



MMC West Africa

QUARTER 1 2025

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 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.

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The environment in Diffa, Niger, 2023.

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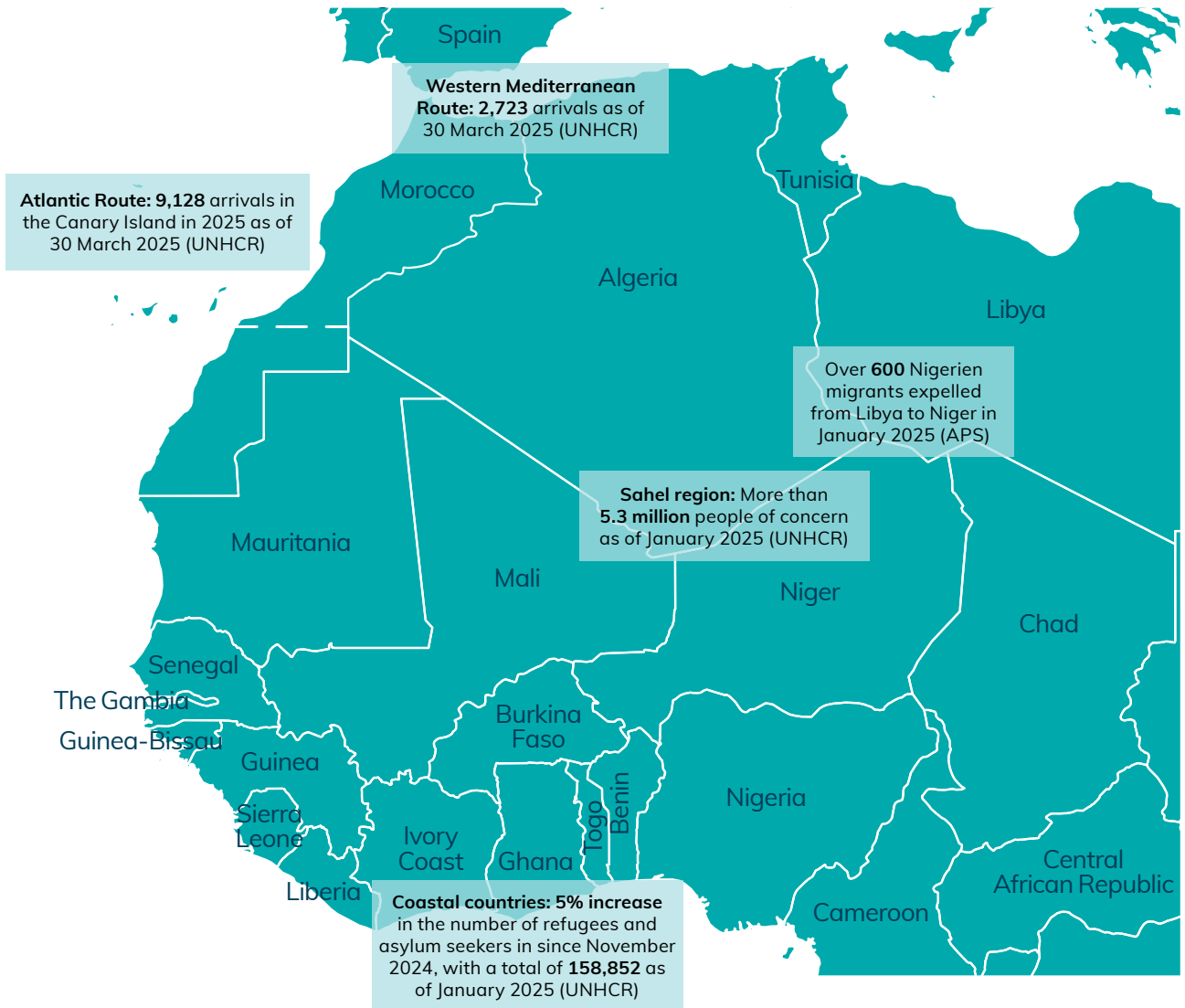
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Quarter 1 - 2025

Key Updates

- **Irregular arrivals to Spain have dropped by 28% during the first quarter of 2025 compared to the same period in 2024**, with the Canary Islands seeing a 31% decline. The Western Mediterranean route (WMR) also saw a 16% decrease.
- **The overall refugee and asylum seeker population in coastal countries has seen a 5% increase over a two-month period**, primarily driven by an increase in the number of Burkinabés in Benin and Ghana.
- **Mauritania has launched an expulsion campaign targeting migrants with an irregular status**. Expelled migrants face re-entry [bans](#) and dire conditions at the borders with Senegal and Mali. Meanwhile, the European Commission [pledged](#) an additional €4 million in humanitarian aid for Mauritania in 2025.
- **Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso launched a new shared passport in 2025** as Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) [maintains](#) visa-free travel for their citizens within the region and for ECOWAS nationals traveling to these Alliance of Sahel States (AES) countries.
- **Niger [introduced](#) a new ordinance tightening entry, residency and movement conditions for foreigners**, including ECOWAS citizens, [reinstating](#) strict criminal penalties for individuals violating the new regulations.
- **The Guinean government has temporarily [banned](#) cross-border transhumance**, potentially disrupting seasonal grazing [across](#) the entire West African region.
- **West African migrants in the US [face](#) heightened deportation risks as the new administration [intensifies](#) immigration enforcement**, with [many](#) West African migrants now living in fear of detention and deportation.
- **In January 2025, Togo and Gabon [launched](#) a two-year initiative aimed at strengthening migration management** and tackling human trafficking and migrant smuggling along land and maritime routes.
- **More than 600 Nigerien migrants were expelled from Libya** during one of the [largest](#) expulsions operations in January 2025.

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

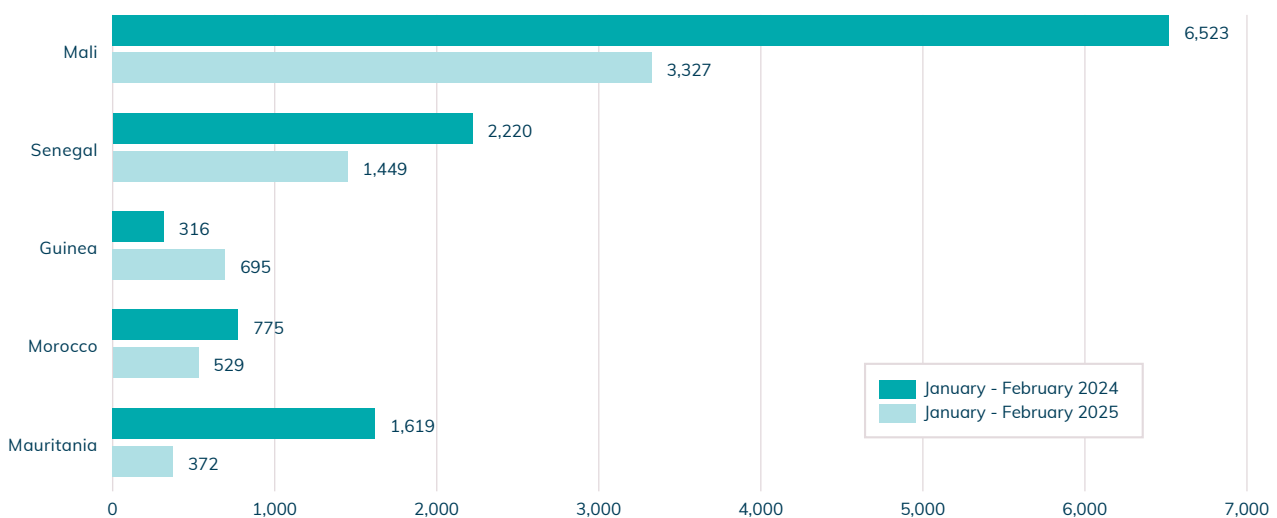
Western Mediterranean and Atlantic Route

Overall, arrivals to Spain across various routes have decreased in early 2025 compared to the same period in 2024. According to [UNHCR](#), as of 30 March, Spain registered a total of 11,851 irregular arrivals in 2025. This represents a 28% decrease compared to the same quarter last year and a 44% decrease compared to last [quarter](#) (21,237). Most arrivals are [recorded](#) in the Canary Islands, via the Atlantic route. As of 30 March, they reached 9,128, representing a 31% decrease compared to last year and a 43% decrease compared to last [quarter](#) (16,109).

As of February 2025, there has been a general decline in irregular arrivals to the Canary Islands, concerning nationals from most West African countries, except for Guinean nationals (figure 1). Mauritania saw the highest decrease, with arrivals decreasing from 1,619 to 372 (-77%). Other countries experienced declines as well, including Mali from 6,523 to 3,327 (-49%), Morocco from 775 to 529 (-32%), and Senegal from 2,220 to 1,449 (-35%). In contrast, arrivals from Guinea increased from 316 to 695 (+120%).

This general decline in arrivals to the Canary Islands may be linked to heightened restrictions in both [Mauritania](#) and [Senegal](#), where efforts to curb irregular migration appear to have [intensified](#) over the past year with support from Spain and the European Union (EU). Poor weather conditions, especially during the winter months, could have also deterred migrants from attempting the crossing due to heightened risks of shipwrecks and fatalities.

Figure 1. Arrivals in the Canary Islands via the Atlantic Route: Top five nationalities, January – February 2024 and January – February 2025



Arrivals on the Western Mediterranean route (WMR) [declined](#) by 16% compared to last year, totalling 2,723 as of 30 March 2025 (a 53% decrease compared to last [quarter's](#) figure of 5,128. The [main](#) countries of origin of migrants using this route continue to be Algeria (1,204) and Morocco (387). Meanwhile, overall arrivals to the Spanish peninsula and Balearic Islands continue to [decrease](#) this quarter by 3.6% reaching 186 as of 15 January 2025 compared to 193 in 2024. In terms of land arrivals to Ceuta and Melilla, the Spanish Ministry of Interior data [reveals](#) a 53% decrease, from 805 in 2024 to 379, with most occurring in Ceuta.¹

Central Mediterranean Route (arrivals to Italy)

As of 30 March, Italy [recorded](#) 9,168 irregular sea arrivals in 2025, a 17% decrease compared to 2024 (11,012) and a 43% decrease compared to last quarter (16,166). Similar to last [quarter](#), departures from Libya decreased by 25% (from 11,341 to 8,502) while departures from Tunisia decreased by 89% (from 3,438 to 372). While fewer migrants are reaching Italy, Libya's migrant population is [growing](#) (824,131 migrants as of December 2024), suggesting ongoing arrivals and potentially longer stays there.

Restrictive migration policies in North Africa, coupled with [ongoing](#) EU-backed efforts to deter irregular migration, have contributed to the decline in departures, particularly from Tunisia, where [frequent](#) interceptions of migrant boats at sea have played a key role, with Sub-Saharan African migrants [particularly](#) affected. Consistent with trends observed [throughout](#) 2024, the share of West African migrants among arrivals to Italy remains minimal, with no West African nationality [ranking](#) among the top 10 countries of origin.²

Dead or missing refugees and migrants ³

According to the [Missing Migrants Project](#) (MMP), as of 30 March 2025, there were 170 recorded migrant deaths or disappearances on the Atlantic Route to the Canary Islands. On the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR), the IOM recorded 123 cases while 225 were recorded along the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) to Italy. On 21 March 2025 the MMP [reported](#) that 2024 was the deadliest year on record with at least 8,938 migrants reported as dead or missing worldwide, of which 2,452 were reported on the Mediterranean. As the MMP acknowledges, these figures are likely a [substantial underestimate](#).

Mixed migration within and to the West Africa region

As of January 2025, according to UNHCR [data](#), there were more than 5.3 million people of concern in the Sahel.⁴ Among these, 3,168,945 [were](#) internally displaced persons (IDPs), reflecting no change since [November](#) 2024. The overall refugee and asylum seeker population also saw a marginal [increase](#) of less

¹ As of 31 March 2025, there [were](#) 3 sea arrivals in Ceuta and 1 sea arrival in Melilla, compared to 0 sea arrivals in Ceuta and 1 sea arrival in Melilla over the same period in 2024.

² The largest group of arrivals consisted of Bangladeshis (35%), followed by Pakistanis (23%), Syrians (13%), Egyptians (8%), and Ethiopians (4%).

³ Numbers in this section are drawing on IOM's MMP and based on MMC calculations made accessing the website on 3 April 2025

⁴ 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.

than 1% compared to [November](#) 2024.⁵ Even with the small change compared to 2024, the Central Sahel [faces](#) consistently high levels of violence. This instability, which is [spreading and evolving](#), will continue to force people to move. For example, compared to 2023, migration movements from Niger to Libya and Algeria [increased](#) by 193% and 68%, respectively, in 2024.

Refugees and asylum seekers in coastal countries

The overall refugee and asylum seeker population in coastal countries has seen a slight increase. According to UNHCR [data](#), there was an estimated total of 158,852 refugees (83,226) and asylum seekers (75,626) in the coastal countries of Côte d'Ivoire (69,219), Ghana (17,563), Togo (48,770) and Benin (23,300) as of January 2025. This compares to 151,716 recorded refugees and asylum seekers as of [November](#) 2024, representing a 5% increase over a two-month period.

The growth in the overall refugee and asylum seeker population in coastal countries is primarily driven by the increase in the number of registrations of Burkinabé in Benin and Ghana. Benin saw the largest increase at 18%, followed by Ghana with 8%, while Côte d'Ivoire and Togo experienced minimal growth, at 1% and less than 1%, respectively. In Benin, Burkinabe asylum seekers, who were not among the top five nationalities in [August](#) 2024, became the leading nationality by [February](#) 2025, reaching 5,051 and accounting for 73% of all registered asylum seekers. A similar trend is observed in Ghana, where Burkinabe refugees, who were previously not among the top five nationalities in August 2024, reached 9,658 by [February](#) 2025, making up 56% of the total refugee population. In [August](#) 2024, Ghana hosted 4,363 Burkinabe asylum seekers. This increase is, thus, attributed to new registrations as Ghana is [now](#) granting prima facie refugee status to displaced Burkinabes.

Mauritania launches an expulsion campaign amid stricter migration measures

Mauritanian authorities have launched a [crackdown](#) on irregular migration, resulting in an expulsion campaign. These expulsions are not new, with earlier actions in [2024](#) and [2023](#). The operation has targeted migrants [from](#) Mali, Senegal, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire,⁶ with some [reports](#) indicating that even individuals holding UNHCR documents have been expelled. On 8 March, tensions [escalated](#) when expelled migrants reportedly attacked a police post in Gogui Zemal, leading to a violent confrontation with Mauritanian authorities. Expelled individuals face a two-year [ban](#) on re-entry, while Mauritania has [introduced](#) a biometric tracking system to reinforce border controls.

The crackdown has drawn criticism from civil society actors. The Association Mauritanienne des Droits de l'Homme (AMDH) [condemned](#) the expulsions, calling them a violation of human rights and a breach of agreements with Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal that ensure free movement and residence rights. The association also [criticised](#) the EU and partner countries, arguing that their migration agreements with Mauritania encourage repressive practices. Meanwhile, the Mauritanian government has [rejected](#)

⁵ In [November](#) 2024, the total number of refugees, asylum seekers, and IDPs stood at 5,358,270 individuals. Among these, 3,168,945 were IDPs and 2,189,325 were refugees and asylum seekers

⁶ While the numbers for each nationality are still unavailable, at least [528](#) Malians were expelled.

accusations of mass expulsions, maintaining that its security measures comply with national and international obligations.

The expulsions have also sparked responses from neighbouring countries. In Senegal, a parliamentarian [raised](#) concerns over alleged human rights violations and proposed a fact-finding mission within the National Assembly to assess the situation of Senegalese and other affected migrants in Mauritania. In Mali, the government [dispatched](#) a mission to assist expelled nationals. During a visit to Mauritania, the Minister of Malians Abroad [announced](#) a special initiative to issue residence permits for Malians in Mauritania, with a fee exemption.

Meanwhile, the European Commission has [announced](#) an additional €4 million in humanitarian aid for Mauritania in 2025 to address the rising numbers of Malian refugees and returning Mauritians. As of December 2024, Mauritania [hosts](#) over 288,000 Malian refugees and asylum seekers, with 162,303 registered individuals. The UNHCR [projects](#) this number to increase to 318,000 by the end of 2025.

Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso introduce new passport as ECOWAS maintains visa-free travel

Following their [official](#) exit from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on 29 January, 2025, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso – united under the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) – have introduced a new shared passport. Existing ECOWAS passports will remain valid until their expiration date.

Despite the three countries' departure from ECOWAS, the latter has [decided](#) to reciprocally maintain visa-free travel for their citizens. In a [statement](#), ECOWAS emphasised its commitment to keeping its “doors open”, allowing nationals from the three countries to continue to benefit from visa-free movement, residence and establishment rights under the 1979 Free Movement Protocol (FMP). While this decision upholds the current mobility rights of citizens from these countries, the practical application of these rights could be influenced by future political developments.

Niger implements stricter entry and residency rules for foreign nationals

On 13 January, Niger's ruling National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP) [introduced](#) new regulations tightening entry, residency and movement conditions for foreign nationals, citing [security concerns](#). The [ordinance](#) mandates that all foreign nationals present valid travel or residency documents upon entry.

The ordinance [reinstates](#) strict criminal penalties against foreigners violating residency rules. They could face administrative measures such as expulsion, detention, deportation and travel document seizure. Failure to renew residency permits without justification carries 1–3 years of imprisonment and fines of CFA 1–5 million (US\$2,000–10,000). Defying expulsion orders or re-entering irregularly results in harsher penalties such as 2–5 years in prison and fines up to US\$100,000. Additionally, [individuals](#) facilitating irregular entry, circulation or stay are subject to similar penalties, including imprisonment, fines and the

confiscation of transportation used in such activities (art.19). Nigerien citizens hosting irregular migrants may also be penalised. The [ordinance](#), however, provides exceptions for individuals seeking international protection and upholds the principle of non-refoulement, mandating that no one is returned to a country where their safety is at risk.

The Guinea government introduces a ban on cross-border transhumance

On 23 January 2025, the Guinean government [announced](#) a temporary ban on cross-border transhumance from 1 January 2025 to 1 March 2026, citing concerns over land management, environmental degradation, and rising tensions between farmers and herders. In Guinea, transhumance routes are increasingly [obstructed](#) by farmland, fuelling disputes between agro-pastoral communities.

While the ban does [not](#) apply to livestock intended for trade and consumption – provided prior authorization is obtained – it is expected to disrupt seasonal grazing patterns [across](#) Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire. As Guinea serves as [both](#) a destination and origin country for cross-border transhumance, the measure risks impacting regional pastoral economies, heightening vulnerabilities for communities reliant on livestock mobility, and disrupting other transhumance corridors as herders are compelled to seek alternative food sources for their animals. The full implications of this decision remain to be seen, particularly in terms of its effects on food security, conflict dynamics and economic stability in the region.

West African migrants in the United States face threat of deportation

West African migrants in the United States (US) are facing heightened risks of deportation as the new administration intensifies immigration enforcement. One of the most controversial measures has been the promise of the [largest](#) deportation operation in US history, targeting irregular migrants. This has [affected](#) West African migrants, many of whom entered the US via Latin America, particularly through [Nicaragua](#). Around 1,214 Mauritians, 930 Senegalese, 700 Guineans, 555 Cameroonians and 306 Nigerians are currently [detained](#) and awaiting deportation. West African migrants [describe](#) a widespread climate of fear, with many undocumented migrants avoiding work or staying indoors to evade immigration raids.

High demand for regular migration pathways to Spain in Senegal and The Gambia

Following the August 2024 [visit](#) of the Spanish Prime Minister to [Mauritania](#), [Senegal](#) and [The Gambia](#), agreements on circular migration were signed to facilitate temporary employment opportunities in Spain, particularly in the agriculture sector. The [program](#) offers seasonal agricultural work contracts ranging from three to nine months, targeting individuals aged 25 to 50.

The recent launch of the recruitment process for seasonal employment in The Gambia and Senegal attracted [significant](#) interest, with applicants assembling at government offices to obtain application forms for the circular migration program. In response to the high demand, authorities in Banjul suspended distribution while Dakar resorted to an online system to avoid crowding. The overwhelming response from applicants highlights the strong demand for regular labour migration pathways amid economic challenges and limited job opportunities in both countries. Circular migration programs are designed to provide alternatives to irregular migration, with workers expected to return home upon completing their contracts.

Senegal and Mauritania strengthen cooperation on migration, security and development

In January, the Senegalese Prime Minister visited Mauritania to discuss a wide range of [development](#) topics, including migration, economic cooperation and security. While specific details on migration-related agreements are still forthcoming, both countries emphasised the need to [enhance](#) cooperation on common security challenges, including irregular migration and transnational organised crime. One key outcome of the visit was the agreement to activate regular meetings between border defence and security forces to address these challenges. In addition, the two countries [agreed](#) to facilitate the free movement of people and simplify residency and settlement conditions for citizens of both countries. This development preceded Mauritania's migration [crackdown](#), which included the expulsion of Senegalese and other nationals to Senegal and Mali.

Togo and Gabon enhance collaboration on migration

Togo and Gabon have [launched](#) a two-year initiative aimed at strengthening migration management and tackling human trafficking and migrant smuggling along land and maritime routes. The agreement [seeks](#) to enhance cooperation between the two countries to better protect and assist migrants, and will also [focus](#) on increasing cross-border collaboration to address irregular migration. This comes in response to growing [concerns](#) over human trafficking along the migration routes between the two countries such as the Togo-Nigeria-Gabon route, particularly involving women and children for domestic work, forced labour, sexual exploitation, and in the mining sector.

Return migration

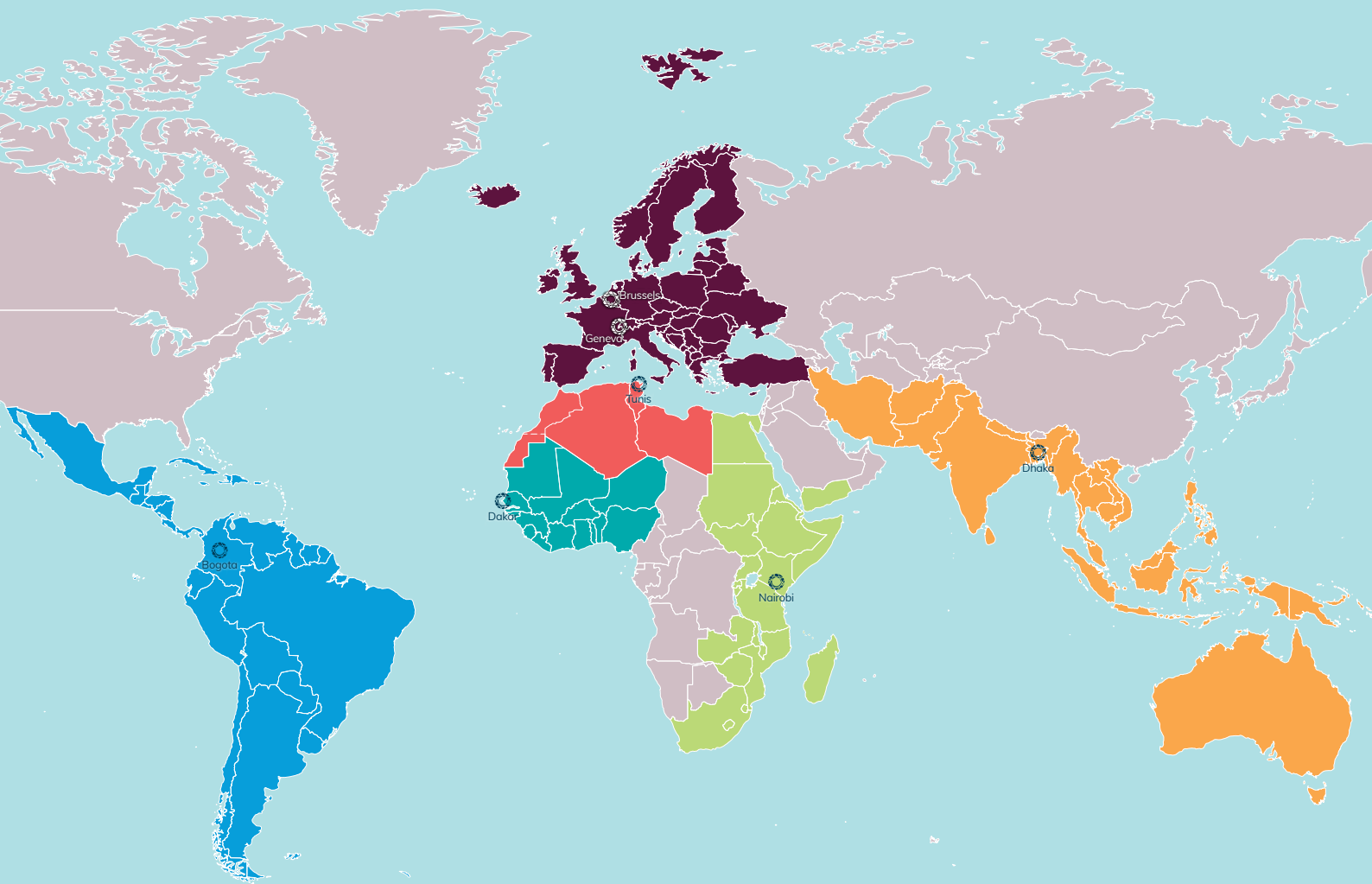
Over 600 Nigerien migrants expelled from Libya

During one of the [largest](#) expulsions operations in Libya, more than 600 Nigerien nationals were expelled from the country in January 2025. Some had been previously [detained](#) across various regions in Libya, including Tripoli, Qatrone, Sabha and Misrata. This mirrors earlier incidents in [November](#) and [July](#) 2024, when Alarme Phone Sahara (APS) documented the expulsion of over 400 people to Dirkou in northern Niger. The organization had also previously highlighted that approximately [10,000](#) individuals were still detained in Libya, facing imminent expulsion.

Observers have [linked](#) the expulsions to broader EU-Libya migration cooperation. As Libyan authorities have [not](#) issued any formal policy on these operations, reports [suggest](#) that expulsions are being carried out arbitrarily by local officials, raising concerns over the lack of oversight and legal safeguards. Similarly, APS has [condemned](#) the expulsions, calling for their immediate halt and urging respect for migrants' rights and freedom of movement. The organization also [criticises](#) EU-Libya migration [agreements](#), arguing that they reinforce restrictive policies that [endanger](#) migrants rather than offering protection.

Senegal to ratify agreement with Morocco on detainee transfers and migrant repatriation

The Senegalese National Assembly unanimously [passed](#) a law on 11 March authorising the president to ratify a convention with Morocco on the transfer of detainees. The agreement establishes a legal framework for consular assistance and humanitarian support, allowing Senegalese nationals convicted in Morocco to serve their sentences in Senegal. Additionally, it facilitates the repatriation of Senegalese migrants in irregular situations who are currently incarcerated in Morocco, with 38 individuals already requesting transfers under the new framework. The measure addresses a long-standing gap, particularly given the [estimated](#) 300 Senegalese currently detained in Morocco, many for irregular migration. While an extradition treaty has [existed](#) between the two countries since 1967, it did not previously cover the transfer of convicted individuals or ensure consular assistance.



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).

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