

Sub-Saharan Emigration: Maghreb as a Transit Area

Mohamed Khachani

President

Association marocaine d'études
et de recherches sur les
migrations (AMERM)
Université Mohammed V,
Agdal-Rabat

Migratory flow toward the Mediterranean basin is characterised by the increasingly significant influx of Sub-Saharan migrants.

Seduced by the so-called «European dream», a growing number of Africans are attempting to reach the northern shore of the Mediterranean. They usually travel overland, through the Sahara in some cases, all the way along the Nile in others, or even passing in transit through Saudi Arabia in the cases of those whose journeys start of farthest to the east are concerned.

More often than not, the journey begins on the other side of the Tenere desert, in Agadez in the centre of Niger. This city has become the new migratory crossroads at which virtually all the flows that originate in western Africa first converge. In their tens of thousands, these despairing people strike out across the desert under «Dantesque» conditions with the goal of travelling through Algeria to reach Libya or Morocco.

At the southern borders of the Maghreb, certain large Saharan cities (Sebha in Libya and Tamanrasset in Algeria) have become centres of migratory traffic heading for Mediterranean Africa.

The journey to Libya is undertaken in overloaded goods lorries, which can carry up to a hundred people in an «incredible balance-defying act». The voyage to Algeria, in order to evade controls, is made aboard Toyota pick-ups, which, equally overloaded, carry between twenty-five and thirty passengers.

This hazardous journey sometimes ends amongst the mirages of the desert. There was very little awareness of the anonymous deaths of these pilgrims until an incident in May 2001, when a lorry broke down in the desert at Libya's southern border, in an event that was to prove fatal for one hundred and forty Sub-Saharan migrants.¹

Clearing the first section of the journey does not signal the end of the dangers set out for these migrants. If they are caught in the round-ups carried out in Morocco, they are expelled to nearby Algeria. A camp has been set up close to Maghnia, where those who have been expelled gather, together with the new arrivals waiting to chance their fate. Both groups share a single objective, which is simply to cross the border. The Mediterranean constitutes the final hurdle of the perilous journey, and is rendered even more impassable by the logistic and regulatory systems they will encounter at the borders of the European Union. These migrants thus find themselves stuck in the north of the African continent or on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. The last barrier is par-

ticularly lethal; the Straits of Gibraltar have become the world's largest cemetery and it is estimated that between eight and ten thousand migrants perished in the sea between 1989 and 2002.² This tragedy appears to be set for continual repetition, something to which the drowning of eighteen Sub-Saharan migrants close to the Moroccan coast on 19th January 2003 bears testimony.³

Due to its very nature, it is difficult to gauge this kind of migration. The number of Sub-Saharan migrants who have gained access to the Maghreb via its southern borders over recent years is thought to stand at between sixty-five and eighty thousand. Within this flow, eighty percent of migrants head for Libya and the other twenty percent make for Algeria. However, of the eighty percent who travel to Libya, a proportion of them, which cannot be easily calculated, pass through Algerian territory to work their way up the Algerian-Moroccan channel.⁴ In Morocco, this migration begins to grow in magnitude and to become visible, particularly in certain cities such as Casablanca, Rabat, Tangier and the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.

These migrants are originally from forty to forty-two different African states. Ordered according to the basis of volume for the period spanning 1995 and 2001, the Malians head the list, followed by nationals of Sierra Leone, Senegal, Nigeria, Niger, Guinea, Ghana and Cameroon.

¹ Ali Bensaad : «Le Ténéré, ou les mirages d'une vie meilleure». *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 2001

² ILO: «L'immigration irrégulière subsaharienne à travers et vers le Maroc». *Cahiers des Migrations internationales*, 54, 2002.

³ *Le Monde*, 21st January 2003.

⁴ Mehdi Lahlou, «Le Maghreb, l'Europe et les migrations des Africains du Sud du Sahara. Situation et possibilités d'action» ILO, 2003.

In quite a number of cases, the journey is converted into an enforced stay under difficult conditions. The challenges posed by crossing the Strait transform Morocco, and the northern and north-eastern regions in particular, as well as the Saharan provinces, into a permanent stopover point for Sub-Saharan migrants. These migrants engage in various activities to survive, and some of them have to resort to begging.

May 2003 saw the passing of Law 02-03 on «Foreigners' entry to and residence in Morocco, and irregular emigration and immigration», which echoed the restrictive measures of European migratory policies. This law makes these migrants very vulnerable, but does not deter new aspirants from venturing into the desert. Africans hoping to emigrate to Europe continue to leave their countries, due to a number of certain factors.

Africa, which represents ten percent of the world's population, is caught up in half of the world's conflicts, and suffers from all that such a situation entails, such as the disastrous consequences it creates for the living conditions of its various peoples.

The African economy is in a state of chronic crisis. Since René Dumont wrote his work «*L'Afrique noire est mal partie*» in 1962,⁵ the causes of the region's under-development have not been eradicated, and instead the situation has continued to deteriorate.

There has been an upsurge in poverty in Africa, which is not only widespread but also extreme in certain countries. According to an UNCTAD report, thirty-two of the forty-eight least developed countries are African.⁶ The expansion of these pockets of destitution

and the resulting «painful existence» are the factors that impel the youth of Africa to look increasingly to the north and to regard North Africa as a transitional destination, a passage to the European Eldorado.

The critical nature of this situation is due to the fact that changes in and the restructuring of international relationships have reduced the strategic importance that was attributed to Africa, and have entailed a relative disengagement with regard to the continent on the part of the major powers of the world. As part of their project of enlargement towards the east, the countries of the European Union are establishing other close relations, and their policies towards the African continent have thus borne little fruit

It seems that these countries still fail to grasp the geostrategic importance of the situation. The recommendation of the United Nations that 0.7 percent of the GDP of wealthy countries be allocated to official development assistance has proved to be an empty promise, with current payments representing a mere 0.25 percent on average. In terms of absolute value, the difference between the promised amount and that actually provided stands at ten billion dollars per year.⁷

Despite some African states being willing to face up to the new challenges, the economic and political consequences are catastrophic. At the same time, the scope of media globalisation has broadened, contributing to maintaining people's desire to emigrate. All these factors have led to a great propensity to emigration and have caused migratory movements to accelerate.

The lack of aid is exacerbated by heavy

debts. Sub-Saharan Africa's foreign debt has multiplied more than 3.3 times over the course of twenty years, from 60.6 billion dollars in 1980 to 206.1 billion dollars in 2000.

Furthermore, and on a different note, there is another factor that appears to be inducing young Africans to make plans to migrate: Colonel Gaddafi's proclamation of the African Union has had the effect of prompting migration toward Libya.

In addition to the factors above, it is necessary to consider the presence of networks of traffickers in the countries of origin and transit, as well as those that are potential destinations. It has become more profitable and less risky to engage in this kind of trafficking than the drug trafficking industry.

The reactions of destination countries regarding this phenomenon have not been conclusive. Furthermore, the battery of legal measures that has been put in place and the logistic systems established (Sive, Ulysses, and so forth) seem to have had pernicious effects. In an interview in the newspaper *El País*,⁸ the representative of the Spanish government responsible for the issue of migration, Jaime Ignacio González, acknowledged that the matter transcends laws and that the root of the problem certainly lies in the aggravation of disparities around the world. These disparities only exacerbate the feeling of deprivation and injustice. He admitted that these flows are set to intensify until such time as the imbalance in question is rectified, because, as metaphorically stated by the former president of Senegal Abdou Diouf, «You cannot hold back the sea with your arms».

⁵ René Dumont: *L'Afrique noire est mal partie*. Seuil. Paris. 1962

⁶ UNCTAD: *Least Developed Countries Report*, 2000

⁷ *Finances et Développement*. December 2001

⁸ *El País*, 16th August 2003