



MIGRANTS WALKING ACROSS DJIBOUTI ON THEIR WAY TO SAUDI ARABIA © IOM DJIBOUTI NOVEMBER 2021/ALEXANDER BEE

## OBJECTIVE

The objective of this report is **to describe the experiences of Ethiopian migrants who are either migrating to the Arabian Peninsula or who have returned from Yemen and are currently in Obock, Djibouti.** This report reflects the stories that migrants shared about their time in Yemen, the transit to Djibouti, their difficulties and intentions. It also presents the stories of the journey of those travelling from Ethiopia in the hope of reaching Saudi Arabia, their challenges, hopes, preparation and understanding of the journey ahead.

## METHODOLOGY

A total of **seven focus group discussions (FGD) were organized** by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) at the Migrant Response Centre (MRC) in Obock and at informal congregation points in Fantahero between the 29th and the 30th of March 2022. **The FGDs involved a total of 40 people** (24 men, 4 women and 12 boys), as follows:

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS	MEN	WOMEN	BOYS	INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Ethiopian migrants returning from Yemen	8 Oromo			1
	6 Amhara			
Ethiopian migrants migrating to the Arabian Peninsula	5 Oromo	4 Amhara		2
	6 Amhara			
Ethiopian migrants returning to Ethiopia			6 Oromo	3
			5 Amhara	

The FGDs were facilitated using three slightly different interview protocols and were conducted by Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) staff from the IOM Djibouti and Yemen missions, from the IOM Regional Data Hub (RDH) in Nairobi, accompanied by interpreters, MRC protection assistants and the psycho-social support officer. The interview protocols covered topics on migration decision-making, experiences, difficulties, needs and intentions of participants.

### LIMITATIONS

Finding migrant women was challenging and only four Amhara women were available to participate in the focus group. Additionally, girls were not part of the FGDs because no girls were present at the MRC at the time of the activity. Moreover, migrants from Tigray didn't wish to participate in the activity and their experiences are therefore not reflected in this report. This report only reflects the experiences of the migrants who participated in the FGD and is not necessarily representative of the experiences of all migrants along the Eastern corridor.

## INTRODUCTION

The international Organization for Migration (IOM), through its Flow Monitoring component of the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), works in collaboration with the Government of Djibouti to better understand the migratory dynamics in Djibouti as well as the profile of migrants passing through the country. In 2021 almost 138,000 migratory movements were observed at ten key transit points in Djibouti, of which 57 per cent were entries into the country, mostly from Ethiopia. Almost all the migrants (99%) were Ethiopian nationals.

*During the first quarter of 2022, migratory movements increased by 38 per cent per cent compared to the last quarter of 2021, with over 45,000 additional observed movements*

The socio-economic situation in countries along the Eastern route has been negatively affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ethiopia, and the drought in the East and the Horn of Africa region. Moreover, the security situation and access to services and livelihoods in Yemen continues to deteriorate and access to Saudi Arabia has become nearly impossible. These factors significantly hinder migrants' capacity to generate income along the journey to support themselves. As a result, significant spontaneous return movements from Yemen to Djibouti have been observed between May 2020 and March 2022, as over 18,000 migrants have returned from Yemen to the coastal region of Obock in Djibouti.

*Over a period of nearly 2 years, approximately 18,000 migrants have returned from Yemen to the coastal region of Obock in Djibouti*

Most migrants entering Djibouti from Ethiopia in 2021 were from Oromia, Amhara, and Tigray. The main driver for this migration is the search for better economic opportunities. The data shows that more than 80 per cent of the migrants left their country due to economic reasons. However, with multiple shocks in the region (conflict, drought, and a pandemic) there is a need for more qualitative information to understand the nuances behind this migration driver, the difficulties encountered by migrants throughout their migratory route and how gender and external factors, such as the interaction with smugglers and the host communities along the way shape the migration experience of different individuals.

This qualitative study was aimed at capturing the experiences, and perceptions, of different migrant groups at different stages of their migration journey. The intention was to engage with three different Ethiopian ethnic groups, Oromo, Amhara and Tigrayans, adults and children, from both sexes.

*Young Amhara and Oromo migrants heading to the Arabian peninsula were more difficult to engage with than migrants returning from Yemen or wanting to return to Djibouti*

Migrants on their way to the Arabian peninsula were afraid IOM would try to discourage them or change their minds about their decision to migrate. They had very little information on how they would get to Yemen and what they could expect and were not keen in discussing the risks that they might face. A small group of young Tigrayan migrants approached the IOM facilitators during a focus group discussion to know what the activity was about but did not want to participate.

Migrant women were hard to come across on the days of the activity and out of six women, a focus group was organized with four Amhara women. Migrants returning to Ethiopia and who were being hosted at the MRC were very keen to engage in the FDGs and children were particularly open to share their experiences. FDGs with children were only held with boys as no migrant girls were present at the MRC during the time of the activity. All children were unaccompanied.



A GROUP OF MIGRANTS RESTING IN DIKHIL REGION, DJIBOUTI  
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## HIGHLIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- From the FGDs it appeared clear that while all migrants stated economic reasons as the main driver of migration, there is in reality a multi-causality of factors driving migrants' decisions. Beyond allowing in the survey for the selection of up to three drivers of migration, **enumerators shall be further trained to investigate what hinders economic opportunities to properly capture the multi-causality of migration decisions.**
- Host communities along the Eastern migration corridor play an important role in the way migrants experience and survive their journeys. The impact of COVID-19 on the economy, the conflicts in Ethiopia and Yemen, drought in the Horn of Africa and most recently the economic and food security impact of the conflict in Ukraine are straining communities and inevitably impacting their capacities and willingness to support migrants. **A deeper understanding of the dynamic between host communities and migrants is critical to designing appropriate and inclusive community-based protection and resilience initiatives.**
- Compared to young adult migrants, migrant children struggle to come to terms with the deception by brokers on the conditions in which they would undertake the journey. They were open in sharing how traumatized the experience left them and how they are haunted by nightmares and feelings of anxiety. **This highlights the importance of child protection and child sensitive policies and interventions.**
- Flow monitoring data in 2022 shows overall that unaccompanied children represent 23% of all children on the move, but from visits at flow monitoring points and focus group discussions, **it appears that the unaccompanied children may be grossly under-reported. This calls for a strengthening of enumerator trainings.**
- Migrants reported that during the migration journey the presence of other migrants from the same ethnic group is the greatest factor in feeling safe, together with the ability to generate income along the way. The use of smugglers makes migrants overall feel safer, although all migrants travelling with smugglers recognized that they were deceived and extorted. Migrants who had travelled without the facilitation of smugglers and who had interacted with other migrants felt more aware of the challenges they would face. **Migrants who decide to migrate don't seem interested in hearing about what the migration journey truly entails and once they leave there are few protection mechanisms available to them along the way. For this reason, protection measures need to be built at local level in communities of origin and along the way through strengthening the capacities of authorities and communities on protection of human rights of migrants, identification and referral of migrants in vulnerable situations.**



## LEAVING ETHIOPIA BEHIND

### *Areas of origin and the journey through Ethiopia*

According to flow monitoring (FM) data collected in 2021, most migrants leaving Ethiopia to travel to Djibouti came from Oromia (60%), Amhara (20%), Tigray (15%) and Dire Dawa (3%). This is a significant shift from pre-pandemic and pre-conflict in Northern Ethiopia, when migrants entering Djibouti in 2019 came mainly from Tigray and Oromia (34% each) and Amhara (19%).

The migrants who participated in the FGDs were mainly coming from the Southeast of Oromia region (Arsi, Bale), the East of the Oromia region (East and West Hararge, Harari, Wello Zone, North Shewa) and from Amhara region (North Shewa, North Wello, and Kemise) in Ethiopia. A 20-year-old woman explained that she went by car from Majeti village through Kemise, through Kombolcha, Bati, Mille, Logia, and Wohallemat, a small village on the way to Galafi in Elidar Woreda. She then went by foot but was not able to describe the way she took in Djibouti, although it is likely that she entered through Galafi.

Amhara migrant children described their journey and how they had to go by their own means from Kemise, the capital of Oromia Special Zone in the Wollo area of Amhara to Kombolcha, a town in North-Central Ethiopia located in the Debub Wello Zone of Amhara. Once in Kombolcha a smuggler took them by car to Bati. From Bati they were taken by another car to Wohallemat, a location in Afar where migrants concentrate in the hundreds. From there they took one day to reach Galafi.

One of the Amhara children explained that the Afar armed youth violently extorted 100 birr (2 USD) per migrant. Those who could not pay could ask other migrants to cover for them. Those who did not or could not pay were beaten up. According to the child, these people were connected to the smugglers as they seemed to know each other. Afar boys sold water on the way and everything was very expensive (1.5l of water costed 2 USD).

All Oromo children said to have gotten by car from Arsi, through Adam and up to Dire Dawa. One boy explained that he had paid to go to Obock, but he got dropped off in Dire Dawa instead and he had to walk all the way to Obock.



PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG ETHIOPIAN MIGRANT, DIKHIL © IOM DJIBOUTI 2021/ALEXANDER BEE



DESERT ROAD USED BY MIGRANTS IN DJIBOUTI © IOM 2021/ALEXANDER BEE

### *What drives young Ethiopians to migrate abroad*

According to the DTM Flow Monitoring data for 2022, 83 per cent of migrants reported economic reasons as main drivers of migration while 15 per cent mentioned conflict, violence and/or targeted persecution. Following the FGDs it seems like conflict might be under-reported as a driver of migration.

The above finding was validated during the FGD where economic factors were confirmed to be the main driver for migration for all participants. However, when asked the reason for this lack of economic resources, almost 40 per cent mentioned conflict as being a decisive push factor as well. Some had lost family members to the conflict, a couple were fleeing forced recruitment and all those who mentioned conflict spoke about the loss of assets, particularly burned land and killed cattle. A 23-year-old man from Wello in Oromia said that he decided to leave his

country because of how pervasive the conflict was, from Tigray to Oromia. He did not see a future for himself. In the same group, a 22 and a 26-year-old men respectively from Wello and Harar in Oromia said they were fleeing forced recruitment. All four Amhara women from Wello, Shewa and Bati described how they had lost family members who either died or were displaced by the conflict and how they no longer had assets and were not able to support themselves and their families. A 24-year-old Amhara migrant from Ataye, a small town affected by conflict, explained that his family lost all of their assets, the farm was burned, and the cattle killed. There was nothing left behind following the conflict, he said.

None of the children made direct reference to conflict, they all spoke about the need to contribute economically to their household as parents were no longer able to provide for them and for their other children.



MIGRANTS WALKING ACROSS DJIBOUTI ON THEIR WAY TO SAUDI ARABIA © IOM DJIBOUTI NOVEMBER 2021/ALEXANDER BEE

### *Information, risk awareness and expectations*

Most migrants travelling to the Arabian Peninsula had very limited information on the journey before they left their homes. However, there were significant differences between migrants who travelled on their own interacting with other migrants along the way and migrants who used brokers and smugglers. Significant differences were also noted between adults and children regarding the challenges they would face during the journey. Some migrants reported that they received information from people who made it to Saudi Arabia and who shared videos or from those who returned to Ethiopia. Many received information through social media (Facebook) while others were given, within their communities, contacts numbers to call through which they would get in touch with brokers who would arrange for smugglers to deliver their services.

Among Oromo migrants travelling to the Arabian Peninsula there was the belief that there are no visa requirements for Ethiopians to enter Saudi Arabia and that they could just cross by foot, which made it more appealing compared to other destinations they had initially considered such as Europe, Turkey

### *Paying for the journey*

According to migrants' accounts, the journey from Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia costs roughly 25,000 birr (480 USD). The segment from Ethiopia to Obock is around 15,000 birr (290 USD), the crossing between Djibouti and the Southern shore of Yemen is equivalent of 100 USD (40 USD for the broker and the rest for the boat). Money can either be paid in cash in Yemen or to an account in Ethiopia, preferably from Saudi Arabia. The migrants mentioned that the smugglers prefer payment to be done from Saudi Arabia because they expect payments to be faster and they expect to be able to ask for more money than if the payment comes from Ethiopia. Migrants mentioned that the Ethiopians that are in Saudi Arabia know what the family member or friend is experiencing while waiting for the payment to be made because they have experienced it themselves and are therefore more understanding and quick to respond.

and Dubai. A boy from Oromia said that he had chosen to go to Saudi because he saw that people who went to Saudi for a year came back with a lot of money and there were a lot of work opportunities.

Those who migrated on foot, travelling independently, gathered information along the way while looking for job opportunities to finance their travel. They often approached more experienced migrants. Some reported to have heard about the challenges of the journey and were even advised not to go by some who had made it to Yemen. However, they deemed that because they had nothing to return to, it was worth taking their chance.

Those who availed themselves of the service of smugglers relied solely on information from brokers and smugglers which by all accounts turned out to be unreliable and misleading. Most migrants reported that the information they had received from brokers prior to departure was nothing like what they experienced. A 22-year-old Oromo migrant said that he only heard about difficulties at sea and in Yemen once he arrived in Obock. He was told by the broker in Ethiopia that along the way there would be access to water and sanitation facilities and that smugglers would take care of the food. However, there was



PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MIGRANT WOMAN IN DIKHIL © IOM DJIBOUTI NOVEMBER 2021/ALEXANDER BEE



# TRANSITING THROUGH DJIBOUTI

## Routes

Migrant boys from Amhara said they entered Djibouti from Galafi and moved to Yoboki, a town located in the western

Dikhil Region of Djibouti. Passed Yoboki, they continue on to Tadjoura and then to Obock. Oromo boys travelled by car to Dire Dawa and entered Djibouti from the south staying in Dikhil before moving to Tadjoura.



MIGRATORY ROUTES PASSING THROUGH DJIBOUTI

## Difficulties and coping strategies along the way

All migrants stated that the journey to Djibouti was much harder than they anticipated. Walking long distances in the heat, the lack of water and hunger were harrowing experiences that many said they will never forget. Oromo children reported that hunger and thirst were something they had never experienced to that degree and one of the boys recalled that for a week, they only ate a spoonful of uncooked rice. All of the Oromo children begged for food and water along the way. Some people gave them something while others yelled at them. What kept them in good spirits was eating and joking with other children from time to time which made them forget their hardships and preoccupations. Amhara children, when asked about how safe they felt, said that thirst and hunger were their main challenges and that everything else was secondary.

The biggest concerns for those travelling without the services of smugglers were safety, remaining healthy and getting enough money to continue their journey and avoid being harassed. Finding work opportunities along the way also gave migrants a sense of safety. Money allows them to pay for transportation, avoid being beaten up and it allows them to buy water and food. For those travelling with smugglers, the biggest issue was not having enough water and being afraid to be extorted money

that was not agreed upfront. Overall migrants reported that they felt safer with smugglers, but what brought them the biggest sense of safety was travelling with people from the same ethnic group. Young Amhara men heading to Yemen reported that they had been told about the beatings inflicted by smugglers against migrants and were not surprised when they experienced them. Five out of six Oromo boys said that they preferred walking with women because they walk slower. One of the children recalled that *“those who cannot walk are left behind and if a migrant falls down and somebody looks back, the smugglers beat them up”*.

Women reported that walking and thirst were the main challenges. A 25-year-old woman had injured her leg falling on a rock and that made the journey very difficult. A 22-year-old woman also mentioned that walking was a challenge, but what she suffered the most from was the lack of access to drinking water. All women agreed on the fact that the host communities were kinder with women than they have observed being with men and in Obock the community had been particularly kind offering them clothes and the possibility to access sanitation facilities. When asked about how they felt with regards to other migrants, they kept their morale strong and were supportive.

# MAKING IT TO THE OTHER SIDE: EXPERIENCES FROM YEMEN

## Disembarking in Yemen and moving through the country

In 2021, a total of 27,693 migrants' arrivals were recorded at nine Flow Monitoring Points (FMPs) along the southern coast of Yemen. This represented a 26 per cent decrease compared to 2020 and an overall 80 per cent decrease compared to pre-pandemic arrivals. This is explained by the fact that restrictions were only put in place in the second quarter of 2020 and since then flows have been slow to recover. Most of the arrivals in Yemen were Ethiopian nationals (88%), followed by Somali nationals (12%).

*Unlike 2020, Obock in Djibouti was the main area of departure (60%) for migrants crossing to Yemen in 2021, while Bossaso in Somalia only represented 40 per cent*

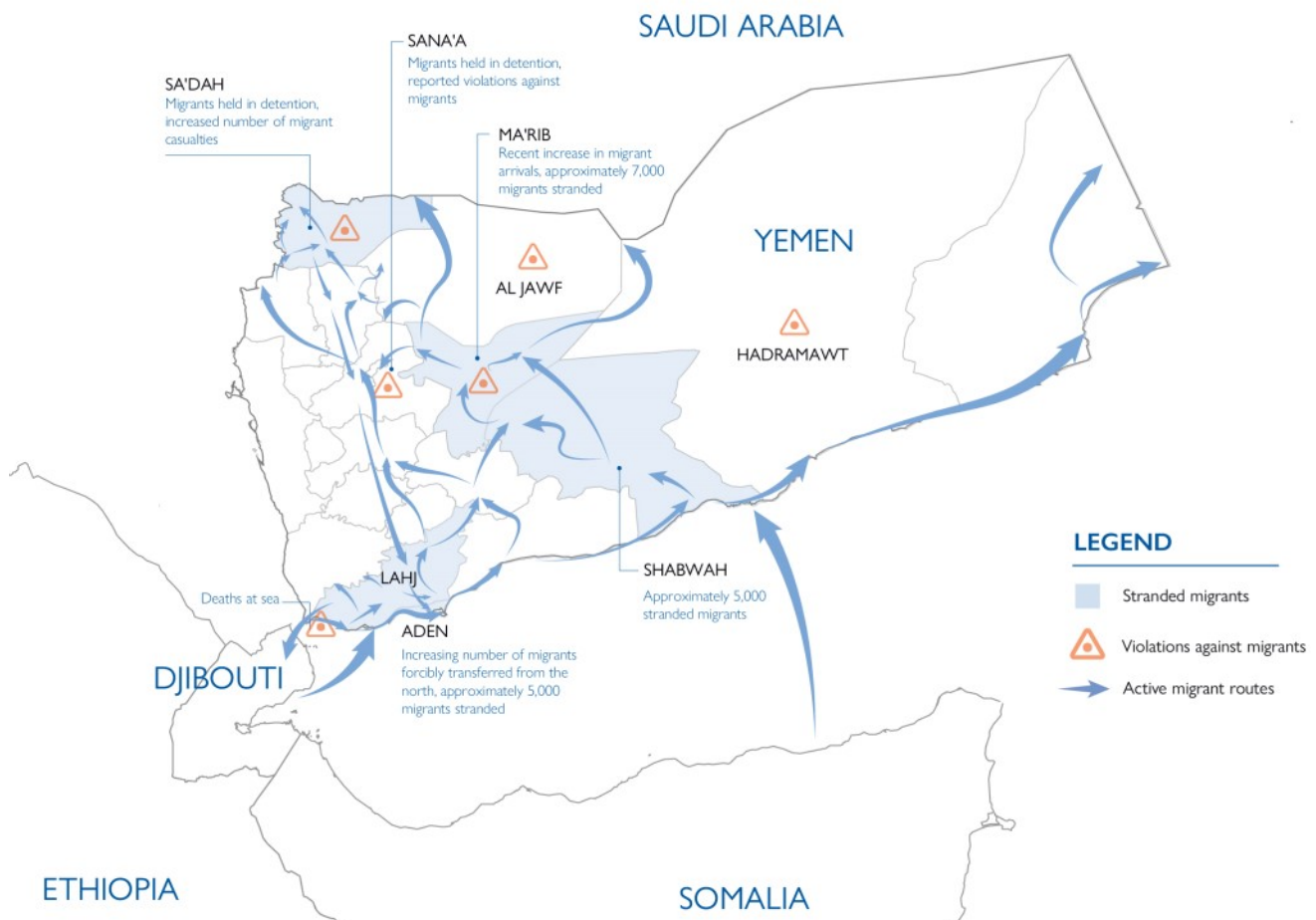
The most detailed and rich accounts of the situation of migrants in Yemen came from children. Two of the Amhara children wanting to return to Ethiopia explained that this was their second migration attempt. The 15-year-old boy from Kemise (Wello area), on his previous migration attempt only made it to the landing site in Yemen and was soon forcibly returned to Djibouti for lack of money. The 17-year-old from North Shewa had

reached Aden twice and provided insights about what happens to migrants who disembark on the shores of Yemen.

The boys said that once off the boats, migrants are taken to waiting areas or money transfer houses called hosh or hawalabayt (which means until the hawala is done, you stay there). Hawala is a traditional system of transferring money used in Arab countries and refers to the transfer for the payment to the smugglers. Bayt means house in Arabic. These are in effect detention areas.

The prices required by smugglers have been increasing and local traders act as middlemen between migrants and smugglers to process money transfers. Hosh or Hawalabayt are like tukuls fenced all around and open on the top where migrants are forcibly held until they pay for their trip across the Red Sea or for continuing inside Yemen. The 17-year-old provided insights on the movements within Yemen from his 2019 migration experience, when he was able to pass Aden and travel from the south to the north of the country.

Back in 2019 the boy recalled that from the landing site he travelled through Al-Jawf and to Sa'dah. He explained that smugglers don't take migrants through big towns where they are afraid, they can talk with other migrants. He recalled that conflict was very intense in Sa'dah at the time and he was captured and deported from Sa'dah to Aden. He was put in containers with between 150 to 200 migrants and he was dropped off at the closest area not controlled by the de facto authorities in the north of Yemen, and told to walk to Aden.



HORN OF AFRICA TO YEMEN MIGRATION ROUTES



## Experiences in Yemen

Migrants arrive in Yemen believing they will find work opportunities that will allow them to fund their journey to Saudi Arabia. However, among both Amhara and Oromo migrants returning from Yemen, there was the realization that there are very few work opportunities available to them, that the number of migrants competing for those opportunities is very high, that the economy in Yemen has been significantly affected by the conflict and by COVID-19, and abuse by smugglers and authorities is rampant, especially in Ma'rib and Shabwah which are primarily controlled by smugglers. According to IOM Yemen, violations against migrants in Sa'dah, governorate bordering KSA, have sparked grave protection concerns in the first three months of the year. Thousands are estimated to be trapped in the governorate, also living in informal sites with inadequate shelter, health, food and other life-saving support.

According to a 25-year-old Oromo man returning from Yemen, migrants can make between 6 and 12 USD per day in Yemen. There are few informal work opportunities, mainly in construction, gardening or serving and cleaning in restaurants. An 18-year-old Oromo migrant found work as a cleaner in a restaurant in Aden and used the money to travel to Saudi but was arrested in Sana'a and forcibly transferred back to Aden. Another 18-year-old Oromo migrant found work serving in a restaurant in Ataq, a small city and the capital of Shabwah Governorate in Yemen, for four months and when he asked to be paid the owner of the restaurant called the army on him and he was sent away. He then found work as a gardener for 15 days, but his employer didn't give him any food, water, or money and when he complained he was sent back to the streets. A 30-year-old Oromo man paid part of his debt to get to Yemen by working as a fisherman for his smugglers in Yemen for four months before becoming ill and spending all of his money (300 Saudi Ryals, equivalent to 80 USD) on hospital bills. He begged in the streets for another four months before returning to Djibouti.

One Amhara man said that he did find work in construction carrying incredibly heavy stones and that injured his back. Amhara migrants returning from Yemen reported that some Yemenis were kind to them, while some others were not and those who had been to Yemen recalled that in the past Yemenis would be generous towards migrants, but they had become tired of seeing so many migrants and they were frustrated.

Amhara children reported that there were very few job opportunities for them in Yemen because they are not as strong as adults, and people don't want to take them for daily labour.

## Returning to Djibouti

Due to the deteriorating situation in Yemen for migrants and the challenges in moving onwards towards Saudi Arabia, many migrants have opted to return to the Horn of Africa. In 2021, IOM tracked 10,547 spontaneous returns of Ethiopian migrants to Djibouti. In the first quarter of 2022 IOM Djibouti identified 1,831 spontaneous returnees marking an over 180% increase in returns in the first quarter of the year compared to the last quarter of 2021.

During the FGDs, Amhara migrants returning from Yemen to Djibouti explained that the boat ride across the Red Sea took approximately six hours. Migrants recalled that when they got in the boat they were told by the smugglers to squat and keep their balance. If they lost their balance, they were beaten up. The boat drivers had life vests for themselves, but not for migrants, and one of the Amhara migrants was told that if the coast guard comes, the boat drivers will throw migrants at sea in an attempt to get away as the coast guard is after the boat drivers, not the migrants.

An Amhara man returning from Yemen mentioned that they have very good relations with the Yemeni refugees in the camp in front of the MRC. They bought things from the shops managed by the refugees; they shared their stories with the refugees who advised them not to go back.



BOATS AT THE PORT IN OBOCK, DJIBOUTI, © IOM DJIBOUTI NOVEMBER 2021/ALEXANDER BEE



# RETURN TO ETHIOPIA

## *Trauma, intentions and expectations*

Most of the Amhara children explained that they have nightmares. They feel safe during the day when they are surrounded by others and engaged in different activities at the MRC, but when they should go to sleep they experience difficulties. Most children have nightmares and one child said that he often dreams that he is falling in a hole, but he never reaches the ground. They don't want to talk with their families through the red cross because they feel bad that they would have to ask for more money to return and they feel a sense of shame. They expressed concern about the length of time that they will have to stay at the MRC and wish to return home as soon as possible. Many expressed a feeling of injustice as they believe that Oromo migrants are given priority to return, while Amhara ethnic migrants have to wait for their areas of return to be verified as safe although they have heard from other migrants that their areas of origin are safe. Such procedure was put in place by IOM to ensure that migrants were not, even if voluntarily, returned to areas in which there is active conflict.

The 17-year-old from Amhara who managed to reach Aden in Yemen twice said that he wanted to return home because he was not able to continue beyond Aden, there were no job opportunities for him in Yemen and he witnessed mi-

## ASSISTED RETURNS

Through its Voluntary Humanitarian Return (VHR) programme, IOM provides safe, voluntary, and dignified return solutions to migrants of various nationalities stranded in Yemen that qualify for VHR. In 2020, VHRs from Yemen to Ethiopia were temporarily on hold for most of the year due to the restrictions brought on by the pandemic. In the first quarter of 2021, IOM, in coordination with the Government of Ethiopia, resumed this lifesaving operation, but activities were again suspended in November 2021 due to the political situation in Ethiopia at the time. During this period IOM continued to provide VHR support to stranded migrants from other nationalities with a total of 2,027 migrants assisted. VHR activities for 2022 have resumed and IOM is preparing for a total of 34 VHR charters to depart from Aden Airport and Seiyun Airport (Ma'rib) over the coming months.

In Djibouti, IOM supports the most vulnerable migrants who wish to return voluntarily to their country of origin to do so through its assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programme. Between 2021 and March 2022, 975 migrants were assisted with AVRR from Djibouti to their country of origin, despite a temporary suspension following the declaration of a nationwide state of emergency in Ethiopia.

IOM Yemen, IOM Djibouti and IOM Ethiopia are closely coordinating returns to ensure returns are in the best interest of the migrants. Currently returns are focused on Amhara, Oromo, and Addis only, stranded migrants from the Tigray region are on hold pending further verification on areas of return.

## CONCLUSION

The Eastern route continues to be the busiest and most relevant migration corridor in the East and Horn of Africa. Studying the flows and volumes of the movements is key to understanding regional and intraregional development, social and economic dynamics. Collecting qualitative information is critical to understand the multi-causality and complexity of migration journeys.

The impact of the conflict in Ethiopia and in Yemen, in addition to the economic impact of COVID-19 and the drought in the region have put a strain on both migrants and the host communities along the way, making a difficult journey even harder.

Protection measures and safe, humane and orderly migration policies and measures must take a comprehensive whole-of-route approach.

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