

## **Between Migrants and Spain: The Sea That Kills**

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### **Body**

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Soon after sunset, every evening, Spanish police boats set out to zigzag on the choppy Mediterranean, their night-vision scopes and infrared cameras at the ready to pierce the darkness.

Their mission is to intercept small motorboats crowded with clandestine African migrants, mostly young men who want to sneak ashore and hunt for work in Europe.

Across the water, in Morocco, a fake Spanish visa may cost as much as \$3,000. But a network of smugglers offer secret night rides for a third of that in rickety fishing vessels painted deep blue for camouflage.

The coast of southern Spain, like the United States' border with Mexico, is a fault line where the worlds of rich and poor people meet, a magnet for migrants seeking a better life.

Ship captains call the strait that separates Europe from Africa here one of the world's most treacherous sea passages, a wind tunnel where the waters of the Atlantic and Mediterranean mix with fury, producing high swells and powerful crosscurrents. And yet, night after night, hundreds of people risk their lives on a 10-mile crossing that may last two hours, stretch from dusk to dawn, or, worse, end in death by drowning.

From just a trickle a few years ago, tens of thousands of undocumented migrants are now taking this route every year, drawn by the booming market in low-paying jobs that Europeans do not want.

"This is a regular night," said Lt. Juan Fernandez at the Spanish Civil Guard base in Algeciras one recent evening. At 11 p.m. the first patrol boat had reported back to base: it had caught a 50-foot boat with 20 men aboard and was bringing them ashore. At 2:30 a.m. a boat was intercepted with 25 people. Earlier, the police helicopter had signaled three other vessels, but they got away in the dark.

As on most nights, the majority of the men were from Morocco. Others may come from as far away as central Africa. Those who consider themselves lucky make it to farms in Spain, restaurant kitchens in France or construction sites in the Netherlands. But for a growing number the trip ends here. The Civil Guard regularly finds bloated bodies or flotsam from the flimsy boats, which are often equipped only with small outboard motors.

"Sometimes the boats are hit by big cargo ships that don't even see them," said Lieutenant Fernandez, who has spent many nights patrolling the water. "Usually, the boats are overloaded and they capsize easily. These are the

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poor who dream of riches in Europe, but many can't swim because they are mountain people. And they don't even have life jackets."

The price of lost European dreams is starkly visible in the windswept cemetery of Tarifa, a village on the southernmost tip of Spain. A mass grave that bears no names is covered with wildflowers. Juan Gallardo, the village gravedigger, said he buried 14 drowned bodies here in 1997. He believed they were Moroccans. Nearby, he had dug a grave for five young black men. They had also washed up on the rocks below Tarifa.

"They looked young, maybe 18 or 20," Mr. Gallardo said. "Poor things, no one ever came to ask for them. Their families must still be waiting for news."

At Algeciras, 10 miles to the east, the cemetery has close to 100 graves of people who drowned in the strait. Almost all are nameless. Only the date of burial and case number have been scratched into the rough cement. Jose Sampalo, an undertaker, said almost half of them were buried in the last three years. Seven drowned just in January.

"No one is really keeping track of all the dead," said Abdel Hamid Beyuki, head of the Moroccan Workers' Association in Spain. "Bodies also wash up on the Moroccan coast or they are just lost." His group estimates that some 3,000 people may have drowned in the last five years.

Statistics about the number of migrant workers who make it to the Spanish shores and then deeper into Europe are equally uncertain. "We reckon we catch about one in four people, at least on this part of the coast," said Lt. Ovidio Corredor at the Algeciras Civil Guard base.

Once detained, the undocumented migrants are taken to detention centers and, often on the same day, returned by ferryboats to the Moroccan port of Tangiers. "Some carry drugs to pay for their passage," said Lieutenant Corredor. "But they stay here and go to jail."

According to the Interior Ministry in Madrid, Spain expelled 17,000 undocumented aliens last year. The ministry said it estimated that some 50,000 legal and illegal workers arrive every year, most of them North Africans.

Many travel on to France, Belgium and the Netherlands, where they can disappear and find support in the large established North African communities. Others stay in Spain, where Moroccans are the biggest contingent of foreign workers.

Spain's Interior Ministry concedes that it can only guess at the number of undocumented people in the country, perhaps some 150,000. But it recognizes that they often find work. They do the low-paid, backbreaking jobs in the great expanses of hothouses that grow winter vegetables. And they work in the olive and orange groves of Andalusia or the factories around Barcelona.

"Spanish employers can be fined for hiring illegal immigrants, but they are often tolerated because they are needed," a government official said. He was merely acknowledging the status quo: despite high unemployment of 14 percent, prospering Spain does want the cheap labor and the seasonal work provided by uncounted foreigners.

So does much of Western Europe. It is why the story repeats itself elsewhere along the Mediterranean. In recent years, boatloads of Tunisians have been crossing to Sicily or have used other Italian islands as steppingstones into the European Union. Albanians, Kurds and Iraqis by the thousands have been sneaking ashore in Italy and Greece.

Cheap labor is only part of the economic equation. As Europeans have fewer children and the population ages, they need immigrants to help make up the pool of workers that will pay for the Continent's costly social security and pension systems.

In Spain, demographers say that the need for foreign workers will become particularly acute. The country now has among the lowest birthrates in Europe -- just 1.1 children per woman. (It takes an average of 2.1 children per woman to keep the population from shrinking.)

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Nevertheless, Spain accepted only 30,000 immigrants last year. Specialists say that it will soon have to import far more to maintain the labor pool needed to sustain its elderly.

But here, as elsewhere in Western Europe, there are signs of rising xenophobia and racism in communities that feel besieged by immigrants. In February, crowds attacked Moroccan laborers in southeastern Spain. Last year, there were several racist incidents near Barcelona. Human rights groups fear that extremists here could build constituencies by campaigning against foreigners, as they have in Austria, Belgium, France and Germany.

The European Union has tried to enlist Morocco to stem the flow of people coming illegally, and equipped the Moroccan coast guard with new radar and boats. The Union is also offering more favorable trade terms and is including Morocco among the countries -- along with Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia -- that will get special development aid in the hope of reducing the flight of their people to Europe.

But European diplomats in Morocco said the Rabat government was ignoring the problem. "Migration acts as a safety valve for this nation that has more than 40 percent unemployment and no welfare," one said, adding that Morocco received some \$2 billion a year from its citizens living in Europe. "That's one of the country's main sources of hard currency," the diplomat said. "It's become almost indispensable."

Moroccan officials have argued that it is better to regulate the traffic across the Mediterranean by setting a quota for migrant workers rather than leave it to smugglers. Talks have been going on for several years.

With Morocco needing to export labor and Europe needing to import it, the flow seems destined to grow. That at least is the perception of the Spanish Civil Guard that patrols this coast.

At its base in Algeciras, Lieutenant Corredor showed half a dozen newly confiscated boats. "People used to cross only in the summer," he said. "January and February used to be totally quiet."

This January, the guards at Algeciras caught 615 people on the water. Some were drug smugglers, most were migrants.

Lieutenant Corredor pointed to one flimsy dark blue boat. "A floating coffin," he said. "This one was adrift with engine trouble and 25 people aboard. We had to revive some of them. They were half dead with cold."

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## Graphic

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Photo: Spain is increasingly a magnet for Africans hoping to find jobs in Europe. These illegal immigrants, of unknown nationality, landed on the southern coast of Spain in February and fled before the police arrived. (Agence France-Presse)

Map of the Mediterranean highlighting Spain and Morocco: The Civil Guard, with a base in Algeciras, seeks to stem migrants.

## Classification

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