

Yemen crisis a boon for people smugglers



Photo: [John James/IRIN](#)

Ethiopian teenage migrants days before being repatriated from Yemen in 2013'

SANAA, 21 November 2014 (IRIN) - Yemen's security crisis is leading to a rapid expansion in the people smuggling trade, with thousands of migrants from the Horn of Africa desperate to use the country as a gateway to Saudi Arabia.

On 21 September, Houthi rebels - a Zaydi Shiite Muslim group based in the north of the country - seized control of the capital Sana'a after a battle with the army and Sunni Islamists.

Three cabinet overhauls in less than two months and ongoing clashes in many regions have thrown the country into a state of limbo. The UN Security Council and the US also recently complicated matters by imposing sanctions on former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and two senior Houthi military commanders.

While most Yemenis bemoan the chaos, for people smugglers opportunity knocks. Thousands more African migrants

seeking to reach Saudi Arabia have arrived in the country as official security has weakened.

In September - the most recent month for which statistics have been released - the Nairobi-based Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS) reported 12,768 arrivals - predominantly from Ethiopia. It was more than double the figure for September 2013 and represented the single largest monthly influx on record.

A lucrative business of extortion and smuggling has developed along the Red Sea migration route, preying on the travellers who know little about Yemen. The migrants overwhelmingly arrive illegally by boat from neighbouring Djibouti. When they arrive the smugglers routinely [beat and rape](#) them as they seek to extract extra payments.

Then they begin their over 400km journey up the coast. Those that can afford it pay a car to drive them, others walk the whole way.

In the remote desert camps where RMMS estimates approximately 75 percent of African arrivals end up in the course of their Saudi quest, some die of starvation, dehydration or disease after being abandoned by the smugglers. Others are killed by bandits as they fail to convince family or friends abroad to pay for their release.

Criminals twice captured 19-year-old Abdullah from Harar, Ethiopia, on his trek to Saudi. Fortunately, he had enough cash to pay his way out of trouble. Moneyless and still shaken, he had to hitchhike to Sana`a where he seeks out odd jobs and shares a one-room hovel with other migrants.

Stories like his do little to deter the thousands more that try to make it to Saudi. "We thought the extent of abuse and hardship had finally outweighed the lure of a job in Saudi,"

said Ali, a trauma counsellor who did not want to give his full name. He works with migrants in Haradh town - an area about 10km south of the al-Tuwal border crossing that has become the de facto capital of the smuggling network. "They gambled everything for a dream that turned out to be a nightmare once the gangs took control of their route."

Chief of Mission of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Yemen Nicoletta Giordano anticipates more of the same. "It's the beginning of the traditional season of high migration because of more favourable climatic circumstances," she said.

"There's obviously jobs to be had in Saudi Arabia irrespective of how difficult it is. It's obvious that the pull factor in Saudi Arabia is still pretty strong."

Haradh's Deputy Prosecutor Abd al-Rahman Jamil was assigned the task of executing justice in a corner of Yemen where power brokers trump the rule of law. He takes a realist view of the situation: "Because it's smuggling work, there will always be different routes, new routes by land, water - wherever the smugglers and corrupt military are."

History repeating itself

This is not the first time political chaos has helped the country's smugglers. In 2011, following an uprising that led to the overthrow of President Saleh, tens of thousands of Africans attempted to smuggle themselves into Saudi via Yemen.

“In this unequal but well connected world migration is now here to stay and if they cannot migrate legally they will do it illegally whatever the personal risk and cost.”

Abdullah was among them - making a failed first bid for the elusive Saudi border. "After a week of walking along the main road to the [Saudi] border, I collapsed on the black asphalt," he recalled.

When he regained consciousness, a pair of guards were laughing hysterically at his naked body dangling three metres from the dirt floor. He had been strung up by tightly bound metal wire around his thumbs. The incident left deep purple scars above his knuckle joints and his thumbs paralysed.

In late 2011, following an increase in the number of migrants trying to reach Saudi Arabia, the country fortified its borders, practically sealing off entry to the Kingdom. This led to a build-up of stranded, destitute African migrants in Haradh.

Yemeni interim President Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi, who replaced Saleh after a single-candidate election in 2012, vowed to crack down on smuggling.

From late 2013 to early 2014, working in tandem with local and international aid organisations and the Saudi government, nearly 200,000 Africans were deported on flights back to Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa and the Somali's Mogadishu. In November 2013 a regional conference resolved to adopt strict legislation outlawing the practice, among other measures agreed on in the Sana`a Declaration.

"Re-cyclers"

Yet the latest crisis is just exacerbating what RMMS dubs "re-cyclers" - migrants deported at least once before.

"Many of the migrants in the new spike are the same ones that were returned [to Addis Ababa] by the Saudis at the start of the year," Christopher Horwood, coordinator of RMMS, told IRIN.

"Our data suggests that [re-cyclers make up] about 15 percent of the caseload," he said. "It's a makeshift form of 'circular migration' that suits some of them very well. They get deported and then return having seen their families, enjoyed some home cooking."

"Behind it all, of course, there must be work in Saudi. If there was not, they would not come: supply and demand of the informal labour market," he said.

"The Saudis may have enforced a number of [anti-immigration] measures," Giordano asserted, "but it's obvious there are a number of economic opportunities in Saudi that are not available in Ethiopia, nor in Somalia, nor Djibouti, nor Yemen. So they are prepared to try anything."

"People keep trying to find the emergency or event that is causing these waves of migration as if they can be stopped or as if they are a short-term event," Horwood said. "In this unequal but well connected world, migration is now here to stay and if they cannot migrate legally they will do it illegally, whatever the personal risk and cost."