Migration sea route to Italy is world's most lethal

Most deaths since 2014 occurred in Mediterranean Rise in crossings follows Balkan border clampdown

More than 22,500 migrants have died or disappeared globally since 2014, more than half of them while attempting to cross the Mediterranean, according to an authoritative report by the UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

A clampdown on Europe's eastern borders has forced migrants to choose more dangerous routes, with the death toll in the Mediterranean continuing to rise despite a drop in the overall number of arrivals, data compiled by the UN migration agency reveals.

"While overall numbers of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean by the eastern route were reduced significantly in 2016 by the European UnionTurkey statement, death rates have increased to 2.1 per 100 in 2017, relative to 1.2 in 2016," reads the IOM report, which is released today.

"Part of this rise is due to the greater proportion of migrants now taking the most dangerous route – across the central Mediterranean – such that 1 in 49 migrants now died on this route in 2016."

Since 2014, more deaths have been documented here than on any other migration route in the world. In the first half of this year, the IOM said at least 3,100 migrants had died or disappeared globally, which is lower than the figure of 4,348 in 2016. But the risk of dying has increased in the Mediterranean even though fewer migrants crossed into Europe.

"The central Mediterranean route, ending at Lampedusa or the main island of Sicily, accounts only for about a quarter of almost 1.5 million people who have arrived since 2014 on all routes, but for 88% of all migrant deaths in the Mediterranean," it said.

Last month, Amnesty International criticised Italy for taking measures to keep migrants away from its shores, which it said have led to "their arbitrary detention in centres where they are at almost certain risk of torture, rape and even of being killed". The IOM's report also complained about smugglers in Libya and Italy increasingly using less seaworthy vessels.

Jean-Guy Vataux, head of mission in Libya for Médecins Sans Frontières, told the Guardian that nearly all people rescued from drowning from the Mediterranean had been "exposed to an alarming level of violence and exploitation".

Restrictions on the eastern route meant the number of arrivals in countries such as Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia had dropped dramatically. The three countries, which are not part of the EU's Schengen border-free zone, restricted migrants' access in late 2015.

In the first half of this year, at least seven migrants have died of hypothermia during the winter months in the western Balkans. The International Committee of the Red Cross has recently published a report warning against the dangers of the route.

More than 120,000 people have arrived in Europe by sea so far this year. About 82% of all migrants were travelling to Italy from Libya. Others departed from Turkey bound for Greece or, more recently, from Morocco bound for Spain. In June, Italian coastguards rescued about 5,000 people in one day in the Mediterranean.

The IOM report covers the period from January 2014 until the end of June and does not reflect the recent developments in Myanmar, where atrocities against the country's Rohingya Muslim minority have led to an exodus of thousands to neighbouring Bangladesh.

The IOM report, entitled Fatal Journeys, has been compiled by the Berlinbased Global Migration Data Analysis Centre. It is the only existing database on migrant deaths at a global level, collected through various means including official records and media reports.

Ann Singleton, senior research fellow at Bristol University's school for policy studies, said: "Better data on migrant fatalities can also help to inform policies aimed at reducing migrant deaths."