

This is the first of a series of global thematic updates on 4Mi data collected remotely by MMC about the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants travelling along mixed migration routes in Africa, Asia and Latin America. After the initial roll-out of our adapted 4Mi survey focusing on the immediate impact of the pandemic in April, we moved into a new data collection phase in July, further zooming in on the impact of the pandemic on mixed migration, including migrant smuggling, drivers of mixed migration and movement decision-making, and protection. This first monthly thematic update focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on migrant smuggling (demand, access, fees, dependency and risks). Similar to MMC's previous global data updates since the start of the pandemic, these thematic reports provide an aggregated overview from all regions; more detailed, thematic and response-oriented COVID-19 snapshots are also developed in each of the MMC regional offices and available [here](#).

## Key messages

- **Overall, with increased need for and reduced access to smugglers as well as increased fees, refugees' and migrants' dependence on smugglers appears to have increased, and this increased dependency increases risks and vulnerability to protection incidents.**
- **47% of surveyed refugees and migrants cited increased difficulty crossing borders** as an impact of the coronavirus crisis on their migration journey, with substantial variations between regions.
- **37% of refugees and migrants interviewed by MMC indicated a greater need for smugglers.** In West Africa and Latin America, this rose to 44% and 46%, respectively.
- **43% of surveyed refugees and migrants indicated increased difficulties accessing smugglers,** with Latin America the only region where respondents less frequently said this was the case.
- **Half of all respondents noted that smugglers' fees have increased** since the COVID-19 crisis began. Respondents in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Colombia, Peru, and Libya all more frequently reported this. Migrant smuggling seems to reflect market dynamics of supply and demand - with higher demand leading to higher fees - as these are also the regions where respondents cited the most increased need for smugglers.
- **Most respondents (61%) indicated that smugglers have started using more dangerous routes since the outbreak of the pandemic.** A strikingly high percentage of over 70% of respondents in Niger, Malaysia and Tunisia indicated that smugglers were choosing more dangerous paths.
- **Smugglers are among a number of groups likely to be the perpetrators of protection incidents.**

## Profiles

**1,419 respondents\*** were interviewed between 2 and 31 July 2020, with 159 interviews conducted in Asia, 357 in Latin America, 341 in North Africa, and 562 in West Africa.

Region	Country	n	Percent women	Mean age
Asia	India	41	42	29
	Indonesia	53	38	28
	Malaysia	65	35	26
Latin America	Colombia	214	71	36
	Guatemala	41	49	35
	Peru	102	62	35
North Africa	Libya	117	29	28
	Tunisia	224	28	29
West Africa	Burkina Faso	166	38	28
	Mali	212	21	27
	Niger	184	32	31
<b>Overall</b>		<b>1,419</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>30</b>

\*These thematic updates only report on the findings from the revised 4Mi COVID-19 survey implemented since July 2020. They do not include data collected between April and July, when MMC conducted 5,906 remote interviews with refugees and migrants, using a different survey. These findings have been reported in a series of [global updates and regional snapshots](#).

In Latin America, the majority of respondents (88%) were Venezuelan, followed by smaller groups of people from El Salvador (6%), Honduras (4%), Nicaragua, Mexico and Colombia (all below 3%). In Asia, 60% of respondents were Afghans, 28% were from Myanmar and 12% from Bangladesh. Respondents in North Africa and West Africa were from a wide range of African countries.

## Methodology

A summary of 4Mi methodology can be found [here](#). All figures are rounded to the nearest whole number. 44 interviews were discarded from analysis due to questionnaire incompleteness or data quality issues. Sample sizes at country level are still small for some countries, and findings regarding these should therefore be considered with caution. Data collection using the revised 4Mi COVID survey has started in East Africa (Kenya, Somaliland) as well and this region will be included in the next global update.

## Context

By April 2020, [the majority of the world's population](#) lived in countries with mobility restrictions, imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19.

These measures have impacted mobility around the world in various ways, which is reflected in the data from the [initial phase of our adapted 4Mi program](#). Refugees and migrants interviewed by MMC most often noted [increased difficulty moving in and between countries](#).

With the re-opening of parts of the world, many refugees and migrants seek to continue their journeys where possible. It has therefore been predicted by [some observers](#) that the COVID-19 crisis will make refugees and migrants more dependent on smugglers, and that smugglers will opt for more dangerous routes and modes of transport. Journeys will become more risky and more expensive.

MMC's interviews with refugees and migrants on their perceptions of smuggling and the dangers and risks of their journey support this analysis and provide additional insights on how the impact on migrant smuggling differs across regions, as shown below.

## Increased need for smugglers

Almost half (47%) of 1,419 respondents interviewed across Asia, Latin America, North Africa and West Africa cited increased difficulty crossing borders as an impact of the coronavirus crisis on their migration journey, with substantial variations between regions. These increased difficulties are likely to be linked to an increase in the need for smugglers: **37% of refugees and migrants interviewed by MMC indicated a greater need for smugglers** since the coronavirus crisis began.

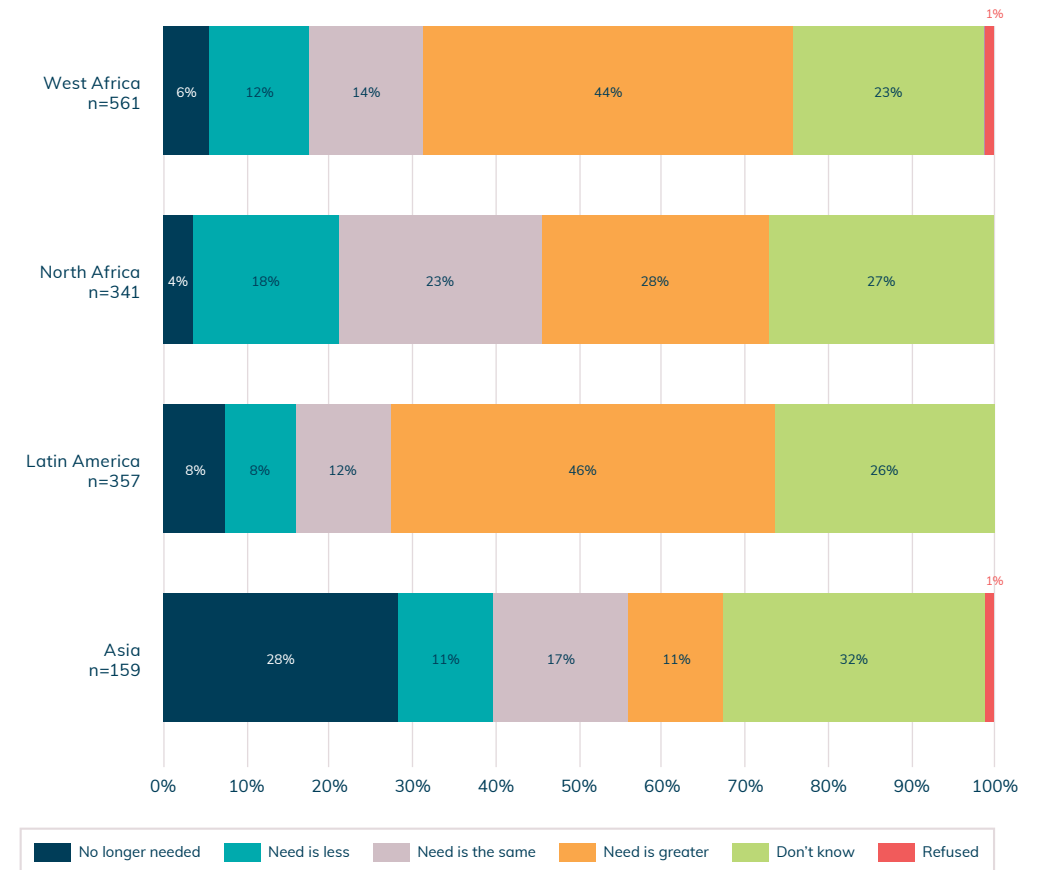
In West Africa, 44% of respondents cited a greater need for smugglers, which is in line with a large share of respondents in the region citing difficulties moving between countries since the coronavirus pandemic hit (79%).

In North Africa, around a quarter (24%) indicated the need for smugglers remained the same and a little over a quarter (27%) stated a greater need for smugglers. Just under half of respondents in North Africa (44%) had noted increased difficulty crossing borders as an impact of coronavirus on their journey.

Respondents interviewed in Asia (India, Indonesia and Malaysia) generally indicate they have reached their final destination, or they are not actively continuing their journeys. As such, they are less likely to report difficulties crossing borders as an impact of COVID-19 (14%) compared to respondents in other regions. Linked to that, about a third (28%) of respondents state that they no longer need to use a smuggler.

Interestingly, only 15% of respondents in Latin America reported difficulties crossing borders as an impact of COVID-19, but 46% agreed that there was an increased need for smugglers. While respondents in Latin America reported difficulties crossing borders less frequently than elsewhere, it is possible that they do anticipate this in case of either onward or return journeys, and therefore report an increased need for smugglers. [There are increasing reports](#) on Venezuelans returning to Venezuela (including from Colombia and Peru) or intending to return and using smugglers to get back into Venezuela.

**Figure 1. How has the need for using smugglers changed during the COVID-19 crisis? (Percentage of respondents by region)**



\*The relatively high percentage of 'don't know' answers relates to the fact that respondents are being asked about their perceptions of a situation, and not their direct experiences. This is also the case for Figures 2, 3, and 4.

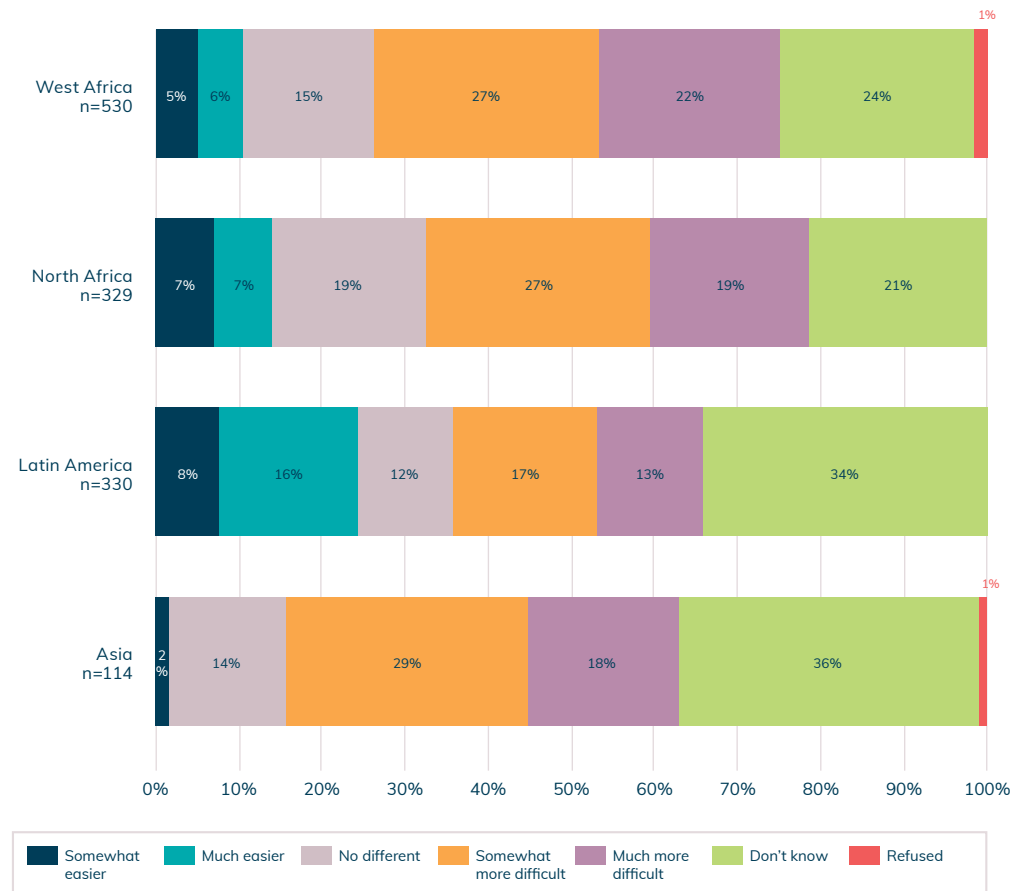
## Difficulties accessing smugglers

While the need for smugglers seems to have increased, access to smugglers has become more difficult since the outbreak of COVID-19.

**43% of surveyed refugees and migrants indicated increased difficulties accessing smugglers**, while slightly over a quarter of respondents (27%) said they were not sure and 15% noted no difference in access to smugglers as compared to before the pandemic.

Difficulties accessing smugglers was frequently cited by respondents interviewed in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, as well as in Malaysia and, most notably, Libya.

**Figure 2. How has the COVID-19 crisis impacted on access to smugglers? (Percentage of respondents by region)**



## Increased smuggling fees

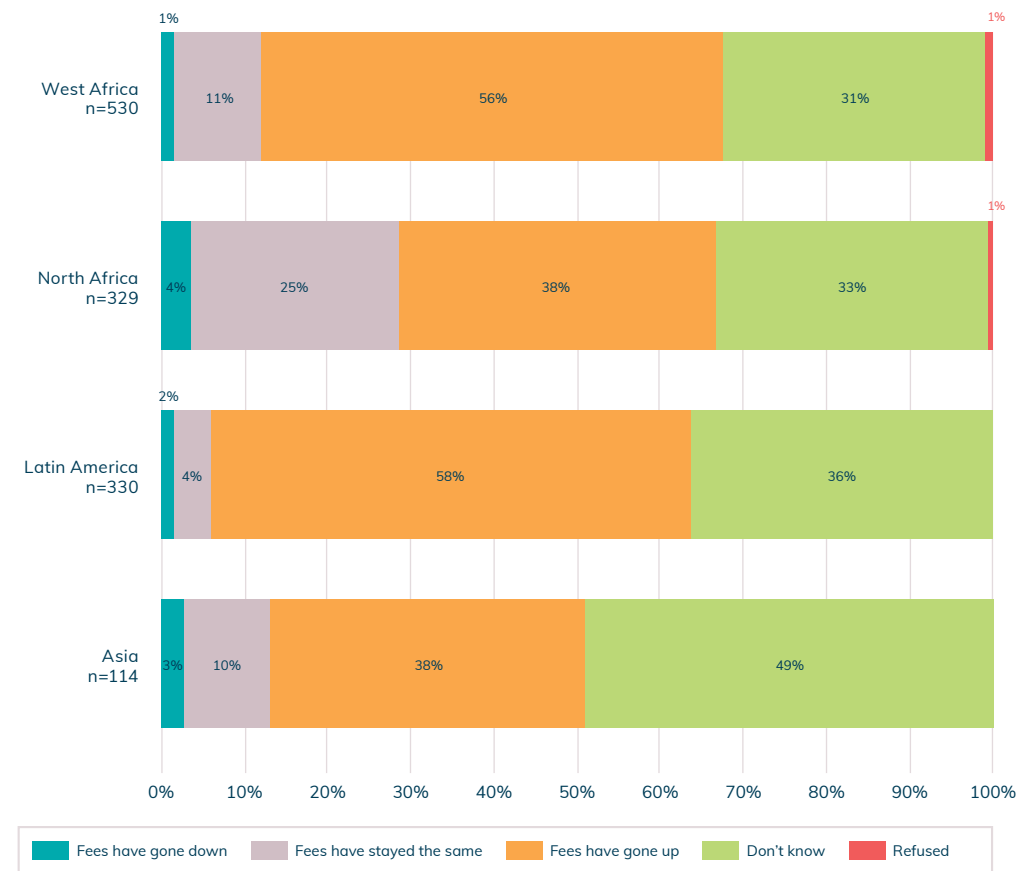
Half of all respondents noted that smugglers' fees had increased as compared to before the COVID-19 crisis.

Higher smuggling fees were noted mostly by surveyed refugees and migrants in Latin America (58%) and West Africa (56%).

This finding is in line with the greater share of respondents in Latin America and West Africa citing an increased need for smugglers since the onset of the pandemic over other regions: following market dynamics of supply and demand, a greater need for smugglers seems to be linked to higher fees.

The proportion of respondents reporting higher smuggling fees was especially high in Malaysia (74%), Niger (68%) and Libya (65%), all countries in which it was frequently noted that access to smugglers had become more difficult (74%, 56% and 66% respectively).

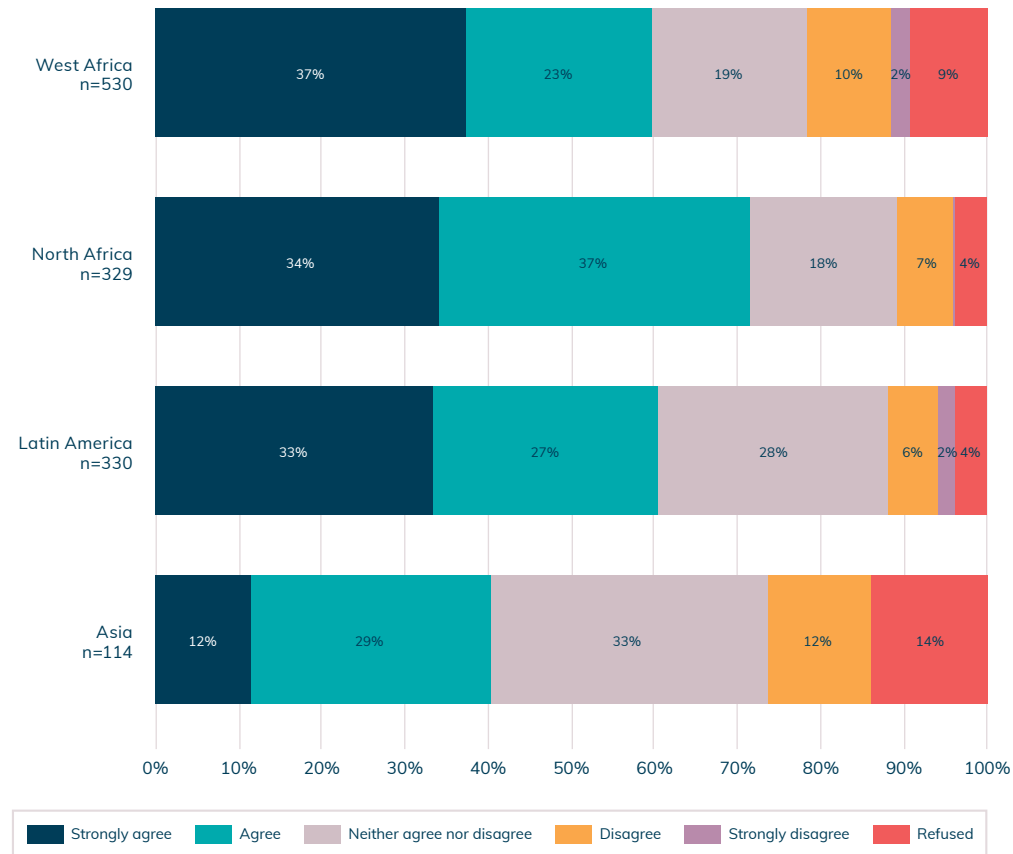
**Figure 3. Have smugglers' fees changed since before the COVID-19 crisis started? (Percentage of respondents by region)**



## Smugglers are using more dangerous routes

Most respondents (61%) indicated that smugglers have started using more dangerous routes since the outbreak of the pandemic. This is particularly the case in North Africa (71%), with shares also high across Latin America and West Africa (60% for both regions).

**Figure 4. Are smugglers using more dangerous routes since the COVID-19 crisis began? (Percentage of respondents by region)**



## Overall increased dependency on smugglers

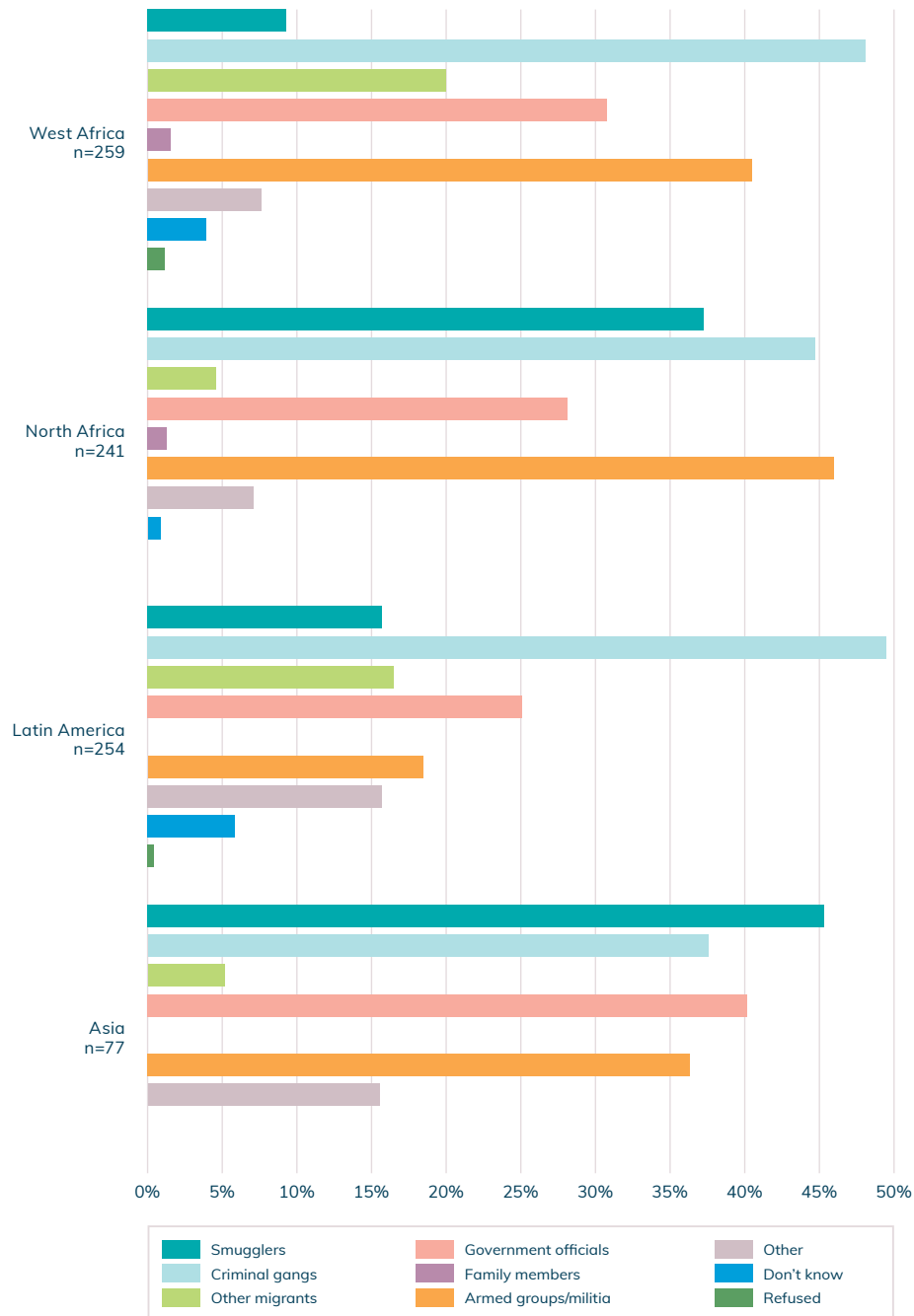
The data suggest that the coronavirus crisis has increased refugees' and migrants' dependency on smugglers, as many indicate a greater need for them, compounded by difficulties accessing them and higher fees in various places. This greater dependency is likely to increase people's vulnerability to violence and human rights violations. Indeed, as shown in Figure 4, a majority of respondents agrees smugglers are using more dangerous routes.

The perpetrators of incidents during migration journeys are diverse and **smugglers are among the main groups committing violent acts against refugees and migrants**, as indicated in Figure 5. This includes, besides smugglers, criminal gangs, armed groups, and government officials, whom in some regions are mentioned more frequently than smugglers.

Smugglers were never mentioned as perpetrators in India and Indonesia, as respondents are more likely to have been in-country for a longer period, and therefore less likely to have interacted with them, while they were the most frequently reported in Malaysia.

In North Africa, overall, smugglers are regarded as the second most likely perpetrator of violence against refugees and migrants, with higher number of mentions in Tunisia over Libya.

**Figure 5. Who were likely to perpetrate protection incidents during the migration journey? (Percentage of respondents by region)**



## Refugee and migrant voices

“Nowadays some smugglers in the country of origin provide personal loans for migration journeys and that money sometimes needs to be payed back in double or with higher interest.”

**29-year-old man from Bangladesh interviewed in Malaysia**

“Many professional smugglers are still willing to bring new migrants to the country but the tight security along some routes due to movement restrictions caused by COVID-19 has made some of the smugglers fail to carry out the duty of safe arrival of the migrants.”

**30-year-old man from Nigeria interviewed in Libya**

“With this crisis, it is difficult to reach smugglers because it is forbidden to move to any destination, and therefore there is strictness by the border authorities.”

**30-year-old woman from Sudan interviewed in Tunisia**

“Now it is something that is kept low-key. No one comments on this, but the smuggling of migrants along the irregular border crossings continues every day.”

**29-year-old woman from Venezuela interviewed in Peru**

“Due to the current situation, many people found themselves stranded at many borders without the ability to pay a smuggler.”

**30-year-old woman from Venezuela interviewed in Peru**

"The majority of Venezuelans who want to return go through Cucuta, in Puerto Santander they cross via irregular border crossings. Many migrants have seen corpses of people on the road who – I imagine – wanted to cross the border and were killed. Drivers charge an amount of money that is impossible to afford. My family travelled in June, 30 adults and 11 children crossed, these 41 people paid 2 million pesos (~520 USD). Normally the ticket from Cucuta to Medellin costs 85,000 pesos (~22 USD) but now it is 300,000 (~76 USD)."

**37-year-old woman from Venezuela interviewed in Colombia**

"Since some routes have been closed, they [the smugglers] look for ways to keep going with the people who continue to take the risk, and these are more difficult."

**25-year-old man from El Salvador interviewed in Guatemala**

"Everything is as before; only crossing borders is very difficult. You have to pay a lot of money. This crisis only benefits the police officers who are on the borders."

**23-year-old woman from Liberia interviewed in Mali**

"Traffic has reduced with the closure of the borders, but smugglers are using detours to cross the borders. This is not without risk."

**25-year-old man from Niger interviewed in Burkina Faso**

## 4Mi & COVID-19

The [Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative](#) (4Mi) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements. Normally, the recruitment of respondents and interviews take place face-to-face. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face recruitment and data collection has been suspended.

MMC has responded to the COVID-19 crisis by changing the data it collects and the way it collects it. Respondents are recruited through a number of remote or third-party mechanisms; sampling is through a mixture of purposive and snowball approaches. A new survey focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants, and the surveys are administered by telephone, by the 4Mi monitors in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia and Latin America. Findings derived from the surveyed sample should not be used to make inferences about the total population of refugees and migrants, as the sample is not representative. The switch to remote recruitment and data collection results in additional potential bias and risks, which cannot be completely avoided. Further measures have been put in place to check and – to the extent possible – control for bias and to protect personal data. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at [www.mixedmigration.org/4mi](http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi)

The development of this global update is supported by\*:



**MINISTRY OF  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
OF DENMARK**



 Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra  
  
Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA  
Directorate of Political Affairs DP  
Human Security Division

\*This update is based on 4Mi data collection in the regions supported by the following donors: DFID, Danida, the EU Trust Fund, ECHO, IGAD, UNHCR and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.