

OUR BODIES ARE NOT YOUR BORDERS

The Cotonou Manifesto for Freedom of Movement

For we cannot fully call ourselves survivors without confronting the very systems from which we suffered—systems that continue to dehumanise and destroy the lives of many. Nor can solidarity be claimed without confronting those systems alongside us.

Therefore, having gathered in the Migration Village at the World Social Forum in Cotonou, Benin, we—victims, survivors, families and activists, together with movements, organisations and allies committed to dismantling the racist migration regime—issue this manifesto.

Those of us who speak from lived experience are survivors of deadly deserts, prisons, detention centres, deportation flights, pushbacks, racist attacks, abductions at sea, enslavement, rape and other forms of inhumane treatment. We speak as people whose bodies have been used to build borders, whose suffering has been converted into dehumanising and exclusionist policies, and whose deaths have been reduced to statistics in order to justify the need for "migration management."

Across the world, the discourse of "invasion" has been revived to dismantle refugee protection, legitimize mass deportations, and turn migrant communities into enemies. Migrants are exploited for political ends and subjected to a system built on racism, fear, and collective punishment. The situation we face is part of a continuum of colonial violence, running from border zones into the heart of the cities, where police violence, racial profiling, detention, pushbacks and the criminalization of people on the move reproduce the same logic of racialized exclusion, control, and confinement. The routes of slavery have been reopened through processes of dispossession and the commodification of human life — processes that drive desperate people to undertake perilous sea crossings and turn the oceans into cemeteries.

Among other actors, the European Union stands at the forefront of these policies. Since the early 2000s, it has pushed its borders outward into Africa, funding governments, coastguards, militias, detention systems and surveillance infrastructure to stop people from reaching European soil. Agreements have been struck with Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, Algeria, Niger, Mauritania, Senegal and other states, turning African territories into prisons and cemeteries for the people Europe deems undesirable. Beyond Europe's borders, European governments pay other countries to commit acts that would expose them to legal and political consequences inside Europe. Libya has become the laboratory of choice for this system. The United Nations and the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal have found that migrants who passed through Libya and other North African countries were victims of crimes against humanity, as well as of torture, degrading treatment, and human trafficking. Yet Europe has gone on funding, training, equipping and legitimizing the very structures implicated in carrying out these crimes.

The United States of America and the European Union are carrying out an outsourced war against human mobility. Frontex has become Europe's operational arm of this war and an armed bureaucracy of disappearance. For years, Frontex has contributed to pushbacks in numerous countries, including Libya and Turkey. This agency continues to detect refugee boats from the sky and transmit their locations to Libyan militias, enabling abductions at sea and returns to prison, torture, enslavement, rape, and disappearance: everything these people were fleeing. Europe's security apparatus does not stop at its maritime borders; it has extended much further — into Senegal, Mauritania, Ghana, Niger, Nigeria, Togo, and elsewhere. Military cooperation agreements between the U.S. and Central American countries have had deadly consequences for migrants just as the U.S. policy of Prevention Through Deterrence has since the 1990s intentionally funneled migrants away from urban ports of entry and into the lethal, remote terrain of the Sonoran Desert.

International agencies such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the UNHCR deploy a smooth vocabulary of "risk analysis," "border management," "voluntary return" and "cooperation" that conceals a deadly project: to identify, track, contain, and deport people on the move before they reach their intended destinations — and to recruit African and other governments as the jailers of their own people.

As for African states: Africa cannot continue describing itself only as a victim of European policy. African governments have neglected their own people, accepted money to police Europe's borders, and participated in the hunting, detention, deportation and abandonment of Africans on African soil. Everywhere on the continent, migrants are treated as commodities and used as bargaining chips in exchange for international funding. They have been transformed into scapegoats by governments seeking to stay in power. Meanwhile, the African Union hypocritically proclaims unity while staying silent as Africans are tortured, expelled, and killed. African promises of free movement remain severely limited, as Africans continue to be treated as irregular foreigners on their own continent, like the mass deportations of migrant populations from Algeria to Niger, from Tunisia to Libya, and from Mauritania to Mali. In South Africa, afrophobia and xenophobic assault — part of the legacy of apartheid — have also turned Black people against one another, with grave consequences for African unity.

This violence is the product of an alliance between states and other capitalist actors: billionaires, media empires, and certain digital platforms that instrumentalize migration to divert public anger away from inequality, exploitation, and politicians' own accumulation of power. In spreading anti-migrant hatred, they draw on racist conspiracy theories and bolster far-right movements. The violent systems we endure do not build themselves: they are designed, financed, directed, amplified, defended and normalized by those who hold political, economic, and technological power. Neoliberal policies, combined with environmental destruction, the depletion of water and other resources as well as neocolonial policies and support for dictatorial regimes, continue to worsen the suffering of populations and trap people in indebtedness. They fuel poverty, widen inequalities, and force millions of people into exile in search of security, freedom, dignity, and decent living conditions.

Given this situation, we demand an end to the externalization of border control; the closure of detention centres and so-called "return" centres; and effective access to the right to asylum. States must honour the commitments they made in signing international conventions: the Geneva Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and others. Leaders must be held to account and held criminally responsible for the deaths that occur along migration routes. As survivors of those routes and the families of those who have died on them, we must be able to take part in the institutions and negotiations that decide our lives.

We defend the freedom of movement, the right of everyone to freely choose where they live, and to travel in safety. We claim the right to leave and the right to stay, without fear of violence or repression, whatever a person's origin or belonging. States must guarantee protection for their own citizens as well as for the people they receive in their country.

We call for the abolition of the visa system, through which states and private agencies enrich themselves on the backs of people seeking to migrate, the majority of them from the Global South. That money must be returned as reparations to all the victims of the global apartheid created by the border regime.

Freedom of movement is not only a fundamental right, it creates ties between countries and peoples, and achieves the full economic, social, and cultural benefits of migration. From a feminist perspective, it guarantees women and gender minorities the possibility of moving to seek safety and freedom. From a Pan-Africanist perspective, it secures African unity and strengthens our societies and the continent's self-determination. From a decolonial perspective, freedom of movement would put an end to the global apartheid of mobility that prolongs the hierarchies inherited from colonization.

Despite the barriers raised in front of us, we too exercise freedom of movement every day by overcoming and undermining deadly borders. We create infrastructures of solidarity to support people on the move. We build transnational networks to learn from one another, to fight together against a racist migration regime, and to build a world in which freedom of movement is a reality.

With these aims, the Migration Village during the World Social Forum in Cotonou was another step toward organising mutual exchange and joining forces for a continuous struggle.

Our forced migration is not your invasion. Our survival is not the crime you claim it to be; it is your states and their leaders who are guilty of crimes against humanity.

Human beings are not your bargaining chips, electoral weapons, or commodities.

Our bodies are not Europe's borders.

Our lives are not Africa's currency.

Our existence is not America's enemy.

We will no longer allow the world to build its borders upon our graves.

Authored and led by survivors.

Supported by the following organizations, movements and collectives:

1. Advocates Female Migrants initiative (Nigeria)
2. Afrique-Europe Interact (transnational network)
3. Al Bawsala (Tunisia)
4. Alarme Phone Sahara
5. Alerte Migration Afrique (Burkina Faso)
6. Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas Studies Program, San Francisco State University (USA)
7. Association des Mères des Disparus en Tunisie (Tunisia)
8. Association Éducation Togo (AET, Togo)
9. Association Malienne des Expulsés (AME, Mali)
10. Association Marocaine d'aide aux migrants en situation vulnérable (AMSV, Morocco)
11. Association Marocaine des droits humains (AMDH, Morocco)
12. Association Mauritanienne pour la Citoyenneté et le Développement (AMCD, Mauritania)
13. Association Nationale des Partenaires Migrants (ANPM, Senegal)
14. Association Togolaise des Expulsés (ATE, Togo)
15. Boza Fii (Senegal)
16. Caritas Dakar/PARI (Senegal)

17. Confédération générale autonome des travailleurs en Algérie (CGATA, Algeria)
18. Citoyennes Citoyens Debout Mauritanie (CCD, Mauritania)
19. Climáximo (Portugal)
20. Collective Against the Criminalization of Solidarity and Civic Engagement in Tunisia
21. Conseil des Migrants Subsahariens au Maroc (CMSM, Morocco)
22. CRID (France)
23. Direy Ben Gao/ RMSM (Mali)
24. Ebrima Migrant Situation Foundation (Gambia)
25. Female Returned Migrant network - FREMNET (Nigeria)
26. 50 Out of Many (Greece)
27. Groupe solidarité des groupements féminins au Togo
28. Jeunesses Nigérienne au Service du Développement Durable (JNSDD AIKIN KASA) (Niger)
29. KISA - Equality, Support, Antiracism (Cyprus)
30. Medico International
31. Mediterr
32. Migrants Lives Matter (Nigeria)
33. Migreurop (Euro-African network)
34. MV Louise Michel project
35. Network of Ex-Asylum Seekers - NEAS (Sierra Leone)
36. Network of People with Migration Experience (Nigeria)
37. Nomad 08 (Tunisia)

38. OGLMI - Terre de Liberté (Guinea)
39. ONG Opinion Éclairée (Ivory Coast)
40. ONG UNION FAIT LA FORCE (Benin)
41. Palestinian NGOs Network
42. Refugees in Libya (RiL)
43. Réseau Maghreb Sahel sur les Migrations
44. Réseau ROA-PRODMAC (African network)
45. Riposte internationale (Algeria)
46. Right2Protest Project Africa
47. Rootstv.tn (Tunisia)
48. Solidarités Asie France (SAF)
49. SOSAPROFEM (Senegal)
50. Southern Africa Migration Network (SAMIN)
51. Teaching Palestine: Pedagogical Praxis and the Indivisibility of Justice
52. trans-border.net Editorial Team
53. Un Monde Avenir (Cameroon)
54. Voice of Migrants Association - VOMA (Nigeria)
55. Voice of Talia Initiative Foundation (Nigeria)
56. WatchTheMed Alarm Phone
57. Welcome to Europe
58. We'll Come United (Germany)