

# WEST AFRICA, NORTH AFRICA AND THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN

## Key Findings on the Characteristics of Migrant Smuggling in West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean

UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants | 20 May 2021

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### Context

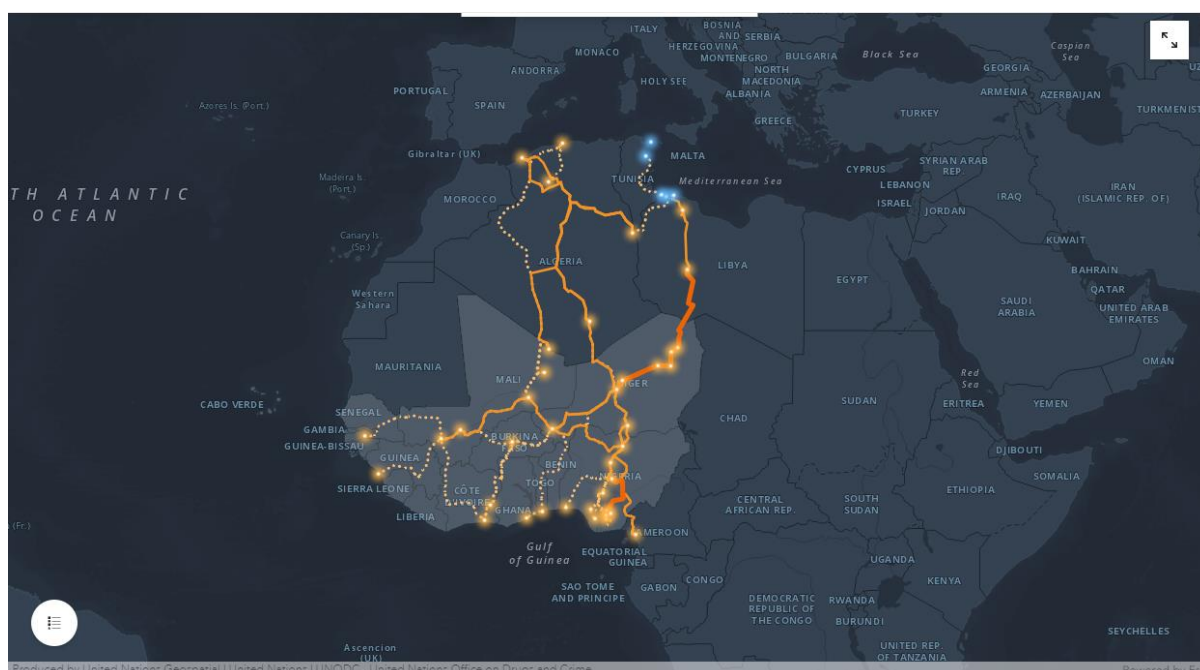
#### Migrant smuggling routes

Throughout recent decades, migration from and within West Africa and North Africa has remained mostly regular [\(1\)](#). During 2010-2015, more than 80 per cent of all those arriving in Europe from West and North Africa migrated through regular channels [\(2\)](#).

Regular movement within West Africa is facilitated by the [Free Movement Protocols of the Economic Community of West African States \(ECOWAS\)](#). Citizens of the [15 ECOWAS](#) Member States have the right to enter another country within the sub-region and remain for up to 90 days, provided that they have a valid travel document and an international health certificate. Migrant [smugglers and facilitators](#) are therefore used within the sub-region in situations where the person travelling does not have valid travel documents, enters via an informal border crossing, where the Member State in question is not implementing the Free Movement Protocols, or when there are security issues. Beyond [ECOWAS](#) borders, migrant smugglers are used by West Africans to reach North African countries, especially Libya, Algeria and Morocco, when regular travel options are not accessible.

Migration from North Africa to Europe is also mostly channelled through regular pathways. People who migrate irregularly may arrange their travel independently or rely on migrant [smugglers and facilitators](#). Recent research indicates migrant smugglers are especially used for the sea crossing from Libya to Italy, while a significant proportion of irregular migration from Tunisia and Algeria to Europe involves community-based operations to support the journeys of their members - with no element of financial gain - or independently organised journeys [\(3\)](#).

### Observatory interviewees' journeys from West Africa towards North Africa and the Central Mediterranean route

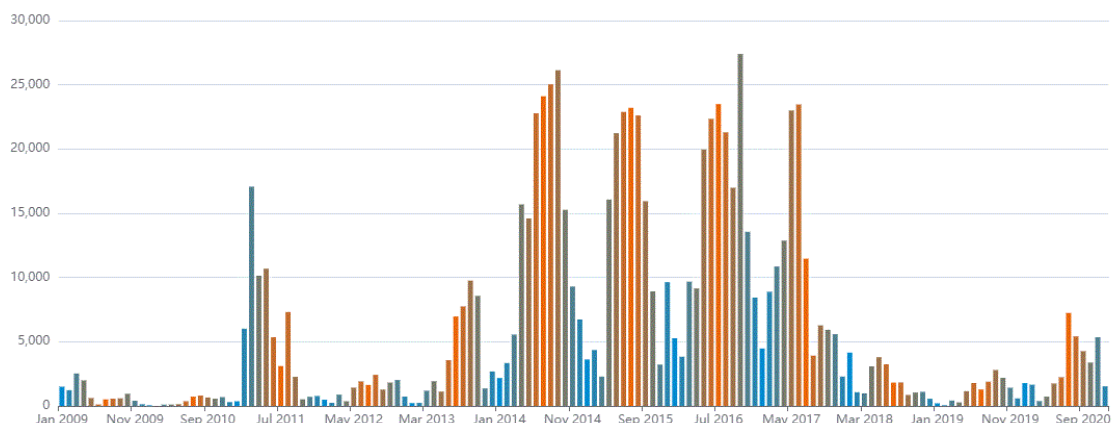


The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. Final status of the Abyei area is not yet determined. Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the parties. Please find more details. [here](#).

This map provides an overview of the journeys of 49 people interviewed for the Observatory research. Lines are indicative of approximate routes only, and do not depict tracking of refugees' and migrants' journeys. Sources: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants, UN Geospatial, ESRI World Roads and ESRI World Cities.

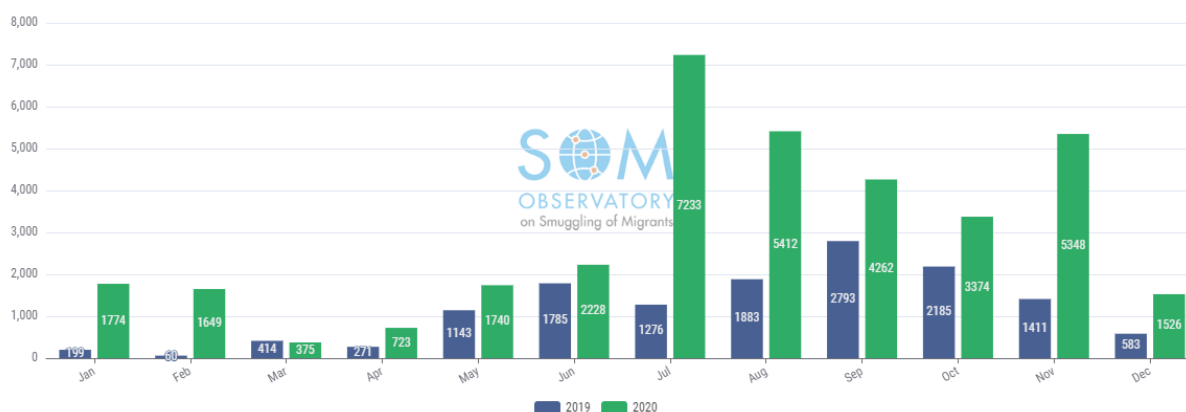
The Central Mediterranean route connects North African countries, specifically Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt, with the European states of Italy and – in much lower numbers - Malta and Greece. The route has been used at least since the early 2000s, but seasonal movements intensified between 2011 and 2017. Between 2014 and 2017, more than 600,000 people departed from North Africa to reach the European Union via irregular sea crossings along the Central Mediterranean route [\(4\)](#). Since 2018, the number of people arriving in the EU irregularly along this route has dropped to pre-2014 levels.

Irregular border crossings detected along the Central Mediterranean Route, by month, January 2009 – December 2020



The COVID-19 Pandemic has not halted irregular sea crossings on this route; in fact, two and a half times as many people arrived in 2020 as in 2019 (5). The European Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex detected over 35,600 irregular border crossings in 2020 along the Central Mediterranean route, compared to 14,000 in 2019 (6). In addition, more than 11,900 people were returned to Libya in 2020 after being intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard – a practice condemned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as Libya cannot currently be designated a “safe third country” – and more than 983 drowned while trying to reach European shores (7). The largest number of irregular border crossings in the EU in 2020 was detected among people arriving along the Central Mediterranean route, followed by the Western African/Atlantic Route connecting the West African coast to the Canary Islands (Spain) (8).

Impact of COVID-19 on irregular border crossings detected along the Central Mediterranean Route, 2019 and 2020



Graph source: UNODC elaboration of Frontex data

The Central Mediterranean route is used by refugees and migrants arriving from different regions of the world. In 2020, the majority of people arriving in Italy along the route originated from countries in North Africa, South Asia and West Africa (9). The Observatory’s research provides an overview of the main dynamics characterizing migrant smuggling operations facilitating the movement of West Africans by land and sea along West African, North African and Central Mediterranean routes. It is based on field research conducted in 2019 with people smuggled from West Africa. Emerging findings are complemented with academic literature and other sources in order to account for the most recent developments

along these routes. Other routes will be covered in future research by the Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

## Smuggling demand

### Who uses smugglers?

Along these routes, smuggling of migrants is largely a demand-driven crime. This means that the incidence of the crime is connected with the number of people who require smuggling services, which in turn is based on their motivation to migrate, combined with a lack of regular alternatives for travel. The demand from refugees and migrants is for migration, and when this is not possible or feasible regularly and independently, this becomes a demand for migrant smuggling.

### Multiple and interconnected reasons to use migrant smugglers

There are multiple and interconnected reasons to migrate using the services of migrant smugglers. The need for a smuggler may also change as the journey unfolds. While motivations for migration may range from personal aspirations and improving quality of life to a response to community and family expectations or a coping mechanism for security and safety concerns, the reasons for using migrant smugglers are always related to lack of alternatives for safe and regular migration, lack of appropriate travel documents, or lack of knowledge about such alternatives where they are available [\(10\)](#).

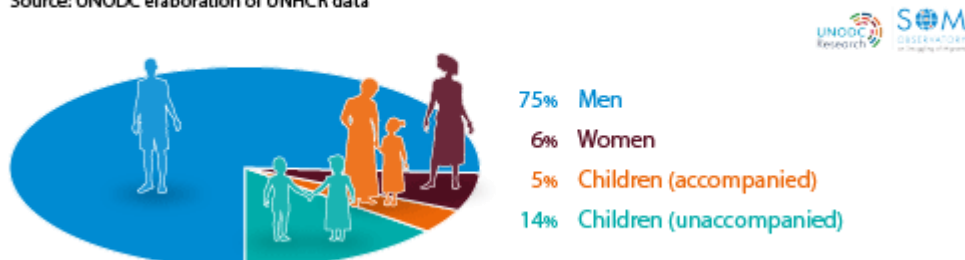
As psychological research demonstrates, people become more likely to take risks when they perceive all their options as bad [\(11\)](#). In such circumstances, the risks in the context of smuggling of migrants of detention, return, economic loss, abuse, exploitation or even loss of life for people on the move - who may be leaving complex situations of unemployment, illness, discrimination, abuse or other issues - may not act as an effective deterrent for using smuggling services. Where people have limited alternatives, smuggling demand may remain constant despite the associated risks and levels of awareness.

### Same route, different profiles

Since 2014, the sex and age composition of people arriving irregularly along the Central Mediterranean route has remained stable, with men representing 70 - 80 per cent of the people arriving; 12-14 per cent being boys and girls; and five to seven per cent being women [\(12\)](#).

Refugees and Migrants smuggled along the Central Mediterranean Route, by sex and age, 2020

Source: UNODC elaboration of UNHCR data



On the other hand, the composition in terms of nationality has varied significantly. In 2017, when the peak in sea arrivals along the Central Mediterranean route was registered, West

African nationalities comprised the majority of people crossing from North Africa, and they almost exclusively departed from Libya. In 2020, people travelling along the Central Mediterranean route mostly originated from Tunisia, Bangladesh and Côte d'Ivoire, and mostly departed from Tunisia, Libya and Algeria [\(13\)](#).

This shift in nationalities points to the complex dynamics governing these irregular movements. A closer analysis of the experiences of each of these groups - Tunisians, Bangladeshi and Ivorians - is likely to unveil very diverse scenarios when it comes to smuggling of migrants.

In Tunisia, the economic fall-out of the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the precarity and frustrations imposed by years of economic downturn, hyperinflation and political shifts, leading some Tunisians to see migration as one of the few available options to improve their lives. Ivorians with appropriate travel documents can travel regularly to Tunisia because of the visa-free regime. Their living conditions in Tunisia have been affected by the economic downturn, racism and discrimination, as well as lack of access to regularization channels, and there are some cases of domestic servitude of Ivorian women [\(14\)](#). Recent studies suggest that many sea crossings from Tunisia are either independently organised by aspiring migrants and their communities, with no element of financial gain, or coordinated by smuggling groups [\(15\)](#). While these groups seem to be mostly small-scale and local, their potential connection with other groups active abroad (e.g. in Libya and Côte d'Ivoire) is currently being investigated.

The irregular movement of Bangladeshi people across Libya and the Mediterranean is facilitated by different actors, including community leaders, armed groups, recruitment agencies and independent agents. While the number of Bangladeshis arriving in Italy after transiting through Libya has halved compared to 2017 (according to Frontex, 4,447 people arrived in 2020 from Bangladesh compared to 9,009 in 2017), their relative increase compared to other nationalities suggests that they may rely on well-organised smuggling groups who have been relatively less affected by obstacles to irregular migration in Libya [\(16\)](#).

### Movements within West Africa

West Africans interviewed for a 2016 study reported avoiding smugglers if possible and only resorted to their services when it was considered the only available option for specific sections of the journey [\(17\)](#). Within the [Economic Community of West African States \(ECOWAS\)](#) and at the border between Cameroon and Nigeria (visa-free entry for Cameroonian citizens), the majority of people interviewed opted for regular travel arrangements, sometimes with the help of [facilitators](#).

The use of [smugglers or facilitators](#) for crossing borders within the [ECOWAS](#) sub-region appears to be mostly driven by:

1. **Protection concerns:** people use [smugglers or facilitators](#) in order to cross borders where non-state actors are present and may pose security threats;
2. **Corruption at border controls:** people may pay a smuggler or facilitator as a means of protection if law enforcement officers are requesting bribes;
3. **Access to legal documentation:** when people are unable to provide the required travel documents, they may use smugglers to make an irregular border crossing.

## Movements from West Africa to North Africa

West Africans interviewed mostly reported using smugglers to reach North African countries, from Niger and Mali. Nigerians and Cameroonians who wanted to reach North Africa and/or Europe often contacted smugglers in Northern Nigeria and arranged the movement as far as Libya or Algeria.

West Africans interviewed also relied on [smugglers or facilitators](#) to reach the Mediterranean shores from the Southern borders of Libya and Algeria. Recent research suggests that West Africans may have no option other than resorting to third parties to move within Libya and Algeria, due to the fragmentation of powers in Libya, discrimination and the criminalization of irregular stay in both countries [\(18\)](#).

## Journeys

### Where does the journey go?

People smuggled from West Africa to Europe usually experience very long journeys; significant numbers of the people interviewed in Italy for the Observatory's research and for research in 2016 had left their country of origin three to five years before arriving there.

### Long-term planning does not mean safer smuggling arrangements

Migratory journeys that have been planned well in advance seldom translate into safer smuggling arrangements. The decision-making process for migration can be long: the people interviewed for the Observatory's research spent months, sometimes years, planning the journey. Even people who decided to migrate in response to a sudden event stated that they had thought about it for a long time before.

Despite long periods spent planning for migration, concrete preparation is limited, and rarely effective in reducing refugees' and migrants' vulnerabilities to abuses and exploitation in the context of migrant smuggling. In the case of Nigerians interviewed for this research, the duration of the preparation is mostly influenced by the time needed to obtain the necessary financial resources. With financial preparation complete, by saving funds, selling assets or borrowing money, few other arrangements are made in preparation for the journey. No interviewees mentioned a prior assessment of the different options for regular and irregular travel and they had rarely made estimates of the overall cost of their journey. As recent research shows, migrants have limited control over their journeys, so there may be little reason to consider anything beyond the next step [\(19\)](#).

### One route, different destinations

Migrants and refugees interviewed for the Observatory's research travelled along the same routes but had different intended destinations. Recent studies confirm that the majority of people moving across borders in West Africa, when they first leave their country of origin, have as their intended final destination a neighbouring country or a North African country [\(20\)](#).

*"I did not want to come to Europe. I just wanted a better life. When I knew Libya, with my eyes and with my body, I had no choice. I had to cross the sea. I was so scared about the sea, I thought I would never take that road. I had to change my mind."*

(Ghanaian man interviewed in Italy)

Many of the people interviewed who had initially moved to a neighbouring country within West Africa later decided to move to Algeria or Libya in search of better economic

opportunities. Despite years of deteriorating security and economic conditions, Libya remains a primary destination for low-skilled migrant workers, mostly concentrated in the informal sectors of construction and agriculture (21). Once in Libya, several of the people interviewed for this research decided to move on to Europe in order to exit exploitation and escape from the intensification of the Libyan conflict in 2019.

Tunisia has also historically been a primary destination for migrants from Côte d'Ivoire, in search of study or job opportunities (22). Recent research has highlighted how Sub-Saharan African migrants residing in Tunisia have been negatively affected by the economic downturn, exacerbated by the pandemic, as they faced additional challenges in generating income and could not return to their countries of origin (23). Emerging evidence suggests that these factors may have prompted Sub-Saharan African migrants residing in Tunisia to embark on irregular sea crossings (24).

### Experiences of the journey

Before and after using migrant smuggling services, people spend long periods in intermediate locations where they either find a home and a way of generating income or are detained. These non-linear journeys are significantly shaped by their experiences in locations considered “*transit countries*”, but often seen as final destinations by the migrants themselves. The decision-making process on onward movements and the use of migrant smugglers is embedded in the relationships that are formed and the opportunities that arise in these locations (25). In these hubs, migrants in transit are usually in touch with people who speak the same languages and/or are from the same country or ethnic group. Language preferences also largely dictate how relationships are formed in accommodation facilities and shape urban geographies of “ghettos” along linguistic and cultural lines.

Modes of travel have not changed significantly in recent decades (26). Refugees and migrants often travel in overcrowded forms of transportation used for regular commuters within the ECOWAS sub-region, and then travel on larger trucks, smaller pick-up trucks and motorbikes to move further North on land routes.

#### ***Changing destinations: the case of a young man from Guinea (Conakry)***

*“In Bamako [capital of Mali], I met a guy from Senegal. He wanted to reach Algeria. He said there was work there. We exchanged numbers, then he left. When he arrived in Algeria - we were chatting you know - so he told me that I could make money playing football there and told me how to reach Algeria. He said I should go to Gao [Northeast Mali], then get a transport from there. That is what I did. [...] There [in Algeria] I worked for a long time, I don't know how long. I met some people who knew other people who could push me into Libya. They brought me to Debdeb [Algeria], by car. There, they put me in a van and made me cross the Libyan borders. [...] I spent two years in Libya, I was mostly detained and tortured. I had to work for people that would not pay me. I escaped and was hosted in the “black neighbourhood” of Tripoli by other brothers. They helped me cross the sea and reach Italy.”*

### Smuggling hubs remain the same

As described in the [UNODC Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants 2018](#), smuggling hubs tend to remain stable over time. This is the case for hubs along West African routes in recent years, mainly passing through Gao in Mali and Agadez in Niger. However, key informants interviewed for the Observatory's research reported that in the last two to three years, overland smuggling routes have shifted due to interventions by state and non-state actors. Smugglers have explored new trajectories in order to avoid armed groups in parts of Niger and Mali. In Niger, counter-smuggling efforts may have contributed to the emergence of new routes connecting Niger and Libya, as well as emerging smuggling hubs in Southern Algeria [\(27\)](#).

Nevertheless, the people interviewed for this research mostly transited through Agadez (Niger), where they spent a few weeks collecting the necessary financial resources to pay for the journey or waiting for the transporter to gather enough passengers. Interviewees spent time in overcrowded, informal accommodation facilities in the city, sometimes unable to meet basic needs.

A significant proportion of refugees and migrants interviewed for this research worked *en route* in order to pay for unforeseen expenses, repay a debt or just to be able to continue to travel. Men mentioned working as bricklayers, porters, drivers' apprentices, construction workers, or on farms, while two women interviewed in Italy worked as domestic workers. The precarious situation of many people on the move, and their criminalization for irregular entry and/or residence, expose them to the risk of abuses and exploitation, including trafficking in persons.

### Smuggling by sea

Land and sea smuggling departing from West and North Africa involve two very different types of operations. While smuggling by land often builds upon historical trade routes, smuggling by sea requires a very specific organizational capacity.

Along the Central Mediterranean route, departure points have changed since 2017, with an increasing number of people departing from Tunisia and Algeria rather than Libya. During 2013-2017, more than 90 per cent of all people irregularly arriving by sea to Italy departed from Libya [\(28\)](#). Since 2018, an increasing number of departure points for irregular sea crossings have been identified in Tunisia and Algeria. Departures from Eastern Libya and Egypt have also gradually reduced in importance in recent years [\(29\)](#).

In the case of departures from Libya, which should not be generalised as illustrative of smuggling dynamics all across the Mediterranean, [\(30\)](#) sea crossing requires high levels of organisational capacity, including financial capital upfront and the ability to bribe or circumvent law enforcement patrols, including coast guards and surveillance [\(31\)](#). The Observatory's research confirms that a number of criminal groups specialize in smuggling by sea from Libya. They operate in a limited number of locations, with the capacity to carry out numerous sea crossing operations per month, despite the high risk of vessels being intercepted and returned to Libya. The "*Lampedusa triangle*", an area that comprises a 200 km portion of the Libyan shoreline between Zuwara and Misrata, remains the main departure point in Libya.

Several studies shed light on the importance of the role of trust in migrant smuggling operations. From the smugglers' perspective, migrants' trust is established either by building a reputation – especially relevant in cases where recruitment is mostly by referral -, or by



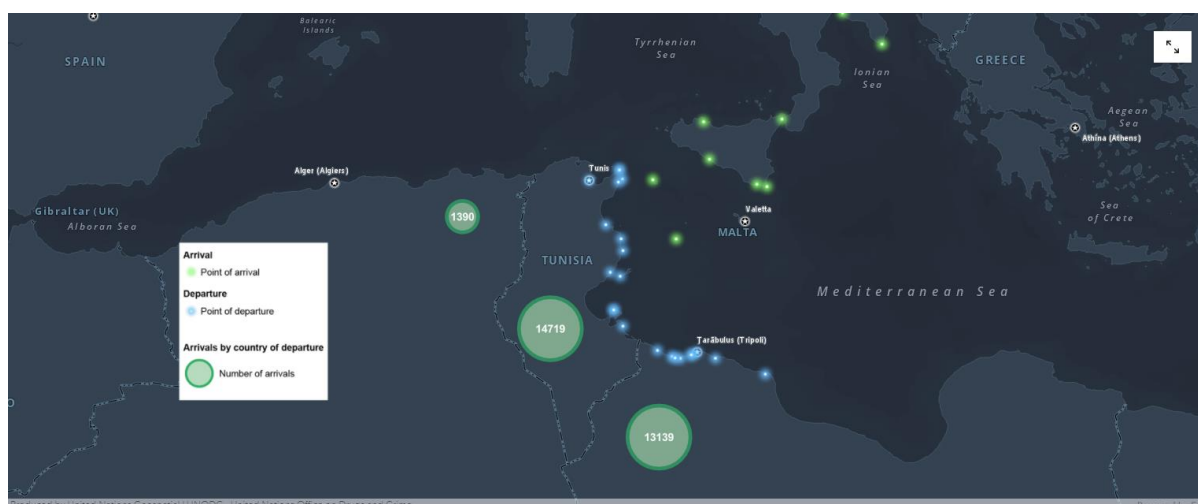
creating bonds with prospective clients – mostly in the case of step-by-step, pay-as-you-go journeys (32). In a context of high demand for smuggling and a smaller number of actors capable of providing the service, smugglers do not need to build their business on reputation, and consequently worry less about the actual chances of a successful sea crossing – as in the case of departures from Libya. Observatory interviewees reported having attempted the sea crossing up to eight times. As a new payment was requested with each attempt, their smugglers may have limited incentives to ensure successful border crossings.

In some cases, different smugglers embarked their clients on the same vessel. This practice suggests that either small-scale smugglers join forces in order to circumvent the increased patrols of the Libyan Coast Guard, or different smugglers work for the same criminal organisation.

*“I left Libya on a balloon boat, one person died on the crossing. Most people on the boat were from Nigeria and Senegal. We left at night. The people who crossed the sea with me had been helped to get on the boat by different people.”*

(Nigerian woman interviewed in Italy)

### Number of refugees and migrants arriving in Italy in 2020 by country of departure



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*Departure points in Algeria or Eastern Libya are not included in the Map as no information on those locations was available at the time of writing. Sources: UNODC elaboration of UNHCR data, accessed in January 2021, UN Geospatial.*

In the case of Tunisia and Algeria, however, recent research has indicated that sea crossing operations are often independently organised or collective endeavours (33). Some aspiring migrants who have the necessary financial resources avail of the help of structured organised groups who operate locally. Through a number of smugglers or facilitators, these groups accommodate passengers originating from both West and North Africa (34).

The presence of transnational criminal organisations operating across Libyan and Tunisian borders has been posited, according to a small but increasing number of accounts of

refugees and migrants who departed from Tunisia after transiting across Libya. Whether these changes reflect the emergence of new Tunisian actors or the shift of Libyan-based smuggling networks to the Tunisian shores is not clear. An Ivorian woman interviewed for the Observatory's research was held captive in a prison by Libyan-based smugglers who then organised her transportation to Tunisia. Her sea crossing was arranged from there, suggesting a connection between Libya-based and Tunisia-based smugglers.

## Smugglers

### Who are the smugglers?

Migrant smuggling departing from West Africa seems to be largely based on opportunistic agreements and ad-hoc interactions among different local, and sometimes transnational, actors, rather than on highly structured transnational crime organizations.

While reports on law enforcement operations recently revealed the existence of organized criminal groups active in migrant smuggling along routes from East Africa to Europe, there is little evidence to suggest the presence of similar groups along the land routes from West Africa to the North African coast (35). The [Economic Community of West African States \(ECOWAS\)](#) free movement area reduces the need for migrant smuggling on West African routes, though questions remain on the role of organized criminal groups on specific legs of the journey, such as the movement from Niger to Libya, and for sea crossings from the North African shores to Europe.

Smugglers operating in West and North Africa are mostly described as men, and occasionally women or children (36). Women are more often involved in coordination activities, connecting people on the move with [smugglers or facilitators](#) in different locations, or providing accommodation or food along the journey (37).

### Fragmented actors facilitating movement

The majority of people on the move interviewed for the Observatory's research relied on distinct actors to facilitate different legs of the journey. Similar to the findings of other research, the smugglers used by interviewees to facilitate the journey were mostly active at one border only (e.g. Niger-Libya border, Algeria-Libya border) (38).

In Niger, fragmented and uncoordinated actors operate along routes connecting the Northern region of the country with Algeria and Libya. Following the implementation of the 2015 anti-smuggling law in Niger, individuals and groups working in the transportation sectors who had historically facilitated cross-border movements became subject to prosecution as migrant smugglers. The present-day smuggling industry in Agadez (Niger) appears to be a mix of professional and part-time actors, who enter into ad-hoc and opportunistic agreements with each other to fulfil the clients' aspirations and needs (39).

Independent brokers known as "connection men" or "*coxeurs*" tend to work independently and enter into sporadic agreements. Many among them are former migrants or migrants in transit themselves, who connect the newly arrived with the transportation and accommodation services that they need (40).

### Transnational crime organizations involved in smuggling of migrants

In order to arrange their journeys from West Africa across several countries, a small proportion of the migrants interviewed relied on transnational organized criminal groups ("*a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert*").

*with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences” according to the [United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#), “in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit”). In these cases, the prospective migrants are first put in touch with a local contact of the transnational organization before departure. The local contact arranges the first border crossing and collects the first instalment (of an undetermined number of instalments) of the smuggling fee. The number of instalments and the final price are rarely fully negotiated upfront, as they depend on how the journey unfolds. Like migrants, smugglers seem to have very limited control over the journey, even when they work in connection with other individuals and groups based in different countries. As the journey progresses, the migrants are then handed over to other people or groups along the route.*

Migrants smuggled from or through Nigeria rely to a significantly larger extent on transnational criminal organisations compared to other West Africans. Often the main organizers are based abroad, with [smugglers or facilitators](#) active along the routes in the main smuggling hubs of Kano (Nigeria) and Agadez (Niger).

Interviewees suggest that border crossings facilitated by structured criminal organizations are not safer than those arranged by occasional or individual smugglers. Despite being mostly active in areas where state and/or non-state actors may represent a security threat for migrants, no significant difference in exposure to risk and abuses could be found among those who rely on transnational organized crime groups as compared to fragmented and individual actors. Key informants interviewed also reported that in recent times even highly organized smugglers or traffickers tend to lose control over their clients/victims once they reach Libya.

While literature suggests that smuggling operations on the Central Mediterranean route have traditionally been small-scale, a number of experts have put forward the hypothesis that tighter border controls and the deterioration of the security situation in Libya may have pushed small-scale operators out of the local market, favouring larger, more organised groups [\(41\)](#).

### [Saviours, brothers and job agents](#)

Offering familiarity in a place where migrants feel at risk or like outsiders is a powerful confidence builder and often a strong determinant of migrants’ choices in selecting a smuggler [\(42\)](#). A Cameroonian woman was looking for a smuggler upon arrival in Kano, Nigeria, where she reported meeting different service providers at a bus station. When asked which factors had informed her decision, the interviewee responded that she had chosen the person who was most similar to her, and who could best understand her needs and wishes. The interviewee also generalized her reasoning, adding that this was not an original thought, but rather common knowledge. In foreign and insecure settings, cultural, linguistic and ethnic commonalities between prospective clients and smuggling recruiters are key elements of the transaction. As already documented by many practitioners and scholars, the smuggler-migrant relationship often includes a number of mutually beneficial interactions. Cultural ties, personal sympathy and empathy with the service-provider often drive the decision-making process from the client’s perspective [\(43\)](#).

Forms of solidarity and cooperation sometimes emerge and blur the lines between migrants’ and smugglers’ roles. A key informant reported the case of a group of Eritreans, who, having arrived in Libya and being horrified by the accounts of their co-nationals, decided to join an

established group active in migrant smuggling in order to provide safer travel arrangements, and protect their co-nationals on the move.

In other cases, smugglers employed some of the refugees and migrants interviewed for some time, before arranging their travel. For example, a Cameroonian woman worked for few months as a domestic worker for her smuggler in Algeria, as a compensation for the smuggling fee she was unable to afford. The interviewee did not associate any traumatic memory or event with this working period, as she did, for instance, when describing the conditions she faced in Libya. Other common forms of payment include agricultural or construction work carried out for a third party connected to the smuggler.

## Fees

### How much does smuggling cost?

Data on smuggling fees remain limited and difficult to compare. Fee variations depend on a number of factors on both the demand and supply sides, including the number of actors involved in the transaction and their commissions, the risks of the journey and the perceived wealth of the customer.

### Payment modalities

Fees are paid or extorted through different means. In the majority of reported cases, smuggling fees are paid upfront – before each leg of the journey - and in cash.

Cash is often transferred from the country of origin through informal money transfer systems, including *hawala*. Besides using savings and other resources accumulated prior to departure, interviewed refugees and migrants also worked *en route* to earn the necessary amount of money to be able to afford the cheapest smuggling service for the next leg of the journey. An Ivorian man interviewed worked as a porter in Niamey, the Niger capital, for three weeks, until he had earned around USD 250 which allowed him to reach Libya (at the reduced price associated with the upfront payment modality).

Upfront payments result in a discount on the fee but expose migrants to higher risks. Despite being aware of the risks, migrants reported being faced with no other choice but to pay upfront as they could not afford the higher price demanded at the destination.

A few people interviewed reportedly compensated the smuggler directly with their labour, by working for the smuggler or a third party in exchange for the smuggling service. While mostly described as contractual arrangements, these alternative remuneration methods carry a risk of forced labour for women, men and children, and sexual exploitation or domestic servitude for women and girls. Key informants confirm that women and girls may be asked or forced to have sexual intercourse with smugglers, border guards, police officers or other exploiters along the route as an alternative form of compensation for the passage. In these cases, the value attached to sexual intercourse may far outweigh the available cash held by the migrant and speed up the journey for the migrant and for the group she is travelling with. As a consequence, rape and sexual exploitation of women and girls may be subject to group pressure, especially in situations of economic need.

To those who cannot afford the smuggling fee, transporters in Niger offer a different package, combining the facilitation of an irregular border crossing with a job offer in a country of destination or transit. Some interviewees who are offered a discount for an advance payment upfront subsequently reimburse the remaining debt by working in agriculture, at car washes or on construction sites in Libya or Algeria. These smuggling

packages always include an element of deception, abusing the economic vulnerability of the victims and their desire to leave the precarious conditions of life in transit.

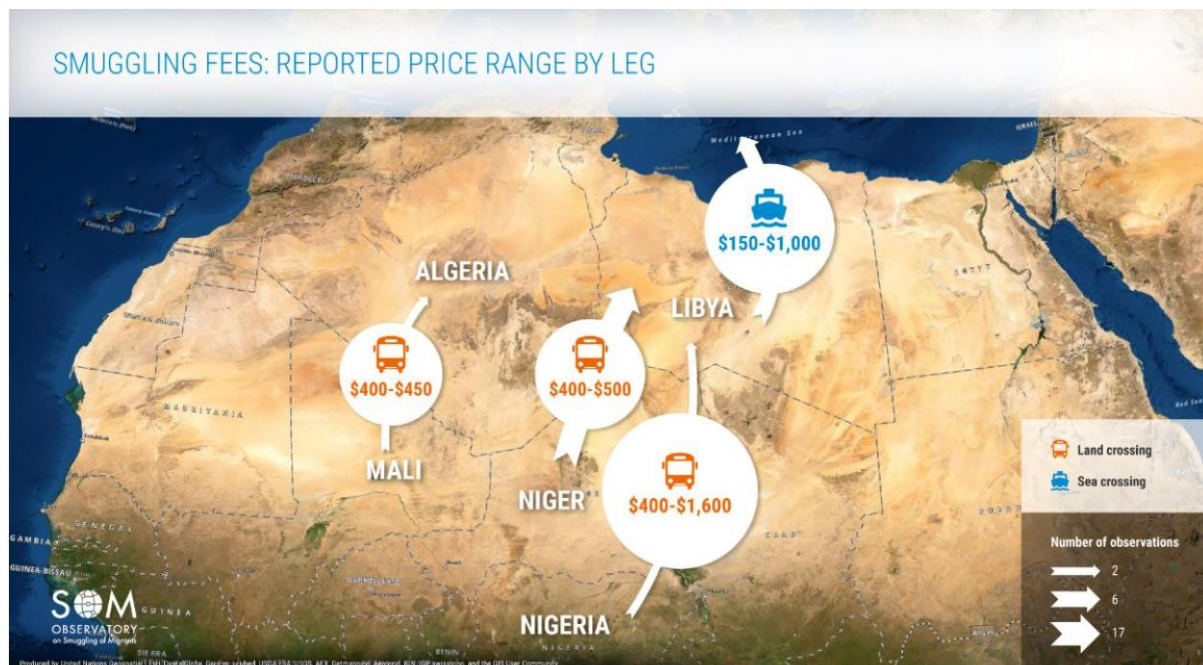
Additionally, some interviewees referred to debts contracted *en route* to people who helped them to pay smuggling fees and ransoms, as an additional way of accessing financial resources. Research has also shown the existence of this practice among smuggled Ethiopians and Eritreans (44).

The different types of payment modalities for smuggling services identified suggest that the migrants' capacity to pay the fee in cash may have little influence on price setting. This means that smugglers may not lower the prices even if a large share of their clients cannot afford the price in cash. Smugglers know that people can resort to this diverse set of payment modalities (including money transfers, debts, and work in lieu of cash payments) (45).

### Where there is smuggling, there is corruption

Corruption and migrant smuggling are two closely interconnected crimes. Along migrant smuggling routes, smuggled migrants become a source of income not only for smugglers, but also for law enforcement and local economies (46).

Smuggling fees, more often than not, include bribes to be paid at border crossing points to the police, border guards, military or armed groups. These bribes are paid to government officials, as well as to non-state actors claiming territorial control in various locations. Bribes are often paid as a cash payment. Bribes are mostly negotiated directly by the smugglers, not the migrants, in accordance with the rank of the officers, with the higher ranks demanding larger sums.



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All sums are in USD. Source: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants.

## Lower prices, higher revenues

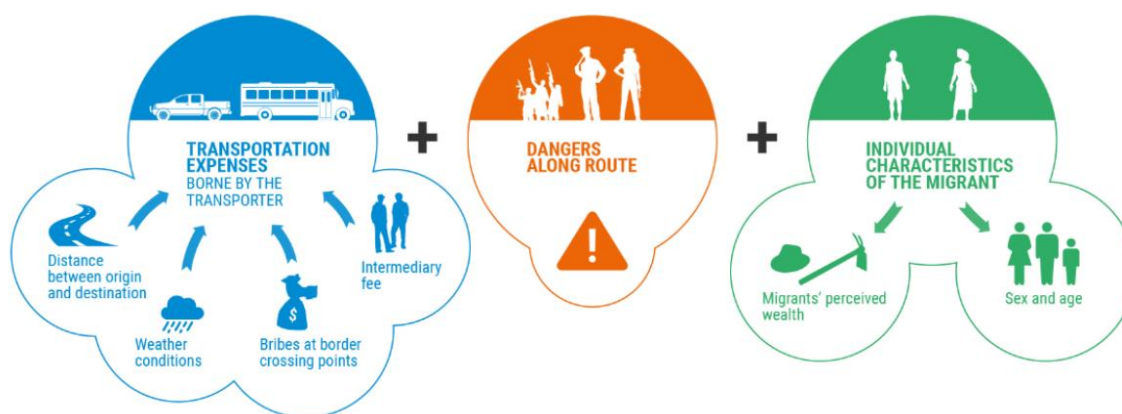
It is difficult to determine whether significant fluctuations in smuggling fees have occurred along West African, North African and Central Mediterranean routes since 2014. While key informants generally assumed an increase in smuggling fees due to the higher risks and border controls, smuggling fees reported by interviewed migrants show a slight decrease.

The sea crossing is almost always paid separately from the rest of the journey, and sometimes paid to different actors. The field research for the Observatory suggests that smuggling fees requested for the sea crossing may have decreased since 2015, when the average was reported at around USD 1,000 for a Sub-Saharan African client (47).

Migrants who pay upfront are often kidnapped for extortion and/or exploited while *en route*, suggesting that the smuggler makes up their losses from the discounted price by charging an intermediation fee to exploiters or kidnappers (48). In these cases, smugglers profit from two different types of service provision: (1) the facilitated irregular border crossing to migrants and; (2) the sale of migrants to a third party for extortion or forced labour.

In these instances, the smugglers' income generation strategy seems to fully incorporate other revenue-generating activities beyond the facilitation of irregular border crossings. Kidnapping and imprisoning Sub-Saharan Africans for forced labour or extorting money from them and their families for their release have become systematic activities for smugglers and their criminal partners in Algeria, Mali and Libya, showing important linkages between migrant smuggling and human trafficking dynamics (49). As smuggling packages vary, and the smuggling fee paid by migrants represents just one of the revenue-generating activities linked to smuggling, the assessment of price variations over time, and of smugglers' profits, is a challenging exercise.

### SMUGGLING FEE: HOW SMUGGLERS SET THE PRICE FOR DESERT CROSSING



## Risks

### What are the risks when using smuggling services?

Migrants are exposed to extremely high risks of abuse and exploitation along smuggling routes in West and North Africa and towards Europe (50). Specialized sources report that virtually every person who arrived along the Central Mediterranean route to Italy between 2014 and 2019 showed symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The most commonly

reported mental health issues include sleep disorders, anxiety and panic disorders, as well as intrusive thoughts [\(51\)](#).

### Loss of life during the journey

Accounts of deaths in the desert at the borders between Niger, Mali, Algeria and Libya have been increasingly reported in recent years [\(52\)](#). Observatory interviewees recalled travelling in overcrowded pick-up trucks along land routes connecting West and North Africa, with many suffering from dehydration, and in fear of being abandoned in the desert if they were not able to keep holding on or standing up on those vehicles. While there are no official data on the number of people who lose their lives in the desert while trying to cross, research has highlighted that increased patrolling may have prompted smugglers to take new, and potentially even riskier, routes [\(53\)](#).

On the Central Mediterranean sea route, 557 people have lost their lives already in 2021 (as of 12.05.2021), compared to 149 recorded during the same months in 2020 [\(54\)](#). People embarking from Libya are often boarded onto precarious vessels, without the necessary equipment and provisions for the full sea crossing. Those leaving from other locations or in better modes of transportation are often confronted with adverse weather conditions, and the need to avoid detection and detention in countries of arrival may prolong further the time spent at sea. The absence of EU or national-level search and rescue operations in recent years and the progressive reduction of NGO search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean has further increased the risk of death at sea for smuggled people.

### Trafficking, kidnapping, deprivation of liberty, sale of a person, inhuman and degrading treatment and torture

Accounts of kidnappings and “sale of persons” are common along the route. Almost all interviewed migrants and refugees reported being kidnapped multiple times along the routes from West Africa to North Africa, particularly in border areas in the Sahel, while working in agricultural fields or living in Tripoli. In many cases, this would constitute trafficking in persons, as the three elements necessary for the crime of trafficking in the case of adults are evident: recruitment/transfer/receipt of persons, by means of abduction, for the purpose of exploitation.

Almost all interviewed migrants and refugees experienced extended periods of deprivation of liberty in Libya, Algeria and/or Northern Mali. They are held captive by their smugglers or other non-state actors, who are either independent or affiliated with their smugglers. They are detained multiple times in buildings described as prisons run by armed groups, private warehouses, or private houses. Following failed sea-crossing attempts, interviewees are also detained in official detention centres, where, for instance, a number of interviewees were held during the bombing and air strikes conducted Northern Libya in 2019. Some interviewees suffer health issues due to the extremely poor hygiene conditions in captivity.

After weeks or even months spent in captivity, interviewed refugees and migrants are released and manage to continue their journey only when:

1. A ransom is paid by their family members - in this case, their captors then arrange their next movement along the route;
2. They are freed or manage to escape with the help of other prisoners and, once liberated, contact a smuggler in order to move on;

3. They are “sold” by a guard to a third party, then offered freedom in exchange for forced labour in agriculture or construction for men, and exploitation in domestic work or prostitution for women.

*“There was no food in prison and they tortured me to convince me to pay but I had no money. One day, one of the armed men who used to bring us food came, took me and brought me to work in his olive field. I worked for him, collecting olives.”*

(Nigerian man interviewed in Italy)

Interviewees reported being tortured, sometimes continuously for months at a time. The torture includes harsh beatings (especially targeting the teeth), being kept in chains, sometimes in extremely narrow spaces, [falaka](#), electric shocks, and burning.

*“In Sebha [Libya], I was tortured, beatings, electric shocks, I was tied to the ceiling, people would have me lying on the floor and then hit me with a big stone on my legs, I was burned, I did not eat or drink for days. [...] They wanted money, I had nobody to call.”*

(Nigerian man interviewed in Italy)

### Forced labour

The practice of selling captives to third parties for forced labour has been widely reported in Libya ([55](#)). Libyan law foresees hard labour or the payment of a fine as punishment for irregular migration ([56](#)). Unpaid labour in official detention facilities is reported, and sometimes extends beyond the premises of detention centres, as private businesses can benefit from this unpaid workforce ([57](#)). In some cases, private Libyan citizens bail out detainees, who are then forced to work for them for free for a certain period of time, to pay off the bail money. Limited accountability and rule of law in certain areas has contributed to the proliferation of an informal market for migrant labour, often involving corrupt prison guards ([58](#)).

In some cases, after a number of months of forced labour, the exploiter offers to pay for the victim’s sea crossing. Interviewed men spoke of being approached by their exploiter, often at the end of the harvest season, who offered to facilitate their sea crossing. It is difficult to assess whether some kind of payment is requested in addition to the labour. One interviewee mentioned that he appreciated this offer, as he had been afraid that the exploiter would find other ways of getting rid of him at the end of the season. Key informants for this research confirmed the existence of this practice at least since 2017.

*“In a prison in Sabratha [Libya], there was a girl who had a phone. A friend of mine from Mali used it to call someone in his village, who put him in touch with an Arab man. This Arab man came and said that he could take us out of the prison but we had to work for him for free to repay him for the money he had to spend in order to get us out.”*

(Guinean man interviewed in Italy)

These numerous accounts suggest that the same actors involved in the smuggling industry in Libya may collaborate with trafficking networks specialized in the exploitation of West African people ([59](#)). These networks seem especially active in the province of Sebha (Libya), which has long relied on a workforce from Sub-Saharan African countries for its agricultural fields. The risk of falling victim to trafficking in persons *en route* – or from the point of recruitment in origin areas - remains significant.



### Sexual exploitation and abuse

While experiences of sexual violence are reported by both female and male interviewees for the Observatory's research, accounts of sexual exploitation are mostly provided by women. Women describe being coerced into sexual exploitation after being kidnapped. The elements of the crime of trafficking in persons in the case of adults are evident here – recruitment/transfer by means of abduction, for the purposes of exploitation. A few interviewed women reported being sexually exploited in Algeria and Libya, and later “freed” by a man, described as a “boyfriend” or “saviour”. Further sexual exploitation often follows these apparent rescue attempts, as interviewees are quickly revictimized. Key informants described these dynamics as particularly affecting Nigerian women and girls.

### Food and water deprivation

Food and water deprivation along the journey is also systematically reported. Refugees and migrants describe witnessing co-travellers dying from lack of water and food.

Food and water deprivation is also common in detention facilities, in addition to torture, beatings and other mistreatment. According to one Nigerian man in his twenties, who had been repatriated from a detention facility in Libya, “one spoon of rice a day was considered a decent meal”. An Ivorian woman interviewed in Italy provided the following account:

*“In prison [in Libya] you would eat only once a day, they would throw the food through the door and people would fight and get hurt and injured trying to grab some food. We were so thin, we were skeletons. Here [at the reception centre] you see that many men do not have teeth anymore, it is because of the torture, it is common practice in Libya.”*

## Methodology

### How was the research conducted?

The UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants employs qualitative research methods, triangulated and cross-referenced with desk research and quantitative sources. For this phase of research, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with 49 refugees and migrants from West Africa who had been smuggled to North Africa, and/or to Europe along the Central Mediterranean route, between 2015 and 2019. 33 of the interviews were conducted in Nigeria in October 2019 and 14 in Italy in December 2019. In-depth interviews were also conducted with 16 key informants, including experts and practitioners from law enforcement, criminal justice, international organizations and non-governmental organisations. Interviewees were selected purposively for their profile and expertise. Findings were triangulated with secondary data from statistical sources, as well as academic literature and reports by international organizations.

A qualitative analysis of the data collected during the field research was conducted with the support of *Atlas.ti* and *NVIVO software*. In the analysis phase, emerging findings were triangulated with secondary literature and available quantitative and qualitative information to ensure the validity of the data.

### Challenges and limitations

The selection of interviewees was based on purposive sampling. As such, the findings should not be considered representative of the entire population group of refugees and migrants smuggled along these routes. As no children (anyone under 18 years) were interviewed for this research, the findings cannot be considered representative of children's experiences.

Where possible, limitations were compensated for by triangulating data from various sources.

## End Notes

### West African, North African and Central Mediterranean Smuggling Routes

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## Terms used

### West African, North African and Central Mediterranean Smuggling Routes

- **The ECOWAS Free Movement Region:** The Free Movement Protocols of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) provide for citizens of ECOWAS Member States to have the right to enter another country within the sub-region and remain for up to 90 days, provided that they have a valid travel document and an international health certificate. The 15 ECOWAS Member States are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea (Bissau), Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.
- **Falaka:** a method of corporal punishment that consists of hitting the soles of a person's bare feet, a body part that in some cultures in West Africa is associated with male virility.
- **Hawala:** informal money transfer system.
- **Smuggling of Migrants:** “the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident” (Article 3 of the [UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol](#)).
- **Smuggler:** the word “smuggler” is used throughout when it can reasonably be assumed that the crime of migrant smuggling is constituted, as per Article 3 of the [UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol](#).
- **Facilitator:** the word “facilitator” is used whenever the elements of (a) irregular entry and/or (b) financial or material benefit, could reasonably be assumed not to be in evidence according to the primary or secondary sources used.
- **Organized criminal group:** “a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences” according to the [United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#).