

The trade in human misery; Somalia's people-smuggling racket is the most lucrative - and most lethal - in the world

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BOSSASO

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 from 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 both 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, which has its own images of mass drownings.

But the body count in the route from Somalia to Yemen -- which then leads on to the Middle East and Europe -- is actually higher, and the type of deaths meted out even more shocking.

Every month, dozens of corpses are found floating in the Arabian Sea, often with gunshot wounds, often with hands tied behind their back -- victims of vicious 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 in 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 khat, a hallucinogenic plant.

Here, in the streets of Bossaso, 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.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, an average of 30 boats a month are arriving in Yemen from Bossaso. The numbers of deaths are said to be hundreds but 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.

Bossaso in Puntland, a self-declared autonomous area in northwest Somalia, is now the world's busiest smuggling hub.

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 being 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 ill-fated intervention in Somalia 13 years ago.

The very few who can afford it will pay around \$75 Cdn to stow away on larger ships. But for the vast majority the journey will be spent packed in leaky boats manned by Kalashnikov carrying crews who, having collected the per head fee of around \$ 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 breakdowns, 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 Bossaso where he was discovered after sitting on the pavement for days on end with little water and no food. The International Organization for Migration took him to a hospital and arranged his repatriation back to Ethiopia. He is now recovering from starvation but unable to speak, traumatized from his horrific experience.

Women and young girls -- a surprisingly large number among the travellers - are vulnerable to sexual abuse and being sold to brothels in Arab countries.

The 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 jelabib, 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 the land. There were others who could not swim; six of them were children. I think they were all right because everyone helped each other out."

Farhia returned to Bossaso earlier this year, but after failing to find any work, she is thinking of getting on the migrant trail again back to the Middle East, and, if possible, on to England.

Fued Yusuf, 27, from Mogadishu, was on a boat when fellow passengers were forced into the sea. He and 169 others, squashed into a space 3 metres long and a metre and a half wide, had almost reached their destination when the engine broke down.

"The time on the boat was terrible, there were so many of us that we could not 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 \$750 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 work in Saudi Arabia for the daily dangers of Mogadishu 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 Bush'a refugee camp of unrelieved squalor, the 22 year old, who had fled from Mogadishu, 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 toward the boat, but there was no one near. I started screaming and 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 International Organization for Migration (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."

Officially there are currently 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 Bossaso's dockside were humping huge bags of cement at one dollar 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 Europe. He charted the way: "I would go from Yemen into Syria and from there to Turkey and then make my way up."

Abdi Ali Noor, 28, would 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 Europe and North America.

Noor said, "They are blaming all the people for crimes committed by just a few, that is a generalization." Mohammed quickly 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."

Dennis McNamara, the UN's special adviser 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 the luckier ones 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.

One of those incarcerated is 35 year old Amal Hussein Ali whose seven children are back in Mogadishu, in the care of an aged mother. She faces a minimum of one and maximum of three years in prison, said police Chief Colonel Mohammed Rashid Juma.

The colonel professes sympathy for Amal's plight, but then continues, "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.

GRAPHIC: Photo: Men from Jowhar in lawless southern Somalia head for Bossaso in hopes of getting on a smuggler's boat for Yemen and working illegally in Saudi Arabia.; Photo: File Photos , At Qaw, 35 kilometres west of Bossaso, Puntland, Somalia, would-be passengers, -- not knowing if they were cheated -hopefully wait for their small boat for Yemen.; Photo: New female Somali police officers fall in line under police Chief Colonel Mohammed Rashid Juma.; Photo: Somali women wait for a smuggler's boat (in background) that was due to leave for Yemen. Most passengers are between 15 and 30 years of age.; Map :