

FRANCE - OPINION

# Migrants die, the world looks the other way

Monday 15 August 2022, by [BRAHIM Nejma](#) (Date first published: 13 August 2022).

**From the north of France to the Aegean Sea, from the Mediterranean to Mexico, the number of deaths at our borders is rising. More than 24,000 people are officially known to have perished on the perilous Mediterranean sea route alone since 2014. Yet these recurring tragedies produce no reaction from our political leaders. In this opinion article Mediapart's Nejma Brahim says this casual acceptance of migrant deaths cannot continue.**

How long will we continue to abandon migrants to their own fate, leaving them forced to take dangerous routes via often unscrupulous people traffickers because they have no legal migration options? It is a question that deserves to be asked as migrants continue to die in tragic circumstances around the world without the slightest reaction from politicians.

On Wednesday August 10<sup>th</sup> Mohammed died near to a camp at Grande-Smythe in northern France. The 22-year-old from Sudan drowned in a canal where he had gone to wash, as he had no other real access to water. This is one of the many basic human rights that France flouts every day; on July 20<sup>th</sup> the Human Rights Observers association [revealed](#) how in the middle of a heatwave state officials in the Nord *département* or county had ordered the seizure of water tanks that had been laid on for migrants.

“One more death and one which was in no way an accident, it’s the result of criminal policies at our borders,” said the association Utopia about Mohammed’s death near Dunkirk. This group, which helps migrants in the Dunkirk and Calais areas, goes to great efforts to pay tribute to the victims who die on this frontier - more than 300 have done so since 1999, a toll made worse by the [sinking of a boat on November 24<sup>th</sup> 2021](#) in the English Channel. They also try to put a name to these men and women who are, out of convenience, often just referred to as “the migrants”.

The previous day, on Tuesday August 9<sup>th</sup>, another boat had sunk in the Aegean Sea off the Greek island of Karpathos. On the morning of August 10<sup>th</sup> Greek coastguards announced that they had rescued 29 people but that between 30 and 50 people were still missing. The boat, bound for Italy, had come from the Turkish city of Antalya.

It is on this eastern Mediterranean route that so-called “[pushbacks](#)” by the authorities are regularly recorded, even though this is illegal under international law. This practice sometimes has deadly consequences: the migrants are forced to get into boats with no engines and are then literally pushed back off towards the sea without food or water and thus with no guarantee they will survive ([see Mediapart’s investigation](#)).

## **Only civil society groups are taking responsibility for these lives**

In the central Mediterranean, where only the humanitarian vessels chartered by European non-

governmental organisations such as SOS Méditerranée, Open Arms, Sea-Watch and Sea-Eye (when not blocked by the Italian authorities) come to the rescue of the migrants who attempt the perilous sea crossing, several other tragedies have also occurred in recent days. On Tuesday August 9<sup>th</sup> eight people - three women, four children and one man - died when their boat sank off Tunisia. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), nearly 1,200 people have died on this route since the start of the year. The previous day, August 8<sup>th</sup>, six others died when their vessel sank off the Algerian capital Algiers. Among the survivors was a pregnant woman.

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***While the organised people trafficking networks must take their share of responsibility, Western states forget that it is they who, first and foremost, write the script for these horror films and their ever-more dangerous backdrops.***

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On the other side of the Atlantic three people died crossing the Darién Gap which separates Colombia and Panama, three others perished trying to reach Nicaragua by sea and five more migrants lost their lives in the sea between Cuba and the United States. Two weeks earlier 17 Haitians drowned when their boat capsized off The Bahamas.

At the end of June this year more than 50 migrants originally from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras were found dead in the back of an overheated lorry in Texas. President Joe Biden simply blamed traffickers for the tragedy, [talking of](#) a “multibillion-dollar criminal smuggling industry” involving people who had “no regard for the lives they endanger and exploit to make a profit”. In France the interior minister Gérald Darmanin had reacted similarly after the sinking off Calais on November 24<sup>th</sup> last year.

It is difficult to imagine an end to this grim list. But should we just allow these tragedies to become accepted as normal? While people trafficking networks must take their share of responsibility, Western states forget that it is they who, first and foremost, write the script for these horror films and their ever-more dangerous backdrops.

Restrictions on the awarding of visas, the flouting of asylum rights, illegal pushback, the building of walls, barbed wire and an increase in the number of checks at the borders and police violence ... these are all deliberate and considered decisions taken to stop people who leave their homes from reaching our land. The pretext is that they have the wrong colour skin or don't have the right “culture”; the result is ever-greater control over our “migration flows”.

And too bad if that involves more deaths. Who still cares, outside the voluntary associations and citizen solidarity groups? More than 24,000 people are officially known to have perished on the Mediterranean route alone since 2014. This figure should make turn our stomachs churn, but nearly everyone seems to have got used to it.

Only the face of little Alan Kurdi, who was found drowned at the aged of three on a Turkish beach in 2015 after crossing the Mediterranean, was able to awaken people's consciences. Unfortunately that didn't last long.

There are good grounds for thinking that our sea and land borders now have the role of “cleansing” the world of people perceived as “illegitimate”. But to criminalise lives and journeys which have nothing criminal about them is not something that is worthy of our democracies.

Migration represents a natural phenomenon which it would be better to adapt to rather than to contain simply as a response to the foolish fears of a section of public opinion.

At a time when migration is certain to grow because of climate disruption, Western states can no longer shirk their responsibilities. They have a duty to organise and develop a policy that offers a genuine welcome to migrants. Let us stop looking the other way and let us stop counting the deaths.

**Nejma Brahim**

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**P.S.**

- MEDIAPART. AUGUST 14, 2022 :  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/130822/les-exiles-meurent-le-monde-ferme-les-yeux>

English version by Michael Streeter

- *Les articles de Nejma Brahim's articles in Mediapart:*  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/biographie/nejma-brahim>

- The original French version of this opinion article can be found  
here

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