

## Refugees dying at 'alarming rate' at sea, says report

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News

A new report says that refugees and migrants attempting to reach Europe via the Mediterranean Sea lost their lives "at an alarming rate" in 2018.



*Rescued migrants at Malaga harbour* | **Photo credit: Press Association**

The death toll, along with cuts in search and rescue operations, "reinforced" the Mediterranean's position as the world's "deadliest" sea crossing.

The latest 'Desperate Journeys' report was released on Wednesday at a news briefing at Brussels press club by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency.

Speaking at the launch, Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, told reporters that six lives were lost on average every day last year.

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An estimated 2,275 died or went missing crossing the Mediterranean in 2018, despite a major drop in the number of arrivals reaching European shores.

In total, 139,300 refugees and migrants arrived in Europe, the lowest number in five years.

Grandi said, “Saving lives at sea is not a choice, nor a matter of politics, but an age-old obligation. We can put an end to these tragedies by having the courage and vision to look beyond the next boat, and adopt a long-term approach based on regional cooperation, that places human life and dignity at its core.”

The report describes how “shifts” in policy by some Member States saw numerous incidents where large numbers of people were left stranded at sea for days on end, waiting for permission to dock.

“We can put an end to these tragedies by having the courage and vision to look beyond the next boat, and adopt a long-term approach based on regional cooperation, that places human life and dignity at its core” **Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees**

NGO boats and their crews faced growing restrictions on their search and rescue operations.

The report says that on routes from Libya to Europe, one person died at sea for every 14 who arrived in Europe – a sharp rise on 2017 levels. Thousands more were returned to Libya where they faced appalling conditions inside detention centres.

The report goes on, “For many, setting foot in Europe was the final stop of a nightmarish journey on which they had faced torture, rape and sexual assault, and the threat of being kidnapped and held for ransom. States must take urgent action to dismantle smuggling networks and bring perpetrators of these crimes to justice.”

## SEEDS OF HOPE

However, the report says that “new seeds of hope” did emerge in some places.

“Despite political deadlock on progressing with a regional approach to sea rescue and disembarkation, as called for by UNHCR and IOM last year, several states committed to relocating people rescued in the central Mediterranean – a potential foundation for a predictable and lasting solution,” it said.

“Thousands of resettlement places were also pledged by states for evacuating refugees out of Libya.”

Despite the number of deaths at sea remaining alarmingly high in proportion to the amount of refugees and migrants actually arriving in Europe, the report said that the number of deaths has fallen in recent years.

In 2015 3,771 died at seas with the figure peaking in 2016 with 5,096 fatalities.

## **ROUTE CHANGES**

The report also reveals “significant” changes in the routes being used by refugees and migrants.

For the first time in recent years, Spain became the primary entry point to Europe in 2018, with the number of migrant arrivals in Spain increasing by 131 percent compared to the previous year.

Around 6,800 arrived by land and a further 58,600 people successfully crossed over the perilous Western Mediterranean.

As a result, the report said the death toll for the western Mediterranean nearly quadrupled from 202 in 2017 to 777.

Some 23,400 refugees and migrants arrived in Italy in 2018, a five-fold decrease compared to the previous year. Greece received a similar number of sea arrivals, some 32,500 compared to 30,000 in 2017, but saw a near three-fold increase in the number of people arriving via its land border with Turkey.

Elsewhere in Europe, Bosnia and Herzegovina recorded some 24,000 arrivals, as refugees and migrants transited through the Western Balkans.

Cyprus received several boats carrying Syrian refugees from Lebanon, while the UK witnessed small numbers crossing from France towards the end of the year.

## **About the author**

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at The Parliament Magazine

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