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icon presenting western mediterranean region

Data on detected illegal border-crossings suggest that the migratory pressure on the Western Mediterranean route in 2021 was similar to the situation in 2020 *(see Figure 4.6).* Illegal border-crossings on the dangerous Western African route in the first months of 2021 were slightly higher than in the same period in 2020. While rising towards the end of the year, they remained far below the peak of November 2020. Overall, illegal border-crossings on the Western African route were therefore roughly stable.

The number of asylum applications lodged in Spain decreased by about one-quarter to 65,000, the lowest in 3 years. However, this decrease was largely due to far fewer Latin American applicants, many of whom can legally enter EU+ countries without a visa and, hence, are not reported in data on illegal border-crossings. Despite decreasing applications, Venezuelans and Colombians remained the main nationalities in Spain. They were followed by Moroccans, Malians and Senegalese, who all applied considerably more than in 2020. Applications in Portugal (1,500) decreased by one-half.

Stable situation on the Western Mediterranean and Western African routes

Figure 4.6. Applications in Spain (left), detections of illegal border-crossings on the Western Mediterranean route (middle) and the Western African route (right), 2021 compared to 2020

Figure 4.6. Applications in Spain (left), detections of illegal border-crossings on the Western Medit

Source: Eurostat [migr_asyappctza] as of 22 April 2022 and Frontex [Detections of illegal border-crossings] as of 8 March 2022.

Canary Islands

Boat crossings to the Canary Islands continued in 2021 with disembarkations on the islands and reported loss of lives during the crossing.415 The Spanish Ombudsperson published a study on the situation on the Canary Islands which cited difficult reception conditions, including issues with the provision of information.416 The report also states that access to the asylum procedure was a major challenge for Spanish and European asylum systems.417

UNHCR and the IOM jointly called for more support to prevent further tragedies at sea after a boat with seven survivors was found off the Mauritanian coast on 16 August 2021.418 The two organisations appealed for more support to be able to continue their life-saving interventions and the provision of medical and psychosocial assistance.419

Ceuta and Melilla

In the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, the sudden arrival of around 8,000 migrant in 24 hours, which included families and unaccompanied minors, led to a crisis. The government deployed the army and additional security forces to control the situation.420 Many migrants were seen attempting to scale the border fence or swim around the border in full view of Moroccan border guards.

Spanish authorities were quick to enforce readmission agreements with Morocco and returned many of the migrants, including minors. This was criticised not only by civil society organisations,421 but also by the Spanish Ombudsperson, who submitted a reminder to the government that procedural safeguards needed to be in place prior to any return procedures for minors.422 UNICEF also stated that automatic returns from Ceuta and Melilla must end because they violate the rights of children.423 A Spanish administrative court ordered the government to temporarily halt the removal of nine unaccompanied minors to Morocco because legal procedures had not been followed.

In another case decided in the same month, a local court in Ceuta suspended the return of nine unaccompanied minors to Morocco. The court held that the bilateral agreement of 6 March 2007 between Spain and Morocco is not an international treaty and therefore cannot be invoked to justify the return of minors. In addition, it referred to Article 5 of the agreement which specifically states that any decision on the return of minors should respect the rules and principles of international law and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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