



Republic of Djibouti



International Organization for Migration (IOM)
The UN Migration Agency

ETHIOPIAN MIGRANTS RETURNING FROM YEMEN TO DJIBOUTI: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

IOM – DJIBOUTI

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DTM

IOM DISPLACEMENT
TRACKING MATRIX

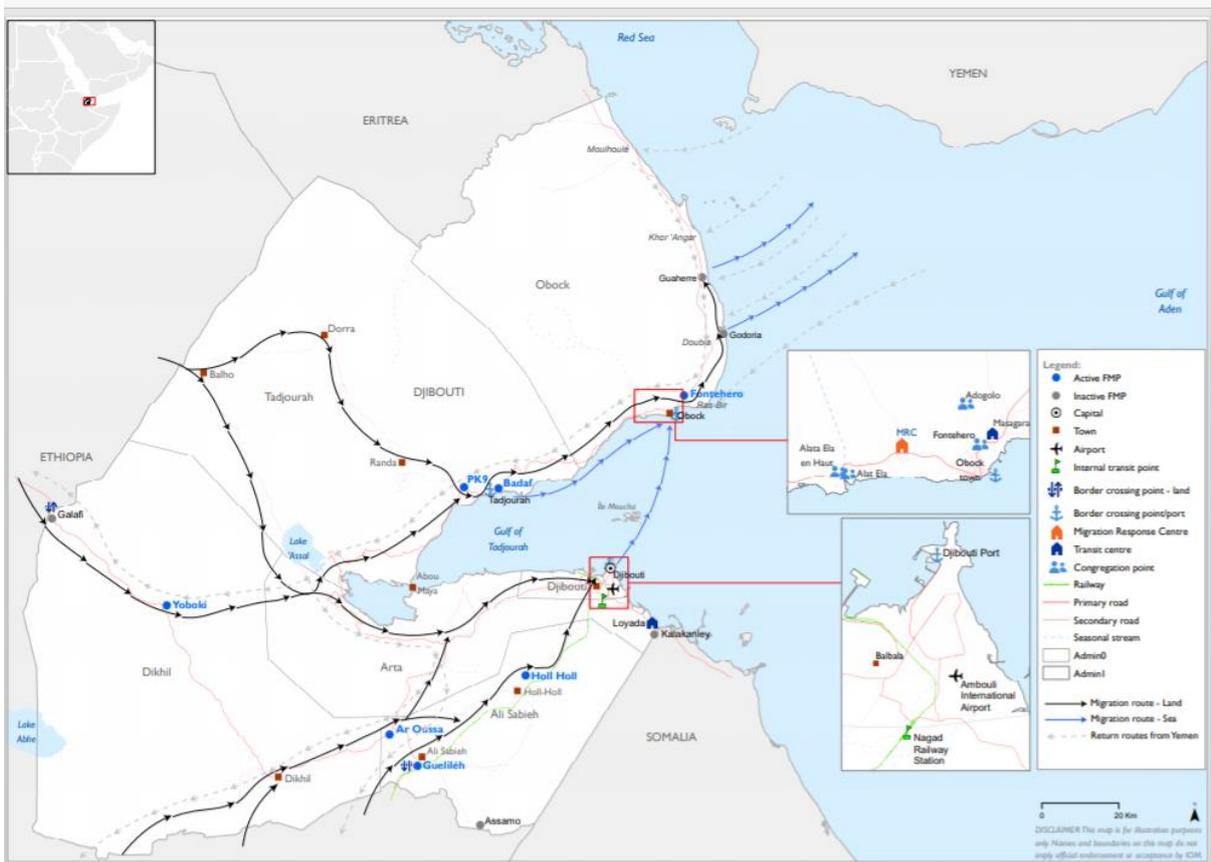
IOM mobile unit provides emergency assistance to stranded migrants
in Guehere, Obock region, September 12, 2020.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Djibouti is a transit country for one of the busiest, and arguably, the most dangerous migration routes in the world. Each year, thousands of migrants from Ethiopia and Somalia travel to Djibouti, and across the Gulf of Aden towards the Arabian Peninsula along what is now known as the Eastern Route. In 2019, more than 215,710 movements of migrants, mostly of Ethiopian nationality, were recorded at various IOM Flow Monitoring Points (FMPs), of which 49,059 were observed in Obock before their departure for Yemen. Ethiopians travel hundreds of kilometers from their home villages, often on foot, and then travel through the Republic of Djibouti, before crossing the Gulf of Aden into war-torn Yemen mostly in the hopes of reaching the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The following map shows the migration routes through the Republic of Djibouti as well as the main places of embarkation for migrants from the Republic of Djibouti which are also the main points of disembarkation for migrants travelling from the Arabian Peninsula.

Main migration routes through Djibouti



II. CONTEXT

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a public health emergency. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the total number of confirmed cases reached 28,637,952 as of 13 September 2020 while 917,417 deaths have been recorded as a result of COVID-19. In addition, the virus has had a significant impact on the mobility of people both regionally and globally.

Following the border closure between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Yemen in April 2020, hundreds of migrants from the Horn of Africa found themselves stranded in Yemen, unable to move forward or

to return home. There are currently around 14,500 migrants, mostly Ethiopians, stranded in the country.¹

Stranded migrants in the country have been transferred by authorities to different provinces where they live in extremely difficult conditions and without access to basic services. Most of them suffer from exclusion and are victims of violence. In addition to that, there is a widespread discriminatory narrative that depicts migrants as carriers of COVID-19, resulting in their being stigmatized by the locals. Unable to reach their final destination, many Ethiopian migrants decide to return home by transiting through Djibouti. This has resulted in return movements from Yemen to Djibouti, as migrants use the services of smugglers to cross the Gulf of Aden, and are transported back to Djibouti, usually disembarking between Moulhoulé and Ras Bir on the Djiboutian coast.

Objective of the study:

This qualitative study aims to understand the situation of Ethiopian migrants returning from the Arabian Peninsula, their living conditions during their stay in Yemen, and the factors that prompted them to return to Ethiopia.

III. METHODOLOGY

The information included in this report was collected through focus group discussions through the use of a questionnaire developed by the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) team. The data collection took place in the Massagara site at the outskirts of the town of Obock from August 14 to 24, 2020. A total of 72 migrants (15 women and 57 men) participated in the discussions, which included 38 Tigrays, 31 Amharas and 3 Oromos². The participants were divided into small groups of 6 to 12 people. The groups of men were divided by ethnicity in order to facilitate the discussion, as well as provide a basis of comparison of responses by ethnicity. There were few women present on the site, hence they were not separated by ethnicity. The majority of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 25, hence further disaggregation by age was not needed. The approximate duration of the group discussion was one and a half hour. Discussions were held in Ethiopian languages, and the IOM facilitator was accompanied by an IOM translator. The team of facilitators consisted of three IOM officers, two of whom were in charge of psychosocial support, and one in charge of information management.

IV. LIMITATIONS

Since this data was collected through a non-randomized sample, and only consisted of participants passing through a particular site during a specific time frame, the findings cannot be generalized to the migrant population as a whole. Additionally, due to natural constraints that are present in group discussions, including a bias towards those that are more prone to speak, these findings should be taken as indicative of this sample only, and interpreted in the same spirit. The facilitators utilized various techniques in an effort to foster an environment of open discussion, which included the creation of smaller discussion groups that may encourage all participants to express themselves.

V. DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

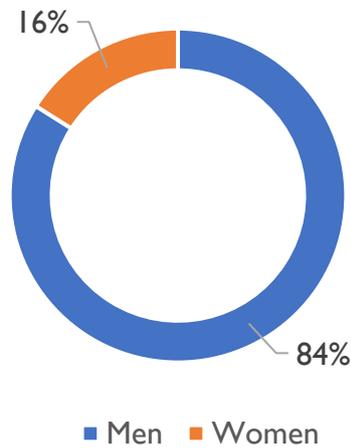
Since May 2020, IOM Djibouti systematically collects data on migrants arriving in Obock from Yemen. During the month of May, 109 migrants arrived from Yemen. The number of arrivals doubled in June (243 arrivals) and was multiplied by almost eight in July (858 arrivals). Between May 17 and September

¹ These figures are an estimate, the number of migrants is probably higher. Source: [IOM Yemen](#).

² This ethnic distribution should not be taken to represent that of migrants returning from Yemen. It only corresponds to that of migrants who participated in the focus group discussions.

24, IOM tracked 2,960 Ethiopian migrants returning from Yemen to Djibouti, including 568 women (19%) and 2,392 men (81%). The majority of migrants (80%) were young people between the ages of 15 and 25. Children (under 18) represented around 17% of the total number of migrants observed.³

Gender distribution of the number of migrants from Yemen counted by IOM between May 17 and August 30, 2020



³ The age breakdown is an estimation from the quantitative data of migrants registered at the Obock Migration Response Center (MRC) between 2019 and 2020.

VI. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION RESULTS

I. REASONS FOR MIGRATION

Economic reason was the main driver for migration as per the responses received during the focus group discussions. The majority of the migrants talked about the difficulties faced regarding their search for employment in Ethiopia and said that their main source of livelihood was agriculture and rearing of livestock. They also mentioned that the income they derived from these farming activities was not sufficient to support their families. Participants also spoke of the role played by their families and friends in their decision to migrate, as most were motivated to follow those who have emigrated to the Arabian Peninsula and who regularly inform them about the economic opportunities in that area. Ethnic and family conflicts also appear to be one of the reasons for the departure of some of the migrants.

2. LOGISTICS OF THE JOURNEY

a. Trip from Ethiopia to Djibouti

All the migrants utilized the services of smugglers to facilitate their journey. The majority of migrants said they had changed smugglers several times en route to Yemen, and had used various modes of transportation from Ethiopia to the Republic of Djibouti, including walking, trucks, private vehicles, etc. Depending on the mode of transport used and the conditions during the trip, the voyage from Ethiopia to Obock could take from 5 days to up to a month. Migrants also mentioned that they paid smugglers between 3,000 and 4,000 BIRRs (72 to 96 euros) to take them to Yemen.⁴

The migrants encountered many difficulties on the road, made worse by the heat and lack of water. They stressed that conditions were particularly difficult in some locations such as Yoboki and Lac Assal and that they sometimes had to abandon some of their companions on the way. While most migrants only spend a few hours or days in each of the locality they pass through, some said they stayed several days, or even months in the towns of Obock or Tadjourah in order to find work and be able to finance the upcoming leg of their journey towards the Arabian Peninsula.

b. Trip from Djibouti to Yemen

Once the smugglers dropped the migrants in Obock, they would usually spend one to a few days there before heading to Yemen. According to their testimonies, most migrants had very limited information about the journey and many were not even aware that they would have to cross the sea to get to Yemen; some believed it was just a river. On the departure day, migrants were transported, usually at night, to their place of embarkation between Godoria and Khor Angar. They embarked on small sea-vessels which are usually overcrowded and can hold up to 100 people. The payment for the crossing, which lasts between 5 and 7 hours, can vary but is usually around 7,000 to 8,000 BIRR (168 to 192 Euros). Methods of payment vary among migrants. Some migrants, mostly from the Tigray ethnic group, choose to pay their trip upon arrival in Yemen while others, mainly migrants from the Oromo and Amhara ethnic groups, choose to pay in installments at each stage of the journey. Migrants said the crossing is usually a source of anxiety for them.

⁴ The conversion rate is rounded off to 24 Euros per 1000 Ethiopian BIRRs.



Once in Yemen, some migrants have to pay between 25,000 and 45,000 BIRRs (600 to 1,080 Euros) to Yemeni smugglers. These are mainly those who have agreed to pay the full amount requested by the smugglers once they arrive at their destination. The migrants disembark on the Yemeni coasts in the Lahj governorate and are then picked up by smugglers who take them to Sana'a where they will try to cross the border between Yemen and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

3. STAY IN YEMEN

a. Inability to cross into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Migrants explained that upon arrival in Yemen, smugglers informed them that it was impossible to reach the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as the borders were closed due to the COVID-19 epidemic. They said they were either taken to temporary sites or stayed with migrants who had traveled to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia previously and had been reported back to Yemen. Some also opted to stay with other migrants who were stranded in Yemen and were planning to travel onwards when possible. While some migrants were driven to Sana'a and other towns in the northwest, some were left behind in Aden.

b. Life, work and communication while in Yemen

The interviewed migrants spoke of the difficulties they faced during this period of uncertainty in Yemen. Some said they suffered from hunger and thirst. Most said they had gone for several days without eating. A few migrants were able to communicate with their families using the phones of smugglers or members of the host community for a fee. Some said they did not want to communicate with their families because they were remorseful. It appears that migrants whose families were unable to pay the smugglers suffered terrible physical and psychological abuse. To survive, many migrants had to look for work in neighboring localities, or resort to begging. Some of the migrant women interviewed said they had been victims of sexual violence perpetrated by smugglers, armed groups, and even other migrants. Female migrants tried to remain in groups and remained vigilant during this waiting period - many were still traumatized by their ordeal.

c. Stay in prison in dehumanizing conditions

According to migrants' testimonies, several of them were arrested by armed groups and put in prison, some of these were located underground near the border between Yemen and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Sa'dah and Sana'a governorates). The migrants said they suffered severe mistreatment while in prison and were deprived of food. Some said they had to pay up to 15,000 BIRR (360 euros) to be released. Others said they were recaptured after their release and forced to pay again. It also appears that many migrants died in prison as a result of the poor living conditions and the treatment they suffered.

d. Assistance from humanitarian organizations

While in Yemen, the majority of migrants said they had received no assistance from humanitarian organizations. Some migrants remembered seeing IOM in Sa'dah after recognizing the logo on the clothes of the facilitators. The ICRC was also in some areas to sensitize armed groups about the treatment of migrants. Other migrants were registered by an international organization in Aden and received non-food items, water and food.

e. Stigmatization of migrants in relation to COVID-19

Most migrants said they were stigmatized and accused of bringing COVID-19 to Yemen. They say they felt rejected by the local populations, and they had difficulty finding work in those conditions. Some say they were jailed on the pretext that they were carriers of the virus.

f. Decision to return to Ethiopia

Faced with the inability to continue their journey to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the harsh living conditions they faced, and the abuse they suffered, some migrants decided to return to Ethiopia. However, according to information gathered, many migrants remained behind in the hope of continuing their journey. Other migrants were currently waiting for their families to send more funds to finance their return journey.

4. TRAVEL FROM YEMEN TO DJIBOUTI

The migrants that were able to return to Djibouti paid the sum of 7,000 BIRR (168 euros) to the smugglers for the trip. Families of the migrants often paid these amounts directly to a Yemeni national in Ethiopia who then informs the smuggler that the money was received. The money reaches the smuggler via a smuggling network operating on the migration route.

The migrants embark in the middle of the night and land on the Djiboutian coast, mainly between Ras Bir and Moulhoulé. According to those interviewed, smugglers informed migrants that the town of Obock is close to the disembarkation site, although it is actually located at tens of kilometers from the coast⁵. Some migrants said they had to walk from the coast to the town of Obock in very difficult conditions due to the heat (temperatures exceed 40 degrees in the area) and lack of water. Many said they saw some of their companions die en route from dehydration. Some migrants expressed their gratitude to the authorities and IOM for the assistance they received on their arrival in Djibouti.

5. FUTURE PROSPECTS

During the discussions, the migrants expressed their satisfaction to be in Djibouti where they feel heard and receive assistance. They said they were relieved to be alive after all the hardships. Some migrants said they forgave those who mistreated them during their stay in Yemen. Respondents expressed their desire to return home to Ethiopia to find work and reunite with their families. The

⁵ The town of Obock is located 87 km from Moulhoule, 60 km from Khor Angar, and 48 km from Guehere.

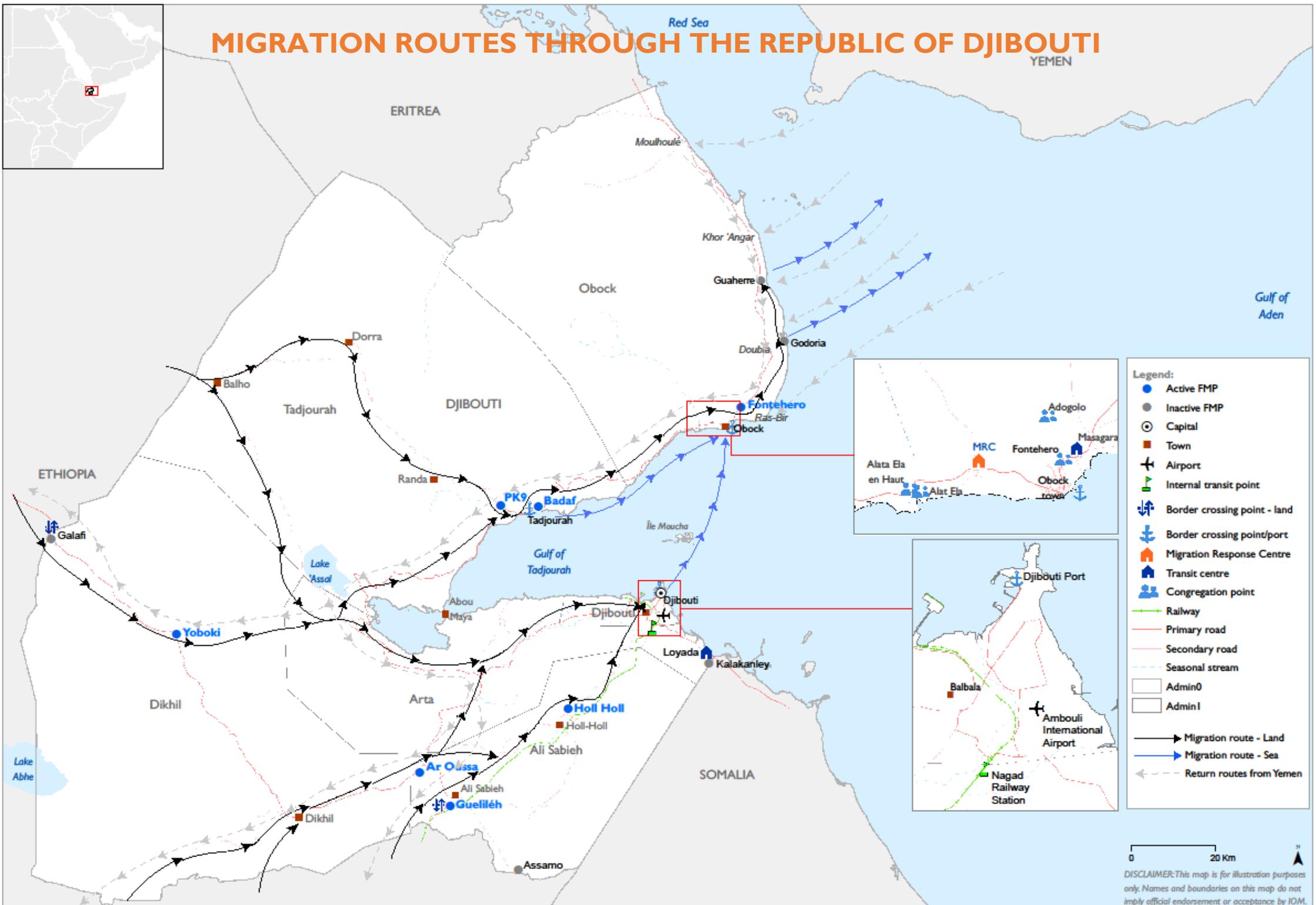


majority of migrants say they do not want to try the trip again and would try and dissuade their families and friends from making this trip.

6. CONCLUSION

Due to border restrictions put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a large number of Ethiopian migrants found themselves stranded in Yemen as they attempted to travel to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Most of these migrants report having suffered from hunger and thirst during their journey and during their stay in Yemen. Some also said they had been detained and suffered physical abuse. The situation of these migrants is unfortunately expected to remain the same as long as border restrictions persist in the Gulf as well as in the Horn of Africa.

MIGRATION ROUTES THROUGH THE REPUBLIC OF DJIBOUTI





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