

U.N.: Smugglers drown 39 off Yemen coast

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Armed human traffickers forced 140 Ethiopians and Somalis to jump overboard off the coast Yemen, drowning at least 39 refugees, the United Nations reports.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Tuesday reported the incident happened Sunday in the Gulf of Aden involving 349 people on three boats.

A survivor told UNHCR staff in Yemen one of the boats developed mechanical problems, but managed to cross the Gulf with help from the other two boats. Once close to shore, the faster two boats sped ahead to avoid coast guard patrols, and dropped off their passengers, but the third boat could not get close to shore. Not wanting to be left behind with a broken boat, the smugglers forced all 140 passengers overboard in deep water at gunpoint.

UNHCR field officer Mohammed Godboudin said it's not known what happened to the other people on the boat, but the dead had been documented.

"The bodies were picked up by our staff and buried in a traditional ceremony on the spot," Godboudin said.

In February, UNHCR reported smugglers forced 137 men, women and children into deep waters off Yemen, killing at least 33, with another 30 missing.