



**MMC East Africa
& Yemen**

QUARTER 1 2021



Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: East Africa & Yemen

This Quarterly Mixed Migration Update (QMMU) covers the East Africa and Yemen region (EAY). The core countries of focus for this region are Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi, Somalia, DR Congo, South Sudan and Yemen. Depending on the quarterly trends and migration-related updates, more attention may be given to any of the countries over the rest.

The QMMUs offer a quarterly update on new trends and dynamics related to mixed migration and relevant policy developments in the region. These updates are based on a compilation of a wide range of secondary (data) sources, brought together within a regional framework and applying a mixed migration analytical lens. Similar QMMUs are available for all MMC regions.

The Mixed Migration Centre is a global network consisting of six regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. For more information on the MMC, the QMMUs from other regions and contact details of regional MMC teams, visit mixedmigration.org and follow us at [@Mixed_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)

MMC's understanding of mixed migration

"Mixed migration" refers to cross-border movements of people, including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking, and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people in mixed flows have a range of legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel - often travelling irregularly, and wholly, or partially, assisted by migrant smugglers.

Front cover photo credit:

Michael Kirby Smith (2013)

Ethiopian migrants outside the Migrant Response Centre in Haradh, Yemen, May 2013.

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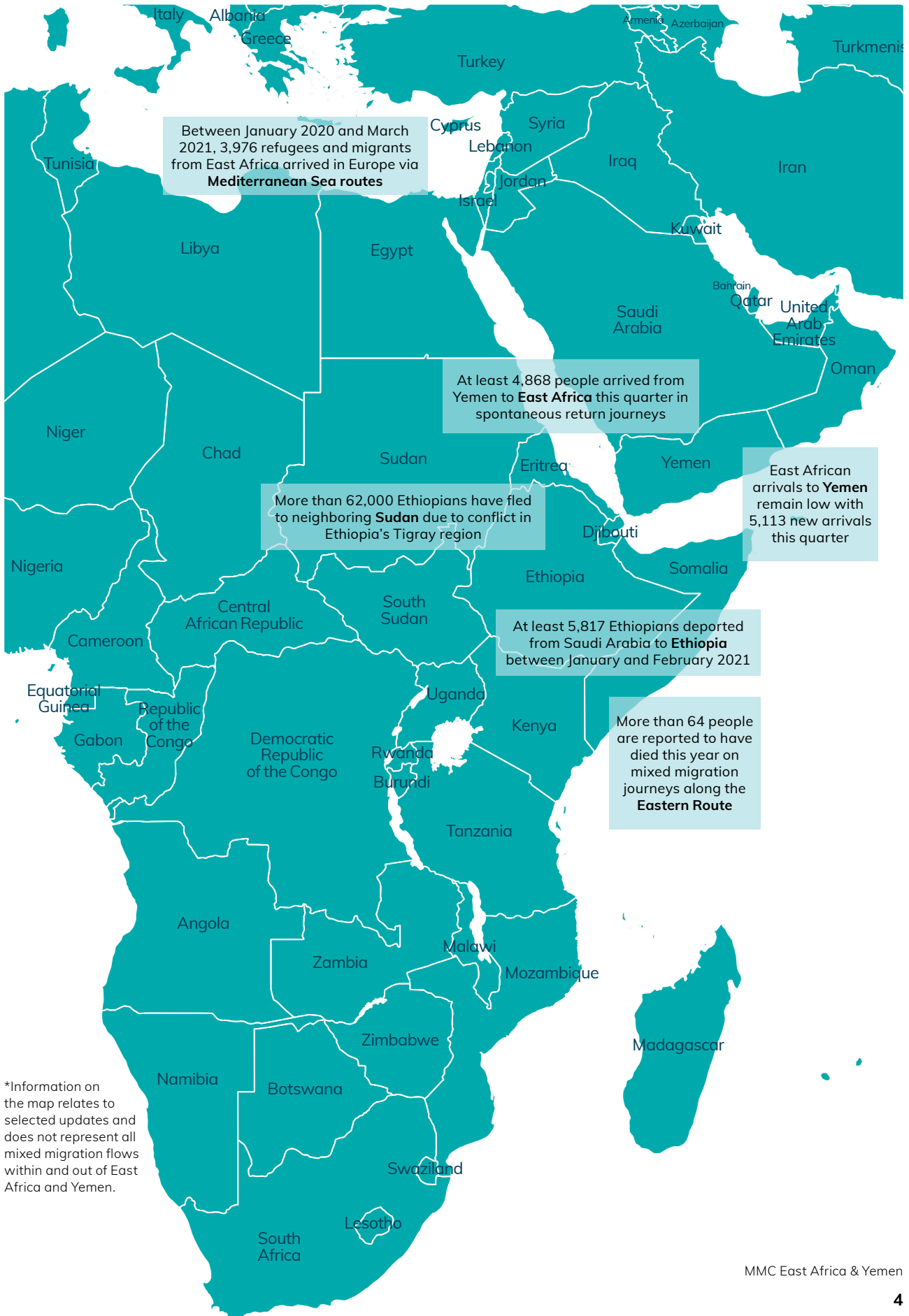
Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: East Africa & Yemen

Quarter 1 - 2021

Key Updates

- **Ongoing hostilities in Ethiopia's Tigray region impact displacement in the region:** More than [62,000 Ethiopians have fled to Sudan](#) due to the ongoing hostilities in the Tigray region.
- **Low numbers of refugees and migrants arriving in Yemen along the Eastern Route:** New arrivals of East Africans along the Eastern route remain low with only 5,113 [new arrivals](#) recorded in Yemen between January and March 2021. This represents an 82% decrease from the [27,948 arrivals reported during the same period in 2020](#).
- **Spontaneous returns from the Gulf to East Africa increase this quarter:** 4,868 refugees and migrants were recorded to have returned from Yemen to East Africa this quarter (at least 4,559 arrivals to Djibouti and 309 to Somalia).
- **Fire in migrant detention facility in Yemen claims lives of at least 60 migrants:** [At least 60 migrants](#) (believed to all be Ethiopian) were killed in a fire that broke out at a detention facility in Sanaa. Migrants were protesting poor conditions at the facility when projectiles were fired into the center by Houthi rebels.
- **Killings of Somalis in South Africa sparks protests:** In February 2021, [more than 200](#) protestors took to the streets in South Africa's Port Elizabeth to protest the killing of 4 Somalis in alleged xenophobic attacks.

Regional Overview*



Mixed Migration Regional Updates

Mixed migration within East Africa

Kenyan government orders closure of refugee camps

On March 24, the Government of Kenya [ordered the closure of the largest refugee camps](#) in the country - Dadaab and Kakuma. Situated in Northern Kenya, Dadaab currently hosts [225,000](#) people, the majority of whom are from neighboring Somalia. A further [163,000](#) refugees and asylum seekers live in the Kakuma camp, mostly from South Sudan and others from Ethiopia, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The government gave a [14-day ultimatum to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\) to disband the camps](#). In [2016](#) and [2019](#), the Kenyan government issued a similar demand on the premise of security concerns. UNHCR says the move would greatly affect the protection of refugees and more so in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and invites the government to dialogue further on the matter. [Refugees have also expressed concern](#) over the directive, citing security and safety concerns if they were forced to leave the camps.

The decision to close the camps was challenged in court and on the 8 April, the [High Court issued a stay order temporarily holding off on closing the camps](#) and called on UNHCR to formulate a plan to close the camps as soon as possible.

Launch of Regional Migrant Response Plan

In March 2021, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Danish Refugee Council, Mixed Migration Centre, and 38 other humanitarian and development organizations and governments [launched a four-year Regional Migrant Response Plan \(MRP 2021-2024\)](#). The MRP is designed to facilitate coordination and support for vulnerable migrants in East Africa, with a focus on the Eastern Route migration corridor. The launch event included an appeal for USD 99 million for the first year of response (2021), which would provide life-saving support to 563,128 vulnerable migrants whom are stranded and local communities.

Ongoing hostilities in Ethiopia's Tigray impact displacement and migration in the region

In November 2020, unrest erupted in the northern Tigray region of Ethiopia killing [hundreds of people](#) and displacing over 2 million. The fighting also forced over [62,000 Ethiopian refugees](#) and [374 Eritreans](#) to seek safety in Eastern Sudan. The high numbers of Ethiopians fleeing to Sudan, and the remote location of the area in which refugees are being received, has put UNHCR and Sudanese Commission for Refugees under stress to provide adequate services to incoming refugees. In collaboration with humanitarian partners and the Sudan government, [UNHCR has opened a new camp](#), Tunaydbah in Sudan's Gedaref state, as the Um Rakubah refugee camp nears full capacity.

On March 23 2021, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed [confirmed the involvement of Eritrean troops in the conflict in Tigray region](#), after months of denial from both countries. [Eritrea later also confirmed its engagement](#) in the conflict. This was the first time the Ethiopian government had acknowledged that “serious crimes had taken place in Tigray” and stated the Eritrean troops would leave the region. However, [recent reports of arrivals of Eritreans](#) in “truckloads” in several Tigrayan cities as of April 2021 may signify continued conflict.

Before the recent fighting, Tigray was home to an estimated [200,000 refugees and internally displaced people](#). The fighting has impacted access to basic goods and ability for humanitarian actors to deliver services. Further, inaccessibility poses a challenge in identifying the exact number of those affected as parts in [Southern and South East Tigray remain largely inaccessible](#) leaving many vulnerable without assistance. Humanitarian access is gradually increasing; [UNHCR confirmed access](#) to 2 refugee camps hosting Eritrean refugees in Shire (Shimelba and Hitsats) for the first time since November 2020. Refugees are reportedly seeking safety in two other refugee camps in Shire (Mai Aini and Adi Harush) as well as in Mekelle, Afar and Addis Ababa.

Refugees typically use existing mixed migration points to enter Sudan, particularly through the Humera and Metema border crossings from Ethiopia to Sudan. These [border points](#) see thousands of people crossing regularly and irregularly every year, and it is still unclear what medium to long term impact the displacement and refugee influx will have on mixed migration in the region. A recent MMC article '[Mixed Migration consequences of the Tigrayan crisis](#)' highlighted potential impacts of the conflict not only in Ethiopia but the wider East Africa region, but suggested that movement beyond neighbouring countries as the main priority of the affected groups is safety.

Further, the figures for the last two quarters do not show an increase in Ethiopian movements to Yemen with just 87% compared to last year's 90%. However, there is a small likelihood that Eritreans or more Somalis may join the Eastern route if the region experiences further destabilization as a result of the Tigray conflict. However, very few Eritreans have historically used the Eastern Route to Yemen¹ as of yet there is no evidence of any increases and there were no registered Eritrean arrivals in Yemen from [October 2020 to March 2021](#).

1 Between August and November 2020, MMC interviewed 318 Eritreans in Djibouti. The interviews showed that 99% of the respondents began their journeys in Eritrea, with only 1% of Eritreans transiting through Ethiopia on their journey to Djibouti. Of the 99% of respondents who departed from Eritrea, the majority (55%) reported North America as their intended destination, 33% reported Europe, 9% intended to head to Gulf countries, and only 1% cited Africa (Swaziland) and Australasia (New Zealand).

Refugee's and migrant's voices

MMC's 4Mi data collection project conducted interviews in Somalia with 15 Tigrayans (11 men, 4 women) who left Ethiopia between November and December 2020. All respondents were interviewed in November and December 2020 and indicated an intention to travel to Saudi Arabia.

"A war is still going on in Tigray region, it is a white lie that the war is over, it has not finished yet. I have seen people burned to death, the young boys and girls are forced to go the front lines of the war. Me and my friends were firstly going to travel to the Sudan border but when we came to Mekelle we have learned that the Abiy military are not accepting anyone to go to the Sudan border, all the roads were closed, but it is okay to travel to Addis Ababa so we decided to come here with the help of smugglers."

25-year-old Ethiopian woman from Tigray

"I was a taxi driver in Addis Ababa but I felt I was being discriminated by even my closest friends who are the taxi drivers too. My Tigray people are being arrested indiscriminately due to false claims that we all support TPLF leaders. I sold my taxi and started thinking to make my life great by leaving Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia."

43-year-old Ethiopian man from Tigray

"I was a federal police forces member operating in Piazza market area in Addis Ababa, I have witnessed a specific crackdown against my ethnic Tigray people in Piazza by the current regime. I was afraid of being arrested because countless number of people were being arrested due to their ethnicity. My family in the USA sent me some money to make this journey out of Ethiopia because even the other Tigray police and military are fleeing from the country to anywhere which is safe from the government."

37-year-old Ethiopian man from Tigray

"I was working as an Ethiopian civil servant in immigration and customs for 9 years but I fled the country due to ethnic targeting and indiscriminate arrests made by Abiy government against my people of Tigray. When I have seen that my Tigray colleagues were arrested from the same work place I decided to flee and run out of the country to Djibouti and then to Somaliland. I can't travel to Saudi directly by air but I would like to take my chance and travel by boat from Bossaso city. I want to work once again in peace and tranquillity and get a better living conditions for my family."

46 year-old Ethiopian man from Tigray

The Eastern Route from East Africa to Yemen

Low numbers of arrivals along Eastern Route into Yemen

The COVID-19 pandemic brought migration along the Eastern Route and other migration routes in East Africa to a halt for much of 2020. Movements along all migration routes are slowly resuming, but at significantly reduced numbers. In the first quarter of 2021, [5,113 refugees and migrants from East Africa](#) reportedly arrived in Yemen along the Eastern Route (mixed migration corridor from East Africa to Yemen). This is an 82% decrease from the arrivals reported during the same period in 2020 ([27,948 were reported between January and March 2020](#)). However it is a slight increase from arrivals recorded in the last quarter of 2020, when [4,413 arrivals](#) were reported along the Eastern Route.

Ethiopian refugees and migrants continued to make up the [majority](#) (87%) of those travelling on the Eastern Route and Somalis make up 13% of the arrivals. A further look at the demographics shows that 10% of arrivals were women, 78% were men and 11% represented children. In a shift from the last quarter of 2020 where [66% of departures for Yemen were from Somalia](#), a majority of movements of movements this quarter were from [Djibouti \(52%\) with 48% from Somalia](#).

Ongoing movement restrictions and border closures have continued to affect movement with many being stranded, either on their way to Gulf countries or on their way back to and through East Africa. In March, Saudi Arabia announced an [extended closure of its borders until May 17](#), including its border with Yemen. The closure has implications for migration dynamics both within Yemen and across the region. It is estimated that at least [14,500](#) East African refugees and migrants remain stranded in Yemen and as of the end of March, at least [855 Ethiopian migrants were stranded in Djibouti](#) and over [900](#) people were stranded in Somalia.

Increase in spontaneous returns from Yemen to East Africa

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, many Ethiopians have expressed the need to leave Yemen due to the [harsh conditions](#) in Yemen and immobility as a result of border closures. For most of 2020, options for voluntary return to East Africa including humanitarian flights and voluntary repatriation were suspended. Limited options are now available, including IOM's Voluntary Humanitarian Return programme which assisted [140 Ethiopians](#) to return to Ethiopia from Yemen in early March 2021.

With few options for those stranded in Yemen, refugees and migrants are [increasingly attempting deadly](#) journeys from Yemen to East Africa via smuggling boats. In 2021, 4,559 migrants were recorded arriving into Djibouti from Yemen (1,488 in [January](#), 1,227 in [February](#) 2021, and 1,844 in [March](#) 2021), an increase from the 2,536 refugees and migrants recorded between [October](#) and [December](#) 2020. A small number of arrivals were also recorded into Somalia from Yemen, with just [309 movements recorded](#) by the end of February 2021 (224 to Bossaso and 65 to Berbera which included 180 Somali returnees, 125 Yemenis and 4 Ethiopians).

Intensified risks for refugees and migrants at sea

Tragically, major incidents have been reported along the bi-directional Eastern Route over [the last few years](#), and at least 64 refugees and migrants are reported to have died at sea in 2021. On 12 April, [44 people died](#) when their boat capsized on its way from Yemen to Djibouti. The boat was reported to have been carrying 60 people. On 31 March, 20 people [drowned while en route](#) to Yemen from Djibouti. Reports indicate the vessel was overcrowded, carrying over 200 people before smugglers threw 80 overboard.

Fire in migrant detention facility claims lives of at least 60 Ethiopians

On 7 March 2021, [at least 60](#) Ethiopians were killed when a fire broke out at a migration holding facility in Sanaa, Yemen. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), deplorable conditions at the detention centre led migrants to hold protests, before camp guards reportedly fired two projectiles which caused the fire. Migrants had complained of inadequate food and water, and lack of access to basic needs. According to the detainees, they would need to pay the guards USD 280 in order to be released. Migrants organized a hunger strike '[to protest the conditions and their continued detention](#)'. [Houthi news Agency, Saba, reported](#) security forces used unnecessary force to deal with the crowds. Reports said that tear gas cannisters launched at the protestors landed on a foam mattress causing fire to spread rapidly in the detention center. Houthi authorities initially blamed the UN and IOM for failing to take responsibility over the migrants and not deporting them.

Such incidences show the major risks for refugees and migrants living in detention centers. At least [6,000 migrants](#) are believed to be held in detention facilities across Yemen, many of which are [overcrowded, unsafe and inadequate with limited resources](#). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, refugees and migrants in Yemen increasingly face dire conditions with [reports of human rights abuses](#) and [violence](#), and [mass deportations](#) of refugees and migrants from the Houthi-controlled Northern Governorates to the Southern Governorates in Yemen. According to [reports in 2020](#), there were an estimated 4,000 migrants reportedly living on the streets with thousands of refugees and migrants trapped in Aden. Further, refugees and migrants have been forced to the Saudi Arabia border where they have been shot by Saudi Arabia border guards. Those who made it across the Saudi border with Yemen face detainment in [deplorable conditions](#) and deportation back to East Africa.

Deportations from Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia slowly continue

Since the [March 2017 crackdown on undocumented migrants](#) by Saudi authorities, around 10,000 Ethiopians were reportedly deported each month until March 2020 when numbers decreased amid concerns related to COVID-19. By the last quarter of 2020, deportations were slowly restarting, though by the end of 2020 only [36,632 Ethiopian returnees had been](#) registered by IOM. This quarter the deportations have been slow but consistent, and between January and March 2021 [10,244 Ethiopians](#) were deported from Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia.

In August 2020, an investigation by the British newspaper The Sunday Telegraph showed [inhumane conditions](#) in detention centers in Saudi Arabia, and throughout 2020 there was increased concern and visibility around the conditions in which migrants were being kept. Despite global attention and [advocacy efforts](#), the abuse against [migrants held in detention continued](#). In January 2021, Ethiopia's Deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonen said that extensive work was being done to [return 34,000 Ethiopians living in difficult conditions in the Middle East](#), with a focus on those stuck in Saudi Arabia.

Returnees from Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia's [beleaguered Tigray region](#) have also continued in [significant numbers](#). However, due to the ongoing hostilities [IOM reported](#) in February that "many returnees who are unable or unwilling to return to Tigray are choosing to reunify with family or relatives outside of Tigray". The Ethiopian government is [reportedly providing transport](#) for the returnees to southern Tigray, but it is unclear how many returnees are actually making the journey.

The Northern Route towards North Africa & Europe

East African arrivals to Europe along Mediterranean routes remain low

Between January and April 2021, [17,876 refugees and migrants](#) are reported to have arrived in Europe via land and sea Mediterranean routes. Of this, 8,472 arrived in Italy, 7,051 in Spain, 1,998 arrived in Greece, 290 in Cyprus and 65 in Malta. Though COVID-19 is still impacting migration dynamics and numbers of people arriving on migration routes around the world, dynamics are unpredictable. For example, 5,034 refugees and migrants arrived in Italy between January and February 2021, almost double the total of [2,553 new arrivals reported in Italy between January and February 2020](#).

Overall, East African arrival figures are still quite low with only about 887 new arrivals in 2021. All together between January 2020 and March 2021, [2,049 East Africans were recorded arriving in Italy](#) (1,015 Eritreans, 948 Somalis and 86 Ethiopians) and [1,927](#) East Africans arrived in Greece (923 Somalis and 1,004 from the Democratic Republic of Congo as of December 2020). It is important to note that reports of Eritreans nearly doubled from [the last quarter](#), 453 Eritreans are reported to have arrived from January to March 2021 and only 562 Eritreans were reported to have arrived [in all of 2020](#). It is not clear what accounts for this shift, but [UNHCR staff in Italy who working with Eritrean arrivals](#) mention a majority had spent about 5 years in Libya prior to their departure to Italy.

East African refugees and migrants in Libya and Tunisia

Although the percentage of East Africans arriving into Europe remains low, East Africans continue to [travel north](#) along the Northern Route and numbers of East Africans in North Africa are still significant. In Libya, [9,144 East Africans](#) were recorded as people of concern by UNHCR as of 1 March 2021 (including 5,245 Eritreans, 2,525 Somalis, 1,073 Ethiopians and 301 South Sudanese). East Africans also represent 5% of the 575,874 migrants [reported by IOM in Libya](#) as of the end of February 2021 (6,130 Somalis, 4,869 Eritreans, and 1863 Ethiopians).

Reports of East Africans in Tunisia in 2021 show similar numbers compared to the same period in 2020. By the end of February 2021, [501 East Africans were registered](#)² by UNHCR, and by the end of February 2020 [542 East Africans](#) were recorded as population of concern.

Interceptions and deaths at sea

Though arrivals along the mixed migration route to Europe remain relatively low, the route remains the deadliest migration route in the world. In January 2021, [43 people were reported to have drowned](#) after their boat capsized off the Libyan coast. The victims were believed to be [men from West Africa](#) aboard the boat was believed to be heading to Europe. On 18 March 2021, [60 more people](#) are said to have drowned as the boat they were on caught fire off the Libyan coast. On 28 February, [15 people are reported to have drowned](#) after the rubber boat they were in began to sink. Though many of the victims of these tragedies are believed to be from West Africa, similar risks are faced by [East African](#) refugees and migrants along these routes.

Since the beginning of the year, the Libyan coast guard has made a number of interceptions at sea. IOM reported that at least [1,487 migrants](#) were stopped at sea in February 2021. Reports show at least [246 migrants](#) were stopped at sea at the end of March 2021, and additional reports claim at least [1,000](#) others were intercepted and returned to Libya between [March 28 and March 29](#). After they are returned back to Libya, most refugees and migrants are kept in detention centers, including those run by armed groups. Refugees and migrants held in these centers report [deplorable conditions and recount](#) extreme human rights abuses, including sexual abuse, torture, unlawful killings, extortion, forced labour, and food deprivation.

The Southern Route towards South Africa

South Africa to revamp asylum system

[An agreement](#) between UNHCR, the United Nations Human Rights Council and the Department of Home Affairs in South Africa was announced in March 2021, which will set the stage for the revamp of South Africa's asylum system. The announcement introduces the Asylum Decisions Backlog Elimination Project which seeks to have over 153,000 outstanding asylum cases heard in order to determine whether they receive refugee status or not. Additionally, an improved management system will help clear delays and backlog accumulated since 2004.

According to UNHCR, two thirds of South Africa's 266,694 refugees and asylum seekers [currently cannot access their rights and privileges](#). The project will oversee the processing of over 153,391 cases thereby allowing those who will be determined as refugees to access services in the country. If granted status, refugees will be able to contribute to South African society and support development in the country. The new move is a welcome change, said the [UNHCR representative in South Africa](#) Leonard Zulu, "Changes to policy and strengthening administrative procedures are vital for a fair and effective asylum system and for the public to have trust in the architecture of refugee management, and the institution of asylum."

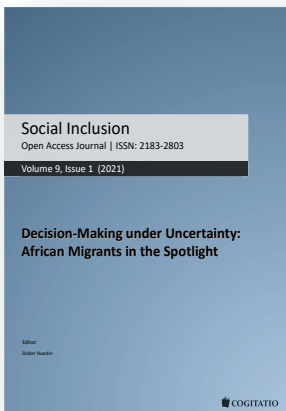
² Including 251 Eritreans, 161 Somalis and 89 Democratic Republic of Congo nationals.

Killings of Somalis in South Africa sparks protests

In February 2021, over [200 people](#) (mostly Somalis) took part in protests over the killings of 4 Somali shop owners in Port Elizabeth's Nelson Mandela Bay. The 4 Somalis were shot while at their shops and their businesses looted by unknown perpetrators. The protestors claimed they are targeted by local communities and frequently robbed but that South African authorities do not take measures to protect them.

South Africa is a preferred destination for many refugees and migrants from across East and Southern Africa, however they often face discrimination and xenophobic attacks. Concerns about xenophobic fears that foreigners are causing the high rates of unemployment in South Africa, and ongoing human rights abuses by [local authorities and host communities](#) could influence negative public perceptions on migrants. Xenophobic violence has left thousands displaced and scores dead in recent years, [including 12 people killed as part of violence in 2019](#). In 2019, UNHCR reported violence had displaced 1,500 foreigners from their homes, and the threat of attack left many afraid to go conduct their businesses. In 2019 the South African government responded by creating [a five-year plan](#) to address xenophobia, racism, and discrimination. The plan [aims](#) 'to improve access to justice and better protection for victims, and increase anti-discrimination efforts to help achieve greater equality and justice.' Human Rights Watch claims that the issue of accountability for perpetrators of violence is not addressed.

Highlighted New Research and Reports



[Decision-Making under Uncertainty: African Migrants in the Spotlight](#)

Cogitatio Press | March 2021

This journal's thematic issue on social inclusion examines decision-making under limited information, focusing on migration decisions. The issue also explores agency among migrants in relation to migration plans, with migration decisions best understood as chains of multiple decisions rather than simple push-pull or two-step models.



[An Unsettled past, an uncertain future](#)

UNICEF | December 2020

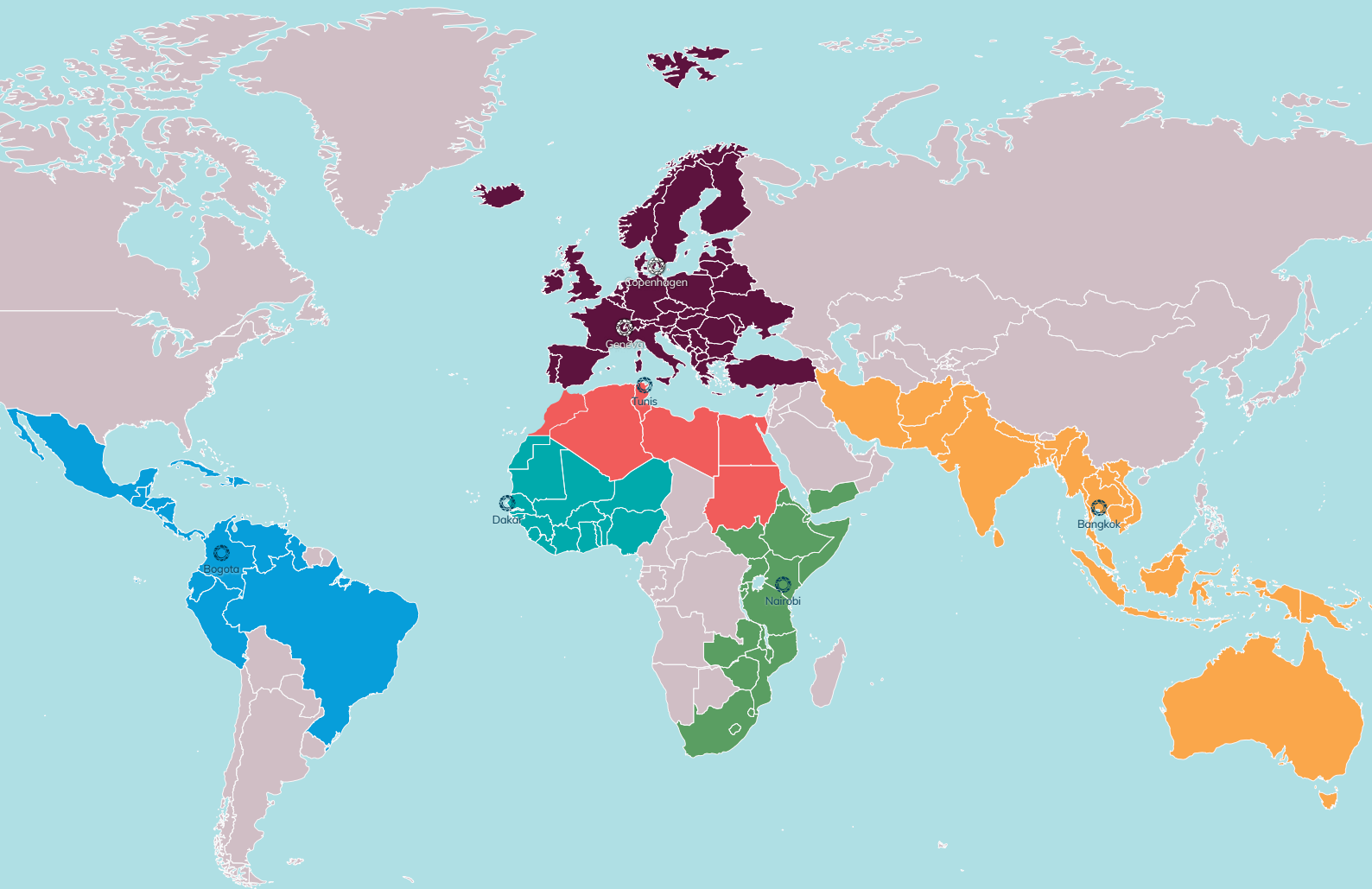
This report is based on 4Mi data collection with children along the Southern Route, as part of a partnership between UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office and MMC East Africa and Yemen. The report outlines findings from the data collection with particular attention to drivers and conditions of children on the move along the Southern Route (including protection risks and abuses).



[A Study on Child Migrants from Ethiopia](#)

IOM | December 2020

This IOM assessment of irregular child migration from Ethiopia is based on a case study in the Ethiopian regions of Amhara, Oromia, Tigray, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPR) and Dire Dawa. The report provides insight into the characteristics of child migration patterns from Ethiopia, the vulnerabilities of unaccompanied migrant children and the various protection risks they face during their migration journeys.



The MMC is a global network consisting of six regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional MMC teams are based in Copenhagen, Dakar, Geneva, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Bangkok.

For more information visit:

mixedmigration.org and follow us at [@Mixed_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)

