

Desperate African immigrants risk crossing to Canary Islands

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As the borders of Fortress Europe are increasingly reinforced Africans immigrants desperate to escape poverty and civil strife are resorting to ever more hazardous measures in an attempt to reach the continent.

The borders of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the Moroccan mainland have been effectively sealed with six-metre high fences. There are intensive naval patrols on the seas off the southern coast of Spain, especially in the region of Gibraltar, where the gap between Africa and Europe is at its narrowest, about 13 kilometres (8 miles) wide.

As these routes become increasingly difficult, more and more immigrants are attempting the hazardous sea journey to the Canary Islands. The Canaries are Spanish territory off the coast of Morocco in the Atlantic. Whilst they have been one option for would be immigrants for quite a number of years, there has been a recent surge in the numbers attempting the journey.

Morocco and the Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara are adjacent to the Canaries and the logical starting point for a sea journey to the islands. Since 2005, following demands from the Spanish government, the Moroccan authorities have tightened up border and coastal patrols. Previously traffickers would smuggle potential immigrants into Western Sahara from the town of Zouerat in Mauritania by bribing Moroccan guards and police.

In response to the actions of the Moroccan authorities the traffickers are now operating out of Mauritania. The most popular point of departure is from around the port area of Nouadhibou, which lies in the very north of Mauritania nearest to the Western Sahara border. From here they face an over 500-mile trip to the Canary Islands. Whereas the safest method would be to hug the

coast on the journey north, the presence of patrol boats off the Moroccan coast means that the boats, loaded with immigrants, are pushing further out in the Atlantic making the journey even more dangerous.

Pressure is now being exerted on Mauritania to reduce the numbers trying to reach the Canaries from their territory. A report on the news web site EUobserver.com stated that on March 16 officials from the Spanish foreign and interior ministries had participated in discussions with Mauritanian government officials. EUobserver.com described it as an “emergency trip.”

Speaking to Spanish media, Bernardino Leon stated, “This is an international problem, and it is also necessary that the European Union and Africa commit themselves to confronting it.”

Spain is offering patrol boats and help in setting up detention centres in Mauritania to hold immigrants expelled from the EU prior to trying to repatriate them. Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar the Mauritanian prime minister was quoted in the Spanish media, “We cannot resist this growing pressure. We need help.... A country cannot confront a phenomenon like this alone. We need help of all types: planes, boats, vehicles.”

Authorities in Mauritania estimate around half a million sub-Saharaners are currently in the country waiting to attempt the journey north, the majority of them from the West African countries of Senegal and Mali.

Putting the squeeze on boats leaving Mauritania would mean immigrants beginning their journeys further down the West African coast from countries such as Senegal. A British *Guardian* newspaper report on March 27 explained; “one vessel that sailed into the Tenerife resort of Los Cristianos last week, with about 70 people on board, was 20 metres long and decorated

in Senegalese style.”

The article went on to quote a report that had appeared in Spain’s *La Vanguardia*. Citing claims by the Spanish police that they believed the boat had come from the Senegal port of Saint-Louis, it continued, “A police source said he was surprised, not by the fact that this had happened, but that a new route to rival that from Nouadhibou had opened up so quickly.”

Many of the vessels making the perilous journey from Mauritania are known as “pirogues.” These are dug-out canoes around 10 metres long with an outboard motor fixed on the back. The boats are open to the elements and have insufficient lifejackets or protective clothing. The traffickers send to sea the immigrants —60 to 70 crammed in a boat—with only a hand-held compass for guidance. They have no phone or radios to summon help in an emergency.

A British Broadcasting Corporation news report from the Canary Islands on April 4 gave a picture of the journeys endured. It spoke to one man from Mali who had arrived on a boat that day after being at sea four days. Another man, Siad, had also made the journey. In a harrowing account, he described a voyage without food and water, surrounded by people that were constantly being sick. Explaining why he was prepared to put up with such conditions he added, “You can only understand it if you come from where I come from.”

It is the extreme poverty in their own countries that drives many thousands of African immigrants to risk their lives. On March 27, Reuters news agency carried a report under the subheading “Migrate or Die.” This explained, “Many of the estimated 10,000-15,000 sub-Saharan Africans in Nouadhibou (Mauritania) trying to scrape together the 150,000 OUGUIYA (£326) needed to buy a place on a boat are ready to risk their lives ... simply to work. More than two-thirds of the population of West Africa are under 30 ... unemployment in some countries tops 50 percent, leaving many with no hope of finding a job.”

It is this that accounts for the fact that, despite the dangers, the numbers attempting to make the journey are increasing. An Associated Press report of April 5 reported that over 4,000 people have made the crossing to the Canary Islands since the beginning of the year, compared to 4,751 for the whole of last year.

For all those who succeed in making it to the islands there are many others who perish on the way. The Red

Cross estimates around a 1,000 have died in the attempt this year. Others put the figure higher. Manuel Pombo, a Spanish ambassador-at-large, estimates that 40 percent of those attempting the journey die in the attempt. It has now become a regular event that bodies of African immigrants wash up on various tourist beaches on the Canary Islands.

The majority of those who succeed in making it to the islands are repatriated to their African country of origin; a few are sent on to Spain where they are dumped and left to fend for themselves.



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