

# Spain: refugees killed, survivors abandoned in Moroccan desert

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For weeks European television news reports have showed images of bloody and battered migrants attempting to scale the militarized fence separating Morocco from the Spanish colonial outposts of Ceuta and Melilla. Five were shot to death while trying to scale the border fence to get into Ceuta and six more died in “clashes” with Moroccan and Spanish security forces in Melilla.

This is the brutal and tragic end for people who have endured terrifying 2,400-mile trips from the poorest sub-Saharan African countries such as Cameroon, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. Many migrants have travelled up to two years to escape from civil wars, dictatorships, droughts and famine only to be beaten by Moroccan and Spanish border troops and forcibly repatriated. Human rights organizations have described this policy as a breach of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of refugees.

A report on SignonSandiego.com described the experiences of one refugee en route to Morocco, “Along the way, he saw the unspeakable—men so thirsty they drank their own urine, then begged others for theirs, hunger bordering on madness, skin cracking under a searing sun, horrendous, gushing nosebleeds.... Next came 18 months in a hillside pine forest in Morocco, hiding from baton-wielding police by day, sneaking out at night to eat from trash cans and dodging bandits. His destination, this Spanish enclave on North Africa’s coast...”

The European Union (EU) has financed the militarization of the Spanish border with Africa as part of its “Fortress Europe” strategy. On October 11, Amnesty International published a press release saying, “The present dire situation in North Africa, where people trying to gain entry to EU territory are reportedly being shot dead, or even dumped in the desert without food or water, relates directly to pressure exerted by EU countries to strengthen fortress Europe.”

EU Justice and Security Commissioner Franco Frattini heightened tensions by telling EU ministers, according to a copy of his speech notes, “Intelligence suggests that around 20,000 immigrants are waiting in Algeria ready to begin their journey to Morocco and then Ceuta and Melilla with another 10,000 already waiting in Morocco.”

Frattini responded to Spain’s request for more assistance, adding that “we are going to send the message to the Moroccans that Europe stands ready to commit itself very quickly on the ground as well, but Europe requires a strong and clear commitment on the part of Morocco.”

Spain and the EU have steadily choked off all unofficial routes

into Europe for the most impoverished, with joint naval patrols cutting off access to the Spanish mainland via the Mediterranean and Atlantic Ocean. Since 1997 conservative estimates put migrant deaths by drowning at more than 4,000. Many of the boats are unsafe and overcrowded and suspicions abound that Spanish naval security has ignored boats in distress despite having some of the most advanced radar systems in the world.

According to eyewitness accounts from Melilla, Spain’s notorious Civil Guard beat those who managed to get onto the Spanish side of the fence and forcibly “repatriated” those it captured. The injured and dying were literally picked up, a gate in the border fence was opened and they were dumped in Morocco at the mercy of troops. Spanish authorities have refused to condemn or investigate the conduct of the Civil Guard and have instead praised their professionalism under duress. Abdela Bendhiba, Moroccan governor of Nador, described his troop’s actions as “within the bounds of legitimate self-defence.”

Those who scaled the fence and later gave themselves up expecting to be treated under the statutes of the Geneva Convention now face immediate deportation back to Morocco by the Spanish authorities. Wolfgang Grenz of Amnesty International stated, “It would be a fatal decision that Spain opts out of obligations to the Geneva Convention on protection of refugees.”

Responding to the scenes broadcast on Spanish television, the Socialist Party (PSOE) prime minister of Spain, Jose Luiz Zapatero, sent 500 more soldiers—not to relieve the humanitarian crisis but to reinforce the “security” of Spain’s border, proclaiming this his top priority. Zapatero had already ordered the perimeter fence to be doubled to a height of six meters. According to one report the authorities approached high-tech specialists in corporate security systems to use the latest technology to track the movement of migrants along the border fence.

The Spanish government is resurrecting its 1992 accord signed with Morocco and has demanded more finance from the EU. The revived accord allows the expulsion of “illegal entrants” back to Morocco, even if they are of different nationality. Zapatero said of reviving this accord, “We are going to begin repatriations to Morocco.... That’s something which has never happened before but now it will happen.”

After visiting Melilla, Deputy Prime Minister Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega was unrepentant. “In the coming hours, probably tomorrow or the next day, illegal immigrants will be returned to Morocco,” she said.

Interior Minister Javier Antonio Alonso was reported to have threatened, “The message for immigrants without papers must be clear: those who come in leave immediately.”

French-based Doctors without Borders (MSF) has filed an urgent request to the Spanish government to respect the rights of refugees and suspend its program of forced repatriations to Morocco. Its request was rejected, and a flight left Spain for Tangiers on October 7, the first of many planned “repatriations.”

Doctors without Borders says it has evidence that Moroccan troops are forcing refugees, including children, pregnant women and the injured, onto buses and abandoning them to die in the remote desert between Morocco and Algeria. According to the charity, the buses were hired by the Moroccan Interior Ministry. Doctors without Borders spokesman Carlos Ugarte reported, “We are hearing that the Moroccan police took them away in the direction of the southwest ... that is the desert.... The camp (containing the other nationalities) is no longer there and there are signs there was a struggle.”

*El Pais* interviewed Javier Gabaldon, a Spanish doctor. “The immigrants’ situation is awful,” he said. “Aside from the injuries caused by the fence wires and the bruises from the Moroccan and Spanish police—of which there are many—about 80 of them are starving and suffering from thirst. We have distributed 400 litres of water and 180 packets of cookies and we have had to do this carefully because they were clawing at us for food. They have been robbed of everything on this route, and they survive only due to the compassion of the local villagers.”

SOS Racismo spokeswoman Elena Maleno told Spanish state radio that they had located three convoys taking people into the desert on Sunday. “One is made up of nine buses, in another there are seven and the other left from Tangiers with several buses including one full of women and babies.”

Eyewitness Guy-Rostand Tembon described what happened: “The Moroccans marched us off buses at night, some 20 kilometres from the Algerian border.... They hit us and women and youngsters were attacked. Then we walked towards the border—but the Algerians were waiting for us with guns trained on us.... We are desperate. Please do something for us.... We’re in a hole—we don’t know where to go. The women are sick. Algeria refuses to let us in and the first town of Oujda is 500 kilometres away.”

The *Independent* reported that after severe criticism from human rights organizations, Moroccan authorities began rounding up those it had earlier abandoned. “On Saturday, convoys of Moroccan police and military vehicles were transporting the Africans yet again, to Oujda on Morocco’s northern border with Algeria, where Senegalese and Malians were to be flown home.... The fate of Africans from other countries, however, remained unclear, amid reports they were to be trucked to the western Sahara and abandoned yet again, to die of hunger and thirst,” the newspaper reported.

Anti-immigrant hysteria is being whipped up on both sides of the border, with one Moroccan newspaper report headlined, “Black locusts invade the north of Morocco.”

Enrique Santiago, secretary general of the Spanish Commission for Assistance to Refugees (CEAR), described the repressive measures by Moroccan troops that led to a humanitarian crisis in

the African encampments.

“The Moroccan government is working with the Spanish on immigration control and has started to use methods which fail to respect national accords in relation to human rights,” he said. “This has led to a systematic harassment of the camps where sub-Saharan immigrants hide out on the other side of the border.”

Interviewed in *El Pais*, Abu Baber from Mali described the circumstances that led to the desperate scenes. “Until a few months ago, the Moroccan soldiers would come to the camp with their sticks once a month. But for the last few weeks it’s been three times a day.”

Beri Amudi from Guinea-Bissau told the newspaper how troops had so tightly surrounded them that they couldn’t get drinking water, “People started to drink from the stream but they became ill. In the end the guys from Doctors without Borders came and made the agents let us drink. I thought we were going to die of thirst.”

Esteban Beltran, Amnesty International’s director for Spain, added that the authorities expelled the immigrants without identifying them or considering their possible status, in violation of the Geneva Convention, which also forbids the expulsion of any person to a country where they could be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment. “Torture and bad treatment is endemic in Morocco,” he said.

Beltran described the implications of policies pursued by Spain and Morocco:

“No immigrant can be deported unless he has been identified, with a lawyer present, and his case heard. Collective expulsions are contrary to international law and, if carried out with violence and the prospect of death, could be considered a crime against humanity.”



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