

# Human trafficking: Greed and the trail of death

**In the port city of Boosaaso, on the horn of Africa, one gets to see the endless strife driving the dispossessed from Somalia to risk the most perilous sea voyage in the world, says Kim Sengupta**

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The ones who want to go are desperate and those offering to take them across the sea are greedy and murderous - fateful encounters which are resulting in a trail of death and misery in the Horn of Africa.

The human trafficking trade out of Somalia is now one of the busiest, most lucrative and the most lethal in the world. The ferocious violence and anarchy in the region has kept the scale of profits and misery the most hidden from outside eyes.

Now, say the United Nations and humanitarian agencies, the extent of people smuggling in the region rivals traditional routes into Europe from Africa via the Mediterranean, a journey in which mass drownings are common. But the bodycount in the route from Somalia to Yemen - which leads on to the Middle East and Europe - is actually higher, and the type of deaths meted out even more shocking.

Dozens corpses are found floating in the Arabian Sea every month, often with gunshot wounds, often with hands tied behind their back - victims of traffickers who have jettisoned their cargo in the most final way.

The question of illegal migration and asylum-seekers is a hot topic now in the West, and nowhere more so than Britain, with mainstream politicians - not just from the far right - playing the race card. The latest groups of foreigners to be subjected to critical, often xenophobic, scrutiny are the Somalis, who have recently arrived in Britain large numbers. Members of the community have been blamed for recent high profile murders, and have also been accused of an array of offences from gang fighting to fraud to the importation of qat, a hallucinogenic plant.

Here, in the streets of Boosaaso, on the very tip of the horn of Africa, one gets to see the sheer grinding poverty, the drought and the endless strife that is driving the dispossessed from not only Somalia, but also neighbouring Ethiopia to risk the most perilous voyage in the world.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees says about 30 boats a month are arriving in Yemen from Boosaaso. The numbers of deaths are said to be hundreds, but it could well be thousands. Earlier this month at least 39 passengers drowned after being forced to jump off their smuggling boat at gunpoint. It was one of many such incidents.

Boosaaso in Puntland, a self-declared autonomous area in north-east Somalia, is world's busiest smuggling hub. The port city, with a population of 200,000, is hosting another 12,000 from the rest of Somalia and Ethiopia seeking a passage out.

The remittance the workers who do get jobs send back to their families is the biggest foreign-revenue earner for Somalia, a country with no economic infrastructure and where the recently elected government cannot even get into the capital, Mogadishu, wracked by a civil war between Islamists and warlords. Under the rules of the "war on terror", the Americans are backing the warlords, their enemies during the US's ill-fated intervention in Somalia 13 years ago.

The few who can afford it will pay about \$70 (£38) to stowaway on larger ships. But for the majority the journey will be spent packed in leaky boats manned by Kalashnikov-carrying crews who, having collected the per-head fee of about \$ 30 up front, can kill them with little or no risk of ever getting caught.

The boats used for the trips are moored at the portside, swaying on the waves. Designed to take 20 to 30 people, they will have upwards of hundreds packed into them for the night time crossings. The gross overcrowding predictably leads to frequent breakdown of ships, which the owners solve by flinging their human cargoes overboard. Many of those who survive the journey are left scarred by being pressed against searing engines and exposure to biting cold winds at nights.

In one particularly horrific case the crew of the smuggling boat killed all the passengers, except a 10-year-old Ethiopian boy, Badesa, who was kept to clean the boat. He was eventually dumped back in Boosaaso where, after days on end with little water and no food, he was found sitting on the pavement. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) took him to a hospital and arranged his repatriation to Ethiopia. He is now recovering from starvation but unable to speak, traumatised from his horrific experience.

Women and young girls - a surprisingly large number are among the travellers - are vulnerable to sexual abuse and being sold to brothels in Arab countries. Women also have to cope with other common dangers. Farhia Ahmed Mohammed, 17, was packed into a boat with 94 others on a trip to Yemen six months ago, lasting two days and nights, when two of the passengers asked for water from the crew. "The owner and his men had water, but they refused to give it," said Farhia, a tiny girl in a red traditional jilbab, from Ethiopia. "There was an argument and they shot the two men with their Kalashnikovs. Then they threw the bodies over the side. A woman who also asked for water was beaten with a stick.

"When we got near the shore the rest of us were thrown into the ocean. I could swim but even then it took me 45 minutes to get to land. There were others who could not swim, six of them were children. I think they were alright because everyone helped each other." She returned to Boosaaso earlier this year, but after failing to find work she is thinking of getting on the migrant trail again, back to the Middle East, and, if possible, on to England.

Fuad Yusuf, 27, from Mogadishu, was on a boat when fellow passengers were forced into the sea. He and 169 others, squashed into a space 12 feet long and five feet wide, had almost reached their destination when the engine broke down.

"The time on the boat was terrible, there were so many of us we couldn't move. At the end we could see the lights of the villages on the coast, but then the boat stopped," he recalled. "The owner and his men had AK-47s and they told a group of men to jump out and swim. They had no choice. Those who could swim made it to the shore, but the ones who could not died. I don't know how many. There were other deaths, because there was no fresh water left, one man began to drink sea water. His eyes rolled, and he died.

"You can ask 'why should people take such risks?' But if you are really poor, and have no way of feeding your wife and children, you have to take a chance. This is difficult to explain to someone who has a full stomach every day.

"After Yemen I went to Saudi Arabia and worked for six months. I earned \$700 and that was needed to make sure my family had essential things. I had seven people to look after."

Amira Ali Mohammed wanted to exchange the daily dangers of Mogadishu for work in Saudi Arabia, had paid a fixer \$40 for the trip. In the early hours of the morning, on the way to the boat, the man and his companion dragged her off and attacked her.

Sitting on a floor of stamped mud in a shelter of torn fabric at "100 Buush", a refugee camp of unrelieved squalor, the 22-year-old, who had fled fighting in the capital, recalled: "They suddenly got hold of my arms and started to drag me away. It was on the beach, I could see people in the distance going towards the boat, but there was no one near. I started screaming ... The men got scared and I ran back. I could not face going to that boat again.

"I wanted to work as a maid in Saudi Arabia, they pay you well there. The money was given by my parents, now I have no more money and I am stuck here in this place. I cannot go back to Mogadishu, it is too dangerous."

Betsiba Zerihun, an official with the IOM, who counsels women who are trying to migrate illegally, said: "Girls are in great danger in this situation. I have recently dealt with the case of a 17-year-old girl who was going to catch a boat. She was sleeping in a shed on the beach when she was taken away. She was gang raped by nine men. She died."

There are 80,000 registered refugees in Yemen, of whom 75,000 are Somalis. Unofficial estimates put the real figure at several hundred thousands. Most of those migrants want to seek jobs outside Yemen, in Saudi and the Gulf states. Others, however, want to go further afield, into Europe and Britain.

In a sultry day of sauna-like heat, the workers at Boosaaso's dockside were humping huge bags of cement at \$1 a day. Many of them had been smuggled abroad before and then been deported back to Somalia. But there is a general desire to try again and some want to try their luck in the West, with England as the preferred destination.

Mahmud Abdi Mohammed, 33, made the journey in a boat built for 50 taking 170. He recalled how the crew would lash out with sticks if the passengers tried to stand up. "I was hit on the head and blood kept pouring out," he said. "But at least we were not made to go into the water."

If he were to go abroad again, it would be to the UK. He charted the way : "I would go from Yemen into Syria and from there to Turkey and Europe and then make my way up."

Abdi Ali Noor, 28, would also go to England. "That is my dream, I just want to work hard and get good money there, then I will come back home. I will be no trouble to anyone," he said.

The men appear well informed about the situation of Somalis in the UK. Mr Noor said: "They are blaming all the people for crimes committed by just a few, that is a generalisation." Mr Mohammed interjected: "If someone commits murder, that is wrong in the eyes of Allah, and he should get his punishment. People go to Britain because they know someone already there. This will continue."

Abdi Karim Mahmood, 21, has spent \$70 on his mobile telephone calling his uncle and cousin, who have been living in London for the past 13 years, on his way to Boosaaso from Mogadishu. He, too, hopes to get there via Yemen, and wanted his relations to send money to the extended family. Mr Mahmood's journey was particularly difficult because he was hit by shrapnel in the latest round of fighting in the Somali capital. He has cuts to his left leg and has lost a toe. "I was sitting outside just talking to my friends when the shell landed," he said. "I have injuries, but I suppose it could have been worse. Afterwards I talked to my mother and father that I had to get away. If I am to die then I would rather that it happened trying to leave the country than sitting in Mogadishu. They agreed that if I went away I will be safer and also I will be able to send back money."

Mr Mahmood thinks he will have to pay \$40 for his passage. He has got the money. The frail young man, who looks young for his age, is fiercely determined to succeed in his attempts at escape. "I will try to get to Yemen every day," he said. "If I do not succeed one day I will the next. If they catch me and send me back I will try again. I am not worried about death. I live in Mogadishu."

Dennis McNamara, the UN's special advisor on displaced people, said: "What is happening here is horrific. As bad as the worst cases involving migration. In fact, we have never seen photos like the ones we are seeing here, of men, women and children drowned with their hands tied behind their backs.

"Some of these people will end up in Europe. It is in the self-interest of Western nations who say they do not want this influx from the South to help this region so that people do not have to make these dreadful journeys."

One of the main problems in dealing with the crisis is endemic corruption. The racketeers have ties with senior officials in the Puntland administration.

At the central police station 30 people, including women, are being held for offences involving human trafficking - the catch is that none of them are smugglers, but would be migrants. Each one has been arrested after handing over their fare to the smugglers who then miraculously got away from the police.

Among those incarcerated is 35 year old Amal Hussein Ali whose seven children are left back in Mogadishu, in the care of her ageing mother. She faces a minimum of one and maximum of three years in prison, said the police chief, Colonel Mohammed Rashid Juma. The Colonel professes sympathy for Amal's plight, but continues in a stentorian voice: "She has gone beyond the law, she is an illegal immigrant, which is forbidden under the Puntland constitution. I am here to defend the constitution from danger. She is a criminal."

But there is no such law under the constitution. According to Somali sources the police are waiting for the clans of the prisoners to buy them out. The human trafficking industry continues to be a profitable one for dealing in misery.