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IN FOCUS

Africa's continuing migration problem: Three issues

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COMMENTARY

Africa's continuing migration problem: Three issues

Migration from North Africa is back in the spotlight after the death of 23 migrants who tried to enter Spain's Melilla. The tragedy signals a larger migration problem between the two continents

Apoorva Sudhakar



Image Source: Blasco Avellaneda/AFP/The Guardian

Another tragedy has struck migrants moving from Africa to Europe. With pictures of migrants lying bleeding near the border fence and a mass grave for the deceased, the death of migrants has brought back the world's attention to one of the frequent migrant routes - from North Africa to southern Europe.

The Morocco tragedy

Migration can be legal and illegal in nature. Legal migration includes moving formally through official processes, securing jobs and educational visas, or moving in with families settled abroad. In the case of North Africa, sometimes migrants resort to irregular means like crossing the Mediterranean through dinghies and boats, often handled by smugglers to reach Europe.

On 25 June, Morocco's state news channel said at least 23 people had died while attempting to enter Spain's enclave Melilla, from Morocco - the highest recorded casualties in a few years. Over 200 people, including security personnel and other migrants, were wounded. According to a local government delegation's statement, around 2000 people had approached Melilla, of which

nearly 500 entered a border control area and 133 reached Melilla. Blaming human traffickers for the incident, Spain's prime minister Pedro Sanchez termed the migration attempt an attack on Spain's "territorial integrity." According to a Spanish news report, quoted by The Guardian, a survivor said the people crossing and the police threw stones at each other, causing panic and stampede which led to the deaths. The person also accused the Moroccan forces of being "very violent, more aggressive than other times."

On 27 June, the African Union Commission chairman Moussa Faki Mahamat expressed shock at the "degrading treatment of African migrants" and called for an investigation. Mahamat called on all countries to remember "their obligations under international law to treat all migrants with dignity." Similarly, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) spokesperson called on the European Union and the AU to ensure border governance measures, including safe migration paths, accessible individualised assessments, protection from collective expulsions and from refoulement, and from arbitrary arrest and detention.

The incident took place after the two countries resolved diplomatic tensions prevailing since 2021. In March 2022, Spain supported Morocco's claims to Western Sahara. BBC explains that Spain expected that supporting Morocco would ensure cooperation from the latter on the migration issue. Previously, in 2021,

Morocco broke ties with Spain after the latter offered treatment to a pro-independence leader of Western Sahara in a Spanish hospital. Further, when around 10,000 migrants crossed into another autonomous Spanish enclave, Ceuta, in May 2021, Morocco turned a blind eye, further deteriorating the ties.

From North Africa to Europe: Three Issues

First, Morocco as an origin, a transit and a destination. Moroccans have migrated to European countries in search of better jobs and opportunities. In 2021, a policy paper by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) mentions that over three million Moroccans live in EU countries, namely Italy, Spain, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. People of other nationalities accounted for less than 20,000 annually. Morocco also acts as a destination and transit point to Europe for several people migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, escaping conflict, violence, impacts of climate change, lack of opportunities, economic difficulties or poverty. Due to its geographical proximity, Morocco acts as a gateway to Europe, especially to two autonomous cities under Spain - Ceuta and Melilla located in North Africa. The KAS policy paper also explains that Morocco remains a destination for those who cannot migrate to Europe or those who tried to illegally migrate, but was detained.

Second, the larger North Africa to Europe migration. Apart from Morocco, Libya and Tunisia also act as transit points where people take the Mediterranean route to reach Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Malta and Spain. According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Tunisia and Algeria, along with Morocco, account for five million of the 11 million African migrants in Europe. However, the above four are entry points to Europe and not necessarily destinations for the migrants; destinations include France, Norway and Switzerland where enrolling in an education programme and family reunification

programmes were easier. For example, few of the earlier migrants who settled in Europe act as support systems for family members who migrate now.

Third, the humanitarian cost. The irregular routes taken by migrants to enter Europe are dangerous and often lead to the loss of lives. In 2015, when the migration crisis gained global attention, Amnesty International's data said since 2000, around 22,000 people had died trying to reach Europe. The International Organization of Migration (IOM) recorded 1,903 deaths in the Mediterranean and the Western Africa/Atlantic region, so far in 2022. The figures recorded over the years are 3157 (2021); 2326 (2020); 2087 (2019); 2380 (2018); 3140 (2017) and 5305 (2016). Apart from the casualties, human trafficking is also an equally important issue. In 2018, The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime published a policy note which said since 2014, over 600,000 migrants had boarded from Libya and arrived at the Italian shore and 12,000 died in the attempt. The IOM interviewed over 1000 people and found that at least 76 per cent of the respondents had encountered one indicator of trafficking and exploitation during the trip.

To conclude, the issue of migration, especially illegal, has been continuing for years. The five European countries that act as entry points have often called on the EU to share their burden. The latest incident may once again lead to the souring of relations within the EU and between Europe and North Africa.

Further, among illegal migrants, the casualties over the years have not reduced except after 2016 which witnessed over 5000 deaths. Since 2017, the deaths have reduced or increased by a few hundred without displaying any improvement, despite the pandemic and restriction of movement since 2020. Failure to resolve the problem will lead to magnifying

Africa's displacement, as is evident in Morocco and other North African countries like Libya, where sub-Saharan Africans reside due to inability and obstacles towards migrating safely. It is

also likely to result in continued human smuggling.

(Note: Parts of this commentary were previously published as a short note in the NIAS-IPRI-KAS Conflict Weekly)

Recent publications on Africa

Apoorva Sudhakar and Avishka Ashok, "China's interventions in the Horn of Africa," *The Hindu*, 29 June 2022

Sankalp Gurjar, "The Visit of Belgium King to the Democratic Republic of Congo: A Wasted Opportunity?," *Africa Weekly*, 21 June 2022

Apoorva Sudhakar, "DRC-Rwanda tensions: Latest developments and issues," *Africa Weekly*, 21 June 2022

Apoorva Sudhakar, "Africa's displacement crises: Three key drivers," *Africa Weekly*, 7 June 2022

Poulomi Mondal, "Communal Tensions in Ethiopia: Five drivers," *Africa Weekly*, 17 May 2022

S Shaji, "Sudan, three years after Omar al Bashir," *Conflict Weekly*, 11 May 2022

AFRICA IN BRIEF

21 June-28 June

By Apoorva Sudhakar

TUNISIA

Trade union head rejects IMF conditions

On 23 June, the head of the UGTT rejected the IMF's conditions to issue a loan to bail out Tunisia from its economic crisis. On 22 June, the IMF's regional director said the fund was ready to commence formal talks. The regional director said Tunisia would need to contain its civil service wage bill and replace generalized subsidies with transfers to the poor to address its fiscal imbalance. The UGTT head said though the union supports reforms, it does not support the vision of the current government, citing Tunisia's "low salaries, lack of means, rising poverty and unemployment." On 27 June, the UGTT called on government workers for a second general strike against the government's proposed measures to meet the IMF conditions ("[Tunisia trade unions chief rejects IMF reforms](#)," *France24*, 23 June 2022; Mike Thomson, "[Tunisia's top union calls another general strike](#)," *BBC*, 27 June 2022)

LIBYA

UN official calls for facilitation of return to electoral process

On 27 June, the UN political affairs chief called on the UN "to facilitate a return to the electoral process, based on a sound and consensual constitutional basis for elections," adding, "This is what the Libyan people have asked for." Referring to the rivalry between the government appointed by the House of Representatives and the UN-backed government, the UN official warned of an escalation of clashes between the rival groups if maximum restraint and dialogue are not maintained. ("[Libya: UN highlights need to speed up progress towards national elections](#)," *UN News*, 27 June 2022)

ETHIOPIA

Ruling party calls on AU to oversee peace talks

On 27 June, the ruling party called on the African Union to facilitate a peace process between the federal government and rebel forces from Tigray. The development comes weeks after prime minister Abiy Ahmed announced the formation of a committee to learn how the government should negotiate with the rebel forces. The committee's report paved the way for the Prosperity Party to call on the AU to monitor a peaceful resolution. ("[African Union should lead Tigray peace talks, Ethiopia's ruling party says](#)," *Reuters*, 28 June 2022)

SOMALIA

Hamza Barre sworn in as PM

On 26 June, all 220 members of parliament approved Hamza Abdi Barre as the new prime minister, thereby paving the way for a new government. Barre said he would create a government focused on inclusive political stability that would complement the president's vision of a "reconciled Somalia that is at peace with the world." Following the swearing-in of Barre, president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud tweeted: "Our government has an ambitious policy programme which seeks to improve our security, strengthen our economy and deliver basic services for our people." ("[Somali MPs approve new Prime Minister](#)," *Africanews*, 26 June 2022)

MALI

UN chief expresses shock over mass killings

On 22 June, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres issued a statement over reports of mass killings on 18 and 19 June by armed groups in central Mali. At the same time, similar attacks took place in

Mali's northeast. Totally, over 100 people were killed in the attacks and thousands displaced. Guterres called on Mali's military government to "redouble" efforts to establish peace and stability. ("[Mali: Guterres 'shocked and outraged' by reports of civilian massacres](#)," *UN News*, 22 June 2022)

BURKINA FASO

Civilians asked to evacuate for military operation against rebels

On 24 June, an army spokesperson said civilians living in northern and southeastern parts of Burkina Faso were notified to evacuate the region within 14 days, ahead of proposed military operations against rebels in the area. However, the spokesperson did not specify how long the civilians had to stay away and where they had to go. The development comes after nearly 100 people were killed and thousands displaced in a rebel attack on 11 June. ("[Burkina Faso: 14 days to evacuate before vast army operation](#)," *Al Jazeera*, 24 June 2022)

NIGERIA

State governments ask locals to use arms against gangs

On 27 June, BBC reported the Zamfara state government's directive to locals to arm themselves against criminal gangs involved in kidnapping and violence. The state government suggested it would help address the increasing insecurity, and has also ordered the closure of markets in a few districts, and banned motorcycles and the sale of petroleum products. A shoot-to-kill order was reportedly issued against those using motorcycles. (Rhoda Odhiambo, "[Nigerian state tells residents to take up arms against kidnap gangs](#)," *BBC*, 27 June 2022)

CAMEROON

Over 30 killed in Southwestern Region

On 27 June, a Reuters news report quoted sources who said at least 30 villagers had been killed in Southwestern Region; victims included women and children. The Presbyterian Church spokesperson said the massacre took place over a land dispute between Oliti and Messaga Ekol ethnic groups, dating back to violence that took place in April. The casualties also included five Nigerians. ("[More than 30 die in ethnic violence in Cameroon](#)," *News24*, 27 June 2022)

SOUTH AFRICA

Power company to increase load shedding

On 24 June, South Africa's state power company, Eskom, said it was forced to increase electricity cuts amid protests by workers demanding a 10 per cent hike in wages. With this, Eskom will increase the outages to Stage 4 from Stage 2, wherein 4000 megawatts will be shed. Eskom appealed to the labourers, unions and employees to consider the people of South Africa. Currently, despite having a 46,000 MW capacity, more than 20,000 MW could not be used because of breakdowns and maintenance. (Anait Miridzhian and Alexander Winning, "[Protests force South Africa's Eskom to widen power cuts](#)," *Reuters*, 24 June 2022)

REGIONAL

Sudan-Ethiopia: Khartoum recalls ambassador from Addis Ababa

On 26 June, Sudan's foreign ministry said it would recall its ambassador to Ethiopia and also summon Addis Ababa's ambassador over the alleged killing of seven Sudanese soldiers by the latter's military. On 25 June, Sudan claimed that seven soldiers had been captured by Ethiopia on Sudan's territory on 22 June, killed and their bodies hung in Ethiopia's public. However, on 27 June, Ethiopia denied Sudan's claims and alleged that Sudanese soldiers entered Ethiopian

territory, thus leading to skirmishes between the two sides. ("[Sudan recalls envoy to Ethiopia after execution of seven soldiers](#)," *Al Jazeera*, 27 June 2022)

INTERNATIONAL

Commonwealth meet commences in Rwanda

On 24 June, delegations from 54 countries of the British Commonwealth met in Rwanda for the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). From the UK, Prince Charles and prime minister Boris Johnson were present. Referring to slavery under the colonial rule, Prince Charles expressed "personal sorrow at the suffering of so many." Around 10 million Africans were enslaved by Britain and other European colonisers between the 15th and 19th century. Meanwhile, on 25 June, Gabon

and Togo who were not British colonies were admitted into the Commonwealth. Togo's foreign minister said they joined the Commonwealth "to expand its diplomatic, political and economic network." Similarly, Gabon's foreign minister said joining the Commonwealth could assist the country in economic diversification. Previously, Rwanda and Mozambique who were not British colonies also joined the Commonwealth. (Ayenat Mersie and Clement Uwiringiyimana, "[Prince Charles expresses sorrow over slavery in Commonwealth speech](#)," *Reuters*, 24 June 2022; James Tasamba, "[Gabo, Togo join Commonwealth association](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, 26 June 2022)

About the authors

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About NIAS Africa Studies

As a part of the area studies initiatives, the Institute started a focussed study on Pakistan in 2020. In 2021, it expanded the area studies to include Europe Studies, China Reader, and Maritime Studies. In 2022, the Science, Technology and International Relations (STIR) programme at the Institute is further expanding its area studies, to include Africa.

The primary focus of NIAS Africa studies would be on the following five verticals: contemporary political issues, colonial legacies, problems of governance, civil-military equations, and the rise of radical Islamic groups. The primary objective is to study Africa from an internal prism. ,

NIAS Africa Studies would include a series of expert lectures, workshops, publications and a weekly exclusively focussed on Africa. The initiative also aims to create a network of young scholars studying Africa and also African scholars studying in various Indian institutions.

About the team

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