

Somalis Brave a Sea of Perils For \$50-a-Month Jobs Abroad

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BOOSAASO, Somalia

Luckily, Farhia Ahmed Muhammad knew how to swim.

As the rickety fishing boat Ms. Muhammad and 94 other desperate souls took out of Somalia last fall approached the Yemeni coast, the smugglers forced them all overboard into the surging, shark-infested sea.

They dared not resist. The smugglers had already shot two men simply because they had begged for water. "There was no request," said Ms. Muhammad, 17. "They just threw us in."

It is not at all difficult to understand why people want out of Somalia, with its brutal clan warfare, its life-sapping drought and its dire poverty. In recent weeks, a surge in fighting between Islamists and Somali warlords has left hundreds dead and many more injured in Mogadishu, Somalia's crowded capital, spurring an even greater exodus. But getting out by sea to Yemen, an illegal gateway to jobs in the Middle East, carries risks that rival those on shore.

At best, the journey across the Gulf of Aden takes two nights, if the tides are right, the boat engine does not fail and the Yemeni Coast Guard does not intercept the vessel. But it can take a week or more if something goes wrong, or the trip can be aborted halfway through, with the smugglers deciding for whatever reason to hurl the migrants over the side.

"We know there are two possibilities: life or death," said Abdi Kareem Muhammad Mahmoud, 21, who fled Mogadishu last week with a bullet wound in his foot and came to the Somali seaside in hopes of reaching Yemen. "We heard we might make it or we might be thrown over and die. I still want to try. After all the danger I've been through, what is some more?"

The danger for residents of Mogadishu is huge. Militias linked to the capital's notorious warlords -- who, according to a variety of Africa analysts, have been paid by American intelligence agents to track down and capture members of Al Qaeda -- have been facing off in recent weeks and months against gunmen hired by Islamist leaders trying to assert control over the anarchic city.

The recent violence in the capital is the worst since Somalia's last central government fell 15 years ago, and of the hundreds who have died most have been civilians caught in the cross-fire.

But the death toll at sea has been even higher.

About 1,000 people have died since September, trying to make the trek from Somalia's northern coast across the sea to Yemen. And that is just an estimate, since nobody really knows how many boats, all of them grossly overloaded, attempt the trek from the shores of the remote Puntland region in northeastern Somalia.

The only way to gauge the horrors is to count the bodies as they wash up on shore and listen to the awful tales recounted by survivors.

After being forced into the sea, Ms. Muhammad was so sapped of strength she barely got to shore in Yemen, where she stayed briefly before returning to Somalia.

Miraculously, everyone else on her boat managed to survive as well, including the six young children aboard.

The Somali smugglers are a ruthless lot. They charge \$30 to \$100 for passage, quite a bit since they pack 80 to 200 bodies into the fishing boats. And payment does not guarantee safe passage, not by a long shot.

If the seas get too rough, some passengers might be hurled overboard to lighten the load. If someone dares to stand up during the voyage, a whack with a stick or a gun butt is the inevitable punishment. Unaccompanied women might find themselves sexually molested by the crew in the dark.

But it is when the Yemeni Coast Guard appears and the boat owner risks losing his craft that things get even worse. The crew is likely to force all the passengers into the sea at gunpoint. If anyone hesitates, the crew will sometimes tie the hands of the passengers and throw them out, or simply shoot them.

"This is as bad as it gets," said Dennis McNamara, the United Nations special adviser for displaced people, who visited Boosaaso this week to urge the local authorities to crack down on what he called one of the world's worst and most overlooked illegal transit routes.

The Somali migrants make their way across harsh terrain to Boosaaso, a ramshackle port town. There, they are joined by Ethiopian refugees, who flee political persecution or set off in search a better life in the Persian Gulf states.

Those migrants, with others from as far south as Zambia, gather in hovels here by the sea, where they try to raise the money to make the journey.

Many had the fare but were robbed along the way. Work is scarce in Boosaaso, so raising enough money may take years and years of labor.

"These are the poorest of the poor," said Mr. McNamara, who toured their wooden shacks, which lack running water and toilets and are packed together so tightly that fires regularly rage through the slums, forcing everyone to begin again.

If they do raise the money, the migrants seek out a dealer, who whispers to them the location of a gathering spot on the outskirts of the city.

As a group, the migrants head for a remote section of beach, where they are loaded aboard vessels under cover of darkness.

'It's so dangerous, and there's a real risk of being thrown in the sea,' said Batsieva Zerihum of the International Organization of Migration, who counsels the Ethiopian migrants gathered in Boosaaso to abandon their journey and head home.

'I talk to them, but everybody wants to try it. There are people who have tried four times and are trying it again.'

The first time Asho Ali Baree, 34, made the trip, the boat developed engine trouble, and the captain told the passengers to pray.

They did, and the boat somehow managed to find its way back to Somalia.

She was given another trip across, which made her luckier than another boatload of passengers who set off one night, only to be dropped down the Somali coast four days later and told that they had made it to Yemen.

'I was so mad,' said Adisu Sisai, 18, an Ethiopian, who lost \$50 but has begun trying to earn enough to try again.

One of the more horrible tales emerged this year, when more than 100 people died at sea after the crew forced them out of the boat midjourney. A 10-year-old boy named Badesa was kept aboard to clean the ship on its return to Boosaaso. He is recovering from starvation and shock in the hospital. His abductors remain at large.

It is an open secret that powerful people in Puntland, including some with links to top politicians, own many of the boats engaged in the trafficking, but they do not seem to be pursued by the authorities.

Somalis who reach Yemen are entitled to benefits at a refugee camp there. But that is nobody's goal.

The point is to get a highly paid job, anything above \$50 a month in this part of the world, and for that they risk their lives.

Many find themselves deported, often to a landing strip outside Mogadishu, far from the villages where they began their treks.

Another danger lingers along the Somali coast. The police, though largely ineffectual in stopping the smuggling, sometimes arrest the migrants, though the legal basis for doing so remains unclear.

On a recent day, the police chief, Col. Muhammad Rashid Jama, paraded three men and one woman onto the grounds of the police station. All confessed that they had tried to get to Yemen.

One man, Abdi Ahmed Muhammad, 28, had a bandage on the side of his head, where he said a smuggler had bashed him with a rifle butt. The smuggler had taken his money but then refused to allow him onto the departing boat, he said.

The woman, Amal Hussein Ali, 37, said she had left seven children in Mogadishu as she went in search of a job in Yemen to support them. A widow, she faced up to three years in jail, the police said.

'Anyone who has a heart will feel pity for her,' Colonel Jama said. 'I'm like that. But she became a criminal, and I am a Puntland officer safeguarding the Constitution.'

When United Nations officials protested to the Puntland authorities about the detention of the migrants instead of the smugglers, officials altered their account. The detained people, including Ms. Ali, were smugglers, they said.

Crackdowns have put some boats out of commission. But officials say they are hampered by the fact that no explicit local law prohibits trafficking.

So the flow continues, fueled by desperation mixed with greed. Mr. Mahmoud, nursing his wounded foot and haunted by so many years of living a nightmare, said he felt drawn to another, quieter place across the sea.

'When I look at the sea, in my mind, I think about going away from all this,' he said. 'I just hope I make it.'

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GRAPHIC: Photos: A camp for migrants in Boosaaso, Somalia. Many seek a way to Yemen. Farhia Ahmed Muhammad (Photographs by Evelyn Hockstein for The New York Times)(pg. A1) Many migrants work on the docks, top, to pay smugglers for a place on a boat. But some are caught at sea on the way to Yemen and are jailed back in Boosaaso, above. Others die or are killed trying to make the trip. Farhia Ahmed Muhammad, 17, was among 95 boat passengers forced by smugglers to jump overboard during a voyage from Somalia to Yemen. (Photographs by Evelyn Hockstein for The New York Times)(pg. A6)Map of Somalia highlighting Boosaaso: Smugglers charge \$30 to \$100 for passage from Boosaaso to Yemen. (pg. A6)