



# Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: West Africa



This Quarterly Mixed Migration Update (QMMU) covers the West Africa (WA) region. The core countries of focus for this region are Senegal, Mauritania, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and the coastal countries. 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.

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

For more information on MMC and the quarterly updates from other regions, visit [mixedmigration.org](https://mixedmigration.org) and subscribe to the [MMC newsletter](#) to receive our latest research. Follow us on BlueSky [@mixedmigration.org](#), on X [@Mixed\\_Migration](#) and LinkedIn [@mixedmigration-centre](#).

### MMC's understanding of mixed migration

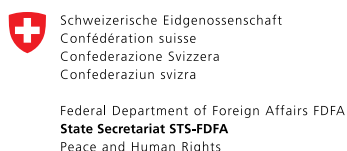
"Mixed migration" refers to cross-border movements of people, including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking, and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people engaged in mixed migration have a range of legal statuses 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. Mixed migration describes migrants travelling along similar routes, using similar means of travel – often travelling irregularly, and wholly or partially, assisted by migrant smugglers.

#### Front cover photo credit:

Jean-Baptiste Joire (2017)

Women watching boats in Joal-Fadiout, Senegal, February 2017.

SUPPORTED BY:



**MINISTRY OF  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF DENMARK**  
*Danida*

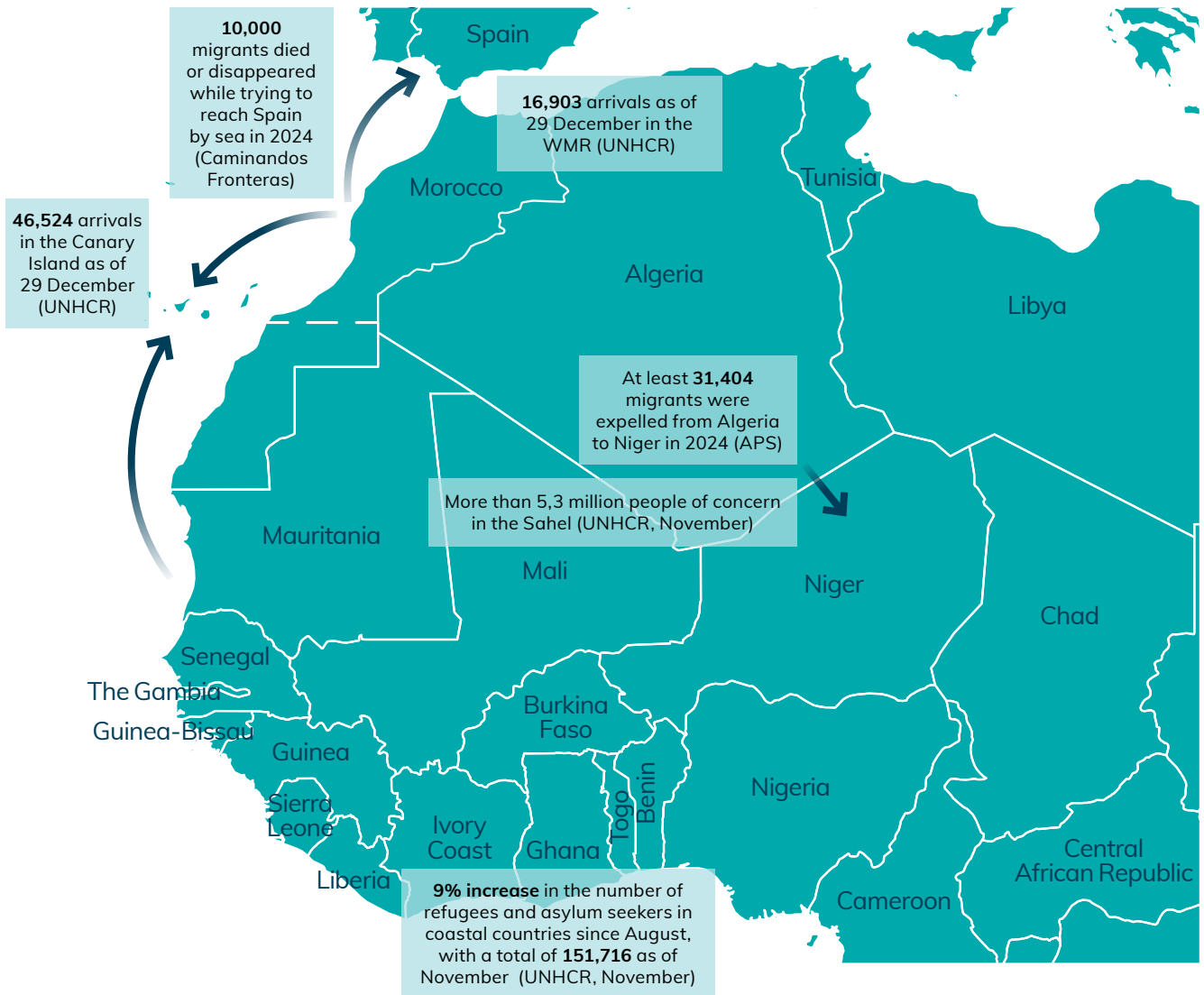
# Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: West Africa

## Quarter 4 - 2024

### Key Updates

- The number of migrants crossing the [Atlantic](#) to the Canary Islands (46,524) has risen by 16% between 2023 and 2024, setting a new record for overall arrivals to [Spain](#) (63,427). Arrivals on the [Western Mediterranean route](#) remained stable with a slight decline of 1% (16,903), while West African migrants accounted for a smaller share of arrivals to [Italy](#) (65,474 total arrivals in 2024—a 58% decrease compared to 2023). Compared to [last quarter](#), arrivals to Spain increased by 25% while arrivals to Italy decreased by 31%.
- According to NGO Caminando Fronteras, [10,000 migrants died or disappeared](#) while attempting to reach Spain by sea this year making it the deadliest year on record since Caminando Fronteras began tracking in 2007. Meanwhile the International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s [Missing Migrants Project](#) (MMP) recorded 1,062 deaths or disappearances along the Atlantic route, 412 on the WMR, and 1,659 on the CMR.
- Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger [maintain visa-free travel for ECOWAS nationals](#) despite exit plans. While some ECOWAS member states [advocate](#) for reciprocity, others remain [hesitant](#).
- West Africa becomes [transit](#) point for South and East Asian migrants seeking Canary Islands, with an increased migrant presence [observed](#) in Mauritania, for instance.
- Spain has [called](#) on Frontex to secure agreements with West African countries to patrol their territorial waters to address increasing migration to the Canary Islands. The expansion of Frontex's activities in West Africa raises [concerns](#) that its focus on deportation over reintegration leaves returnees without adequate support to rebuild their lives.
- Senegal's intensified efforts to combat irregular migration, with [financial support from the EU](#). On 1 October, the Senegalese government [launched](#) regional and departmental committees in efforts to decentralize strategies against irregular migration.

## Regional Overview\*



\*Information on the map relates to selected updates and does not represent all mixed migration movements within and out of West Africa and North Africa.

# Mixed Migration Regional Updates

## Northbound mixed migration

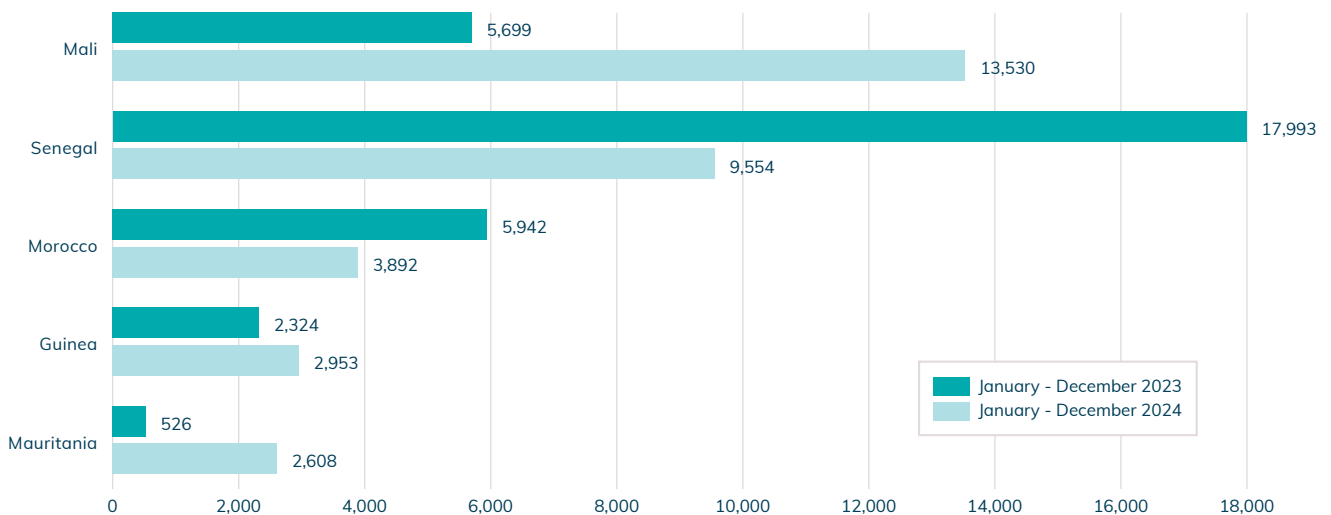
### Western Mediterranean and Atlantic Route

Spain saw a record number of migrant arrivals in 2024. According to [UNHCR](#), as of 29 December, Spain registered a total of 63,427 irregular arrivals in 2024. This figure includes 21,237 people during the period from [29 September](#) to 29 December. This represents a 11% yearly increase compared to 2023 and a 25% increase compared to [last quarter](#).

Mixed movements on the Atlantic route drove the increase in migrant arrivals to Spain in 2024. They reached 46,524 as of 29 December (16,109 from 29 [September](#) to 29 December), representing a 16% [increase](#) compared to 2023 and a 47% increase compared to [last quarter](#).

In 2024, Malian’s surpassed Senegalese as the largest group of arrivals to the Canary Islands, rising 137% from 2023. Mauritians also saw a sharp increase in 2024 rising over 396%. Arrivals from Guinea also recorded a 27% increase, while Senegal experienced a decline of 47%, possibly due to stricter controls.<sup>1</sup> As of December 2024, the main nationalities migrating through the Atlantic Route to the Canary islands [are](#) Malians (13,530), Senegalese (9,554), Moroccans (3,892), Guineans (2,953), and Mauritians (2,608) (see Figure 1). From 2023 to 2024, Mauritania saw the largest increase in [asylum applications in Spain](#) at 3,240%, followed by Mali at 806% and Senegal at 449% (see Table 1).

**Figure 1. Arrivals in the Canary Islands via the Atlantic Route by nationality – from January until December 2023 and January until December 2024**



Source: [Frontex Migratory Map](#)

1 See page .... (on interceptions in Senegal) – to be added at layout stage

**Table 1. Most common nationalities of asylum applicants in Spain in 2023 and 2024 (as of October)**

Nationality	2023	2024	Percentage Increase
Mauritania	53	1,770	3,240%
Mali	980	8,883	806%
Senegal	1,233	6,768	449%
Morocco	2,570	3,688	43.5%

Source: [Spain - Asylum Applications - October 2024](#)

[Arrivals on the Western Mediterranean route](#) (WMR) overall remained stable with a slight decline of 1% compared to 2023, totalling 16,903 as of 29 December (5,128 this quarter, representing a 14% decrease compared to [last quarter](#)). Overall sea arrivals on the Western Mediterranean route [dropped](#) from 15,435 in 2023 to 14,431 in 2024. This is primarily due to a decrease in sea arrivals to the Spanish Peninsula. Meanwhile, arrivals to the Balearic islands alone have [tripled](#), reaching nearly 6,000 in 2024 compared to 2,278 in 2023. Land arrivals to Ceuta and Melilla have also continued to [increase](#) this quarter, rising from 1,234 to 2,647, with most occurring in Ceuta (from 1,068 to 2,531). Algerians and Moroccans continue to be the [main](#) nationalities among migrants arriving in Spain on the Western Mediterranean route, with 7,992 and 4,212 arrivals in 2024, respectively.

## Central Mediterranean Route (arrivals to Italy)

Consistent with the [previous quarter](#), the share of West African migrants in arrivals to Italy remains minimal. As of 29 December, Italy [recorded](#) 65,474 irregular sea arrivals in 2024 (including 16,166 between 29 [September](#) and 29 December), a 58% decrease compared to 2023 and 31% decrease compared to last quarter. Similarly, departures from Tunisia and Libya [decreased](#) by 80% and 20%, respectively. This trend can be attributed to increasing [interceptions](#) in North African countries, such as Tunisia and Libya, which [disproportionately](#) affect Sub-Saharan African migrants. The largest group of arrivals in Italy consisted of Bangladeshis (21%), followed by Syrians (19%), Tunisians (12%), Egyptians (7%), and Guineans (6%).

## Dead or missing refugees and migrants<sup>2</sup>

2024 was a [particularly](#) deadly year for migrants, with widely varying figures reported depending on the source. The differences in the figures presented by IOM and Caminando Fronteras (see below) likely reflects differences in methodology and underscores the challenges of tracking migrant fatalities and disappearances, as many incidents go undocumented.

<sup>2</sup> Numbers in this section are drawing on IOM's MMP and based on MMC calculations made accessing the website on 31 December 2024.

The Spanish NGO [Caminando Fronteras](#) reported 9,757 deaths on the Atlantic Route in 2024, emphasizing the growing risks as migrants sought alternative paths to Spain due to increased securitization of Mediterranean migration routes. 183 deaths were recorded on the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) and 513 on the Algerian route, bringing the total number of migrant deaths on routes to Spain in 2024 to over 10,000. This represents the highest annual death toll since Caminando Fronteras began tracking these figures in 2007.

Meanwhile, the IOM's [Missing Migrants Project](#) (MMP) recorded 1,062 deaths or disappearances along the Atlantic route. Of these, 208 died or disappeared during the fourth quarter of 2024. On the WMR, the IOM registered 412 deaths and disappearances, including 48 in the fourth quarter, as of 31 December. Additionally, at least 1,659 people have died or gone missing on the CMR, including 438 during the fourth quarter.

## Mixed migration within and to the West Africa region

As of November 2024, according to UNHCR [data](#), there were more than 5.3 million people of concern in the Sahel,<sup>3</sup> totaling 5,358,270. Among these, 3,168,945 were internally displaced persons (IDPs), reflecting a 1.5% increase since [August](#) 2024.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the overall refugee and asylum-seeker population has also [grown](#), registering a 7.4% increase compared to August 2024.

This increase may be partly due to the [intensification](#) of [violence](#) in Burkina Faso, [Niger](#), Mali, and other countries in the region. In Burkina Faso and Mali, for example, [ACLED](#) reports that November became the deadliest month of 2024, with a 7% rise in fatalities compared to October. Additionally, the increase in displacement could also be linked to the heavy rains and flooding that [impacted](#) the region during the summer of 2024, with ongoing effects still being felt by affected populations.

## Refugees and asylum seekers in Coastal countries

According to [UNHCR](#) data, there was an estimated total of 151,716 refugees (71,617) and asylum seekers (80,099) in the coastal countries of Cote d'Ivoire (68,505), Ghana (16,329), Togo (48,713), and Benin (19,732) as of November 2024. This compares to 138,941 recorded refugees and asylum seekers as of [August](#) 2024, representing a 9% increase. Ghana shows the largest percentage increase, of approximately 35%. Côte d'Ivoire and Benin also experienced increases, at 12% and 15%, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The figures reported reflect the number of IDPs in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger, as well as refugees dispersed throughout the Sahel region. They also include the number of refugees from the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) and in the neighboring coastal countries of Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo.

<sup>4</sup> In [August](#) 2024, the total number of refugees, asylum seekers, and IDPs stood at 5,157,576 individuals. Among these, 3,120,078 were IDPs and 2,189,325 were refugees and asylum seekers.

<sup>5</sup> The number of asylum applications in these countries exhibits quarter-to-quarter fluctuations. While these variations may be influenced by changes in UNHCR operations, such as shifts in registration procedures, refugee status determination processes, and fluctuations in refugee arrivals, MMC could not confirm the specific reasons for these changes based on the available information

## Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger maintain visa-free travel for ECOWAS nationals despite withdrawal

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES), comprising Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has [announced](#) that it will maintain visa-free travel with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) nationals. The three countries announced their intent to leave the bloc [earlier](#) this year. They have been [granted](#) until July 2025 by ECOWAS to reconsider their decision to leave the regional bloc. The extension was agreed upon during talks held in Abuja on 15 December.

As MMC previously [noted](#), one of the most significant challenges posed by leaving ECOWAS would be the loss of access to its free mobility framework, which facilitates the movement of people and trade. The AES's decision to maintain visa-free travel aims to preserve the benefits of free movement of goods and people despite political and diplomatic tensions, while also [allowing](#) AES member states to enforce national laws on entry eligibility.

The decision of the AES members has sparked a debate among ECOWAS members regarding the implementation of a reciprocity measure. While some member states, such as Togo, Senegal, and Benin, [advocate](#) for reciprocity, others remain [hesitant](#). In the absence of a regional consensus by July 2025, individual ECOWAS member states may decide sovereignly on reciprocity, potentially leading to bilateral agreements.

## The AES moves toward harmonized travel documents amid delays

As reported [last quarter](#), the AES is working to harmonize travel and identity documents to facilitate free movement across their borders. Security ministers from the three countries [met](#) in Bamako in November to finalize technical specifications for passports and national ID cards. The harmonized documents will be presented to the Heads of State for final approval. Despite this finalisation of technical specifications, logistical and financial challenges have [delayed](#) its implementation.

In December, however, Mali's Prime Minister has [urged](#) citizens to remain patient regarding the rollout of the new biometric passports. The Prime Minister [emphasized](#) the importance of completing several procedural steps before these documents can be issued.

## West Africa becomes transit point for South and East Asian migrants en route to the Canary Islands

A new trend has emerged involving migrants from South and East Asia using West Africa as a [transit](#) point en route to reach the Canary Islands. Reports indicate that migrants, including from countries such as Pakistan, are [paying](#) smugglers up to euros 16,000 for journeys that often [involve](#) flying to Senegal via the United Arab Emirates and Ethiopia before departing by boat from Mauritania. This trend has also been [observed](#) in Mauritania, where local communities have noted the increasing presence of South and East Asian migrants. Authorities in Mauritania recently [arrested](#) 125 Pakistani nationals attempting to cross to the Canary Islands, following an earlier arrest of 16 individuals.



## Frontex in West Africa: Spain's request for enhanced border control

Spain has [called](#) on Frontex, the European Union border agency, to secure agreements with West African countries to patrol their territorial waters to address increasing migration to the Canary Islands. According to Frontex's [strategic risk analysis](#), the region faces growing challenges requiring enhanced border management. The agency's approach emphasizes partnerships with third countries, encompassing border control, surveillance, capacity building, and return operations as critical components for managing migration.

The expansion of Frontex's activities in West Africa raises [concerns](#), particularly regarding sovereignty, human rights, and reintegration practices. [Reports](#) indicate that Frontex's involvement often prioritizes deportation over reintegration, leaving returnees without adequate support to rebuild their lives. This focus on deportation has led to [criticisms](#) of opaque reintegration processes and potential violations of migrants' fundamental rights.

## Mauritania strengthens EU-Spain cooperation on migration management and security

In Mauritania, authorities have expressed [concern](#) about the strain on resources amid the rising number of departures from its shores and the growing refugee population in the country. The Mauritanian defence minister described the arrival of migrants as reaching a "[critical threshold](#)," driven largely by the escalating insecurity in the Sahel region. Within this context, the Mauritanian authorities have [called upon](#) the EU and its member states to enhance their collaborative efforts.

As MMC highlighted in previous 2024 [QMMUs](#), Mauritania has intensified its cooperation with Spain and the European Union (EU) to tackle these migration-related challenges. These efforts are set to continue into 2025, with Mauritania slated to host the [inaugural](#) Spain-Mauritania High-Level Meeting. This meeting will [address](#) key areas such as enhancing security cooperation and managing migration. Additionally, an EU-Mauritania High-Level Dialogue is scheduled for January 2025, with expected participation from the Directorate-General of the European Union for International Partnerships and the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, according to a MMC key informant.

## Senegal has intensified efforts to combat irregular migration

Senegal has continued to strengthen its efforts to address irregular migration. On 1 October, the Senegalese government [launched](#) regional and departmental committees under the Interministerial Committee for Combating Irregular Migration (CILMI). This effort seeks to [decentralize](#) strategies against irregular migration, enabling more localized responses. Central to these efforts is the [establishment](#) of the Interministerial Committee itself, which brings together government ministries, civil society, and local authorities to develop and implement strategies aimed at curbing irregular migration.

The strategy is largely security-driven, with a primary focus on enhancing border security to reduce irregular departures. In October 2024 alone, Senegal's National Navy [intercepted](#) nearly 1,000 migrants attempting to reach Europe by sea. In a separate series of operations during late October, the authorities [intercepted](#) almost 600 migrants over the course of ten days.

## Senegal receives euro 30 million EU aid to combat irregular migration

The European Union (EU) has [announced](#) a euro 30 million aid package to support Senegal's efforts in combating irregular migration in response to the rising number of irregular migrants departing from Senegal and heading towards the Canary Islands. In October, the EU's Commissioner for International Partnerships [confirmed](#) the financial assistance during her visit to Dakar.

While these initiatives are framed as preventive measures to ensure migrant safety and avoid further deaths in the Atlantic, [critics](#) argue that EU development funds are increasingly directed towards strengthening border security and migration management. As highlighted by a [recent investigation](#) into the EU's funding mechanisms, a significant portion of the EU's budget for migration-related projects is allocated to security measures, which may contribute to a more coercive migration management.

## Return migration

### Expulsions from Algeria to Niger reach record high in 2024

In 2024, Algeria [expelled](#) at least 31,404 people to the Niger border, a 21% increase compared to 26,031 expulsions in 2023, with over a third (11,606) of these [expulsions](#) occurring between August 14 and December 31. Alarme Phone Sahara highlights the inhumane and sometimes fatal conditions faced by those expelled, primarily sub-Saharan Africans, including cases of abandonment in the desert and multiple deaths. The organization [attributes](#) the rise in expulsions to intensified cooperation among [Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya](#) as well as the European union which aims at limiting migration. They [call](#) for an immediate halt to these practices, emphasizing the urgent need to address the dangerous conditions and human rights violations at Algeria's borders.

### Migrants expelled from Libya remain stranded in Niger

Around 400 individuals, mostly Nigerian nationals, remain [stranded](#) in the desert town of Dirkou in eastern Niger, many for several months, outside the International Organization for Migration (IOM) centre. Most of these individuals [come from](#) Nigerian regions such as Kano, Katsina, and Maiduguri, having fled violence, while others are originally from Chad and Sudan. Many had previously been in [Libya](#) and are now seeking to return to their home countries. This situation echoes a similar incident in [July](#) when approximately 460 individuals were expelled from Libya to Niger and were temporarily stranded in Dirkou before being transferred.

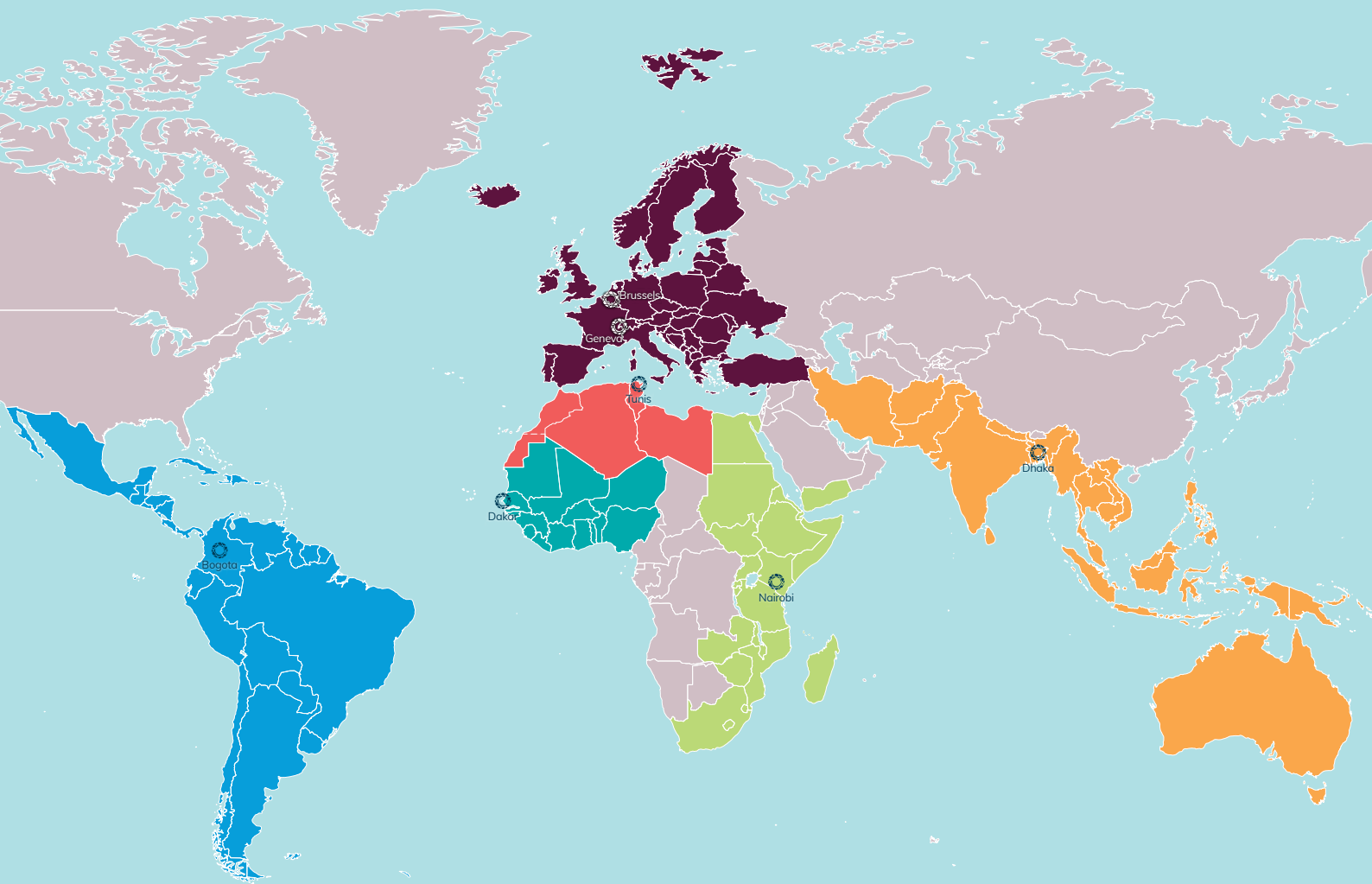
In December, migrants stranded in Dirkou Niger, [protested](#) outside the IOM International office, demanding assistance with their return to their home countries. According to Alarme Phone Sahara ([APS](#)), while the IOM offers voluntary return programs, their implementation is often slow, leaving many migrants stranded for extended periods. APS has called for immediate humanitarian assistance, stressing the urgent need for blankets, mattresses, and other basic supplies, especially as winter temperatures in the desert drop. The organization has also highlighted the importance of [accelerating](#) transfers to larger IOM centres in Agadez to address the overcrowding and prevent further humanitarian crises.

## Malian migrants continue to be repatriated from North Africa

Similar to what was reported last quarter, [repatriation](#) of Malian migrants from North Africa, with recent operations reflecting ongoing trends. On October 1 and 2, 198 Malian migrants returned home from [Morocco and Tunisia](#), facilitated by cooperation between the Malian government and the respective authorities of these countries. Over 8,000 Malian migrants have received support this [year](#) through repatriation and reintegration assistance programs.

## Human rights group urges action for stranded Senegalese migrants in Niger

The Action for Human Rights and Friendship (ADHA) has [expressed](#) serious concern over the plight of Senegalese migrants stranded in Niger. In December the organization, as reported by [RFI](#), called on the Senegalese government to act swiftly to repatriate these individuals, who have been living in harsh conditions following their expulsion from Algeria and Tunisia. Reports indicate that 83 Senegalese migrants are currently stranded in Niger, with some having been in this situation for as long as five months.



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

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

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

**For more information visit:** [www.mixedmigration.org](http://www.mixedmigration.org)

follow us on Bluesky: [@mixedmigration.org](https://bsky.app/profile/@mixedmigration.org)

X: [@Mixed\\_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration) LinkedIn: [@mixedmigration-centre](https://www.linkedin.com/company/mixedmigration-centre)

and [subscribe to our newsletter](#).

