

Refugees left to drown on their way to Europe

(No 5 in a series of essays addressing current issues in Somalia)

While up to 30,000 migrants are believed to have made the journey across the Mediterranean over the last four months from Libya to Europe, large numbers have died en route. It is estimated that more than 800 migrants of different nationalities who sailed from Libya never made it to European shores and are presumed dead. Many more were simply not counted and no one will really know how many others have made the same desperate journey ... and died in their effort to find a new life. One case, a nameless woman was one of four bodies washed ashore on the Andalucía coast as hundreds cross the Straits of Gibraltar in a vain attempt to escape the misery of their homelands. It is a desperate dash across the 20-mile stretch of water to leave behind the wars, poverty and famine that stalk Africa.



African Refugees left to starve to death adrift in the sea as Europe looks on.

A common practice, according to reports received by Mathaba in the past is for Libyan ships to carry Africans towards Italy or Malta with the pretence of delivering them to shore, but for the Africans to be forced to jump and swim from outside territorial waters, an impossible feat in the rough and cold Mediterranean Sea.

Also, under cover of darkness, exhausted Somali refugees stagger onto Yemen's southern beaches at the end of a grueling and dangerous journey across the Gulf of Aden.

"We were loaded onto the boats like animals," says Adil Mokhtar Mohammed. "We were forced to squat for three days and we were tightly packed together in rows. The smugglers don't even allow you to open your bag for food and water. If you try to move, they beat you."

Since the outbreak of Somalia's civil war in 1991, each new cycle of turmoil has generated a fresh flow of refugees to neighbouring Yemen. But during this past year's rise and fall of

Somalia's Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), tiny fishing vessels carried 26,000 men, women, and children – a record number – from Somalia to Yemen. (By Ginny Hill).

“Anything that floats - from leaking, rusting fishing boats to treacherous rubber dinghies - is packed with men, women and children, mainly from West Africa and east African continent”.

And the gangs running the human smuggling and illegal transport across state or national boundaries of goods or persons are liable to customs or to prohibition. Smuggling has been carried on in nearly all nations and has occasionally been adopted as an instrument of national policy.

The human traffickers are merciless individuals fairly described as ;

1. Lacking pity or compassion.
2. Deficient in richness, fertility or vigour; feeble: the meagre soil of an eroded plain.
3. Taking advantage of a new income as smuggling humans is more lucrative than smuggling drugs and tobacco-running.

One observer wrote “The risk in packing these hapless people off across one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world is minimal to the gangs, who stay behind keeping their feet dry in the cafes and bars of their countries. Human traffickers visit local pensions and hovels which are packed with the human contraband waiting for the sea to become calm enough to make a run for the twinkling lights of Tarifa across the Straits. And as days turn to weeks, the refugees, waiting for the day they can set out on their hazardous journey to Spain, are at the mercy of the men they have entrusted their lives to.

Those who can't pay, turn to crime to raise the money to try to make their dreams of a new life come true.

These are:

Entirely without money and risking their life into the high sea

Very poor and vulnerable and desperate.

Women forced into prostitution, a return to the days of slavery

Of humanity - such is the innocence of these desperate people, many believe the lights blazing across the thin stretch of the Mediterranean are those of Africa. The journeys begin mainly at night when they are pushed off from an isolated beach to make their own way across the Straits, notorious for its strong currents and packed with huge tankers and cargo ships. In one week alone, 200 people were packed into five tiny boats to make their way across to Tarifa. Most never make it - but no one knows exactly how many die on each and every trip across the Sea.

The frail, packed dinghies disintegrate as the oil and petrol-laden tankers plough into them, their crews barely aware of any collision as the would-be asylum seekers die beneath their propellers.

Jose Chamizo, the ombudsman for southern Spain, estimates more than 1,000 have died trying to cross the Straits in the last two years, but most of the bodies are swept out of the Mediterranean and into the Atlantic where they are never recovered. Bodies of refugees are

constantly washed ashore on the coast at Tarifa, now becoming a well-known as the illicit gateway to Europe and Great Britain as it was as a windsurfers' paradise with its crashing waves and mile-long flat beach.

There is no dignity in their death. The clothes of the light-skinned African woman have long since been swept away by the force of the waves. African continent based research says: *"As long as there is poverty and wars over there in Africa, refugees will come."*

To menace or threaten; intimidate journeys so futile many who beat the odds and reach dry land will inevitably end up back in the countries they had tried to escape, usually penniless and often at the mercy of their own governments. *"They arrive in a terrible state and they are near death"*. They have sold everything to come here and are returned with even less than they started. *"But now they are sent to refugee camps to discover whether they can stay or are deported. They are easy victims of criminal gangs and are used as slave labour on the illegal market places. For the women it is far worse. The criminals send them into prostitution."*

The responsibility for refugee protection

Rescues of refugees and the obligation to rescue can be used as a pretext to undertake Interception. In the course of rescue and interception operations, priority should be given to ensuring the safety of the people on board boats on the high seas. This will imply their transfer to a safe place which cannot be a ship but must be disembarkation to dry land. Undertaking an effective rescue will also require ensuring the availability of medical and psychological treatment for persons rescued who need it, such as separated children, traumatised persons and victims of violence by the traffickers while they are on transit.

"In the past, the patrolling helicopter pilots signalled to the passengers that a rescue vessel was on its way", the survivors said. It never arrived. The passengers held up the two babies onboard, to show the pilots the desperation of their plight. The pilots ignored and flew away. *"They must be very desperate to make that journey,"* he says, nodding towards the bodies in the sand. *"But who knows? Maybe the dead are the better off. But it is such a terrible way to die."*

Then, as the boat drifted, its fuel tanks empty, the passengers began to die of starvation, one by one, until just 10 were left alive. *"Every morning we would wake up and find more bodies, which we would leave for 24 hours and then throw overboard,"* Abu Kurke, Ethiopian and Ahmed Ali Somalian survivors, told the Guardian. By the end, he said, *"Everyone was either praying or dying."*

Despite the gruesome conditions, those aboard the stricken boat clung desperately to their humanity. After their parents died, the two infants were kept alive by others who were near death themselves. *"We saved one bottle from the helicopter for the two babies and kept feeding them even after their parents had passed,"* explained Ahmed Ali, who said he survived by eating two tubes of toothpaste and drinking his own urine. *"But after two days, the babies passed too, because they were so small."*

There are occasions when a media story will hit you in the solar plexus leaving you angry and speechless in equal measure. Monday the 9th May was one such day. The Guardian front page was dominated by a story that simply defies belief, a saga that provides an

insight into the reality of humanitarianism, and racism as 61African migrants being left to die in the Mediterranean Sea.

According to survivors, two jet aircraft took off from an aircraft carrier and flew low over the boat while the migrants stood on deck and held the two starving babies aloft into the air, but from that point on no help was forthcoming. Unable to manoeuvre any closer to the carrier, the migrants' boat drifted. Shorn of supplies, fuel or means of contacting the outside world, they began succumbing to thirst and starvation.

DESPAIR: "The bodies of woman and children lying in the sand are victim of the heartless trade in refugees who flee the poverty of Africa", dreaming of a better life in Europe. They are probably missing daughter, Missing sister. Missing mother...

World G18 Recommendations

"These are people living an unimaginable existence, fleeing political, religious and ethnic persecution. The world must have justice for them, for those that died alongside them, and for the families who have lost their loved ones." The weight of that downturn falls heavily on the developing world, with as many as 200 million workers at risk of being pushed into "extreme poverty."

"We highly recommend that they need sustainable economical /social development in their homeland, before they flee their country dreaming for better life in Europe and end-up in the high Sea".

The ineffectiveness of the Somali government is largely to blame for the trouble within its borders, much as it is to blame for a spate of piracy in recent years. Since the 1991 fall of the Said Barre regime, there have been many attempts at re-stabilizing the nation, but none have succeeded so far.

The World G18 Somalia aim is to support these disadvantaged and displaced refugees and continue to provide as much shelter, medicine, education and humanitarian assistance as possible, but until conditions in Somalia change, all support providing organisations will experience with an ever rising number of displaced Refugees.

Prepared by Mahdi Aadam (Horn Secretary of World G18 Somalia)