

## **SOMALIA: Tragic Cargo - Part One**

[This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations]

NAIROBI, 8 June (IRIN) - Introduction

Every morning at dawn, groups of Ethiopian and Somali migrants arrive on the desert outskirts of the Red Sea port of Bosasso in northeastern Somalia, ready to take the gamble of their lives.

Packed into small fishing boats, the migrants pay US\$50 to smugglers to cross the Red Sea. Since 2001, thousands of migrants are known to have taken their lives in their hands, leaving the tip of the African continent for Yemen and Saudi Arabia, hoping to find a better life in the wider world.

Some are fleeing insecurity and political persecution; some are trying to escape an endless cycle of poverty and hopelessness. They know the danger, but they are prepared to pay the price.

For many, it ends in tragedy when overloaded boats come to grief. Many hundreds of Somali and Ethiopian migrants have died crossing the Red Sea. The United Nations says in 2005, the numbers of people being transported, grew dramatically, with an alarming increase in dead bodies being washed-up on the shores of Yemen.

Still, there are always more who are ready to go.

It is a tragedy with international dimensions. Yet in Bosasso port, smugglers continue to have a free hand to peddle their extraordinary wares: drugs and guns brought into Somalia, people shipped out.

People out, weapons in

In Bosasso's harbour are fleets of small fishing boats. These are the smugglers stock in trade: drugs and guns in, people out. Heroin and morphine are said to be among the main "imports" from India, distributed through East Africa. Guns - small arms, Kalashnikovs and rifles - are brought in from Yemen and sold throughout the region. According to local security officials, an automatic rifle costs about \$50 in Yemen, and can be sold for between \$230 and \$300 elsewhere.

The regional smuggling network plays an important part in moving

weapons. Dealers organise distribution according to areas of conflict. "If there is fighting in Kismayo [a port in southern Somalia], the dealers organise to take the guns from the boats straight down there - and it will be like that for two or three weeks, until somewhere else comes up," explained a security source.

In the absence of controls, smugglers and brokers enjoy impunity. The visible movement of people across the Red Sea is likely to be only a small component of their extensive trade. Motivation to stop it is minimal. Police and security forces have no - or very sporadic - wages, are poorly trained and have no equipment. Because the authorities also lack modern tracking and monitoring equipment, the smugglers' methodology and technology easily outstrips the capacity and motivation of the local security forces.

Many of the desperate migrants perceive the smugglers as providing a service. Alongside the tales of vulnerability and fear - robbery, violence, extortion and rape - migrants also use words denoting respect for people smugglers.

One of the reasons it is difficult to stop the trade, explained one Bosasso resident, is because some key smugglers are "prominent elders and personalities". They pay the police off and are respected members of the community.

One of Bosasso's main smugglers is a woman. Her prices are competitive, and she is the "most trusted", said a security source. Once she receives her fee, she guarantees a place on a boat and passage to Yemen - unlike some who sail up the Somali coast and offload their unsuspecting customers.

### **Departure point**

In a small cove about 35km south of Bosasso, some 50 young Somali migrants sit and wait on the beaches and cliffs of Qaw, one of the better-known departure sites.

They have paid their \$50 to the smuggler and his crew and were brought here in a truck. A fishing boat is tethered just off the beach, rolling precariously in the waves. They have been waiting for two days, with small bundles of possessions, a couple of litres of water each and some food for the journey.

Tonight we go, they nod confidently.

A truck mounted with an anti-aircraft missile stands on white sand just a little further up the coast, moving slightly when it sees unfamiliar vehicles. Security officials say it belongs to the smugglers; the local police commander says it belongs to him.

The mood on the beach is tense: Four women were raped on the cliffs the previous night. Gunmen came and took the women away, beating back young men who protested. Afterwards, the gunmen came back and looted bundles of possessions and stole any money they could find. One young man lost the money he had to travel from Yemen to Saudi Arabia, but still, he intended to make the journey. "I will take my chance," he smiled.

The price of the hope of a better life

Eyes down, feet treading the punishing desert road towards Bosasso, nine men carry only the clothes on their backs and three small bundles between them. They veer off towards the hills to avoid the town checkpoint, manned by gunmen and local security personnel, but are stopped in their tracks by Abdulhai Dahir, a local aid worker, with the only weapon he has at hand - pictures of dead bodies.

Dahir shows the migrant group the pictures. "We don't know if they were Somalis or Ethiopians, or if they were pushed, or jumped or starved," he says of the graphic pictures of bloated corpses lying spread-eagled on a beach.

Over the last few years, thousands of mostly Somali migrants have paid smugglers to ferry them in small fishing boats across the Red Sea. Many come to grief when boats drift or sink, or when fights break out over water and food. Bodies wash up along the Yemeni and Somali coastlines, macabre evidence of a tragic trade.

Abdulkadir Osman, 28, sinks to a squat and considers. He knows there is great risk involved in crossing the Red Sea, but to him it is the price to be paid in search of a better life. "We will try our luck," he says.

Abdulrahman Adile, 23, also sits, puts his hands behind his head, breathes out hard and shakes his head. "I will not go by boat," he says.

"He will," says the aid worker as he puts the pictures back in his car and heads to the port, where he runs a feeding programme for stranded migrants. "They all try to."

The mayor of Bosasso, Khadar Abdi Haji, agreed. Somali and Ethiopian

migrants arrive every day to take the boats to Yemen, each paying about US\$50 for the voyage. "Ethiopians and Somalis die here on the shore when there is a boat accident," he said. "We get dead bodies and injured people. It's a mess. So we show the other migrants - but next day they are boarding the boats to go."

The exodus through Bosasso started around the year 2000, with Somalis the first to go, but increased in 2004 with an influx of Ethiopians. And the numbers of Ethiopians risking this journey has since continued to swell, so that in March and April 2006, the number of Ethiopians registering as refugees with the UNHCR in Yemen, slightly exceeded the number of Somalis registering - almost 2,200 Ethiopians and 2,000 Somalis.

In January and February 2006, 3,400 Somalis and 3,000 Ethiopians had registered, with UNHCR officials sighting no less than 22 people smuggling boats in one six day period alone that January.

This means that in the first four months of 2006, more than 10,000 Somalis and Ethiopians together crossed into Yemen by boat, registering as refugees. Many more migrants than that, the UNHCR believes, arrived in the Yemen but did not register - particularly Ethiopians who, unlike Somalis, it says, are not granted refugee status automatically there.

From May to October each year, when Indian Ocean monsoon winds change direction and the Red Sea is rougher, fewer boats risk the crossing, and people smuggling usually hits a seasonal low.

Local officials and humanitarian workers said people arriving in Bosasso to take the boats, fall broadly into two categories: those looking for employment, and those fleeing insecurity and political repression.

In the absence of any established registration or screening process, however, all are simply called 'migrants'.

Would-be migrants from unstable southern Somalia

Abdi Mohamed, 40, is the oldest of these nine new arrivals from southern Somalia, the self-appointed leader of a group made up mainly of teenagers and young men. They all say they are going to Saudi Arabia to look for work. "We can be gardeners, cleaners, mechanics - anything. The money is good," he said.

Abdi Mohamed left behind a wife and two small children with his parents

in southern Somalia, where drought pushed him to leave. "I used to work on the farms and plantations. For the last year, nothing," he said. The others agree - "no jobs, no hope" - and complain of insecurity and poverty.

Ibrahim, 17, said he cannot plan a future in Mogadishu because of insecurity and lawlessness. He emphasises the fact that in Saudi Arabia "they have government".

Abdi Mohamed's extended family collectively raised 200,000 Somali shillings - about \$15 - to pay for transport through central Somalia and into the northeast. Contact with the smugglers is easy. Over the last few years, the smugglers' network has extended its tentacles deep into Somalia and Ethiopia, where middlemen work with the boat owners to organise trucks to Bosasso.

Abdi was fully prepared for the long journey when he left home. He carried a small bag of vital possessions and money enough to pay for food, accommodation and the boat fee. But in Galkayo, northeastern Somalia, he was robbed of everything. "I was offered a lift by a group of young men, and when I got into the car they took everything. They had guns. They left me on the road," he said.

Abdi joined up with the men on the road who had variously travelled from Mogadishu, Baidoa and areas around the town of Jowhar. Together, the group begged for lifts, food and water to get to the port. By the time they reached the outskirts of Bosasso, only three still carried the money and possessions they started out with. Robbed and exhausted, walking without water for nearly two days, they nevertheless remain determined to get across the Red Sea.

"I will earn money in Bosasso working at the port, and I will go," Abdi said.

### **Smugglers' port**

Abdi's chances of earning enough money in Bosasso to pay the \$50 fee are poor.

Hundreds of homeless Ethiopian migrants already live on streets next to the port wall, sleeping under small scraps of plastic sheeting, begging for food, desperately trying to earn enough for daily survival. Stranded Somali migrants drift to the poverty-stricken camps for displaced people and returnees on the outskirts of town and depend on friends and relatives.

The port is vital to the region's economy, actually exceeding, in terms of trade, its pre-war output. However, it has become a dangerous magnet, attracting more hopefuls than it can support. As a result, Bosasso has been overwhelmed by dependent groups - the internally displaced from other areas of Somalia, returnees from refugee camps and neighbouring countries, impoverished residents who have suffered catastrophic loss during the years of war and conflict - and, now, more recently, stranded migrants.

### **An Economy of Risk**

Migration is rarely an individual's choice in countries like Somalia, according to local humanitarian workers in Bosasso. It is an investment by the extended family. Usually, it falls to the youth - particularly young men - to travel abroad, as where there is persistent insecurity and poverty, a young, single person is a dependent, representing an economic drain.

By risking the Red Sea crossing, he becomes a potential asset.

"We collected money together so that I could look for work. . I have done this [journey] before," said Abdulhai Ali Yusuf, a member of a minority clan in Mogadishu, as he waited on the beach to take a small boat. When he was deported back to Mogadishu from Saudi Arabia in 2005, his family provided money to send him back to Bosasso port.

In southern Somalia, where insecurity persists and education and training opportunities are almost nonexistent, young men and women are encouraged to cross borders and seas. The prospect of them earning a basic wage in a developed country represents an opportunity at a level rarely achievable at home.

Yet that level is itself, basic. Somali migrants said they would expect to earn just US\$5 day in Saudi Arabia, for example.

Since the collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991, the Somali economy has been driven by its diaspora community. The economy runs on remittances, the transfer of earnings abroad to the extended family at home. Money-transfer companies have been established to facilitate fast remittance; money paid at transfer offices in Europe, North America and the Middle East can often be collected the same day from branches in Somalia.

Once abroad, the Somali migrant has a strong cultural obligation to

remit. In almost all cases, they do so if they can. Maintaining family loyalty is, in turn, an investment for the individual who has travelled to areas likely to have hostile immigration policies. Most will return home and rely on their extended family themselves.

"Every time someone dies here, the whole family has lost," explained one migrant. The number of deaths on the Red Sea route to Yemen makes that risk very high, reflecting the extreme situation in Somalia.

Hassan Abdi Osman, 30, from Jowhar in southern Somalia, said he had crossed the Red Sea nine times. Each time he is deported back to Mogadishu by the Saudi Arabian authorities, his family pays for him to return. He brushes off death and danger and describes a life of sickness, insecurity and hopelessness. "I die here, or I die at home," he said. "What's the difference?"

In contrast, one of the greatest fears among stranded Ethiopian migrants in Bosasso port is the debt they incurred when they left their home country. Unlike Somali migrants, the onus falls on the Ethiopian individual. Whether the individual borrows through friends, family or formal financial institutions, the assumption is that this debt will be met through opportunities found abroad. Wealth will be accumulated, and family and friends repaid.

This poses a major dilemma for those who are robbed or get stranded at the port. Unlike Somalis, most Ethiopians have no option of support from relatives and friends in the camps or the town.

Fatuma, 18, from Ethiopia, earns the equivalent of a few cents a day washing dishes in a food kiosk. Her family gave her money to travel and helped her arrange her transport. "They said I could send money home when I got to Saudi Arabia," she said.

Fatuma started out with enough money to pay brokers and buy food and water, as well as to cover the costs of transport and accommodation. Then, what she had left was stolen. She would love to go back to Ethiopia, but is stuck: "I borrowed too much money," she said.

#### **Extensive regional network**

Tigist, young and unemployed from Ethiopia, gives little away when she talks of the smugglers' house in which she and her friends were held: "We always sat together and always slept together. Two men watched out for us."

She stayed in the house inside Ethiopia for a week while the broker - a wealthy man of local standing - collected about 100 transient migrants. He demanded extra fees from them before arranging their journey to Bosasso port in northeastern Somalia. His trucks took them from Hartisheik, on the Ethiopia-Somalia border, to Burahao in Somaliland, and abandoned them.

Tigist said she was attacked and robbed by a local gang in Burahao. She walked for days, begging food and water, before getting a lift. Now stranded in Bosasso, earning the equivalent of about US 15 cents a day selling tea, she counts herself among the lucky ones. "The brokers can get violent over money. Women get raped. Some people die on the way," she said.

There are thousands of hapless migrants like Tigist, stranded in Bosasso, living a hand-to-mouth existence, unlikely to earn enough to continue their journey. But there are always more who are ready to pay the price and go.

Modern methods, ancient lands

Smugglers have reinvented their ancient trade using modern tools - mobile phones, radio and e-mail - to invisibly extend a network that deals in weapons, drugs and the movement of people. This network is highly effective in a region that has been marginalized by regional governments and all but abandoned by the outside world.

Brokers and middlemen exploit the poverty, conflict and absence of authority in the isolated pastoral areas of Somalia. They have in their pay loyal and heavily armed militias.

In Bosasso, testimonies from migrants reveal a network stretching from Mekele, the provincial capital of Tigray in northern Ethiopia, south to Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, and then east from there towards Harar, Jijiga, Hartisheik and Burahao, through Sool to Bosasso. From as far south in Somalia as Kismayo, a port near the border with Kenya, to towns and cities in more central areas of southern Somalia, like Baidoa, Jowhar and Mogadishu, migrants can arrange their travel through brokers with links to the northeast.

Ethiopians can spend the equivalent of hundreds of dollars trying to get to the port. At the port, smugglers usually charge about \$50 to cross the Red Sea in a small fishing boat.

Hartisheik in Ethiopia - once one of the biggest refugee camps in the

world - has become an established smuggling and trafficking centre. Migrants are held in "safe houses" there while middlemen arrange for large groups to cross relatively unnoticed into Somalia.

### **Children sold**

There is also trade in children for use as cheap regional labour, said refugees and local residents living in the Hartishiek area. In the absence of education, children are sold as labourers, domestic workers and animal herders. "We take money for them and send them away from about age 10," said one refugee in Kebre Deyhre camp. "Some of them come back pregnant."

Passports and new identities are bought and sold, in part because Ethiopians try to pass themselves off as Somalis on their arrival in Yemen to qualify for refugee status.

The people-smuggling network goes much further a field, too. Thousands of dollars are paid to middlemen to fly children out of the region, particularly through Mogadishu and Hargeysa. Children as young as two or three are known to have been flown or shipped out to the Middle East, Europe and North America, sometimes for education, sometimes for more exploitative reasons.

Somali children make up the largest group of separated children in some European countries: They are abandoned at airports or used to claim welfare benefits, or end up with distant relatives as cheap labour.

'Tragic Cargo', Part Two, to follow  
[ENDS]