

United Nations High Commissions for Refugees



**Measures to Enhance the Protection of Refugees and Migrants
along the Mediterranean Route**

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1. Introduction to the Topic

The Mediterranean Route remains one of the most significant pathways for refugees and migrants seeking safety and stability in Europe. The causes of migration along this route are diverse and complex, ranging from armed conflict and political persecution to extreme poverty and severe human rights violations, particularly in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Sudan, and Libya. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), thousands of individuals risk their lives each year trying to reach Europe through the Mediterranean Sea.

During these journeys, many refugees and migrants are exposed to serious human rights abuses, including sexual violence, exploitation, human trafficking, forced labor, and even torture. In addition, harsh weather conditions and unsafe vessels make the Central Mediterranean Route one of the deadliest migration routes in the world. Subsequently, the growing humanitarian crisis in the region requires urgent and coordinated international action.

It is essential that the international community adopts effective measures to strengthen the protection of human rights, establish safe and legal migration pathways, improve search-and-rescue operations at sea, enhance international cooperation between states and organizations, and protect vulnerable individuals from smugglers and human traffickers. Furthermore, greater support should be provided to humanitarian organizations operating in the Mediterranean region in order to ensure adequate assistance, protection, and dignity for all affected persons

2. Definition of Key Terms

2.1 Refugee

A refugee is a person who has been forced to flee their country because of persecution, war, violence, or fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

2.2 Migrant

A migrant is a person who moves away from their usual place of residence, either within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, for various reasons.

2.3 Human Trafficking

Human trafficking refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through force, coercion, fraud, or deception for the purpose of exploitation.

2.4 Smuggling of Migrants

The smuggling of migrants is the procurement of illegal entry into a country for financial or material benefit.

2.5 Asylum Seeker

An asylum seeker is a person who has applied for international protection and whose claim for refugee status has not yet been decided.

2.6 Internally Displaced Person (IDP)

Internally displaced persons are people who have been forced to flee their homes but have not crossed an internationally recognized border.

3. Background Information

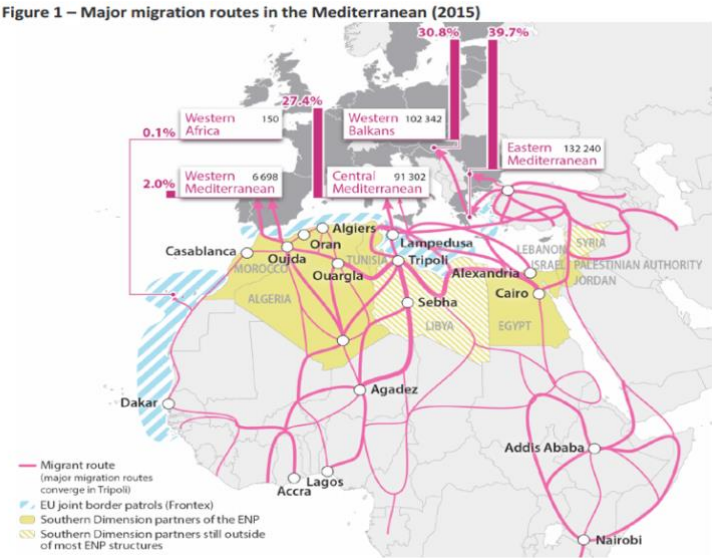
3.1 Overview of the Mediterranean Route

The Mediterranean Route is one of the main migration pathways used by refugees and migrants attempting to reach Europe from Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. The route is commonly divided into three major pathways:

- I. the Western Mediterranean Route
- II. the Central Mediterranean Route
- III. and the Eastern Mediterranean Route

Among these, the Central Mediterranean Route, mainly connecting North Africa to countries such as Italy and Malta, is considered the deadliest migration route in the world. Many individuals travel in overcrowded and unsafe boats operated by smuggling networks, often risking their lives at sea. According to the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), thousands of refugees and migrants attempt to cross the Mediterranean every year in search of safety, protection, and better living conditions.



3.2 Countries of Origin

The refugees, who mostly flee due to crises such as wars, climate change, political instability, poverty, or human rights violations, mainly come from following countries:

- I. Syria
- II. Afghanistan
- III. Eritrea
- IV. Libya
- V. Sudan
- VI. Somalia

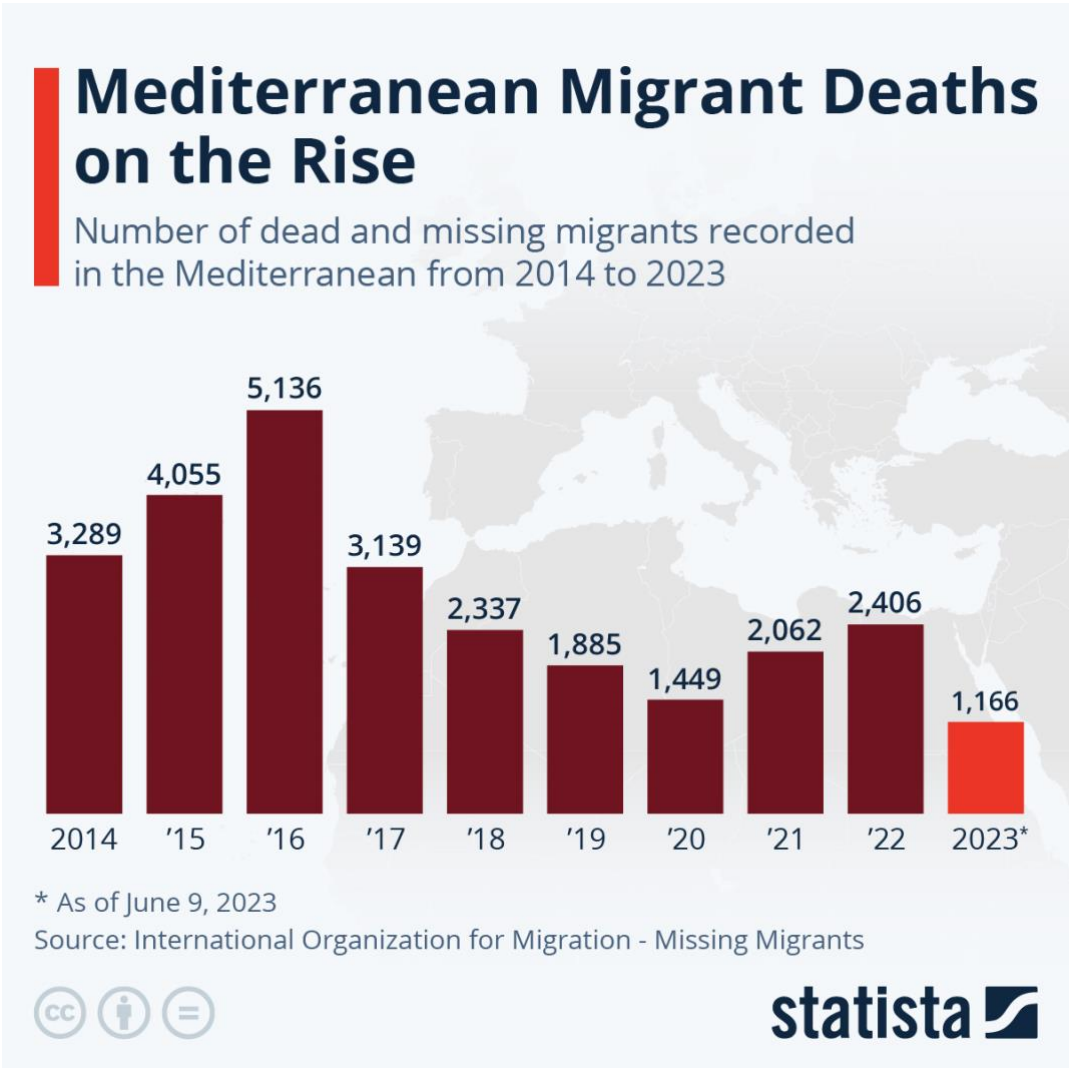
3.3 Causes of Migration and Displacement

The reasons for undertaking the high-risk Central Mediterranean route are diverse and complex. A key factor is armed conflict, which leads to political instability, violence against civilians, and general insecurity. Human rights violations, including discrimination, torture, political persecution, and forced recruitment, also significantly contribute to displacement. In addition, economic conditions play a major role, as unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity push many people to search for safer and more stable living conditions. The increasing impact of climate change further intensifies these pressures, causing droughts, flooding, crop failures, and growing resource scarcity. Overall, these factors often interact and reinforce one another,

leaving many individuals with limited alternatives other than migration despite the significant risks involved in the journey.

3.4 The Humanitarian Situation in the Mediterranean

The humanitarian situation along the Mediterranean routes is extremely critical. Refugees and migrants are exposed to numerous dangers, including perilous sea crossings, inadequate medical care, exploitation, human trafficking, and abuse. Thousands of people have lost their lives or have gone missing while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, many refugees are confronted with overcrowded reception facilities, insufficient access to food, water, sanitation, and healthcare, as well as severe psychological stress caused by displacement, violence, and uncertainty regarding their legal status. The international community and the responsible authorities are therefore called upon to strengthen humanitarian assistance, ensure the protection of human rights, improve search-and-rescue operations, and address the root causes of forced migration.



4. Major Challenges

4.1 Humanitarian Crisis at Sea

Thousands of refugees and migrants lose their lives each year while attempting to reach what is often perceived as a “safe Europe.” Overcrowded boats, dangerous weather conditions, and insufficient rescue capacities contribute significantly to the high number of deaths at sea. In addition, many migrants become victims of human trafficking and smuggling networks. Criminal organizations exploit vulnerable people for profit, exposing them to violence, sexual abuse, forced labor, and other forms of exploitation. Since these networks often operate across borders, international cooperation is essential to combat them effectively.

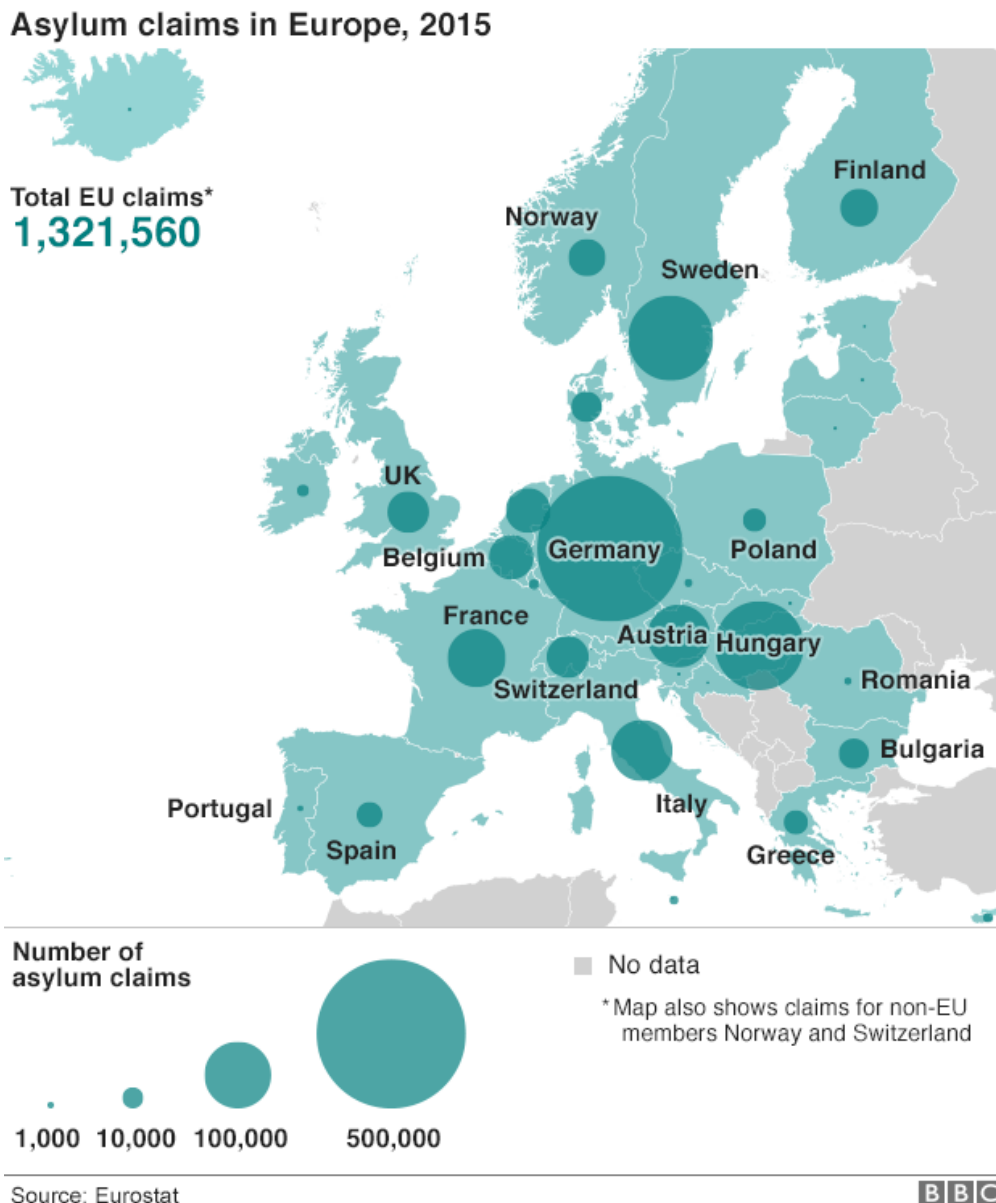
4.2 Human Rights Violations and Poor Living Conditions

Refugees and migrants frequently face serious violations of their human rights. Reports include arbitrary violence, torture, detention, and restricted access to asylum procedures. Furthermore, refugee camps and detention centers in countries such as Greece and Italy are often overcrowded and underfunded. Many facilities lack adequate sanitation, healthcare, food supplies, and protection services, increasing the risk of disease, violence, and psychological trauma.

4.3 Political and Structural Challenges in Europe

A major challenge is the lack of safe and legal migration pathways. Due to limited access to visas, asylum procedures, and resettlement programmes many refugees and migrants

to take dangerous routes across the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time, European states often disagree on the distribution of responsibility for receiving and relocating refugees. As a result, Mediterranean countries face disproportionate pressure in managing migration flows and maintaining effective asylum systems.



5. International Involvement

5.1 Role of the United Nations

The United Nations play a central role in addressing issues related to the Mediterranean Route. Various UN organizations cooperate in order to protect human rights, provide medical and humanitarian assistance, and strengthen international cooperation in response to the ongoing migration crisis.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) primarily focuses on:

- the protection of refugees and asylum seekers,
- the provision of emergency assistance,

- the support of resettlement programmes,
- and ensuring access to international protection and asylum procedures.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) supports:

- vulnerable children,
- unaccompanied minors,
- educational programmes,
- child protection measures,
- and access to healthcare and psychological support.

Furthermore, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) combats:

- human trafficking,
- migrant smuggling,
- transnational organized crime,
- and the exploitation of vulnerable migrants and refugees.

In addition, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) contributes through:

- humanitarian assistance,
- voluntary return programmes,
- migration management initiatives,
- and the collection of migration-related data.

5.2 Role of the European Union (EU)

The European Union is one of the principal actors responding to migration in the Mediterranean region. The EU cooperates closely with its member states, UN organizations, and transit countries in order to manage migration flows, strengthen border security, and coordinate humanitarian responses.

Major measures implemented by the European Union include:

- the financing of humanitarian assistance,
- strengthened border protection through surveillance systems and border control operations,
- support for search and rescue missions at sea,

- reforms of the European asylum system,
- and cooperation with transit countries to combat irregular migration and smuggling networks.

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency, commonly known as Frontex, is responsible for:

- coordinating border control operations,
- assisting member states in managing external borders,
- supporting anti-smuggling operations,
- and improving information sharing between European countries.

Nevertheless, the migration policies of the European Union remain controversial, particularly regarding:

- detention conditions for migrants,
- unequal burden sharing among member states,
- pushback allegations at borders,
- and balancing border security with the protection of human rights and international humanitarian law.

5.3 Role of NGOs and Humanitarian Organizations

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and humanitarian organizations play an essential role in protecting refugees and migrants throughout the Mediterranean region. These organizations often provide immediate assistance in areas where governmental support is limited or insufficient.

Many NGOs provide:

- emergency medical care,
- food and shelter,
- legal assistance,
- rescue operations at sea,
- psychological support,
- and humanitarian aid for vulnerable families and children.

One important humanitarian organization is Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), which is involved in:

- conducting rescue operations in the Mediterranean,
- providing emergency medical treatment,
- and supporting migrants rescued at sea.

Another major organization is the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), which contributes through:

- emergency relief operations,
- humanitarian assistance in refugee camps and reception centers,
- disaster response coordination,
- and healthcare support for displaced persons.

In addition to humanitarian aid, many organizations also focus on:

- documenting human rights violations,
- advocating for stronger international protection mechanisms,
- promoting refugee rights,
- and improving living conditions in refugee camps and detention centers.

Despite their important contributions, NGOs continue to face major challenges, including:

- financial difficulties,
- political criticism,
- legal restrictions on rescue operations,
- limited resources,
- and increasing pressure from national governments.

6. Previous Actions and International Agreements

6.1 Geneva Refugee Convention (1951) and 1967 Protocol

The cornerstone of international refugee protection is the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. It establishes key legal principles:

- The definition of a refugee as a person with a well-founded fear of persecution
- The principle of non-refoulement, prohibiting the return of individuals to countries where they would face serious harm
- The right to seek asylum
- Fundamental rights (access to courts, education, employment, etc.)

The Convention remains the primary legal framework for international refugee protection and is widely recognized as a binding standard for States that have ratified it.

6.2 EU Migration and Asylum Policy

The European Union has developed a comprehensive legal framework for the management of migration and asylum.

- The Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which sets minimum standards for asylum procedures and reception conditions
- The Dublin Regulation, which determines which EU Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application
- The Schengen Borders Code, which regulates controls at internal and external borders

Recent reforms of the European asylum system aim to improve solidarity among Member States. In addition, asylum procedures are to be accelerated and cooperation with third countries such as Albania is to be strengthened. Furthermore, border security is intended to be reinforced. Critics question whether these reforms will achieve the desired outcomes.

6.4 Search and Rescue (SAR) Operations in the Mediterranean

Search and rescue operations are a critical component of previous international responses in the Mediterranean.

Key actors include:

- EU Member States with coastal responsibilities (e.g. Italy)
- Frontex operations
- Civilian rescue NGOs

These actors focus on locating vessels in distress, rescuing migrants, and providing immediate medical assistance. In addition, they ensure transport to safe European ports. Despite ongoing SAR operations, safe rescue is still not guaranteed due to ongoing disputes between States (e.g. regarding the allocation of rescued persons and vessels).

6.5 International Cooperation with Transit Countries

The EU cooperates with transit countries such as Libya and Tunisia in order to manage and limit migration flows. In this context, the EU provides financial and technical assistance for border management, training of coast guards and security forces. Furthermore, cooperation includes efforts to combat human trafficking and support return programmes in cooperation with North African states. Critics emphasize that protection mechanisms for refugees in these transit countries remain insufficient.

7. Useful links/Sources

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