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For African Migrants, Europe Becomes Further Away

By [IAN FISHER](#)

AGRIGENTO, Sicily, Aug. 22 — The deadly flow of flimsy boats crammed with migrants heading north across the Mediterranean has slowed substantially this summer. After years of surging arrivals, Italy and Spain, the initial destinations for thousands fleeing Africa for safety or jobs in Europe, are reporting drops of a third or more compared with last year.

Government officials in both countries trumpet success from more sea-borne patrols and better cooperation with African nations across the Mediterranean to reduce journeys that have flooded European countries with often-unwanted migrants and claimed thousands of lives in the last decade, experts estimate.

But even as Spain is reporting a sizable decrease in drownings, success is far from complete. With more obstacles in place, migrants appear to be taking greater risks. Fortress Europe, a migrant advocacy group, reports that the number of deaths among those seeking to reach Italy has remained stable, despite this year's drop in overall arrivals, suggesting that those who try face a more perilous journey.

“All of us were the captain,” said one recent arrival to Italy, a 28-year-old Nigerian named Moses, who would give only his first name because he said he faced danger back home. “We did the job together.”

They were forced into the role because smugglers are taking fewer chances, choosing to send their human cargo in smaller, barely seaworthy boats rather than the large vessels piloted by professional captains that they used in past years.

Moses' particular task on the trip from Libya was to shine a flashlight on a compass the smugglers had given to another of the 24 men packed into a small rubber raft for a journey that is just 180 miles on a map, but took several wandering days on often rough water.

“The Lord was with us,” he said at an [immigration](#) holding center here.

Many others have not made it. The day Moses spoke, six bodies were fished out of the same stretch of sea he had traveled. That same day, the Italian news agency ANSA reported, a rescued Mauritanian man said he was the only survivor of a rubber raft from Libya that capsized with 45 people aboard.

“It is clear people are still dying in very dramatic circumstances,” said Erika Feller, assistant high commissioner for protection for the [United Nations High Commission for Refugees](#). “It proves that the disincentives are not enough to discourage quite large numbers of people from putting their lives at risk at sea.”

For years, the clandestine flotilla of boats — sailing over the Mediterranean for Southern Europe, or in the case of Spain also over the east Atlantic for an initial stop in the Canary Islands — has stood as the most disturbing symbol for Europe’s larger problem of immigration. The migrants wash up, alive and dead, most often in summer, at times along the beaches where Europeans vacation.

They are perhaps the most stark component of a quandary Europe has had much trouble solving: how to continue to meet its international obligation to protect those fleeing war and persecution while keeping out those it fears will form a permanent underclass or, in the worst cases, expose their countries to terrorism.

Now, after years of angst, it appears European efforts to stem the flow — and the resulting deaths — might be working, at least temporarily.

The numbers are incomplete, but as of the end of July, Fortress Europe reported the number of arrivals to Italy at 5,200 people, compared with 9,389 in the same period in 2006, a drop of 45 percent.

Despite repeated requests, the Italian Interior Ministry, which most closely tracks the numbers, said it was not able to provide statistics because everyone authorized to speak with the press was on summer vacation. A ministry press release, without giving specific numbers, said arrivals were down 30 percent this year. The Italian coast guard, however, reported a drop of roughly 50 percent.

Spain has reported an even greater reduction: official numbers for this year show 7,934 arrivals through July , compared with 17,433 in the first seven months last year. Greece, another major destination for immigrants, is also reporting a drop of 20 percent from last year.

The drop was achieved, advocacy groups and government officials say, through a variety of means. Last year, Frontex, a new [European Union](#) agency charged with border security, began patrolling the Mediterranean with boats and aircraft. Spain has engaged in joint patrols with Morocco and Senegal, confiscating boats before they sail and intercepting others that make it out to sea.

Spain has also initiated programs praised by many advocacy groups that have opened up more legal ways to enter the country for immigrants who might otherwise make dangerous sea crossings.

Italy's job has been, in many ways, more difficult: Facing resistance in a Parliament it controls only narrowly, the center-left government has not made any major changes in immigration procedures. And Libya, the launching point for many of those heading to Italy, is far less reliable than more democratic nations like Morocco or Senegal.

Libya has in recent months, however, been more helpful, possibly because it is working toward a closer relationship with Europe. Its leader, Col. [Muammar el-Qaddafi](#), has forged informal agreements with Italy to crack down on smugglers and patrol its own borders to keep those fleeing other African countries from entering and then heading north from its shores.

But problems remain. Human rights advocates say Libya has resorted to harassment, arrest and arbitrary deportation even for those fleeing war. They also say the country's work to stop the flow is incomplete at best.

"If you pay the police, you can go on with your trip to Sicily," said Fulvio Vassallo Paleologo, an immigration expert and professor of law at the University of Palermo in Sicily.

Half a dozen recent migrants at a so-called welcoming center in Caltanissetta in central Sicily said in interviews that it was difficult to find boats in Libya willing to take them, providing evidence that the nation is having some success clamping down on emigration.

But they also said that Libyan security forces were cracking down harshly on immigrants. Several said, in fact, that they felt pushed into

making the trip across to Italy because they otherwise might have been arrested in Libya and deported.

“There were a lot of people in Libya who were ready to make the trip,” said Ibrahim, 28, who said he had fled the war in Darfur, Sudan, to Libya before making the trip on July 21 in a small fiberglass boat with 45 other men, including [Palestinians](#), Moroccans, Tunisians and three Iraqis. “But there were too many checks” on smugglers.

The difference between the diplomatic challenges faced by Spain and Italy may account for differences in the death rates of migrants this year. According to Fortress Europe, the number of deaths in Spain or the Canary Islands is down substantially to 43 through Aug. 20 of this year, compared with 728 in all of 2006, a particularly deadly year, and 121 in 2005.

Italy, meantime, has 102 reported deaths through Aug. 23, according to Fortress Europe, compared with 96 in all of 2006.

Advocates for migrants say they believe that beyond traveling in smaller boats, some migrants are taking longer, and thus riskier, journeys to avoid patrols.

In the end, the larger question is whether the decrease in arrivals this year signals the start of a more permanent decline in the number of migrants willing to cross the sea. Some experts cautiously predict a continued drop, particularly if Libya keeps on its path toward a more formal partnership with the European Union.

Others are more pessimistic: They say that the broader problems in Africa — poverty, war, religious and ethnic strife — remain and are likely to continue to push people across the water.

Ibrahim, the migrant from Darfur, said: “We were already dead when we were in Sudan and Libya. If we died on the boat, it’s all the same.”

Peter Kiefer contributed reporting from Sicily, and Anthee Carassava from Athens.

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