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Barcelona Or Death!

Migrants from Senegal Record Their Perilous Journey

A special report by The Advocacy Project



Four days into his journey from Senegal to the Canary Islands, Ama Ndiaye Thiombane knew he was in trouble when two huge waves almost swamped the tightly-packed *pirogue* and threw his fellow migrants into a panic. No-one was wearing a life vest.

On the following day food started to run short and the first migrants died. The bodies were pitched overboard to the horror of Mr Thiombane, who later recorded [a rap song](#) about his ordeal: "Monsters show their face and start to eat people."

On day six the motor gave out. After pitching helplessly for several hours, the migrants were finally rescued by a Mauritanian boat and taken ashore, where several were beaten and locked up before being taken to Rosso on the border with Senegal.

They then made their way back to the village of Sendou near Dakar that they had left a few days before. The entire trip had been in vain.



Mr Thiombane (photo) is among tens of thousands of West Africans who have been driven by poverty to seek a better life in Europe. Over 23,000 reached the Spanish Canary Islands last year. Many more may have turned back and over 2,000 are thought to have drowned. Boats have even [washed up in the Caribbean](#) carrying the decomposed bodies of African migrants.

Mr Thiombane was one of five migrants on the Sendou boat who shared short video clips of their perilous journey with [Jeremiah Gatlin](#), an AP Peace Fellow who worked with returned migrants and their families in Sendou this past summer. The footage has been edited by Gio Liguori at AP into a [short but powerful video](#) that also draws from Mr Thiombane's rap song.

The film is part of an AP effort to change the narrative of “illegal migration” and hear directly from migrants and their families. As part of the project, several women near Sendou have used embroidery to describe how their sons and brothers drowned and how their own lives have been shaped by tragedy. Their blocks [can be seen here and](#) are being turned into an advocacy quilt by an expert quilter in the US.



Mr Gatlin provides context for the video in a series of blogs. He places the blame squarely on a development plan known as “Emerging Senegal” that has been imposed on Sendou-Bargny by a government

seeking to attract foreign investment and under pressure from the European Union to prevent the exodus of migrants like Mr Thiombane.

Under the plan, the government has expropriated farming land in Sendou-Bargny for use by a Turkish company, Tosyali Holding Senegal, which is building a port and steel factory.

The project has [met with fierce local resistance](#). The government hopes to create 1,200 jobs, but most migrants would not qualify, reports Mr Gatlin. Meanwhile the construction has caused pollution and devastated fishing and agriculture, which are the main sources of livelihood and employment in Sendou (photo).

Foreign companies are also fishing under agreement with the government and using large vessels and trawling techniques that deplete fish stocks and force local fishermen further and further out to sea.

Deeply discouraged, Baye Ngagne Thiombane, another migrant who met with Mr Gatlin, sold his fishing gear and signed up for the trip to Spain, which can cost between \$600 and \$900.

“The government sold away the ocean,” he said. “There aren’t any fish in the ocean. There is nothing here for us. We have to immigrate. (It’s) Barcelona or death.”



Mr Gatlin (on the right in the photo) is also unforgiving towards the European Union, which is pressuring African governments, including Senegal, to deter migration.

In 2015 the EU established the [Emergency Trust Fund for Africa \(EUTF\)](#) to provide an economic incentive for migrants to

remain; but as the Sendou-Bargny steel project shows, top-down development rarely achieves this goal. In addition, many EUTF gains have been wiped out by the pandemic, which has put added pressure on migrants to leave.

European migration policy hardened on September 23, 2020 when the EU offered a new deal to African governments known as the [Pact on Migration and Asylum](#). This shifted the focus from development to deterrence. Mr Gatlin and other advocates also view the Pact as “blackmail” because it threatens to reduce or eliminate visa programs with governments that do not act firmly to prevent migration.



As well as illustrating the extreme perils of boat passage, *Barcelona or Death* is a tribute to persistence. [Pape Moussé](#) (photo) another returned migrant who met with Mr Gatlin, has tried to make the journey four times since 2004. In spite of being turned back and suffering multiple beatings in Mauritania, he is prepared to try again.

While Pape Moussé may be resilient, other migrants are deeply scarred by the experience. Two of [Khady Mbengue](#)'s brothers tried to make the

passage. Ibrahima died and was thrown overboard (bottom photo). Ms Mbengue's second brother, Abdou Karim, survived but "came back a different person," as she explained to Mr Gatlin. There are few services for returned migrants and clandestine migration is generally a taboo subject in Senegal. Many returnees suffer from mental illness.

Most migrants are young men, but Mr Gatlin also met women who had attempted to make the journey and suffered horrific abuse. Hawa Ba (not her real name) sold a family cow and escaped without the knowledge of her parents to avoid forced marriage. She made it to Morocco before being caught and repeatedly raped. Ms Ba's family has refused to meet with her since her return, and blames her for being raped.



[Aissata Ndiaye](#) (photo) secured a visa to study in Russia but decided that Western Europe offered more education possibilities. She traveled to Morocco and set out for Spain in an inflatable dinghy with twelve other migrants. Five of the migrants, including one woman from the Ivory Coast, drowned when the dinghy capsized off Morocco.

After a brief spell in hospital, Ms Ndiaye (who has told her story on television) made it back to Senegal, where she created an association for returning migrants and threw herself into advocacy.

The AP Board will meet shortly to decide how to build on Mr Gatlin's productive summer. The first step will be to assemble the embroidered stories, which were made in Senegal through OPEN-SARL, a social

enterprise that has supported over 750 returned migrants. The stories are being made into an advocacy quilt in the US by Kathy Springer.

With help from Mr Gatlin, who is completing his Masters Program at the Fletcher School, AP will explore options for working with OPEN-SARL and make the finished quilt available for any advocacy.



Khady Mbengue's embroidered story shows the body of her brother Ibrahima after he died and was thrown overboard.

- * Watch *Barcelona or Death* in [English](#), [French](#), and [Wolof](#)
- * [Listen to Diardiarou Mbeugeumeu](#) ("*Living in Migration*") by Ama Thiombane (AKA Papa Mbissa Boy)
- * [See how mothers of the migrants view their ordeal](#)
- * Watch "#387," [an award-winning film](#) about the identification of migrants who drowned in the Mediterranean
- * [Contact Peace Fellow Jeremiah Gatlin.](#)



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