

Spain: Amnesty International details abuse of migrants

Marcus Morgan
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A report published by Amnesty International details the worsening situation facing many migrants from the sub-Saharan African region at the hands of both the Moroccan and Spanish authorities.

Thousands of migrants risked their lives to make the perilous journey from Africa to Spain and other European Union countries last year, in a desperate bid to seek a life free from destitution and war. Many fare little better when they reach their supposed destination of safety.

The report raises serious concerns over the mistreatment and death of migrants trying to cross the Spanish Moroccan border at the Spanish enclave regions of Ceuta and Melilla.

Amnesty states that asylum-seekers it interviewed had not been given any legal assistance upon entry into Spanish territory, or given an opportunity to apply for asylum status. A spokesperson said, “The authorities of Spain and Morocco not only used excessive force to forcibly return migrants and asylum-seekers, in many cases they expelled them immediately and en masse to countries where they could be at risk of torture or other ill-treatment.”

Spain and Morocco have signed “readmission agreements,” which enable them to deport people to countries where they face the risk of serious human rights violations. This practice, known as *refoulement*, is prohibited under international refugee law.

The report also voices concerns that one year after the deaths of 13 people and the wounding of hundreds more seeking to cross into Ceuta and Melilla, no investigation or disciplinary action has taken place.

In some cases deaths and injuries on the border appear to be the result of people falling from the fences whilst trying to climb over them. The border is a very hazardous obstacle, constructed by two razor-wire-

topped fences up to six metres in height and several metres apart, bristling with surveillance cameras and infra-red sensors. It is regularly patrolled by the border guards. Even the Independent Association of the Civil Guard has raised concerns with the Spanish government over the fence, stating, “It is made of wires and stakes and when the migrants fall from a six metre height [they] are torn to pieces.”

In other cases, bodies were recovered with bullet wounds. There were also claims that some people were beaten by the Spanish Civil Guard and dumped back on the Moroccan side of the fence without receiving any medical attention.

An Amnesty International delegate sent to the region observed, “The evidence we saw showed that law enforcement officials used force which is both unlawful and disproportionate, including lethal weapons. They injured and killed people trying to cross the fence. Many of those seriously injured inside Spanish territory were pushed back through the fence doors without any legal formality or medical assistance.”

In September 2005, at least four people were killed by bullets whilst attempting to get over the high security fence. In July this year three further deaths occurred in the same area of the border, where witnesses reported sounds of gunfire.

Many of the incidents involved the use of rubber bullets, firearms and rifle butts as the migrants climb over the fence. These brutal acts are in clear violation of Spanish law, which stipulates that migrants have a right to legal advice and an interpreter. The authorities have tried to shirk this responsibility by claiming that the narrow space between the fences is territory where Spanish law does not apply—a kind of legal limbo.

Despite the very considerable risks, migrants who fail to get through on one occasion repeatedly attempt the

crossing, a sure indicator of real hardship and desperation.

Aside from the increasing brutality that is meted out to those attempting the perilous journey, there have also been numerous reports of Spain forcibly returning migrants to the Moroccan authorities, who in turn have dumped thousands in the desert on the Algerian border and ordered them to walk to the nearest village, despite their having little food or water. There is at least one report of a man dying from heat exhaustion after walking back through the desert.

Those who do not succumb to dehydration are often picked up by Algerian soldiers and told to go back. There are also hundreds in Morocco being held in police and military bases.

The tightening of border security in the region has driven many thousands to take to the seas as an alternative route into the European Union. Many hundreds have been picked up attempting to cross from Mauritania to the Canary Islands. In March alone, 2,129 were intercepted—a sharp rise on the year before.

In an effort to curb the influx, the Spanish government has increased equipment and training for border patrols of boats and aircraft, with the backing of many EU members, including France, Germany and Britain. These efforts have only served to drive the migration routes further south to Senegal, where the 2,000-kilometre journey is even more dangerous. The total number of people arriving in the Canary Islands exceeded 25,000 this year—more than five times the number in 2005. An estimated 3,000 people are thought to have died making the crossing in poorly equipped fishing boats. There has also been a similar rise in the number of immigrants to Italy from Morocco. More than 10,000 have arrived in the region around the island of Sicily.

Most of those detected appear to originate from the West African countries of Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia. There are also many from Central Africa. The reasons given for fleeing their home countries are severe poverty and war, and no prospects that life will get better if they stay.



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