

## Dangerous journeys – International migration increasingly unsafe in 2016

On 19 September 2016, leaders from around the world will meet at the United Nations in New York to discuss how to address “large movements of refugees and migrants”.<sup>1</sup> One of the issues for discussion will be how to ensure that migration is “orderly, safe, regular and responsible”,<sup>2</sup> as the number of migrant deaths around the world continues to rise significantly. Worldwide, IOM’s Missing Migrants Project has recorded **23 per cent more migrant deaths during the first half of 2016 compared with the same period in 2015**.

This data briefing, produced by the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) Global Migration Data Analysis Centre in Berlin, takes an in-depth look at the available global figures for migrant deaths and disappearances during the first half of 2016. In the first six months of 2016, more than 3,700 people went missing or lost their lives during migration around the world. This is a 23 per cent increase compared to the same time period in 2015, and a 52 per cent increase for the same time period in 2014. This dramatic change can be attributed to a higher number of recorded migrant fatalities in the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. The number of people who went missing or died during migration in other regions of the world is comparable with the same period in 2015, with some differences – including a reduction in the recorded number of deaths by drowning in the Caribbean and South-East Asia.

### THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

Worldwide, the Mediterranean Sea continues to greatly outweigh other regions in terms of the number of people who are recorded missing and/or dead during the process of migration. Of the recorded deaths from January to June 2016, 78 per cent (2,901) were in the Mediterranean, compared with 60 per cent during the same period in 2015. This high proportion is partly due to the fact that the reporting of migrant fatalities in the Mediterranean has received more attention than in other regions. Figure 1 illustrates the high proportion of recorded missing and dead in the Mediterranean Sea during the first half of 2016.

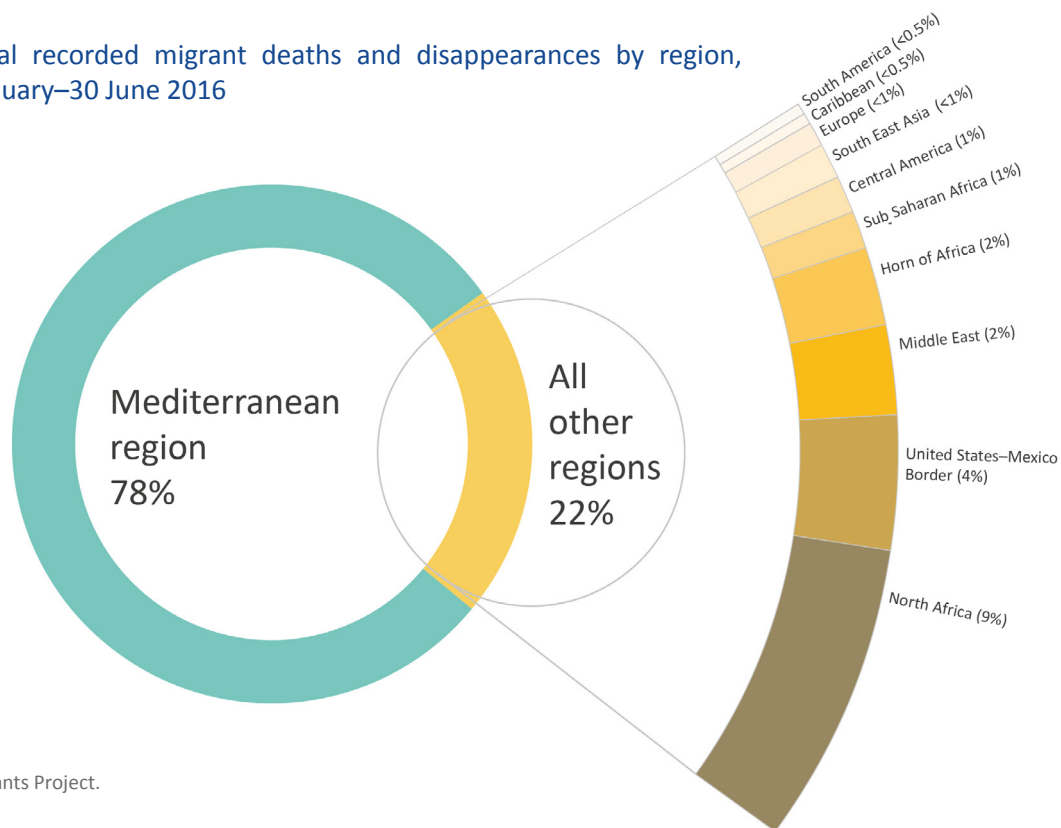
The first half of 2016 saw a 37 per cent increase in the number of recorded deaths and disappearances across the Mediterranean Sea, compared to the same period in 2015. Although the Eastern Mediterranean has seen a decline in the number of reported deaths following the agreement between the European Union and Turkey,<sup>3</sup> the large number of fatalities in both the Central and Western Mediterranean meant that by mid-year 2016, 1,068 more deaths and disappearances were recorded in the region than for the same period in 2015. The following sections provide context for this escalating humanitarian crisis by discussing the increased number of deaths on the Eastern, Central and Western Mediterranean routes. The number of fatalities would have been much higher, had it not been for the increasing efforts to support search-and-

1 United Nations, Summit for Refugees and Migrants, 19 September 2016. Available from <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/summit>

2 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) (n.d.), Goal 10 – Reduce inequality within and among countries. Available from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg10>

3 European Council (2016). Statement of the EU Heads of State or Government, 07/03/2016. Available from [www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/07-eu-turkey-meeting-statement/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/07-eu-turkey-meeting-statement/)

**Figure 1:** Global recorded migrant deaths and disappearances by region, 1 January–30 June 2016



Source: Missing Migrants Project.

rescue operations in the Mediterranean region. Over the past three years, hundreds of thousands of people have been rescued from the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

### Eastern Mediterranean

In 2015, an unprecedented 847,930 people crossed the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece. The top three countries of origin were Syrian Arab Republic (56.1%), Afghanistan (24.3%) and Iraq (10.3%).<sup>7</sup>

IOM's Missing Migrants Project recorded 806 deaths in this stretch of water in 2015. In 2016, 275 drownings occurred in January, the most deaths recorded in a

single month in the Eastern Mediterranean. Following the implementation of the European Union-Turkey Agreement on 20 March 2016, arrivals to Greece decreased by 98 per cent, and no deaths were recorded on this route in both May and June.<sup>8</sup> A total of 376 deaths were recorded in the Eastern Mediterranean in the first six months of 2016.

### Central Mediterranean

As in 2015, the majority of people who died or went missing in the Mediterranean Sea in the first six months of 2016 crossed the Central Mediterranean. In the first half of 2016, 1 in 24 migrants died attempting the Central Mediterranean crossing, compared with 1 in 400 on the eastern route. The high rate of death in the Central Mediterranean compared to other routes is due to two main factors: (a) the significantly longer overseas journey; and (b) more dangerous smuggling strategies, as explained below.

Crossing from North Africa to Italy via the Central Mediterranean is a journey of several hundred kilometres, compared to the dozen or so required to travel the eastern or western routes. Additionally, boats used in the Central Mediterranean are significantly

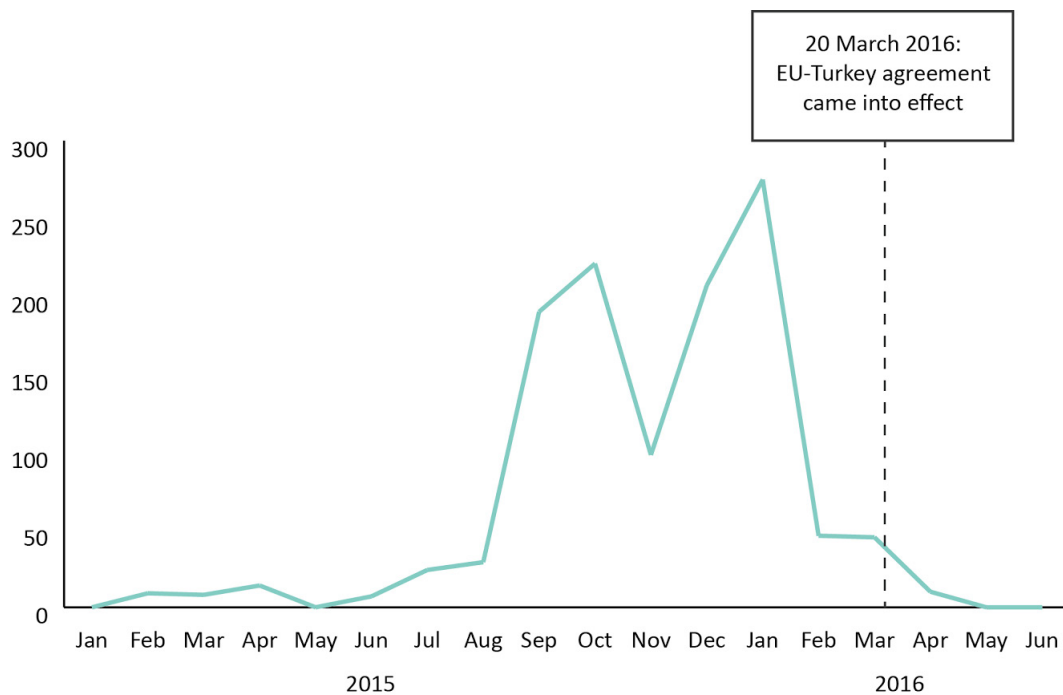
4 IOM, *Fatal Journeys Volume 2: Identification and Tracing of Dead and Missing Migrants* (IOM, Geneva, 2016). Available from [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/fataljourneys\\_vol2.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/fataljourneys_vol2.pdf), p. 6.

5 Between 27 July 2015 and March 2016, the European Union's Operation Sophia rescued nearly 9,000 people. (United Kingdom's House of Lords (2016), Operation Sophia, the EU's naval mission in the Mediterranean: an impossible challenge, Chapter 3. Available from [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldcom/144/14406.htm#\\_idTextAnchor029](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldcom/144/14406.htm#_idTextAnchor029)).

6 Between May and December 2015, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) rescued 23,747 migrants in the Mediterranean (MSF, *Obstacle Course to Europe: A Policy-Made Humanitarian Crisis at EU Borders* (MSF, Brussels). Available from [www.doctorswithoutborders.org/sites/usa/files/msf\\_obstacle\\_course\\_to\\_europe\\_report2.pdf](http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/sites/usa/files/msf_obstacle_course_to_europe_report2.pdf)

7 IOM Greece (2016).

8 IOM Greece (2016).

**Figure 2:** Number of recorded deaths in the Eastern Mediterranean, January 2015–June 2016

Source: Missing Migrants Project.

larger than those used on the eastern route. In the Eastern Mediterranean, rubber boats carrying approximately 20 people are most typically used, while occasionally people travel in wooden boats carrying approximately 35 people.<sup>9</sup> In comparison, boats in the Central Mediterranean are one of two types: (a) inflatable boats that carry a maximum of 130 people; or (b) wooden boats that carry between 300 and 700 people.<sup>10</sup> In the first half of 2016, there were 12 boat incidents in which more than 40 lives were lost in the Central Mediterranean, including 4 in which over 200 people died or went missing into the sea at one time.<sup>11</sup> The images that follow illustrate the boats typically used to cross the Mediterranean towards Europe.

There has also been a marked increase in the number of recorded deaths and disappearances in the Central Mediterranean. In the first six months of 2014, 703 were deaths recorded. The number rose to 1,786 in the first half of 2015, and then to 2,484 between 1 January and 30 June 2016. This increase is likely due to several new and dangerous smuggling practices. First, there has been little change to the practice of sending migrants

in unseaworthy vessels, which started in 2014, with the launch of the search-and-rescue mission, *Mare Nostrum*.<sup>12</sup> For instance, on 26 May, a leaking wooden boat, which was being towed by another vessel, sank with at least 500 people on board. Additionally, in the past six months, instances in which multiple boats carrying migrants departed from the Libyan coast simultaneously were more frequent, making search-and-rescue operations more complicated.<sup>13</sup> New routes are also increasingly risky; particularly when boats depart from Egypt, the journey is longer, and search and rescue is often carried out further away from land.<sup>14</sup>

### Western Mediterranean

The number of recorded migrant deaths in the first half of 2016 on the route from Morocco to Spain was more than double that for the same periods in 2014 and 2015. While 19 deaths were recorded in the first six months of 2014, and 15 deaths in the same period in 2015, in 2016, at least 45 people had died or gone missing on

<sup>9</sup> IOM Greece (2016).

<sup>10</sup> IOM Coordination Office for the Mediterranean (2016).

<sup>11</sup> IOM, Missing Migrants Project (2016). Available from <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

<sup>12</sup> A. Malakooti, *Migration Trends in the Mediterranean: Connecting the Dots* (Altai Consulting for IOM Middle East and North Africa Regional Office, Cairo, 2015). Available from [www.altaiconsulting.com/docs/migration/Altai\\_Migration\\_trends\\_across\\_the\\_Mediterranean.pdf](http://www.altaiconsulting.com/docs/migration/Altai_Migration_trends_across_the_Mediterranean.pdf), p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> IOM Coordination Office for the Mediterranean.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



Rubber boats carrying up to 20 people are the most typically used to cross the Eastern Mediterranean from Turkey to Greece. © IOM Greece 2015



Wooden boats carrying several hundred people are the most commonly used to cross the Central Mediterranean, from North Africa to Italy. © IOM/Francesco Malavolta 2014

this route by the end of June. Of these, 23 were cases of drowning. This is associated with the practice of young sub-Saharan men attempting to cross from Morocco into the Spanish territories of Melilla and Ceuta by boat or swimming, which has reportedly increased as an alternative to climbing over the border fence between the two countries, where security has been reinforced.<sup>15,16</sup> Although irregular arrivals in Spain are lower than in Italy or Greece, the sharp increase in the number of deaths relative to the number of arrivals to Spain<sup>17</sup> indicates that migration here, too, is becoming more dangerous.

## ROUTES TO AND THROUGH EUROPE

Many people make dangerous migration journeys overland before they reach the Mediterranean. Crossing the Sahara Desert in order to reach departure points to Italy and moving through the Middle East to reach Greece were the prevalent migration routes to Europe in the first six months of 2016. The first half of 2016 saw more deaths recorded along both of these routes than in all of 2014 and 2015. The primary dangers for those migrating were harsh natural environments, lack of food and shelter, and violence inflicted by smugglers and national authorities.<sup>18</sup>

15 Malakooti, 2015, p. 6.

16 J.B. Fuster SJ (2015), *Superar Fronteras Informe Anual Sobre Migraciones e Integración* (For Ceimigra). Available from [www.jesuitas.es/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1189%3Ase-presenta-el-que-sera-el-ultimo-informe-anual-sobre-migraciones-ceimigra-2015&catid=34%3Ajesuitas-espana&Itemid=63&lang=es](http://www.jesuitas.es/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1189%3Ase-presenta-el-que-sera-el-ultimo-informe-anual-sobre-migraciones-ceimigra-2015&catid=34%3Ajesuitas-espana&Itemid=63&lang=es), p. 122.

17 There were 3,845 irregular arrivals by sea to Spain in 2015 and 1,818 from 1 January to 31 May 2016 (IOM Spain).

18 IOM, Missing Migrants Project.

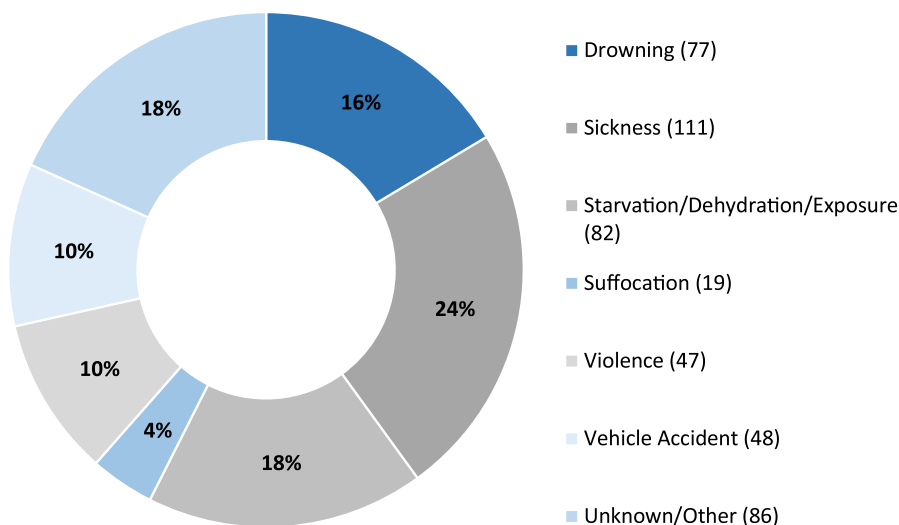
## North Africa

342 deaths have been recorded of people migrating northwards from Niger and the Horn of Africa into Libya and Egypt in the first six months of 2016.<sup>19</sup> This was an increase of almost 78 per cent from the numbers recorded in the same period in 2015. IOM's Missing Migrants Project data indicate an increase in migrant deaths due to violence and the carelessness of smugglers and national authorities in North Africa – a recorded 66 deaths in the first six months of 2016 were due to suffocation during transportation and excessive physical abuse, compared with only 3 in the first six months of 2015. The reported causes of death, shown in Figure 3, indicate the vulnerabilities faced by migrants who leave their countries of origin in Africa.

Data on people who go missing or die are notoriously unobtainable for the migration route from Western Africa through the Sahara Desert. IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix reports an increasing number of migrants leaving from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal travelling through Niger towards Libya and Algeria during the first half of 2016. At least 160,537 people departed from Niger within this period in order to journey north through the Sahara Desert, while another 26,885 West Africans moved south from Algeria and Libya into Niger.<sup>20</sup>

19 Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, *Regional Mixed Migration in the Horn of Africa and Yemen in 2016: 1st Quarter trend summary and analysis*, Quarter 1 2016, p. 8.

20 IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, *Flow Monitoring Points (February–June 2016)*. Available from [www.globaldtm.info/dtm-niger-flow-monitoring-information-sheets-february-june-2016/](http://www.globaldtm.info/dtm-niger-flow-monitoring-information-sheets-february-june-2016/)

**Figure 3:** Reported causes of death of migrants in Africa, 1 Jan–30 June 2016

Source: Missing Migrants Project.

Travelling through the Sahara comes with many risks, due to the difficult terrain and extreme temperatures, as well as the insecurity associated with the networks of smugglers who control these routes. Between 1 and 6 June 2016, the bodies of 34 sub-Saharan Africans were found on the border of Niger and Algeria; they reportedly had died from starvation and dehydration after being abandoned by their smugglers. The dangers of migration routes through the Sahara indicate that many fatalities in the region go unreported.<sup>21</sup>

### Middle East

IOM's Missing Migrants Project recorded the deaths of 81 people migrating within the Middle East in the first half of 2016, compared with 32 recorded in the whole of 2015. At least 69 of the 81 deaths recorded in this region were Syrian nationals, with 64 reportedly killed at the Syrian Arab Republic–Turkey border by Turkish border guards.<sup>22</sup> Since March 2015, Turkey has largely refused entry to Syrians trying to cross the border, except for those who can prove that they have urgent medical needs.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, there are reports of consistent abuse and violence towards people who have

approached the border.<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch reports that because of this situation, Syrians assume that they can only cross into Turkey with the help of smugglers, who take people through dangerously steep, mountainous terrains at night to avoid being detected,<sup>25</sup> which mean that further deaths likely go uncounted.

### Europe

The 22 deaths recorded within the continent of Europe in the first half of 2016 and the 21 recorded in 2015 are in contrast to the 8 deaths recorded on the continent in the same period in 2014. In the first half of 2016, 7 people migrating in Europe have been killed falling off or getting hit by trucks and trains, 5 have drowned, and 5 have died of exposure; these causes of death are similar to those in the same period in 2015. The fatalities of migrants recorded in Europe can be attributed to the risks and difficulties of travelling to intended destinations while trying to avoid physical barriers and being detected by authorities.

### SOUTH-EAST ASIA

The year 2015 saw thousands of migrants from Myanmar and Bangladesh leave by sea, and an estimated 815 deaths in this region. The migration route

21 IOM, "Niger Deaths Add to Growing Toll of Migrant Fatalities within Africa", Press release, 17 June 2016. Available from [www.iom.int/news/niger-deaths-add-growing-toll-migrant-fatalities-within-africa](http://www.iom.int/news/niger-deaths-add-growing-toll-migrant-fatalities-within-africa)

22 IOM, Missing Migrants Project.

23 Human Rights Watch, "Turkey: Syrians pushed back at the border", 23 November 2015. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/23/turkey-syrians-pushed-back-border](http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/11/23/turkey-syrians-pushed-back-border)

24 Human Rights Watch, "Turkey: Open borders to Syrians fleeing ISIS", 14 April 2016. Available from [www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/14/turkey-open-borders-syrians-fleeing-isis](http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/14/turkey-open-borders-syrians-fleeing-isis)

25 Human Rights Watch, 2015.

through the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea proved to be three times deadlier than the Mediterranean in 2015,<sup>26</sup> and mass graves containing the remains of an estimated 166 people were discovered in human trafficking camps in Thailand and Malaysia.

In the first half of 2016, the number of deaths and disappearances recorded during migration in this region fell to 35 from the 726 estimated to have died during migration in the same period in 2015. This decrease is attributed to the fact that the number of people migrating on sea routes between Bangladesh and Myanmar towards Thailand and Malaysia declined as a result of tighter surveillance by authorities and more frequent cases brought against people involved with smuggling in destination countries.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, data collection challenges in this region mean that it is difficult to accurately compare the number of deaths during the first six months of 2016 with the same period in other years. It is possible that news of more deaths during this period will come to light, especially as there are some reports of new overland routes of migration.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports that 80 per cent of undocumented migrants in South-East Asia use the help of smugglers.<sup>28</sup> This is of concern, as the vast majority of migrant deaths recorded in this region over the past two and a half years have been reportedly due to abuse at the hands of smugglers. Common smuggling practices in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea include filling boats well beyond their capacity and forcing people to disembark in deep waters to avoid detection.<sup>29</sup> Reports of abuse, exploitation and abandonment of migrants on land are also common.<sup>30</sup> The deaths of those found in the mass graves in 2015, mentioned above, are attributed to abuse and violence

by smugglers. Key actors in the region fear that the reduction in deaths is only short term, as the drivers of migration remain unaddressed.

## ROUTES TO THE UNITED STATES

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that the number of people leaving Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador is now similar to the number who fled during the violent conflicts in Central America in the 1980s.<sup>31</sup> Many move north in order to pursue *el sueño americano* – a dream of a job and a life free from violence – but the route itself is not without risks. Migration through Central America, which extends from Panama through Mexico, has led to 43 recorded deaths by various means in the first six months of 2016, and it is likely that more go uncounted. Once migrants reach the border with the United States, they must cross dangerous natural terrain, which has led to at least 161 deaths in the first half of 2016. Figure 4 indicates the location of the fatal incidents recorded in the first six months of 2016.

### Central America

Since IOM's Missing Migrants Project started collecting data in 2014, Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran men between the ages of 20 and 40 have comprised the largest proportion of recorded deaths in the Central American region. The main cause of death – train accidents – has also remained consistent. Poverty and the fear of detection at official border crossings have long motivated migrants to illegally hop onto freight trains, collectively referred to as *La Bestia* (the beast), as they make their way through Mexico and onward to the United States. Journeys on *La Bestia* are notoriously dangerous, with frequent reports of assault, maiming and death from falling off the trains.<sup>32</sup> However, since the implementation of the Mexican Programa Frontera Sur in July 2014, the number of migrants who travel on these trains has decreased.<sup>33</sup> Missing Migrants Project data indicate that train-

26 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Mixed Maritime Movements in South-East Asia in 2015* (UNHCR Regional Office for South-East Asia, 2016). Available from <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/regionalupdates/UNHCR%20-%20Mixed%20Maritime%20Movements%20in%20South-East%20Asia%20-%202015.pdf>

27 C. Lewa, Personal communication, The Arakan Project, 30 June 2016.

28 UNODC, *Regional Strategy and Programmes – Smuggling of migrants* (n.d.). Available from [www.unodc.org/southeastasiaandpacific/en/what-we-do/toc/smuggling-of-migrants.html](http://www.unodc.org/southeastasiaandpacific/en/what-we-do/toc/smuggling-of-migrants.html)

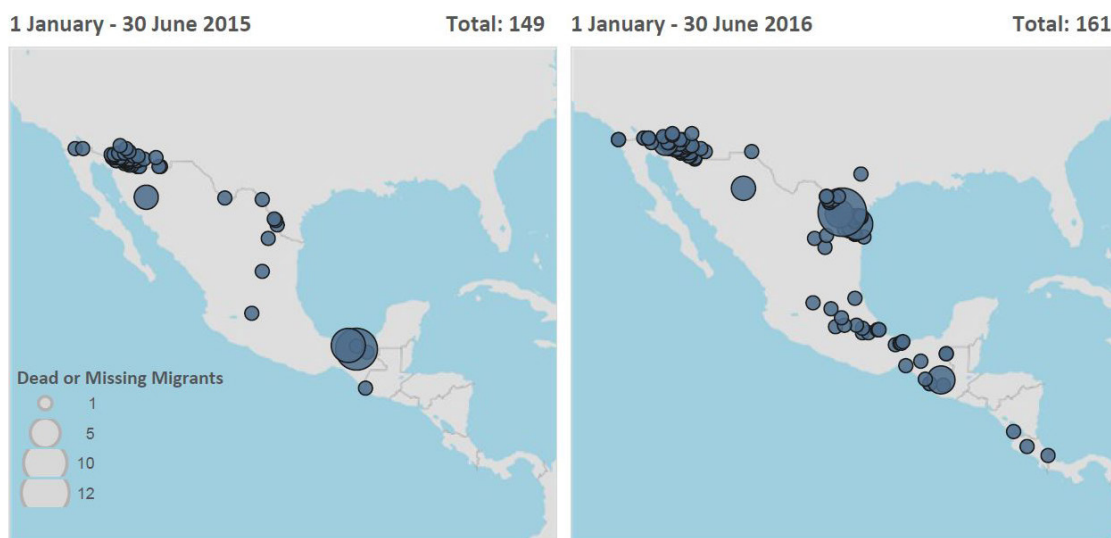
29 UNODC, *Migrant Smuggling in Asia – Current Trends and Related Challenges, April 2015* (UNODC, Bangkok, 2015), pp. 57–59.

30 T. Moran, "The deadliest passage for migrants? The Mediterranean isn't even close", *Ozy.com*, 30 May 2016. Available from [www.ozy.com/acumen/the-deadliest-passage-for-migrants-the-mediterranean-isnt-even-close/69384](http://www.ozy.com/acumen/the-deadliest-passage-for-migrants-the-mediterranean-isnt-even-close/69384)

31 N. Sturm, "UNHCR calls for urgent action as Central America asylum claims soar", UNHCR news story, 5 April 2016. Available from [www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/4/5703ab396/unhcr-calls-urgent-action-central-america-asylum-claims-soar.html](http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/4/5703ab396/unhcr-calls-urgent-action-central-america-asylum-claims-soar.html)

32 J. Sladkova (2013), "Stratification of Undocumented Migrant Journeys: Honduran Case", *International Migration*, 54(1):84–99.

33 Interview with Christopher Gascon (IOM Chief of Mission – Mexico) from A. Moloney, "Interview – Seeking new routes, Central American migrants at risk of trafficking", Thomson Reuters Foundation, 24 June 2016. Available from <http://news.trust.org/item/20160624172837-hlkwc>

**Figure 4:** Recorded deaths and disappearances in Central America and along the United States–Mexico border

Source: Missing Migrants Project.

related deaths in this region have also declined; so far in 2016, 37 per cent of the migrant deaths recorded in Central America were caused by migrants being hit by or having fallen off a train, as opposed to the same period in 2015, when 60 per cent of the recorded deaths were train-related. There has also been an overall decrease in the number of deaths recorded in this region from 74 in 2014, to 45 and 43 recorded in the first half of 2015 and 2016, respectively.

Nevertheless, the central causes of emigration from Central America, high levels of criminal violence, poverty and unemployment,<sup>34</sup> have seen little change in the past six months and people continue to migrate irregularly north through Mexico, and onwards to the United States. However, because of a shift to more clandestine means of travel, such as by foot or hidden in vehicles,<sup>35</sup> when death does occur during migration, there is a higher chance that migrants will not be found immediately, if at all. The reduced access to *La Bestia* also means that Central Americans migrating irregularly increasingly rely on criminal groups to organize their travel through Mexico, which exposes them to a higher risk of violence.<sup>36</sup> This is especially of concern,

.....  
34 Sturm, 2016.

35 Interview with Gascon, 2016.

36 R. Dominguez Villegas, "Central American Migrants and 'La Bestia': The Route, Dangers, and Government Responses", Migration Policy Institute, 10 September 2014. Available from [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-migrants-and-la-bestia-route-dangers-and-government-responses](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-migrants-and-la-bestia-route-dangers-and-government-responses)

as there has been an increasing number of women and children on migration routes through Central America in the first half of 2016,<sup>37</sup> who may be more vulnerable to physical abuse and trafficking.

### Crossing the United States–Mexico border

The border region between the United States and Mexico has cost the lives of at least 6,330 people between 1998 and 2015.<sup>38</sup> Of 161 deaths counted on the American and Mexican sides of the border in 2016 so far, 81 of these are men, 6 are women, and the sex of 74 bodies is not known.<sup>39</sup>

Of the four US states next to Mexico, Arizona saw the highest number of people lose their lives while

.....  
37 US Border Customs and Border Protection (2016), United States Border Patrol Southwest Family Unit Subject and Unaccompanied Alien Children Apprehensions Fiscal Year 2016. Available from [www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016](http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children/fy-2016)

38 Colibri Center for Human Rights (2015), Factsheet. Available from [www.colibricenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Colibri-Fact-Sheet.pdf](http://www.colibricenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Colibri-Fact-Sheet.pdf)

39 The sex of these 74 people is unknown for various reasons. At the time of this publication (August 2016), some had not yet undergone post-mortem examinations. Others who went through this procedure were found in such state of decomposition that determining their sex was not possible. For other incidents, the source used by Missing Migrants Project did not include information on sex.

crossing its border between 2002 and 2013,<sup>40</sup> and it has seen a consistently high number of deaths in the following years. In the first half of 2016, 60 deaths were recorded of migrants who died crossing the border into Arizona, whereas 69 and 72 were recorded in the first half of 2015 and 2014, respectively. Dehydration is the most common cause of death for people attempting to cross from Mexico to Arizona, as migrants walk through desert areas that can reach 50°C (125°F),<sup>41</sup> in order to avoid detection by authorities.

In 2014 and 2015, more migrants died on the border between Texas and Mexico than on that with Arizona for the first time since 2001.<sup>42</sup> In the first six months of 2016, at least 25 people drowned while trying to cross the Rio Grande, which lines the entire border between Texas and the Mexican states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León and Tamaulipas. In the Falfurrias border sector, on the Texan side of the border, the number of deaths by 25 May 2016 increased by 7 per cent compared to last year.<sup>43</sup> However, it is too soon (at the time of writing) to determine if this increase also occurred along the entire United States–Mexico border.

## IDENTIFYING THE DEAD AND MISSING

Due to the multiple challenges involved with gathering data, the numbers of deaths and disappearances provided in this data briefing are not precise, and are likely to be underestimates. Irregular migration often involves taking hidden and risky routes to avoid detection, and those who die or go missing may never be reported, let alone recovered. For instance, in the many cases of unrecovered migrant shipwrecks, it is difficult to ascertain the number of people who were in each boat. The only source of information is statements from survivors who are often unsure of the original number on board or may give different estimates. Of the 3,739 migrants estimated dead in the first half of 2016, an alarming 2,356 are unrecovered.

40 US Border Patrol (2015), Southwest Border Sectors – Southwest Border Deaths by Fiscal Year. Available from [www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/BP%20Southwest%20Border%20Sector%20Deaths%20FY1998%20-%20FY2015.pdf](http://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/documents/BP%20Southwest%20Border%20Sector%20Deaths%20FY1998%20-%20FY2015.pdf)

41 Western Regional Climate Center, Climate of Arizona (n.d.). Available from [www.wrcc.dri.edu/narratives/ARIZONA.htm](http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/narratives/ARIZONA.htm)

42 US Border Patrol, 2015.

43 B. Alvarado, “Border Patrol showcases immigrant hardships”, Corpus Christi Caller-Times, 25 May 2016. Available from [www.caller.com/news/immigration/border-patrol-showcases-immigrant-hardships-339aa9d8-df6b-16a5-e053-0100007f3132-380899421.html](http://www.caller.com/news/immigration/border-patrol-showcases-immigrant-hardships-339aa9d8-df6b-16a5-e053-0100007f3132-380899421.html)

Even when a body is recovered, most are not successfully identified. The Human Costs of Border Control project of the VU Amsterdam looked at identification of bodies recovered and registered in southern Europe between 1990 and 2013 and found that almost two thirds remained unidentified.<sup>44</sup> Even in the case of the two tragic shipwrecks off the Italian island of Lampedusa in October 2013, in which an estimated 400 people died, about half remain unidentified.<sup>45</sup>

The multiple challenges involved in the process of identifying those who die during migration can be demonstrated by the case of the United States–Mexico border. In the desert of Arizona, the uninhabited landscape means that often only skeletal remains are found months after a person walking across the border has died. The extreme temperatures mean that the dead can become unrecognizable even after a few days of lying in the sun. Furthermore, if DNA samples are retrieved from a body, families may never know what happened to their loved one if they are far away and do not know who to contact. What is more, where the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo acts as the international boundary, it can be difficult for American and Mexican border guards to determine on which side of the border the person died, and thus, whose responsibility it is to manage the body. The image that follows shows one of the many unmarked graves along the border of Arizona and the Mexican state of Sonora. For more in-depth discussion of issues related to identifying and tracing people who die or go missing during migration, see IOM’s report, *Fatal Journeys Volume 2 – Identification and Tracing of Dead and Missing Migrants*.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, improved efforts to recover and identify missing migrants are being made in some regions. For instance, on 18 April 2016, the Italian navy started the complex process of recovering bodies from the boat that sank 130 km from the Libyan coast, one year after the incident that resulted in an original estimate of 778 deaths – the largest number of deaths recorded in one incident ever recorded. So far, at least 458 bodies have been recovered from the sunken vessel, and 150 technicians from various countries are working on the

44 Human Costs of Border Control, Borderdeaths homepage, VU University Amsterdam. Available from [www.borderdeaths.org/](http://www.borderdeaths.org/).

45 E. Povoledo, “Italian Lab Battles ‘Not to Lose the Dead’ from Migrant Ships”, *New York Times*, 2 October 2015. Available from [www.nytimes.com/2015/10/03/world/europe/italian-lab-battles-not-to-lose-the-dead-from-migrant-ships.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/03/world/europe/italian-lab-battles-not-to-lose-the-dead-from-migrant-ships.html)

46 Available from [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/fataljourneys\\_vol2.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/fataljourneys_vol2.pdf)





Unmarked grave of someone who attempted to cross the border from Sonora, Mexico into Arizona, United States.  
Source: Colibrí Center for Human Rights.

recovery and identification.<sup>47</sup> Burials of the bodies will take place on Sicily and provide a place for families to mourn their loved ones.<sup>48</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The data collected by IOM's Missing Migrants Project in the first half of 2016 indicate that the number of people who go missing or die in the process of migration has increased significantly since 2014, especially in the Mediterranean region. The Missing Migrants Project's data also demonstrate that increasing numbers of people die on journeys through North Africa and the Middle East, and that migrating through Central America and across the United States–Mexico border continues to pose serious risks.

The risk of death is often related to the routes that migrants take and how much they can afford to pay smugglers. A migrant's place on a boat attempting the already high-risk Mediterranean crossing is often decided by how much an individual can afford to pay for their journey. In the event of a shipwreck, those not on the top deck may be trapped inside and face suffocation. There is also evidence that many migrants cannot afford to adequately provision themselves

for their journeys or are denied access to health care along the way; at least 219 of the recorded deaths in the first six months of 2016 have been due to exposure, starvation, dehydration and/or sickness.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 10.7 calls for "orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people".<sup>49</sup> However, the numbers presented in this data briefing indicate that migration is far from safe and orderly, and that few legal alternatives are available to those migrants facing a risky journey.

## NOTES ON DATA USED IN THIS BRIEFING

Collecting data on migration, especially on those who go missing or die during migration, comes with many challenges. The data used in this briefing are based on methodologies developed to maximize accuracy and timeliness. Data on migrant arrivals in Europe are collected by IOM from national sources on registrations – in this case, the Italian Ministry of the Interior and the Hellenic Police, and include local estimates from IOM staff on the ground. Data on migrant deaths are sourced from IOM's Missing Migrants Project, which, since 2014, has collated information from national and State authorities, media reports, non-governmental organizations and local estimates from IOM staff. However, all numbers in this briefing should be seen as approximations, which nonetheless reflect the scale and trends of those who die during their journey for a better life.

47 Reuters, "Italy says up to 675 migrants died in April 2015 shipwreck", 14 July 2016. Available from [www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-italy-shipwreck-idUSKCN0ZU21A](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-italy-shipwreck-idUSKCN0ZU21A)

48 F. d'Emilio, "Italian navy to resume recovery of boat full of migrant dead", Associated Press, 3 May 2016. Available from <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/f7228ac65a7b489d9b3ef39276a6217e/italian-navy-resume-recovery-boat-full-migrant-dead>

49 UN DESA, n.d.

## About

### GMDAC

In response to growing calls for better data on migration, and better use and presentation of migration data, IOM has created a Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC). Located in the heart of Berlin, Germany, the Centre aims to provide authoritative and timely analysis of data on global migration issues as a global hub for data and statistics on migration.

### Data Briefing Series

The GMDAC Data Briefing Series aims to explain what lies behind the numbers and the data used in migration policy and public debates. The Briefings explain what “the numbers” indicate about movements of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, on a range of topics for policy across the globe.

The way the data are presented has an important influence on public perceptions of migration in Europe and the development of policy. The Series will serve to clarify, explain and exchange specialist knowledge in an accessible format for wider public and policy audiences, for capacity-building and evidence for policy. Briefings will be of interest to expert, as well as lay audiences, including journalists, students, local authority and city planners and lawyers.

### Authors

Kate Dearden, Consultant, Missing Migrants Project, GMDAC

Julia Black, Consultant, Missing Migrants Project, GMDAC

Ann Singleton, Senior Advisor, GMDAC

### Infographics/Map

Denis Kierans, Data and Research Officer, GMDAC

Thomas Mertz, Consultant, GMDAC

## Contact information

For more information about the Data Briefing Series, please contact the editors:

### Frank Laczko

Director of GMDAC

Tel.: +49 30 278 778 23

Email: [flaczko@iom.int](mailto:flaczko@iom.int)

### Ann Singleton

Senior Adviser, GMDAC, and

Senior Research Fellow, University of Bristol

Email: [ann.singleton@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:ann.singleton@bristol.ac.uk)

### Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC)

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

Taubenstr. 20-22 D- 10117 Berlin, Germany

Tel.: +49 30 278 778 22

Fax: +49 30 278 778 99

Please visit the GMDAC website for publications, resources, and events: <http://gmdac.iom.int>

*Disclaimer: This material has been funded by UK Aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.*

*The opinions expressed in this briefing are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout the briefing do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IOM concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning its frontiers and boundaries.*



17 route des Morillons, P.O. Box 17, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland  
Tel.: +41 22 717 9111 • Fax: +41 22 798 6150 • E-mail: [hq@iom.int](mailto:hq@iom.int) • Website: [www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)