

30 AUGUST 2026 - INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE VICTIMS OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

DISAPPEARING ALONG MIGRATION ROUTES



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BORDERS WHERE TRACES VANISH

Every year, thousands of people disappear on migration routes. Some die along the way, at sea or in the desert, without their bodies ever being found. Others lose all contact with their loved ones after being intercepted, detained, transferred, or deported.

Since 2014, more than **82,000** deaths and disappearances have been documented by the International Organization for Migration. This figure remains far from complete: it does not include all those whose loved ones do not know their fate.

DISAPPEARANCES IN MIGRATION: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

A person is considered missing when their loved ones do not know where they are or what has happened to them. They may have perished in a shipwreck, been detained in an unknown location, been separated from their family, or transferred without their destination being disclosed.

Not all these situations legally constitute enforced disappearances. But they share one common feature: loved ones are left without answers and do not know whether their loved one is alive, detained, or deceased.

KEY POINT

Not every migrant who goes missing is necessarily a victim of enforced disappearance. However, certain border control practices can create the conditions for this violation or constitute it directly.

WHEN IS A DISAPPEARANCE CONSIDERED FORCED?

According to the 2006 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, an enforced disappearance involves:

- deprivation of liberty;
- the involvement, support, or acquiescence of State Agents;
- a refusal to acknowledge this deprivation of liberty or the concealment of the person's fate.

In the context of migration, this may involve secret detention, an unrecorded transfer, an interception followed by incommunicado detention, or a refoulement where the authorities conceal the consequences.

THE ROLE OF MIGRATION POLICIES

Disappearances along migration routes are not a matter of chance. By closing off safe and regular routes, migration policies condemn people to longer and deadlier journeys. Interceptions, pushbacks, untraceable transfers and delays in rescue operations turn that risk into loss of life.

The externalisation of border control compounds this: the European Union delegates interception and surveillance to third countries, beyond the reach of its own accountability mechanisms. The longer the chain of actors, the more traces are erased, and the more responsibility is diluted. Every actor can then point to another, while loved-ones search alone.



SEBTA: A EUROPEAN BORDER IN AFRICA

Located on Morocco's northern coast, Sebta is an enclave that has been administered by Spain for several centuries. As a legacy of this colonial history, the city remained under Spanish sovereignty after Morocco's independence in 1956, while Rabat continues to claim sovereignty over it. The borders of Sebta and Melilia are the only two land borders between the European Union and the African continent. This configuration gives them a unique position at the gateway to the Schengen Area. Gradually fortified since the 1990s, they are subject to heightened surveillance, alongside the development of Moroccan-Spanish cooperation on interceptions and readmissions.

These borders have been the site of several tragedies. In 2021, the arrival in Sebta of approximately **8,000 to 10,000 people**, including many minors, led to family separations and lost contact, though no official consolidated tally of missing persons has been established. In June 2022, in Melilia, at least **23 people** lost their lives during an attempted mass crossing; dozens more remain missing, and several bodies have been buried without being identified.

In July 2026, nearly 72,000 people attempted to cross the border. At least 141 people lost their lives, according to our member the [Moroccan Association for Human Rights \(AMDH\)](#). The number of people still missing remains unknown.

INTERVIEW WITH ACHRAF MAYMOUN, PRESIDENT OF THE TETOUAN SECTION OF THE MOROCCAN ASSOCIATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (AMDH)

- What exactly happened in Sebta, and how many people are still missing? Where do these figures come from?

More than 70,000 people on the move crossed at the Tarajal border post, by sea and by land. Dozens of people attempting to cross irregularly drowned. At the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, we have recorded 82 deaths on the Spanish side and 53 on the Moroccan side, according to some of our human rights sources. After these crossings, which continued throughout the day, clashes broke out between the people attempting to cross and the Moroccan security forces. These clashes left dozens injured, and a civilian car, several buses and a security forces vehicle were burned.

As for those who went missing, there is no definite figure, but it can be said that dozens of families of missing people are searching without any guidance.



ACHRAF MAYMOUN, PRESIDENT OF THE
TETOUAN SECTION OF THE MOROCCAN
ASSOCIATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (AMDH)





- **In your view, what role do border externalisation policies and European Moroccan cooperation play in these disappearances?**

We believe that Morocco is playing a policing role on Europe's behalf, preventing crossings in ways that do not respect human rights. The securitisation of the border contributes to violating the lives of people on the move, exposing them to danger and criminalising them, when instead they should be able to enjoy all their human rights without their lives and safety being put at risk.

Interception practices also give rise to numerous human rights violations, including forced returns carried out in breach of international law, particularly where people fleeing war, ethnic and religious minorities and unaccompanied children are concerned.

This pushes people on the move onto routes that, in most cases, lead them towards disappearance and loss.

- **What obligations should the Moroccan and Spanish authorities meet towards families when someone disappears at the border? In practice, how are they and you, as associations, kept informed, and is there an official interlocutor, or does everything go through civil society?**

Unfortunately, on the question of disappearances, Morocco and Spain bear responsibility for search and tracing, and for setting up a dedicated service for people who go missing along migration routes, in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Unfortunately, again, in Morocco there is no governmental or institutional body at all, and it is left to civil society and the human rights movement, whose modest means are insufficient because of limited resources.

As for Spain, from our field experience, it has set up a dedicated Guardia Civil number for reporting a disappearance, but the results remain limited.

- **How are the remains that are found identified, and how many people have been buried without being identified? What needs to change so that these questions do not remain unanswered?**

On identification, according to Spanish sources, some of the remains were identified through fingerprints and DNA testing. As for burials, some of the remains are linked to the events of 30 July and others predate them, so I cannot confirm which is among the roughly 30 people buried in the Muslim cemetery in Ceuta.

The Spanish and Moroccan authorities must coordinate in order to cooperate through every scientific and forensic means available to identify the remains.

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EuroMed Rights note, as of 25 August 2026: 30 people were buried at the Sidi Embarek Muslim cemetery in Ceuta on 21 and 22 August, in two groups. At the time of the burials, only a handful of the deceased had been identified, and repatriation to Morocco had not taken place. Each grave is marked with a number rather than a name. Further burials were expected.

Thirty numbered graves are thirty families still without an answer. Burial does not end the obligation to search and identify. Under the 2023 general comment of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances, States must continue searching, identify the remains and inform families, for as long as the fate of a missing person remains unclarified.

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SOME KEY DATES

- **2006** : Adoption of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.
- **2010** : Entry into force of the Convention and establishment of the International Day on 30 August.
- **2017** : First United Nations report on enforced disappearances in the context of migration.
- **2023** : Adoption by the Committee on Enforced Disappearances of a general comment on States' obligations regarding the search for and identification of disappeared persons, and the protection of their families.
- **2025** : Publication of the report by the Special Rapporteur on migrants who have gone missing or are victims of enforced disappearance and the rights of their families.

