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# Algeria dumps thousands of migrants in the Sahara amid EU-funded crackdown**Desert**

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Not far from the Algerian border, the infant gave up its fight for life under the punishing Saharan sun.

“The mother, she is a friend of mine. Her baby passed away in the desert,” said Thomas Howard, a painter and decorator from the west African state of Liberia.

Mr Howard and his friend had migrated north to Algeria looking for work but were rounded up, beaten and robbed by Algerian security forces before being put in a truck, driven back south and dumped in the desert.

They were told to start walking south through the dunes as their captors drove away.

[Since September 2017, Algeria has left more than 10,000 people](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/25/trumps-stance-immigration-no-worse-anywhere-europe/) at its southern border, leaving them to trek for hours without food or water towards scattered border towns in neighbouring Niger.

North African countries are cracking down on immigration in a bid to stem the flow of sub-Saharan migrants reaching the Mediterranean, and ultimately Europe, and they have received financial backing from Britain and the EU.

As the numbers crossing the Mediterranean fell from 215,997 in the first six months of 2016 [to just 40,944 in the same period this year](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/25/italys-populist-government-crack-migrant-beach-vendors-selling/), the amount left adrift in the Sahara by Algeria has jumped.

In May last year, 135 people were left to fend for themselves in the desert between Algeria and Niger alone - according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) - but this stood at 2,888 in April this year - a 20-fold increase.

The expulsions happen both during the day, when temperatures can hit 110F (43C), and at night, when migrants fumble blindly in the dunes, looking for shelter and safety.

Dozens - perhaps hundreds - are dying of dehydration and heatstroke in the dunes.

“Migrants were going [to Algeria]... and at some point they decided they didn’t want them there any more,” said the head of the IOM’s delegation in Niger, Giuseppe Loprete.

The majority of migrants simply want to work in Algeria, say IOM officials. Although some still use it as a route to Europe only a handful now make it to the boats heading for Italy and Spain.

Better security on Niger’s northeastern border with Libya, following a massive injection of European Union money, has forced people smugglers to reroute towards Algeria.

[Algeria receives less of the EU money](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/06/24/migration-mini-summit-expected-end-failure-amid-bitter-eu-divisions/)that has poured into Niger and Libya to deal with border security, but the crackdown is being felt across the region.

The north African state is also suffering an economic crisis and high youth unemployment, and government tolerance of illegal migrants has evaporated, endangering an army of sub-Saharan workers from Cameroon, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal who were previously tolerated on building sites and as domestic servants.

“(Migrants) are returned to the border without knowing why, some of them were showing me that they were on a construction site and they are still wearing the clothes they were in,” Mr Loprete said following a recent visit to Arlit, the last city on the northern route to Algeria.

“Others left behind their savings, and that’s why some of them are trying to go back immediately."

Niger implemented a harsh anti-smuggling law in 2015 under pressure from the EU, and will receive €1 billion from the bloc by 2020, with specific provisions for dealing with illegal migration.

Several EU bodies operate in Niger, including border agency Frontex and the security training body EUCAP Sahel, aiming to keep migrants from ever reaching Europe’s shores. Both declined requests for comment in the capital, Niamey.

Most of the migrants who are dropped in the desert end up in Agadez, a dusty and lawless city better known as Niger’s “smuggling hub”, where thousands are now stranded.

“There is a lack of solidarity and it creates a lot of problems for us,” said Rhissa Feltou, the mayor of Agadez, of the Algerian deportations. “Water, electricity, health, waste, social relations, culture, everything is being disturbed."

Some of the new arrivals live in an IOM transit camp and agree to repatriation on UN planes, while others stay in squats in the sprawling, dirty streets, reflecting on how to piece their lives back together.

Prince Doe, another Liberian migrant, lived in Algeria for four years, working in the city of Oran as a tiler to provide for his wife and three-year-old son. He is living with his family and 10 others in a three-room home with traditional mud walls, sleeping on mats on the floor and making tea in the courtyard.

“Algerian police went to my house and told me to leave with my wife and my kid,” he said. “They said they want all black people to leave their country, that it was an edict from the interior minister.

“We entered the bus and put our luggage in a truck,” he remembered, pausing to take a big sigh. “We didn’t see the truck again”.

The systematic robbing by the police of possessions and money - often life savings - is a common complaint among the West Africans expelled.

After a swift visit to a deportation centre, the Doe family was driven with hundreds of other people to the southern city of Tamanrasset in a bus, before being transferred to a truck and transported to a point close to the desert border.

Abruptly, the gendarmes shouted at them to get down, and drove away. “I had my son. He was walking in the desert,” Mr Doe said. “There were a lot of children.

“Some Guinean boys died in the desert. They were in the group ahead of us."

The family’s ordeal ended after 45 minutes when a pickup truck appeared to rescue them. Others reported walking up to six hours in the blazing heat. Mr Doe does not miss Algeria, but the income he earned was vital for his extended family based in Monrovia, the Liberian capital.

“I was sending money back to my family. They gave me 20,000 dinars (£128) a month,” he said. “I would send $100 to my family”.

Mr Howard, who witnessed the death of the baby on the crossing, said the police explicitly told him that mobile phones were removed from migrants to stop them filming abuses, after the circulation of torture videos on social media.

“I had a Sony phone and they said we were recording them, sending the images to Al-Jazeera and CNN, so they don’t like it,” he said.

“(Police) will beat you unmercifully,” he added, sometimes with batons, sometimes with their bare hands.

Others reported serious abuses at the hands of their Algerian neighbours while living in the country, which they characterised as racially motivated.

Victoria Bebu, a 35-year-old Nigerian, suffered an arson attack on her home in January. “They came to my house when I was sleeping with my daughters. They set our house on fire,” she said.

“We lost our money and our things but thanks to God we did not lose our lives”.

Mrs Bebu also cared for a pregnant woman who was raped by three men, and who was too frightened of the authorities to report the crime or seek medical help.

“You see this skin? They hate this skin. They hate black people,” she said angrily.

The Algerian police came for her as she walked to work with her two daughters in the southern city of Tamanrasset. “I was going to my shop that morning and they found me on the road. They said you have to go home and I said OK let me go collect my things. They said no, you have to go like that,” she recalled, snapping her fingers.

At the border, her daughters, aged 13 and 17, walked alongside Mrs Bebu as she took care of a friend who had yet to recover from giving birth.

“My friend had a two-week old baby. She begged to be able to take the baby’s things and they said no. She went with nothing,” she said, her voice rising with indignation. “With the stress I was praying for her, that she doesn’t bleed on to the desert.”

Algeria has rounded up students with visas, migrants without identity papers, and even a dozen refugees, experts say. Few have their passports checked before they are ejected into the desert, and they are usually judged “illegal” by the colour of their skin.

“It’s unfortunate this is happening in such a brutal way,” said Alessandra Morelli, Niger representative of UNHCR, the refugee agency. “We appeal to the government of Algeria to at least allow [refugees] readmission as soon as possible.”

The Algerian embassy in Niger declined a request for comment, but Hassen Kacimi, an official with the Algerian interior ministry, said last month that “whoever wants to cry over the outgoing migrants just [has] to put their hand in their pocket,” asking why UN agencies and other African nations did not help them deal with a migrant influx.

In fact, the UN is in advanced negotiations with the Algerian government to better facilitate safe returns from inside the country itself, but these have yet to begin.