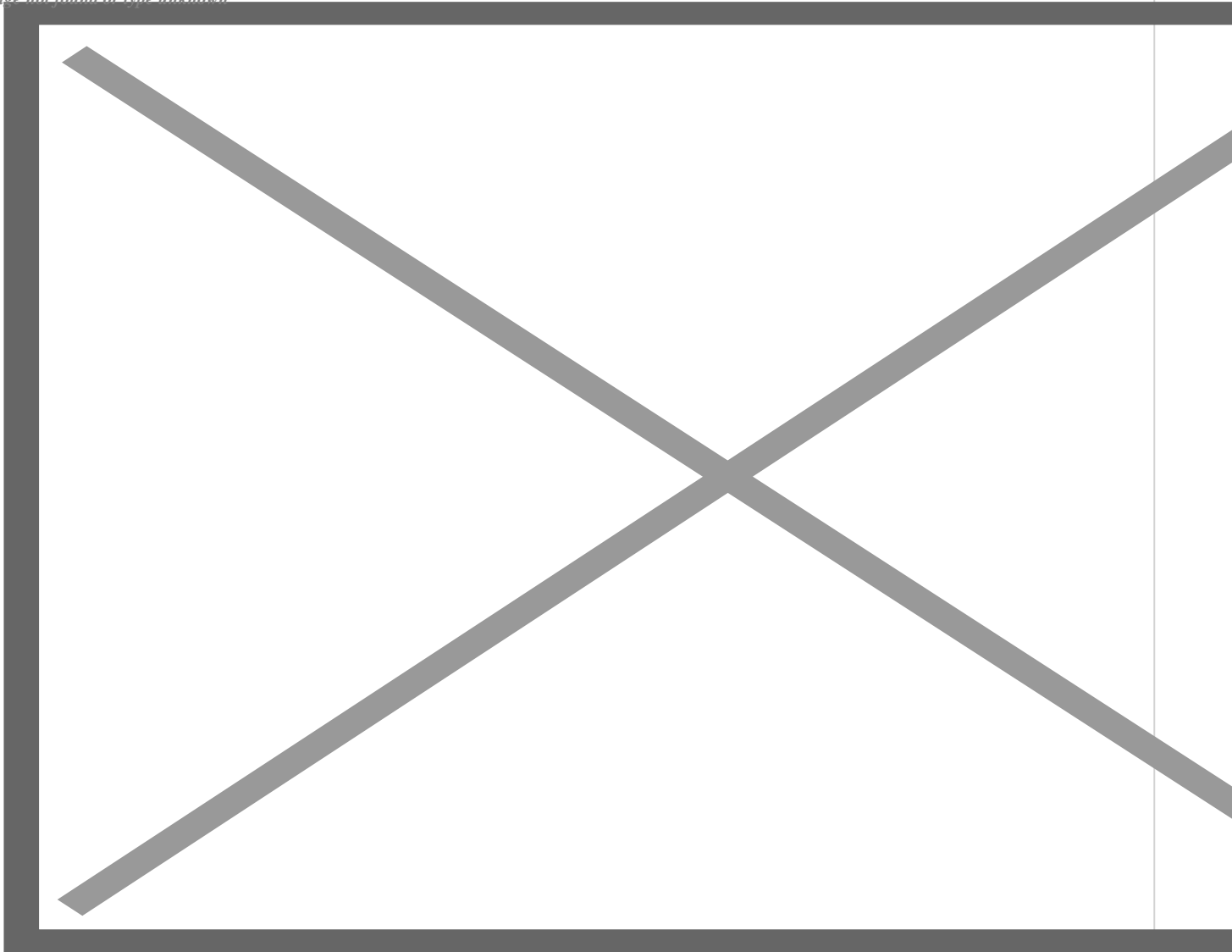


Spain pushes back as migrants continue to reach Ceuta

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More than 8,000 people entered Ceuta on Monday and Tuesday after swimming around a breakwater that extends into the Mediterranean Sea or climbing over the border fence that separates the Spanish territory from Morocco [Jon Nazca/Reuters]

Madrid, May 19 (RHC)-- In a bid to prevent more people's arrival in Ceuta, Spain has upped security along its shared border with Morocco, fired tear gas into the buffer zone between the countries, and returned people who have managed to cross into its enclave in North Africa.

More than 8,000 people -- mostly men, but also some women and children -- entered Ceuta on Monday and Tuesday after swimming around a breakwater that extends into the Mediterranean Sea, or climbing over the border fence that separates the Spanish territory from Morocco.

More people arrived on Wednesday, although in far lower numbers, after both countries moved to stem crossings. At least one person has died attempting to make the crossing, according to Spanish authorities.

Ceuta, with a population of 80,000, is on the northern tip of Morocco across from Gibraltar.

"We have never seen such an arrival of this magnitude," said Red Cross spokeswoman Isa Brasero. "The city has the means to take care of all the people that arrive to its shores, but you never imagine that you will face this type of situation."

On their side, Moroccan police on Wednesday drove hundreds of young men away from the border fence and stopped others from approaching. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez meanwhile promised to "restore order" after the unprecedented surge in arrivals, telling Parliament on Wednesday that about 4,800 migrants and refugees had already been sent back to Morocco. Spain does not grant Moroccans asylum status.

Some of those who made the crossing were unaccompanied children, however, which Spanish law says must be taken into care by the country's authorities. But according to The Associated Press news agency, Spanish police ushered back some teenagers who appeared to be below 18.

In his address to Parliament, delivered a day after he visited Ceuta, Sanchez criticised Moroccan officials for a "lack of border control" in comments that could escalate a diplomatic row between his government and Rabat. "This is an act of defiance," he said. "The lack of border control by Morocco is not a show of disrespect of Spain, but rather for the European Union."

Meanwhile, Spanish Foreign Minister Arancha González Laya said for the first time in public that Madrid believes Morocco loosened its border control in retaliation against a decision by Spain last month to give medical assistance to a rebel leader from Western Sahara, a disputed territory held by Morocco.

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