



Regional multi-stakeholder workshop on human rights at international borders in North Africa and the Sahel

27 July 2021

Virtual Meeting, 9h30 – 16h00

Summary Note

On 27 July 2021 OHCHR hosted a regional multi-stakeholder workshop on human rights at international borders in North Africa and the Sahel. The meeting brought together more than 40 participants from civil society, NHRIs, and academia as well as representatives from OHCHR's Middle East and North Africa and West Africa Regional Offices as well as the Country Offices in Niger and Mauritania.

OHCHR welcomed the participants, introducing the work of the Office on migration and in the Region. The workshop then proceeded in four sessions, the first providing an overview of the protection of human rights at international borders, followed by thematic sessions covering arrivals, immigration detention, and returns. Each session began with a presentation by OHCHR introducing the human rights aspects of the topic and which was followed by plenary discussions in which the participants shared their experiences and the context in their countries related to each topic.

During the session on arrivals, participants emphasized that in their experience States in the region are more focused on preventing irregular entry than on saving lives. They noted that migrants are exposed to violence including pushbacks and kidnap and exploitation by armed groups. Some noted that even where there is generally a strong legal framework for human rights protection of migrants, bilateral agreements regarding migration governance may undermine and supersede those protections, resulting in approaches that are not human rights-based. They also shared that the increased securitization of border zones can make human rights-based monitoring difficult.

During the session on immigration detention, participants noted that in several States in the region the use of detention is on the rise. They also expressed concerns regarding the lack of effective COVID-19 preventative measures in immigration detention facilities, and regarding the adequacy of efforts to provide migrants in detention with information in languages that they understand. Participants emphasized the linkages between detention and expulsions and between detention and missing migrants, with many detained migrants being unable to contact their loved ones. They shared their efforts to monitor conditions of immigration detention and to provide greater access to justice for migrants detained arbitrarily.

During the session on returns, participants shared research regarding pushbacks in the Middle East, across the Mediterranean, and at the Algeria/Niger border. They noted that there is often a lack of a monitoring mechanism for returns, and that return monitoring by an independent monitoring body is a positive practice. Some participants shared positive experiences of work with voluntary return programmes, including ensuring skills development, support, access to justice, and community integration, but others cautioned that in their experience voluntary return programmes can at times mask returns that actually lack freedom of choice.

At the end of the workshop, OHCHR summarized the information shared and thanked participants, expressing the hope that there would be greater opportunities for collaboration on these issues in the future.