

SOMALIA: Interview with Khadar Abdi Haji, mayor of Bosasso

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NAIROBI, 14 June (IRIN) -

QUESTION: What happens to the migrants when they reach Bosasso town?

ANSWER: The main problem with the Ethiopians is that they come into the town and we can't help them. Some of them arrive in very poor condition; some bury their dead on the way. The ones who are stranded here live on the streets - they are destitute, and they starve. We have no effective government, so we have no effective way to assist.

Q: How do the Ethiopians survive here?

A: We see there are two groups. The Oromos are culturally close to us and can integrate, but the other group - the Amharas and the Tigrayans - have a problem when they get here. There is a language and culture barrier that makes it more difficult for them to live here, or to get work and assistance from the community.

Those who can't integrate and remain stranded in the town lack shelter, food, latrines and the basic necessities, and they can't ask for what they need. They don't know how to seek help. Sometimes they are sick - they lie on the streets, even die on the streets - and we try and help them. But we also fear the health problems they bring, like TB and HIV/AIDS. The way they live on the streets also runs the area down and affects the towns' sanitation.

Another problem is the Ethiopians who die here, on our shore, when there is a boat accident. We get dead bodies and injuries. It is a mess. We show the other Ethiopians, but the next day they are boarding the boats to go.

We want the international agencies to play their role and help. These people are their responsibility. We are already trying to support our returnees and IDPs [internally displaced persons], which is a great burden. Now feeding points have been established by a local NGO for the destitute Ethiopians.

Q: Why do you think more Ethiopians are coming these days?

A: Well, we want to know why they come to us, a country without a

government. We think there must be problems in Ethiopia. We know there are two groups who come here: the asylum seekers and the economic migrants. We want to clarify what this is all about. We have discussed it in the municipality, and we agree the best thing would be registration, so we know the numbers.

Personally, I don't believe the Ethiopians are running away from economic problems. I think there must be something more to it. Something has changed. Their standard of living was low before, and you can point to a low standard of living and poverty all over this region - it is not enough to make so many of them take such a journey.

I think it must be insecurity that makes them come; the same reason the southern Somalis come. We all have economic problems, but we manage. No, the push to go is insecurity. Insecurity makes refugees. We are not talking about people with a good education seeking better opportunities. The people coming are peasants, abandoning their homes and their families, leaving their farms.

Q: What are you doing to stop the smugglers?

A: We have arrested so many smugglers and put them in jail. We have also seized boats and the smugglers' vehicles. They will be taken to court; we follow our own procedures here. The times the administration have arrested boats and owners and vehicles and some of the migrants has reduced the traffic. But we have a big problem. We don't have the capacity to carry on doing that, so the smugglers continue. There is always a demand to go to Yemen. When we take some of the smugglers away, we find the departure point has moved down the coast and more boats are there.

The authorities really need help because we don't have the means to control this trade. We don't have the resources; no patrol boats, only private boats. And the main priority is the police force, which needs training and equipment. We have limited resources and we need assistance from donors and the international community to deal with this.

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