



STORY

Deadly Journeys: How Despair Drives Young Ethiopians to Flee to Yemen

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Ethiopians at the IOM transit centre in Obock, Djibouti, waiting to return home. People on the road to Obock told the Guardian that friends had perished en route. Image by Charlie Rosser. Djibouti, 2018.

"We met in the desert," says Badru Mohammed, gesturing at his three companions. The four Ethiopian boys pause for breath and refreshment beside the road, grasping their plastic water bottles tightly as they sip, careful not to waste a drop.

The Djiboutian sun is still low in the sky but the road is already hot. They have more than 200km left to walk and their plastic sandals are disintegrating.

Badru and friends are from Jimma, a poor farming district in Ethiopia's Oromia region. Over the past fortnight they have travelled more than 1,000km from their homes, first on buses and then later on foot, jumping the border into neighbouring Djibouti under the cover of darkness. When the group gathered in Dire Dawa, a town in the arid drylands of eastern Ethiopia a couple of hundred kilometres from the border, there were 20 of them. "Most are left in the desert," says Badru wearily. "They are very tired. I don't think they can follow us."

The Djiboutian police estimate that around 200 Ethiopians enter undercover like this each day, trekking through some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth in the hope of reaching war-stricken Yemen, across the Red Sea, and eventually wealthy Saudi Arabia. In February IOM, the UN's migration agency, tracked nearly 17,000 migrants in Djibouti, most making their way northwards towards the coastal towns of Obock and Tadjoura; more than two-thirds were men and 8% were unaccompanied minors. The vast majority were from Oromia.

Overall, close to 99,000 people, mostly Ethiopians (and a much smaller number of Somalis), arrived on Yemen's Red and Arabian Sea coasts last year, up from 65,000 in 2013. Such numbers dwarf those migrating without documentation from the Horn of Africa toward Europe via the Mediterranean.



Ethiopian migrants walk along Djibouti's coastal road north to Obock, past Lake Assal, one of the lowest and hottest places on earth. Image by Charlie Rosser. Djibouti, 2018.

Many do not make it. The numbers that die in the Djiboutian desert are unknown but there are enough unburied dead to contaminate the water supply. Ethiopians walking along the road north to Obock told the Guardian that friends had perished en route. Another group of three, also from Jimma, say they had no food for the duration of the six-day walk from Dire Dawa. Seven of their companions were left in the desert; some got lost, they say, but one they watched die. “We’ve had no help from anyone,” says the youngest, a 10-year-old orphan.

The journey across the Bab el-Mandeb strait to Yemen is also perilous. One recent estimate put the numbers who have died making the crossing over the past decade at close to 3,000. The boats organised by smugglers are old, rickety and often overcrowded. Few Ethiopians can swim but the vessels, which depart at night in order to avoid detection, usually hover 20m or so away from the shore, which can be fatal for those clambering aboard.

The anarchy in Yemen brings a welter of dangers. In January at least 30 people drowned when their migrant boat capsized, with reports of gunfire being used against those on board. In March 2017, a helicopter opened fire on a vessel carrying more than 140 migrants, killing 42 Somalis.

Those who make it to shore then face multiple threats. UNHCR has catalogued reports of physical and sexual abuse, abduction, extortion, torture and forced labour by smugglers and criminal networks. “Only a very small minority make it to Saudi Arabia without facing at least one incident of abuse,” says Danielle Botti of the regional mixed migration secretariat (RMMS), which monitors movements between the Horn of Africa and Yemen.



The fishing village of Tadjoura, a hub for Ethiopian migrants crossing to wartorn Yemen, and for Yemeni refugees fleeing in the other direction. Image by Charlie Rosser. Djibouti, 2018.

Those who survive remain vulnerable. Some are deported straight back to Yemen rather than home, in violation of international law. Some have their passports taken away by their employers, which is against international labour conventions.

Francesco Martialis, head of Caritas, which works with street children in Djibouti, recounts the story of a 15-year-old who had fled life as a slave in Saudi Arabia. He had been beaten, his skull cracked, leaving him with amnesia. Unable to remember his family or his home, he had walked hundreds of kilometres alone along the road from Obock to Djibouti City, in the country's south, before being picked up by police.

Young Ethiopians in Obock are either unaware or unfazed by the dangers awaiting across the sea. Around 250 have set up makeshift homes under acacia trees and in caves beneath the cliffs near the rubbish-strewn village of Fantahero.

“So what?” asks Hassen, a 20-year-old teacher from Wollo region. “That’s the life of the Ethiopian people.” His companion, Murad, 18, agrees: “We fear Ethiopia more than the war in Yemen.”

Many cite persecution and violence as reasons for fleeing. Oromos, the country's largest ethnic group, complain of marginalisation; for more than three years anti-government protests and deadly confrontations with security forces have plagued the region. “I quit my schooling and came here,” says Mohammed, a 17-year-old from Arsi in southern Oromia. “I was a ninth-grade student. But when I saw youths like myself being arrested and thrown in jail I decided to leave. I was afraid of being arrested too.”



Four young migrants, from the Ethiopian region of Oromia, pictured a few kilometres north of Tadjoura en route to Obock, their final coastal destination. Image by Charlie Rosser. Djibouti, 2018.

But for most, poverty is the biggest grievance. “I’m going to Yemen because I need work,” says Hassen. “There’s nothing in Ethiopia. I have a job but it is too expensive there—2,000 birr (£53) a month? That is not enough! In Saudi Arabia I will get 10,000 birr a month.”

Three days earlier, police had arrived in Fantahero and loaded many of the boys into trucks to deposit at the Ethiopian border. But on the whole the migrants are tolerated. Obock locals have done well out of smuggling and a journey that costs somewhere between \$300 and \$500 (£221-£368) per person. “Nobody will control it,” says Momina Ahmed, a French-Djiboutian who grew up in the town. “All the locals, including the authorities, are profiting.”

An IOM transit centre in Obock, across the road from a UNHCR camp for Yemeni refugees fleeing in other direction, is one of the few institutions available for people who want to return to Ethiopia. It assists with voluntary returns, but it can

take in only around 250 at any one time. Mohammed, the schoolboy from Arsi, says he is one of the few in Fantahero to get cold feet, but that the centre was full when he visited earlier in the day.



People queue to register at the IOM transit centre in Obock, where voluntary returns to Ethiopia are organised. Image by Charlie Rosser. Djibouti, 2018.

Elsewhere in Djibouti, facilities are even more scarce. Mobile health patrols started work only late last year. There are plans to build a humanitarian shelter at Lake Assal, near where the desert hits the coast. There is only one shelter in Djibouti City for migrant children, Caritas, and it is prohibited from providing beds at night.

Last year UNHCR launched a campaign to raise awareness of the dangers of the Red Sea crossing. But it struggles to compete with the tales of relative wealth trickling back to the Ethiopian communities so susceptible to the Gulf's lure. The expulsion of some 140,000 undocumented Ethiopians by the Saudis late last year

also seems to have had little impact: Botti says many almost immediately tried again. About 15% of those arriving in Yemen have made the journey at least once before, according to the RMMS.

Few will return home without something to show for their efforts. “If it is the will of Allah to improve my life, then maybe one day I will return to Ethiopia,” Badru says fatalistically. Just as he speaks a police truck pulls round the corner. Within moments, the four boys have been ushered into the back by armed police officers, their long, hard journey cut suddenly short.



Ethiopians who have run out of money wait at the docks in the town of Tadjoura, en route to Obock, in the hope of securing casual employment. Image by Charlie Rosser. Djibouti, 2018.