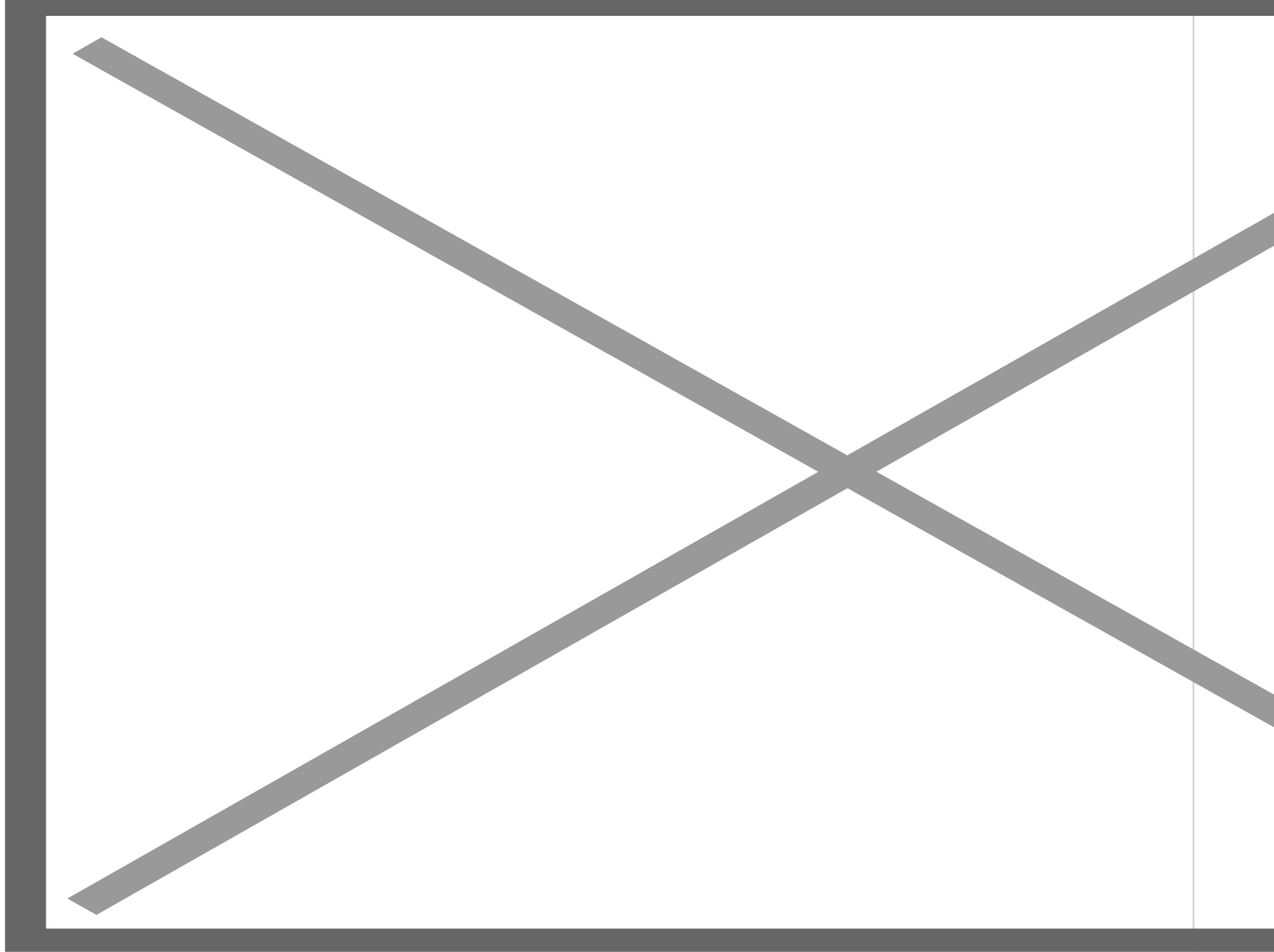


37 migrants dead at Morocco-Spain land border amid police use of extreme violence

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Riot police officers cordon off the area after migrants cross fences separating the Spanish enclave of Melilla from Morocco in Melilla, Spain, June 24, 2022. (AP photo)

Madrid, June 27 (RHC)-- Human rights groups in Spain and Morocco have demanded a probe into the deaths of at least 37 migrants after a mass attempt to scale the border fence into the Spanish enclave of Melilla in northern Africa.

Authorities in Morocco said the migrants died on Friday in a "stampede" after about 2,000 people tried to climb the iron fence that separates Morocco and Melilla, with many of them falling in the attempt.

The videos shared by the Moroccan Association of Human Rights appeared to show dozens of migrants packed into an area next to the border fence, some bleeding and many lying motionless, with Moroccan forces wearing riot gear watching over them in the aftermath of the crossing.

The African Union Commission chief Moussa Faki Mahammat in a statement posted on Twitter on Sunday expressed shock at what he termed the "violent and degrading" treatment of the African asylum-seekers attempting to cross the border.

He called for an investigation into the incident while reminding all countries of their "obligations under international law" to treat all migrants with "dignity" and to "prioritize their safety and human rights."

About 140 Moroccan and 49 Spanish security personnel were also injured in the incident, reports said. Images published by Spanish media showed people lying on the pavement in Melilla, some with bloodied hands and torn clothes.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) in a statement expressed "profound sadness and concern" over the incident while urging the authorities to "prioritize the safety of migrants and refugees, refrain from the excessive use of force and uphold their human rights."

"IOM and UNHCR urge all authorities to prioritize the safety of migrants and refugees, refrain from the excessive use of force and uphold their human rights," the organizations said. The Spanish Commission for Refugees (CEAR) also criticized what it described as "the indiscriminate use of violence to manage migration and control borders" and said the violence had prevented people who were eligible for international protection from reaching Spain.

Moroccan human rights associations blamed the Spanish-Moroccan migration agreement for the tragedy. "The deaths and the injured are a tragic symbol of the European policies to externalize the EU's border, with the complicity of a Southern country, Morocco," they said in an open letter.

Meanwhile, Esteban Beltrán, head of Amnesty International in Spain, said Amnesty had seen images showing Moroccan security officers using "excessive force against migrants and refugees", saying they used "batons to beat people who were already totally under their control and who did not offer any resistance".

Beltrán also said the Spanish authorities forcibly ejected migrants from Melilla in violation of international law since the practice prevented possible refugees from making requests for international protection. He said most of the migrants attempting to enter the Spanish enclave were fleeing conflict in South Sudan and that they should be treated like war refugees.

Spain's prime minister Pedro Sanchez called the incident a "violent assault" on the Melilla border fence. The border guards were "defending the national sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Spain," Sanchez said on Saturday, adding that the assault was the work of "mafias who traffic in human beings."

The two Spanish cities of Melilla and Ceuta are autonomous regions located in the north of the African continent. They are the EU's only land borders with Africa, making them a favored destination for refugees and asylum-seekers fleeing from hardships.

The mass crossing attempt on Friday was the first since Spain and Morocco mended relations after a year-long dispute related to Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony annexed by Morocco in 1976.

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