

# The Human Cost of Outsourcing Europe's Border Controls

**Article by Sonia Moreno**

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An attempted crossing at the Spanish border in Melilla in June this year left dozens dead. Spanish, Moroccan, and EU leaders blamed criminal human traffickers for the deadly incident, refusing to see it as the consequence of racist and cynical border policies that punish the most vulnerable. This tragedy should lead Europe to adopt a more humane policy for its borders. Instead, however, leaders on both sides of the border are striking deals that will result in even harsher treatment of migrants.

On “Black Friday”, as 24 June 2022 has come to be known, at least 23 migrants died from asphyxiation after being crushed during a stampede at the land border between Morocco and Spain. In addition, over 200 migrants, 140 Moroccan agents, and 49 Spanish agents were injured. It was the worst disaster to have occurred on Europe's southern border, surpassing the 2014 events at the El Tarajal beach in Ceuta, in which 14 people lost their lives.

“They were waiting for us. They fired teargas at us and there was a lot of smoke in our eyes; we ran, some people got in, some were arrested by the Spanish police, others by Moroccan police, and they began to beat us. I don't know what had gotten into them, it was the first time something like this had happened. Before, they used to break our hands and arms, but killing us is something new, and it wasn't an accident, it was coordinated. They even used small knives, and we didn't stand a chance of doing anything, they were hitting us with truncheons once we were on the ground.” This is the testimony of Ali, a Sudanese migrant, given by phone from the Moroccan city of Casablanca (he is talking here under pseudonym for fear of being returned to his country, which he left to flee war).

All official death statistics differ greatly from those given by non-government organisations. The collective [Caminando Fronteras](#) documented the deaths of at least 37 migrants on that ill-fated day, while the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) in Nador, the region bordering the Spanish autonomous city of Melilla, counted [27 deaths and 64 disappearances](#).

## How an unprecedented tragedy unfolded

Around 1700 migrants tried to enter Spain from Morocco on 24 June via the Barrio Chino border post into Melilla, despite a heavy Moroccan security presence of over 1000 agents. Early that morning, a security alarm alerted the Melilla Guardia Civil to the approach of a large group of migrants, who were carrying sticks and stones, towards the border fence. The Guardia Civil acted alongside 1200 Moroccan security agents to prevent their entry, with members of the Spanish National Police Corps assisting in detaining those who attempted to jump the fence.

Two hours later, after breaking down the access gate of the Barrio Chino border control post, people began to enter Melilla by jumping over the roof of the building. As evidenced in a video recorded by photographer Javier Bernardo and published by several Spanish media outlets, Moroccan agents crossed the Melilla fence and beat migrants on Spanish territory in order to return them to Morocco.

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For the Jesuit Migrant Service (SJM) in Melilla, which works with migrants to defend their rights, this came as no surprise. “This is not unusual,” stated a spokesperson for the organisation, “From our perspective, these returns are illegal push-backs. No individual treatment has been given to each person at the border, and most of these migrants are entitled to international protection”.

However, the Spanish Interior Ministry has maintained that the Guardia Civil’s interventions were “at all moments in accordance with national and international legal frameworks” and asserted that “no action contrary to them, of any sort, was attributable to any of the agents involved”. They firmly state that “nobody was pushed back at the border.”

The testimonies of the victims tell a very different story. At least those who were interviewed for the purposes of this report agree that either they or their compatriots were pushed back or forcibly returned from Melilla to Morocco. “They stood by and did nothing while the Moroccan authorities killed us. Some Guardia Civil officers even detained us once we were in Melilla and handed us straight back to the Moroccan authorities so they could beat and kill us,” Ali reports.

In the end, only 133 people (from Sudan, Chad, South Sudan, Eritrea, and Niger) managed to enter the CETI (Immigrant Temporary Holding Area) in Melilla, of whom over 100 have now sought asylum. “These countries have a high rate of recognising asylum, so they will admit everyone who applies,” the Melilla SJM assured.

The Moroccan authorities detained 64 migrants who are being held in Nador. Those detained are being tried in two proceedings for various offences including “trafficking in human beings” and “organising and facilitating the clandestine entry and exit of people into and out of Morocco”. Of those being tried, 33 have been sentenced to 11 months in prison, a fine of 500 dirhams (47 euros) and an indemnity of 3500 dirhams (329 euros).

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from Melilla to Morocco.*

Additionally, during the hours following the attempt to enter Spain, Moroccan authorities removed 1300 migrants from Nador to different regions within Morocco, in buses belonging

to security forces. Subsequently, three camps have been set up in the city of Casablanca, where people are living in extremely poor conditions under police supervision, with patrols passing through the camps twice a day.

In these camps, people are sleeping in the open air, and survive only thanks to help from charities and local people. “Up to now, they’ve treated us badly. There’s no transport for us, and no medical treatment for people who are suffering horribly with broken legs and hands”, Ali complains.

## **The blame game**

A delegation from the European parliament is scheduled to travel to Melilla to conduct an investigation, and has not ruled out extending its visit to Morocco. The European Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice, and Home Affairs, also known as the LIBE Committee, has requested an appearance from the Spanish Interior Minister to justify the management of migration by Pedro Sánchez’s government.

The Spanish and Moroccan governments have blamed the events on criminal gangs. As a result, the European Union and Morocco agreed on 8 July, at a meeting at the Ministry of the Interior in Rabat, to update their cooperation on migration issues, and to extend this cooperation in order to adapt to the new *modus operandi* of trafficking networks.

The European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson and the Spanish Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska travelled to the Moroccan capital to meet with their counterpart Abdelouafi Laftit. In the meeting, the officials reached agreements to develop new mechanisms to combat irregular migration, which will primarily include “support for border management, reinforcing police cooperation with joint investigations, raising awareness of the dangers surrounding irregular migration, and strengthening cooperation with European Union agencies.”

“These events, in addition to being a human tragedy, have put traditional methods of combatting human trafficking to the test, and have clearly shown the extreme danger posed by human trafficking networks and the risks they are willing to take”, they said in a joint statement. This statement is contradicted by testimony given by migrants who were contacted for an interview by asylum lawyers: “they make it very clear that they are not organised”, said Javier Giménez Rivadeneyra, a lawyer with the SJM, speaking from the organisation’s office in Melilla.

## **New deals to curb migration come at a cost**

Following the resolution of the diplomatic crisis which resulted from Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Western Sahara independence movement (Polisario Front) being admitted to a Spanish hospital in April 2021, the Spanish Interior Ministry is seeking a cooperation agreement on migrant issues in Morocco modelled on those drawn up with Senegal (2006) and Mauritania (2014). This agreement would establish joint patrols, allowing the Guardia Civil to intercept the departure of boats containing irregular migrants.

The poor relationship between King Mohamed VI and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez began in January 2020, when the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) formed a coalition

government with Unidas Podemos, a party which supports a self-determination referendum for Western Sahara. Relationships deteriorated further when Donald Trump recognised Moroccan sovereignty over all Sahrawi territory in December of the same year. Spain did not follow suit, and the (later dismissed) External Affairs Minister Arancha González Laya defended an international stance in line with that of the UN.

Territorial unity, achieved through the recognition of the Moroccan autonomy plan which annexes Western Sahara as well as the southern provinces, has been the main objective of Morocco's policies, both nationally and internationally, for over five years.

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Pedro Sánchez chimed in on this magic formula in a letter to King Mohammed VI on 14 March, in which he said: "The Moroccan autonomy plan is the most serious, credible and realistic solution" to resolve the Western Sahara conflict. Following this correspondence, the Alawite monarch received the Spanish prime minister on 7 April in Rabat, where they signed a peace agreement along with a new roadmap emphasising control of migratory flows.

Morocco plays its position as border guardian to its advantage; in May 2021, in an effort to cool tempers in Rabat following the admission and treatment of Brahim Ghali, Spain gave Morocco 30 million euros for the purposes of combating irregular migration. It was at this time that 12,000 people had entered the Spanish autonomous city of Ceuta by land and sea, unimpeded by indifferent members of the Royal Moroccan Gendarmerie.

In 2019, Spain sent its southern neighbour direct aid of 32 million euros, meaning that Morocco in fact receives more funding than other African countries with signed cooperation agreements on policing, such as Senegal and Mauritania. Authorities in Rabat maintain that they require around 500 million euros annually to meet the costs of controlling their borders. Accordingly, Spanish Interior Minister Grande-Marlaska has called on Europe to increase funding for joint projects related to migrant issues in Africa.

Spain plays the role of intermediary between Europe and Morocco, and Madrid manages the money given by the European Union to Rabat to control the southern borders. For this reason, human rights organisations consider the 24 June Melilla border tragedy to be a consequence of migratory policies. The AMDH in Nador and the SJM in Melilla are in agreement that these are "crimes committed by criminal migration policies".

"This is Morocco's weapon. It receives a lot of money for the outsourcing of European borders", said Javier Giménez of the SJM in an interview for this publication.

Currently, with its ironclad control, violence against migrants, and raids on homes and in forests, it is clear that Morocco has ceased to be a country of refuge for migrants, despite organising and hosting the Intergovernmental Conference on the Global Compact for Migration in Marrakech in 2018, as well as its two regularisation programmes in 2014 and

2016. Today, the hospitality and warm welcome have come to an end; people with expired residency cards are facing administrative hurdles, more documentation is required, and processes are hampered by delays.

Following this line, and in the wake of the catastrophe, the Moroccan government is planning to re-establish its programme for returning irregular migrants to their countries of origin. The programme has been suspended since 2006, although since 2018 occasional deportations have taken place with assistance from the embassies of certain African states.

The tragedy that took place at the Barrio Chino border checkpoint demonstrates once again that Rabat's role as southern Europe's gendarme and border guard – played with the complicity of the Spanish authorities and the blessing of the European Union – is at the root of the persistent rights violations suffered by migrants and asylum seekers seeking entry into the European continent.

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