

# Migration and humanitarian tragedies in the Atlantic: trends and our future

## *Migraciones y tragedias humanitarias en el Atlántico: tendencias y futuro*

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Given my current position as Director General of Casa África<sup>1</sup> and my former role as the Spanish Government's Delegate during the so-called "cayuco crisis" (2006–2008),<sup>2</sup> the editors of this scientific journal have asked me to carry out a prospective analysis regarding the migratory phenomenon in the Canary Archipelago (Canary Islands, Spain). This comes in light of the fact that in the past year, 2023, the number of migrants arriving from the African continent via the so-called "Canary Route" reached 39,910 people<sup>3</sup> — surpassing the 39,180 arrivals recorded in 2006.<sup>4–6</sup>

I am finishing this article as of June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024. So far this year, 289 boats have arrived, carrying 18,981 people, of whom 822 were women and 1,567 were minors. Among the total arrivals, 1,880 were of Maghrebi origin (mainly Moroccan) and 17,061 were sub-Saharan Africans. Almost halfway through the year, the data suggest that, barring any major shift in trends, we will once again experience record-breaking figures. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the year — especially from September onward, when the ocean calms in our region — arrivals typically increase as the extreme risks of the crossing diminish.

In 2023, a political and governance crisis in Senegal caused a surge in young migrants from that country who, under the motto "Barça or barzakh" ("Barcelona or death," a phrase of Arabic origin used in Wolof), became the most numerous group arriving in the Archipelago. Later, departures began from Mauritania, mainly involving Malian refugees fleeing the violence devastating the north of their country. This year, the trend continues to show departures primarily from Mauritania, along with known embarkations from Tarfaya, El Aaiún, Tan Tan, and other points.

Despite the striking nature of these numbers, it is essential to look beyond them and consider the broader context in which they occur. We must remember that, although in the media and public debate African maritime

migration seems to be the only one that exists, this perception is not scientifically grounded. The reality is that Africans arriving irregularly by sea represent only a tiny fraction of all foreigners in irregular administrative situations in Spain.

In fact, according to data from *Fundación por Causa Foundation*, in the first in-depth study of irregular migration conducted in recent years, nearly 80% of undocumented immigrants come from the Americas, and fewer than 10% from Africa. Moreover, only a minority of that 10% arrive by patera or cayuco. It is estimated that between 390,000 and 470,000 foreign nationals live in irregular administrative situations in Spain — 6 to 20 times more than in 2014.

According to this study, the "face" of irregular immigration in Spain is that of "a 30-year-old woman from Colombia, Venezuela, or Honduras who entered the country by plane."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, 1 in 4 undocumented immigrants entered through Barajas or El Prat airports with a Colombian passport (which has not required a visa since 2015) and remained in Spain.

However, the media and public discourse tend to ignore both the reality of Latin American arrivals through airports with tourist visas and the growing number of EU citizens settling in Spain.

Additionally, it is rarely mentioned that the Spanish government routinely transfers to the mainland those adult migrants who cannot be repatriated (the vast majority). For most African migrants, the Canary Islands (Spain) are merely a stopover on their journey to reunite with relatives or friends in mainland Spain or other European destinations.

Another issue is that of minors, who — under current Spanish legislation — are under the responsibility of the autonomous communities. This has caused significant strain in the Canary Islands, which, as of February 2024, were caring for nearly 5,700 unaccompanied minors. This has inevitably forced the rapid

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creation of emergency shelters, some lacking adequate housing, educational, and social-healthcare resources. Currently, the State and the Canary Islands are finalizing an agreement to establish by law a solidarity-based distribution of minors across all autonomous communities, which would ease the burden on regional resources.<sup>8</sup>

A great deal of education and empathy-building is needed — in both the Canary Islands and the rest of Spain — to understand and explain why young Africans migrate. To do so, one must grasp the reasons behind risking one's life in a *cayuco*, even knowing that they are choosing the Atlantic Route — the most dangerous and deadly migration route in the world.

The official death tolls (which only include recovered bodies) are already horrific, but estimates from specialized NGOs are far worse. According to 2023 data from the International Organization for Migration, a total of 959 deaths occurred on the route to the Canary Islands. Meanwhile, the NGO *Caminando Fronteras* raises the figure — including the missing — to 6,000 people, with 128 shipwrecks on the Atlantic Route that year.

This is why the narratives used by the media when addressing migration are so crucial. These narratives shape public opinion, and public opinion in turn influences policy. The dominant narrative frameworks tend to exploit fear of migrants — portraying immigration not as a phenomenon, but as a threat — and erasing individual identities by turning migrants into a homogeneous mass of “young men of military age” or people “coming to live off welfare, steal jobs, commit crimes, or impose their customs and religions.”

These narratives also ignore the fact that migration is currently the only viable solution to the declining demographics of Spain and Europe — with an aging population

in need of a workforce that contributes, generates economic activity, and sustains the public pension system, universal healthcare, education, and the welfare state as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

Such narratives, I insist, have shaped everything. On April 10<sup>th</sup>, the European Parliament ratified the European Pact on Migration and Asylum, an agreement reached after years of negotiation. In practice, the Pact tightens conditions for entry into Europe, framing migration as a security threat to the EU. It distances the Union from its founding principles, which prioritized respect for human rights enshrined in the United Nations Charter.

From a pragmatic standpoint, some have called it “the best possible deal”, approved just weeks before the European elections, which — as we have seen — resulted in gains for parties likely to harden these fear-based narratives. This agreement establishes a framework that relies primarily on containment at origin, through the externalization of borders — multimillion-euro deals with countries such as Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, and Senegal in exchange for increased control to prevent departures.

Unfortunately, this approach misses the mark. Experience has shown that when one route is closed, another opens, and that the determination and desperation of these young people allow them to evade surveillance along thousands of kilometers of coastline. Without genuine development policies, without an extraordinary effort to help African nations achieve sustainable industrial transformation and create decent jobs and living conditions, young Africans will continue to believe that “Barça is better than Barzakh” — and will do whatever it takes to reach their dreams and support their families.

In this prospective exercise, as I was asked to undertake, logic and global trends tell us that this will not stop.

In the coming months and years, the Canary Islands and Spain as a whole will continue to face the constant arrival of boats and cayucos from the African continent.<sup>10</sup>

We are confronted with a vast region facing enormous challenges: jihadist violence, military regimes in the Sahel, a severe economic crisis still lingering from the pandemic and worsened by the inflation triggered by the war in Ukraine, and fragile democracies at risk of collapse — all in the context of an unforgiving climate crisis that is devastating agriculture, increasing hunger, and forcing massive internal migrations from rural to urban areas across Africa.<sup>11</sup>

Amid this scenario, the best possible foresight is one grounded in human rights.

Knowing what lies ahead, and aware of our geographical position, we must continue to prioritize stopping the loss of life at sea, ensuring dignified care, and providing the best possible medical and humanitarian assistance to arriving migrants — mindful of the immense physical and psychological toll that a cayuco journey lasting 8 or 9 days can inflict.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, let us be remembered for offering a dignified welcome and for humanizing people whom the world insists on rendering invisible.

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