



ONE YEAR ON FROM CEUTA'S DISINFORMATION CRISIS

This 17th May, El Tarajal's small beach, bordered by a breakwater that supports the fence separating Ceuta from Morocco, regains some of the liveliness it lost more than two years ago when the border with the neighbouring country was closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But it has not been two years of complete calmness. This cove of grey sand and calm waters saw precisely one year ago, on 17th May 2021, thousands of people crossing it in an unprecedented border crossing in this autonomous city of just over 83,000 inhabitants. A crossing that, in a matter of hours, also gave way to a disinformation crisis. Social networks and WhatsApp groups served as a battleground for those who wanted to spread havoc in the early hours of 18th May.

Monir is one of the people who crossed the border, first on foot and then by swimming along the breakwater with the fence that separates Moroccan territory from Spanish territory, until they reached the beach of El Tarajal, in Ceuta. He recalls how he was on the other side and a friend phoned him and said: "Monir, the border is open, come on, let's cross and we'll see

later". He already knew Ceuta; in fact, he knew it very well. He had spent 10 years there trying to make a living until the end of 2019, he says, when he was expelled to Morocco. Since then, he has been looking for a way to return to be able to work: "I spent a year and a half in Morocco without work, looking for a way to return to Ceuta", he tells *Maldita.es*. And on 17th May, he saw the opportunity to return.

"When I arrived at the border crossing, I found a lot of people. I never imagined I would find that, women and small children. I was shocked," he exclaims. During 17th and 18th May 2021, according to what the Minister of Interior, Fernando Grande-Marlaska, stated a month later in an [Interior Commission](#) in the Congress of Deputies, what took place "was not a migratory crisis", it was a "border crisis" in which there was an "arrival of more than 8,000/9,000 people". However, this data is not reflected in the reports published by the Ministry of Interior on irregular migration, which do not include the number of arrivals on those two days in May.

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Monir is one of the people who crossed the border

On the other side of the border, on Spanish soil, was Isabel Brasero, head of the Ceuta Red Cross. She, alongside workers and volunteers from this organisation, were attending to the migrants who were arriving by the hundreds on the beach in Ceuta. “It was not normal”, she recalls and explains to *Maldita.es* that, although the protocol was to test for coronavirus to all those who entered, it had to be stopped due to the large influx of people. Brasero says that before this influx of people, the Red Cross had a building that was going to be closed, but it was reactivated. These warehouses were active for the care of migrants until the end of April, when they were closed.

The exceptional nature of the entry through this border checkpoint is not the only thing Brasero remembers about 17th and 18th May: “My WhatsApp was constantly bombarded with hoaxes”. A few hours after people started arriving, on the night of 17th May, many images began to circulate about what was happening at the El Tarajal



Warehouses managed by the Red Cross where migrants were attended to until the end of April 2022. Author: Maldita.es.

border. One of these pictures was of a civil guard rescuing a baby who was drowning in the sea. A few hours after it was disseminated, messages began to circulate claiming that [the baby was a dummy](#) and that the image did not correspond to the crossing at Ceuta. “The child was real, it was a real photo,” assures Brasero.

and the Government Delegation in Ceuta also affirmed to *Maldita.es* that the rescue was real and that the baby was rescued on 17th May when he was crossing the border with his mother.

“The military were getting into the water because people were drowning,” recalls Carlos. Two people died trying to



Carlos (fictitiously named), who runs a bar next to the El Tarajal border checkpoint, also tells *Maldita.es* that the child was real: “The mother was a porter”. This is the name given to women, mainly Moroccan, who buy goods in Ceuta and Melilla and carry them on their backs to the Moroccan side of the border. The Guardia Civil

cross the border, [according to Fernando Grande-Marlaska](#) in the Interior Commission held on 25th June 2021 in the Congress of Deputies.

“There were groups of minors, families, women with children and groups of sub-Saharan Africans,” says Brasero. Carlos says that a cousin of his, a minor,

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Many went to the rocks and created settlements. They understood that they were going to be sent back to Morocco

Isabel Brasero, head of the Ceuta Red Cross

also crossed during those two days, as did many other minors who arrived in Ceuta unaccompanied by their parents or guardians, and that his mother called him crying. “Children from school were coming”. “You talked to them, and they said they were going to see Ronaldo play”, Brasero recalls. According to the data on the immigration gateway of the Secretary of State for Migration, around [1,500 minors entered through this border on 17th and 18th May](#). These unaccompanied minors were referred to a specific warehouse.

The rest of the arrivals were also referred to the warehouses located next to the border checkpoint. However, according to Brasero, many of them did not want to go to these warehouses: “Many went to the rocks and created settlements. They understood that they were going to be sent back to Morocco”. According



Access gate between the border checkpoint of El Tarajal and the warehouses where the migrants were housed. Author: Maldita.es.

to [Interior Minister Grande-Marlaska](#), during the first day of crossings through the El Tarajal border, 2,700 people were returned to Moroccan territory.

One of those who hid to avoid being sent back was Monir, who spent the first nights hiding from the police and sleeping in the street: “I was afraid they would send me back to Morocco, the police wanted to send us back to Morocco”, he tells *Maldita.es*. Like him,

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Monir, is one of the people who crossed the border



On the left, the Temporary Stay Centre for Migrants in Ceuta. Author: Maldita.es.

many others also wandered through the streets or around the Temporary Stay Centre for Immigrants (CETI), which is on the other side of the autonomous city and amongst trees. “Their idea [upon entering] was to look for the CETI”, says Brasero. According to what the Secretary of State for

Migration told *Maldita.es*, 223 people entered the CETI in May, noting that “prior to entering the centre, they had to be in quarantine in the facilities of the Autonomous City”. One year later, as at 12th May 2022, this centre has an occupancy of 412 residents, according to data provided by this institution.

WhatsApp groups that were used as ‘newsgroups’ in which hoaxes were spread about school fires or cars at the hands of migrants.

Andrea, a resident of Ceuta, recalls a year later that she was very scared on the night of 17th May 2021: “It’s not just that they were crossing, there were thousands and thousands of them”. After the first hours of people arriving across the border, she and her friends created what she defines as “news groups” on WhatsApp where they forwarded videos and photos of what was allegedly happening in the streets, from alleged arson attacks, to alleged occupations or aggressions. “Look, this is the school that they burnt down,” he tells *Maldita.es* as he walks past the Lope de Vega school, which is next to his house. One of the videos that they forwarded that night and the following ones through these WhatsApp channels is of a police intervention at the gates of that school after it was allegedly raided and burnt down by immigrants who had recently arrived in Ceuta. [But this was a hoax.](#)

Within the footage, recorded from a house opposite the school, a woman can be heard saying that the immigrants were “at the top” of the school and that “there were four of them”. [However, the public school assured Maldita.es](#) that “there has not been any kind of incident”. As explained from the Lope de Vega centre, the police went to the school to check what was happening after “several rumours from neighbours” warned that “they had entered the building”, but the school’s Head of Studies pointed out that, once there, the police checked that there was no one in the place and that there had been no damage or incident of any kind. In fact, they stated that on the morning of 18th May, classes continued as normal. A year after the school and the authorities denied this event, Andrea, who lives next door to the school, still believes that it is true that there was a fire, even though she did not see it.



[Watch video here](#)

This is not the only hoax about an alleged arson attack or raid of a school on 17th and 18th May. In the headline of a piece of content published on Tuesday 18th May [by the newspaper ABC](#), it was claimed that ‘at least four schools have been occupied’ and that ‘one of them has been set on fire’ related to the arrival of immigrants in the city of Ceuta on 17th May. This piece also stated that ‘the people who have entered the city - which is now equivalent to around 10 percent of its total population - have occupied at least four schools and one of them has been set on fire’, without providing the source of this statement. [Messages were](#) also [posted](#) on social networks claiming that migrants had broken down the doors and entered the San Agustín and Juan Morejón schools.

However, on 18th May, [all the schools](#), except CEIP Ramón María del Valle Inclán, which did not wish to make a statement, denied that there had been any fire or incident related to the arrival of immigrants in the city. The Ceuta fire brigade also assured that it was not true that there had been a fire in a school after the arrival of immigrants on 17th May. Meanwhile, the National Police of Ceuta assured *Maldita.es* on 18th May that there was no “material evidence of any fire or any criminal act in a school” and explained that there had been “a fire in a rubbish bin near a school” but stated that the perpetrator or perpetrators were not known.



[https://datawrapper.
dwcdn.net/5FYRw/8/](https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/5FYRw/8/)



There were hoaxes about school break-ins, nobody has confirmed anything of the sort

Department of Education of the autonomous city

Furthermore, the Department of Education of the autonomous city explained to *Maldita.es* that they were not aware that there had been any fires or altercations in the schools and that, although “there were hoaxes about school break-ins, nobody has confirmed anything of the sort”. The only incident reported by most of the schools in Ceuta was the lack of students. Some of them pointed out that this was due to “parents’ fear” because they would “walk alone” to school.

The hoaxes about alleged arson attacks were not limited to schools. Throughout 18th May, others circulated claiming that newly arrived migrants [had set fire to everything from a Mercadona to the “largest Catholic church in Ceuta”](#). However, **both claims were false**. Mercadona’s communication department assured that it was false, and the two establishments of this supermarket chain in Ceuta denied that their premises had been burnt down.

“That church they said was next to my house,” says Isabel Brasero, head of the Ceuta Red Cross, who claims it was a hoax. A screenshot of a supposed article from *El Mundo* entitled: “Ceuta’s largest Catholic church burns down after a night of riots” was circulated on social media. But it was a montage made from another article about a fire in a church in Plasencia (Extremadura) in August 2020.

“There were car fires, cars were burned”, Andrea assures us, despite not having any evidence other than the content that was forwarded via WhatsApp. One of the pieces of content that circulated on the night of 17th May was the image of a burning car with messages such as “ALERT in CEUTA. Riots continue to rapidly escalate in Ceuta and are reaching worrying levels. Several young migrants have set fire to a private vehicle when the owner refused to hand over their belongings”. However, this was an

[image that did not correspond to the arrival of migrants in Ceuta](#) on 17th and 18th May 2021, but it was a photo that has been published since at least 2014. Furthermore, **the National Police in Ceuta told *Maldita.es* on the morning of 18th May that they were not aware of any fires set by immigrants in Ceuta.**

“I slept with a knife under my pillow,” Andrea tells us, who says her friends were also very frightened. On 18th May, she says that she did not go out onto the street and that the bar where she worked informed her that it would remain closed. “Imagine 7,000 or 8,000 people coming to your house”, she exclaims and adds: “They were loose in the street [...] doing savage things”.

“The city was empty of people from Ceuta”, Pilar Alba, a volunteer with the Elin association, which works to welcome migrants and raise social awareness about this issue in Ceuta, tells *Maldita.es*. According to Alba, on 18th May the shops were closed: “It was as if we were at war”.

During those days “there were provocative messages of aggression on social networks”, he states. These messages began to circulate on the night of 17th May, with warnings such as “two women stabbed in critical

condition in the city centre”. This message was originally published by an account calling itself Ceuta Noticia [Ceuta News], which published its first tweet on 18th May at 1am and was deleted on 18th May. The National Police stated that same day that they had no evidence of stabbings after the entry of people through El Tarajal.

Another of the pieces of content spread a few hours later on 18th May stated that “Gang rapes continue in Ceuta: nine more victims on a night when nearly 10,000 Moroccans crossed the border into the autonomous city. Experts warn of the danger of the rise of <<Islamophobic sentiment>>”. This was posing as a tweet published by the Spanish newspaper *El País*, but it was a [false tweet](#) that used the image of that newspaper. Furthermore, according to what the 112 emergency services assured *Maldita.es*, no calls were received for rapes and the National Police in Ceuta had no evidence of gang rapes in the city since the arrival of immigrants on 17th May. According to available crime data from the Ministry of Interior, in 2021 the number of crimes decreased, with 3,916 recorded, compared to 2019 and 2018, with 4,746 and 4,722 respectively, years of reference for having similar characteristics, since 2020 there was confinement during the months of March and April due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



there were provocative messages of aggression on social networks

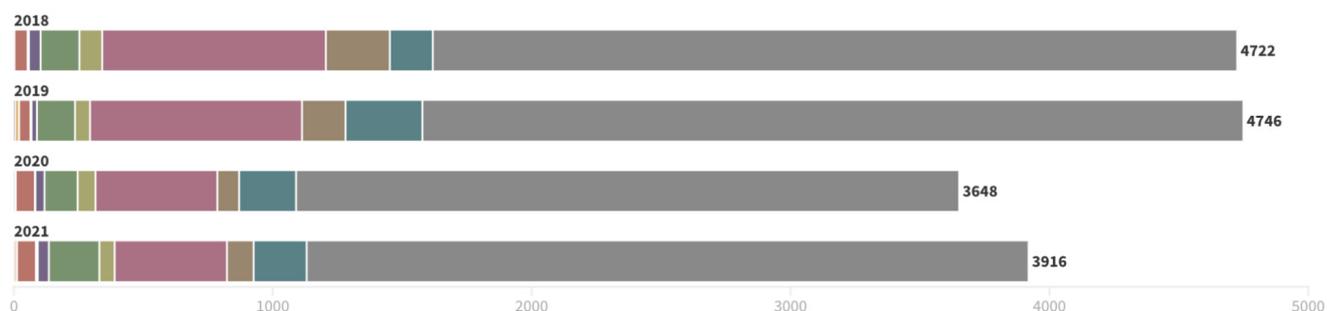
Pilar Alba, a volunteer with the Elin association

Delitos e infracciones penales cometidos en Ceuta

Utiliza el filtro para seleccionar un tipo de delito o infracción

Todos

- Homicidios dolosos y asesinatos
- Homicidios dolosos y asesinatos (tentativa)
- Lesiones y riña tumultuaria
- Secuestro
- Agresión sexual con penetración
- Resto contra la libertad e indemnidad sexual
- Robos con violencia e intimidación
- Robos con fuerza
- Hurtos
- Sustracciones de vehículos
- Tráfico de drogas
- Resto



Fuente: [Instituto Nacional de Estadística \(INE\)](#)

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[Crime chart](#)

People on the streets and help from neighbours



Sabah Hammed on the roof of the house where she helped the people who arrived on 17th and 18th May. In the background, the old prison. Author: Maldita.es

Sabah Hammed recalls those days as if they were yesterday: “Nobody knew what was going on”. From the rooftop of his family home, she points to a white wall in front of her to *Maldita.es* and recalls how the stains that are still visible were created by the dozens or even hundreds of people, she says, who

were waiting for her help. After the first hours of fear and, as she says, lack of answers from the authorities, on 18th May she decided to provide assistance to the migrants knocking on her door, together with Nayma Mohamed, Najad Habib, Leila Abdeslam and Ali Hamido, all residents of Ceuta.

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People saw that they had no future here, they all wanted to go to the Iberian Peninsula

Sabah Hammed

From the rooftop of this three-storey house you can also see the old prison, on the other side of the street, [where many immigrants spent their days after the May 2021 entry](#). “Before you could enter, now it is closed”, says Alí Hamido, president of the residents’ association of the Poblado Regulares neighbourhood, who recalls to *Maldita.es* how, when these facilities were still accessible, he visited them with journalists to tell them how the people who were housed there lived.

“People saw that they had no future here, they all wanted to go to the Iberian Peninsula,” Sabah Hammed explains to *Maldita.es*. In the second quarter of 2021, unemployment in Ceuta stood at 24.2%. “Ceuta is a step, here we don’t even have work for ourselves”, Hammed affirms. According to Alí Hamido, president of the Poblado Regulares residents’ association, the inequality in this autonomous city

causes greater tension between Ceuta residents and migrants. [According to the National Statistics Institute \(INE\) in 2020](#), the last year for which data has been published, Ceuta was the second most unequal autonomous region in Spain after Melilla. “Our minors are abandoned”, says Hamido to *Maldita.es*, who proposes that spaces such as the old prison be set up to provide workshops for young people.



In the foreground, Najad Habib Ali, behind her, Ali Hamido Mohamed. Author: Maldita.es

Asylum applications to leave for the Iberian Peninsula

“Fewer people on the streets has helped to reduce friction,” says Pilar Alba of the migrant care association Elin. According to Interior Minister [Fernando Grande-Marlaska during the Interior Commission on 25th June](#), 80% of the people who entered on 17th and 18th May 2021 were returned to Morocco. *Maldita.es* has asked the Ministry of Interior for the number of people who entered on those two days and the total number of people returned to Morocco, but at the time of this publication we had not received a response.

“With the asylum applications, the problem for the city was disappearing”, says Joana Millán, a representative of the Maakum social group that attends to young migrants in Ceuta, who tells *Maldita.es* that there were migrants who applied for asylum and could therefore leave Ceuta. One of them was Monir, who applied for asylum and could therefore leave Ceuta behind: “A

friend of mine from Ceuta told me about asylum and I went to the immigration office to ask for it”.

“In the last few months, I don’t really like what I have seen of Ceuta “, he says and recalls people who told him that they were having their bread taken away from them: “They think we are very bad, that we are thieves”. He says that one day a man shouted at him to go back to his country when he was carrying bags of food: “I told him that I had come to improve my life, to do something good”. He also says that when he was working lending a hand to a friend of his in his cafeteria, he heard negative comments about “the moros” (a Spanish racial slur aimed at Moroccans): “It hurt me, but I couldn’t say anything”.

He was finally able to leave Ceuta and travel to Algeciras, where he stayed for a few months until he was able to



They think we are very bad, that we are thieves

*Monir is one of the people who crossed
the border*

travel to Madrid. Like him, another [3,151 people applied for asylum in Ceuta in 2021](#), a much higher figure than in 2020, [when 285 people applied for asylum](#), or in 2019, with [579 applications in this autonomous city](#), according to data from the Ministry of Interior. “They were given the papers, we looked for the tickets ourselves”, says Sabah Hamed.

“The situation began to stabilise”, says Paula Domingo, coordinator of Elin. According to Domingo, after requesting asylum and having their applications accepted, people left Ceuta: “It was the way to unblock Ceuta”. “They have another way of leaving, which is to hide in boats and lorries”, she adds.

Some of those who try to sneak onto the boats or into the underside of the lorries are minors who are in homeless situations and are attended to by the organisation No Name Kitchen. According to Bárbara Becares, press

officer, and Greta Casaneli, a volunteer from this organisation that arrived in Ceuta in February 2021, there are minors who arrived in May 2021 who live in the area of the port of Ceuta waiting to be able to “risk it”, as the technique used to migrate on the underside of a lorry or by climbing the ropes of the boats that are moored there is known.

Becares claims that these children “do not trust the system” and, she adds, “they are afraid that when they open the border, they will be thrown out”. Some of these deportations already took place on 13th August 2021, as reported by the [Ombudsman](#), who stated that the procedure did not comply “with the legally established requirements” and claimed to be unaware of the number of minors deported. In addition, the [Raíces Foundation](#), which was in charge of the legal defence of two other minors, reported in December 2021 that they had been deported.



There is a migrant population, but not in public spaces

Joana Millán, from Maakum

According to different organisations such as Elin, Maakum and the Red Cross, this group is one of those that generates the most rejection and tension with the Ceuta population. “There is a lot of friction between the people of Ceuta and homeless minors”, says Pilar Alba, from Elin. According to Joana Millán, from Maakum, months after the arrival in May, a hoax was spread which directly targeted minors who migrated unaccompanied: “A young man came on holiday [...], it was a very forceful assault, and the news began to say that he had been attacked by minors”. This hoax referred to an assault on a young man on Saturday 24th July in the vicinity of the Ribera beach. This assault was spread with messages such as “insecurity increases in Ceuta: seven illegal immigrants of Moroccan origin stab a Spanish minor to steal his bag”.

A day after this assault, the Ceuta Students’ Association organised a protest “for safety” on 29th July. However, this assault had nothing to do with migrants who arrived on 17th and 18th May. [According to what the National Police](#) told *Maldita.es* in [September 2021](#), all those involved in the assault were Spanish and residents of Ceuta.

“Now there is not so much hype about them because they are not so visible”, says Bárbara Becares, from No Name Kitchen. “Now they are invisible”, points out Greta Casaneli, from the same organisation. Joana Millán agrees that migrants are not visible on the streets of Ceuta: “There is a migrant population, but not in public spaces”.

On 17th May, the border with Morocco was reopened bilaterally two years later

One year after this influx of thousands of people and more than two years since the border crossing was closed in March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, [this 17th May at 00:00, this land border was opened](#) at both Ceuta and Melilla.

According to a [press release from La Moncloa \(from 12th May\)](#), this opening will have two stages: an initial stage on 17th May, in which “citizens and residents of the European Union and those authorised to move within the Schengen area” will be allowed access to Spanish territory; and a second stage, from 31st May, in which “legally recognised cross-border workers will also be able to enter Spanish territory”.

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