants on the Southern Route.

²⁷ Ayalew, T. (2021). The State, Families and Disappeared Migrants in Ethiopia. *African Human Mobility Review*, 88.

²⁸ https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/016_smuggled_south.pdf.

²⁹ IOM Staff at the Tanzania country office.

³⁰ https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/011_behind-bars.pdf.

³¹ IOM Staff in the Tanzania Country Office.

³² More information on the methodology of this research can be found at https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzb-dl701/files/documents/iom_rd_h_eastern-route-research_return-migration-dynamics_ethiopia_0_0.pdf.

³³ https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/016_smuggled_south.pdf.

³⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-18531470>.

³⁵ IOM Staff in Tanzania, Missing Migrant Project Questionnaire.

³⁶ Ibid.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA QUALITY

IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP) counts migrant fatalities only at the external borders of a state during the process of migrating toward an international destination. Collecting data on migrant deaths and disappearances in EHoA and elsewhere remains challenging due to lack of official or systematic reporting on deaths of non-nationals in transit, and when available, data are often incomplete. MMP collects data in EHoA through official sources such as 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. 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.

As of 2021, no official registration mechanism exists for deaths discovered on the Eastern and Southern Routes. In some cases, the government of Djibouti and the Ethiopian consulate in Djibouti have provided support for tracing and burial services, though IOM staff in Obock report that burials have taken place without officially identifying or registering those who died.

Eastern Route	Official Sources	Inter- / Non-Governmental Organizations	Media Sources	Eye Witness / Survey Respondents
Percentage of total incidents	9%	87%	0%	4%
Persons dead or missing	2	82	0	5

Figure 4: Sources of 2021 Data on Deaths and Disappearances During Migration in EHoA

To address the lack of official data on missing migrants, IOM Regional Office for EHoA collects data at Migration Response Centres (MRCs), primarily along the Eastern Route through surveys, focus groups and interviews with migrants and support staff. Often, information on missing or dead companions are shared anecdotally by people interviewed on the move. Although MRC data often include incomplete and unverifiable first-hand accounts, they indicate there are likely many more deaths and disappearances during migration in this region that never come to light.

IOM previously sourced data on deaths during migration from surveys conducted by the Mixed Migration Centre, although no such data have been available since 2019, leaving a data gap in the following years that should be taken into account for temporal analyses, particularly on the Southern Route. Gathering information on deaths and disappearances witnessed by survivors can provide invaluable information but also presents serious ethical considerations that further limit data collection. The IOM Regional Office is in the process of establishing information sharing agreements with civil society groups and government partners to fill this gap in the future.

CONCLUSION

Over one hundred cases of deaths or disappearances during migration were reported in the East and Horn of Africa in 2021 – and hundreds more since 2014. However, many more go unreported. The invisibility of unreported missing migrants reflects the efforts they are forced to make to travel undetected. Greater commitment to data generation is, therefore, essential to provide life-saving assistance on these routes and identify those who die or disappear. It is important to highlight that people in transit made vulnerable by their irregular status are the result of a policy environment that leaves them without safe alternatives. Moreover, this challenge is augmented by a context in which irregular migrants may hesitate to report deaths and disappearances due to fear of legal consequences. When migrants are not afforded the dignity of regular options to relocate, their journeys become more dangerous and deadly.

Recently, the importance of identifying missing persons and preventing loss of life in transit has gained increased attention at the international level, such as in Goal 10.7 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. In addition, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights issued the Resolution on Missing Migrants and Refugees in July 2021 urging States to meet their obligations under the African Charter, among other international legal instruments, on the rights of migrants and their families.³⁷ The Commission further called on authorities to investigate migrant deaths, establish coordinated mechanisms to trace and identify missing migrants, and review policies that may exacerbate migrant disappearances. Nevertheless, few concrete steps have been taken by States in this regard and much more remains to be done. The ongoing documentation of deaths by IOM's MMP demonstrates the critical need for safe, orderly and legal pathways to migration, in line with international commitments, to reduce the toll of lives lost on the move.



People found in the desert during migration are loaded into an IOM vehicle to be transported to the IOM Migration Response Centre.
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³⁷ <https://www.achpr.org/sessions/resolutions?id=517>.