



By: *Sharmila Devi*

Pope's clashes with Trump over morality unlikely to subside



Pope Leo XIV has become an unlikely icon for global opponents of Donald Trump's divisive actions on migration and war. But will the pontiff's outspoken criticisms that encompass the "Global North" actually lead to any change?

It remains to be seen how much support richer countries will give after African countries called for action to prevent deaths and disappearances along migration routes ahead of the Second International Migration Review Forum, which will be held next week at the UN in New York.

Nearly 8,000 people are known to have died or disappeared on migration routes around the world in 2025, according to a new report from the UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM) released in April.

Many other deaths are never recorded, and more than 40% of recorded fatalities were on sea routes to Europe, where more than 1,000 people have already died.

The **Pope's** "robust moral vocabulary", as a New York Times opinion writer described it, has put him in opposition to Trump on issues ranging from the Iran war to US plans to bring in firing squads to enact the death penalty.

The Pope said in response to a question about migration on his plane returning from a visit to four African countries on 23 April: "What is the Global North doing to help the Global South or those countries where young people today cannot find a future and therefore dream of moving north?"

Earlier, he criticised the world's treatment of migrants and refugees, claiming that they are often viewed as "worse than house pets or animals".

He also said he did not fear the Trump administration after he was attacked by the US president, who said on social media he was "not a big fan" of the Pope and called him "WEAK on crime, and terrible for Foreign Policy".

Trump also posted an AI-generated image of

himself as a Jesus-like figure, which he later removed.

Sympathy in short supply

The migration review at the **UN** brings together states and civil society groups on 5-8 May to assess progress on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which was adopted in 2018 by more than 150 countries vowing co-operation but not the US, Israel and several other right-wing governments.

More than 82,000 migrant deaths and disappearances have been recorded since 2014, including 18,866 in Africa, according to IOM's Missing Migrants Project. "Behind these numbers are people taking dangerous journeys and families left waiting for news that may never come," said IOM Director General Amy Pope. "Data is critical to understanding these routes and designing interventions that can reduce risks, save lives and promote safer migration pathways."

More than four in every ten deaths and disappearances happened on sea routes to Europe, making them the most deadly, and many cases were "invisible shipwrecks" where entire boats are lost at sea and never found, said the IOM report.

"Migration routes globally are shifting, and the profile of migrants is changing" - IOM

But sympathy among citizens in the rich world appears in short supply if measured by the support for populist measures and anti-migrant parties.

In **Greece**, the police have even recruited migrants to violently push back other migrants across its land border with Turkey, according to a recent BBC investigation.

It found allegations of brutality, with witnesses reporting migrants being stripped, robbed,

beaten and even sexually assaulted. It has been claimed that mercenaries have been unofficially employed on the border since at least 2020.

Migration routes globally are shifting, and the profile of migrants is changing, says IOM, with Bangladeshi nationals becoming the largest group arriving in Europe while Syrian arrivals fell.

Migration still considered the only option

Along the Western African Atlantic route, arrivals to the Canary Islands dropped significantly after strengthened border cooperation, but journeys have become “longer, riskier and more geographically dispersed.”

Pope Leo is due to make the first papal visit to the Canary Islands in June, and he may well make more comments about migration that are likely to anger Trump.



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The route to the Canaries accounted for at least 1,200 deaths last year, while some non-governmental organisations say the number is far higher. The Caminando Fronteras (Walking Borders) group estimates some 3,090 people died at Spanish borders in 2025.

The Iran war is unlikely to stop the flow of migrants if their needs remain high, according to the [Mixed Migration Centre](#) (MMC), part of the Danish Refugee Council.

The Eastern route crossing the Gulf of Aden or

Red Sea and transiting through Yemen remains the largest in volume, with the Gulf region an important destination.

With migration still considered the only option by many people and no definitive end to the Iran war in sight, progressive Catholics have much to remain concerned about, and the Pope looks set to act as their standard-bearer.

Pope Leo says the Catholic Church should prioritise issues of inequality and justice over those of sexual ethics, such as same-sex marriage.

“The unity or division of the Church should not revolve around sexual matters,” said the pontiff on his flight home from Africa. “I believe there are much greater and more important issues such as justice, equality.”