

Illegal South Asian immigrants take dangerous route to Europe

Illegal South Asian immigrants have long strived to get into [Europe](#) by land routes, but of late they are favouring the much longer and more dangerous route from West Africa by the sea.

This has come to light after a fishing trawler Marine 1, with nearly 400 illegal passengers on board, including many Indians, was towed away by Mauritanian authorities in northwest Africa Feb 2.

Having engine trouble in international waters, the Italian-built prawn trawler sent a distress signal and drifted for about 10 days while Spain and Mauritania wrangled about what to do.

Eventually Mauritania agreed to let the migrants land and Spain agreed to manage their immediate repatriation. But one thing stood out: most of the migrants were not African.

'A new route has opened up,' said Antonio Mazzitelli, the representative for the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime in Dakar, Senegal. 'More and more, West Africa is the hub for immigrants from other regions of the world, and especially Southeast Asians.'

The illegal migrants were all men in the age group of 20s and 40s. India and Pakistan were asked to send representatives to the warehouse converted into a shelter by the Spanish Red Cross.

Spain's plans to immediately repatriate roughly 300 migrants to India have fallen apart. As most lack passports and are believed to be concealing their nationality, India does not feel obliged to take them, according to the International Herald Tribune.

Michael Tschanz, the head of the Mauritanian office of the international organisation for migration, said the immigrants claimed that the agents for the trip had kept their passports and that they were given common names, thwarting efforts by Indian authorities to track them in their passport database.

'Because they are hiding their identity, it is difficult for the Indian government to say they are Indian citizens,' he said. 'They have been apparently told by the unscrupulous agents that that would be the best strategy so that the investment made by their family and friends is not lost.'

Initial reports that the migrants were Kashmiris have been found to be untrue, as most of them spoke Punjabi.

'The immigrants aren't told anything, they pay to come to Europe and they are unaware of the conditions,' said Vijaya Souri, who works for the International Organisation for Migration in Mauritania.

'They didn't even know they were paying their way through Africa, and some said that if they had known, they wouldn't have chosen to come,' she added.

The Marine I is the fourth vessel being held for carrying illegal South Asians.

On Jan 12, a boat called the Taobi Stara arrived in the Canary Islands carrying 166 immigrants, roughly 151 of them believed to be from Pakistan.

One landed in the Canary island off Tenerife in September with about 160 people, including 137 South Asians, on board. A third boat, with 226 people, mostly Pakistanis, arrived directly in Spain's Mediterranean port of Cadiz in July.

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