

PEOPLE SMUGGLING FROM SOMALIA TO YEMEN INTENSIFIES; HUNDREDS THROWN OVERBOARD - UN

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People smuggling from Somalia to Yemen increased significantly in the first four months of this year with more than 10,500 Somalis and Ethiopians making the perilous boat journey, with hundreds hurled overboard to drown by the gun-toting traffickers, according to the latest United Nations update.

The total number of Somalis registered in 2005 in Yemen reached 13,400, as they sought to escape a region stricken by conflict, poverty and recurrent drought, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said.

According to the refugee agency (UNHCR), some 100 people a day attempted to cross from Somalia to Yemen from September to March. During six days in January alone, UNHCR counted 22 smuggling boats - small, open fishing dhows - arriving in Yemen.

Smugglers charge between \$30 and \$50 per person, often cramming hundreds of people onto small vessels, with little food and water for a 30-hour passage on high seas.

Earlier this month UNHCR said 39 bodies, mainly Ethiopian, were found near Belhaf in Yemen. Survivors said the dead had been forced at gunpoint to jump from their boat, which had developed a mechanical problem. In another case, there were six dead among 65 passengers and 14 more had been thrown overboard during the journey.

Such casualty rates are not uncommon with some individuals tied up and/or thrown overboard by the smugglers in an attempt to avoid capsizing in dangerous waters, OCHA said. Others drift for days at a time with little food or fresh water.

While fatality figures are difficult to verify, the UN confirmed 262 deaths in January and February 2006. Since September 2005, officials say, the dead could number close to 1,000.

Even when the boats do reach Yemen's coast, passengers, including children, are forced to swim to shore so the boat is not detectable to Yemen authorities. Most passengers including children cannot swim and drown.

This spring, the authorities in Puntland, North-East Somalia, reported that from 200 to 300 Ethiopians were arriving in the town of Bossaso every day to attempt the crossing. Many become stuck there as they lacked the money to pay the smugglers. As a result up to 3,000 to 4,000 Ethiopians were living in appalling conditions in Bossaso.

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