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A View from the Ground: Human Security Threats to Irregular Migrants across the Mediterranean

Derek Lutterbeck

While migrants travelling from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe are often lured by a somewhat distorted image about what will expect them at their intended destination, for many migrants the journey itself often also turns out to be a rather traumatic experience. En route to Europe, irregular migrants often encounter extreme hardships, either as a result of difficult travelling conditions, or due to abuses by state officials or migrant smugglers; indeed many of them never reach their final destination. Researchers in this field are only just beginning to systematically collect data on migrant deaths, but it can be assumed that the death toll of irregular migrants attempting to reach Europe from the African continent numbers in the thousands per year.¹ Threats to migrants' safety and lives during their journey from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe come from at least three main sources: harsh and indeed often extremely dangerous travel conditions, as well as mistreatment suffered at the hands of both state officials and migrant smugglers along the way. In the following some of the main risks irregular migrants attempting to reach Europe typically face are discussed, based on approx. 100 interviews conducted with migrants who have travelled from Africa to Europe in recent years.²

¹See, e.g., International Organisation for Migration, *Fatal Journeys. Tracking Lives Lost during Migration*. Geneva: IOM, 2014.

²The interviews were conducted with migrants of different nationalities who had arrived in Malta during the years 2005 – 2012.

Contrary to common perceptions, migrants' journey from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe is often a rather long one, which is undertaken in numerous stages and rarely in one go. Even though it is not unheard of that migrants coming from countries such as Somalia or Nigeria manage to reach Europe within a few weeks only, more often than not the journey takes several months or even years. As migrants usually need to raise funds to pay (smugglers) for the different legs of their journey, it is quite common for them to stay and work for extended periods of time, sometimes many years, in one of the major cities along the way. Moreover, migrants are often arrested and detained by police or other officials in countries through which they transit. A quick release might be obtained by paying bribes, but if the migrants do not have sufficient funds, their detention might last several months or even longer. While the trip from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe thus often turns out to be much longer than initially planned, migrants also face severe dangers along the way. The most risky parts of migrants' journey from Africa to Europe are the crossing of the Sahara and the last stage of the trip, i.e. the crossing of the Mediterranean by boat.

I. The Dangers of Crossing the Desert and the Sea

When crossing the Sahara from countries such as Sudan or Niger to Libya, migrants practically always resort to smugglers who will transport them across the desert in small pick-up trucks or larger lorries. The trip across the desert is an extremely difficult one, not only due to the long distances involved but even more so because of the very harsh weather in the desert, with extreme heat during the day and freezing cold in the night. The conditions of the road are also very uncertain so that it is difficult to predict the length of the journey, which can range anywhere from a few days to several weeks. It is not known how many migrants die in the Sahara each year, but it can be assumed that they number in the hundreds if not thousands, typically due to dehydration or

heatstroke, or simply as a result of being abandoned by smugglers in the desert.

Migrants travelling from cities such as Khartoum or Agadez across the Sahara typically arrange their journey as follows: first they will search for an “intermediary” or broker who will offer them a trip across the desert, which usually costs around 500 USD (from Khartoum to southern Libya). Once they have paid the money to the broker, they are driven in minibuses or normal cars to the outskirts of the city, where the migrants are assembled in “safe houses” until they embark on the actual journey across the Sahara. Their stay in these safe houses can vary widely, from just a few hours to several weeks, for example in case there are not enough migrants to fill up the car.

The migrants are then herded into open pick-up trucks or lager lorries which will drive them across the desert. In either case, the vehicles are usually very overcrowded; as many as 30 migrants might be crammed into one pick-up truck, or one hundred or even more into a lorry. The transport of migrants across the Sahara seems to be based on rather close cooperation and a division of labour between smugglers of different nationalities. For example, migrants travelling from Sudan to Libya are typically driven first by Sudanese drivers and then handed over to Libyan smugglers somewhere in the desert. For the migrants, as already mentioned, the trip across the Sahara is a very arduous one, not only due to harsh climatic conditions but also because they are often provided with insufficient food and water by the smugglers. On the Libyan side, migrants are then—again—brought into safe houses which are located at the outskirts of the Libyan towns of Al-Kufra or Ajdabiya. It is common that migrants will be locked up and sometimes even mistreated by smugglers inside these safe houses (see below).

An equally difficult and life-threatening part of migrants’ journey from Africa to Europe is the trip by boat across the Mediterranean. Again there are currently only rough estimates, but

it can be assumed that hundreds if not thousands of migrants drown in the Mediterranean each year. Accidents are frequent because the boats carrying migrants are often overloaded and unseaworthy, and the weather conditions in the Mediterranean can of course change rapidly.

As with the journey across the Sahara, the transport of migrants by boat from countries such as Libya across the Mediterranean follows a relatively clear pattern. In this case, as well, the trip is arranged through a broker who is usually of the same nationality as the migrants. Once the migrants have paid the money for the trip—usually between 900 and 1,200 USD—they were given a time and place where they would be picked up. The migrants are then driven—usually in closed pickup trucks and at night—to the place of departure along the coast. Once again, they will be assembled in safe houses close to the seafront. In this case, as well, their stay in the safe house can vary widely, from just a few hours to several weeks or even months, depending on such factors as weather conditions, the availability of boats, and probably also on arrangements with the shift of the Libyan Navy of that night. According to migrants' accounts, staying in these safe houses is practically like being detained. In principle, the migrants might be able to leave the safe house, but they would lose the money they paid for the trip if they did so. Moreover, once inside the safe house, they are entirely dependent on the smugglers for food and other items they might need. Often the smugglers will exploit this dependency, for example by selling food to the migrants for exorbitant prices.

Up until 2008, by far the most commonly used boats to cross the Mediterranean Sea were fibre-glass boats which usually carried around 28 migrants. It seems clear that these boats were built for the sole purpose of transporting migrants across the Mediterranean. However, other types of boats have been used as well, such as small wooden boats and rubber dinghies as well as larger boats carrying 100 or more passengers. In 2009, however, when Italy and Libya began cooperating more closely in

immigration control, the fibre-glass boats disappeared almost entirely and were largely replaced by rubber dinghies, which are easier to conceal and more difficult to detect. More recently, in the aftermath of the popular uprising of 2011 and the ensuing turmoil in Libya, old and sometimes very big fishing boats have (again) been used to cross the Mediterranean, which seems to testify to the lack of state control along Libya's shores.

Whatever types of boats have been used, however, the vessels have usually been unsuitable for the trip across the Mediterranean, resulting in frequent shipwrecks, often with deadly consequences. Moreover, as in the case of the journey across the Sahara, migrants are typically provided with insufficient food and water for the crossing. A further risk factor has been the fact that the boats transporting migrants are usually driven not by experienced captains but rather by one of the migrants, who usually travels for free but often lacks the necessary experience to navigate the vessel.

II. Abuses of Migrants by State Officials and Smugglers

Not only the dangers of the journey itself but also the treatment of migrants by both state officials and migrant smugglers poses a severe threat to irregular migrants seeking to reach Europe. Migrants who are detained by the police during their journey often suffer severe abuses. In Libya, in particular, the conditions in the migrant detention centres are known to be very poor, and their treatment by the authorities extremely harsh. As has been reported by several human rights organisations in recent years, Libyan detention centres are often characterised by appalling sanitary conditions, extreme overcrowding, lack of adequate food, as well as humiliating and sometimes even brutal treatment by prison guards.

Abuses of migrants by smugglers are equally wide-spread. The relationship between migrants and smugglers is indeed a

somewhat ambiguous or unusual one. On the one hand, the migrants are “customers” of the smugglers who purchase their “services” against payment. On the other hand, the migrants are not like “ordinary” customers; rather their extreme vulnerability—in particular due to their irregular status and the fact that they might have little knowledge about the country through which they are travelling—makes them much easier to abuse and exploit by the smugglers than would be the case for normal customers. From migrants’ accounts it seems clear that smugglers generally show little or no respect for human life, and that if they can make a profit they will not hesitate to put migrants’ lives at risk. For example, in offering their “services” smugglers will often lie about the dangers of travelling across the Sahara or the Mediterranean, promising that the trip will be short and unproblematic. The smugglers will claim, for example, that the journey across the desert will take a few days only and that sufficient food and water will be provided, even though usually neither is the case. Similarly, the smugglers might promise the migrants to provide a big boat to cross the Mediterranean—they might even show them photos of a big and modern ship—but in reality the vessels used are in most cases small and rickety.

The fact that migrants are often treated by the smugglers, as well as state officials, as mere commodities, is also evidenced in migrants’ accounts of having been sold by smugglers to the police and vice versa. One migrant interviewed by this author, for example, said that a smuggler who was bringing his group from Sudan to Ajdabiya in eastern Libya sold them to the police there. The migrants were then put in detention and had to pay to be released from prison. Another migrant who was arrested by the police in Tripoli and deported back to the southern Libyan town of Al-Kufra said that his group was sold by the police to smugglers, who then brought the migrants back to Tripoli against pay.

It is also quite common for migrants to be cheated by the smugglers during their trip. Cheating seems to be the most widespread during the crossing of the Sahara. For example, migrants

are often deceived by the smugglers who were supposed to bring them from the Sahara to the Libyan capital. Instead of bringing them directly to Tripoli, for example, the smugglers often leave the migrants in another town along the coast, usually with other smugglers who would then again ask the migrants for money to continue their trip.

It is also during this part of the journey that mistreatment of the migrants by the smugglers seems to be the most severe. Migrants who were transported through the Sahara invariably emphasised that the smugglers were extremely harsh people, showing little if any respect for migrants' lives and safety. Smugglers driving the migrants through the Sahara would regularly beat the migrants, sometimes with iron bars. The smugglers' lack of any consideration for migrants' lives was highlighted by one migrant who had fallen asleep when his group was taking a short break in the middle of the desert. When he woke up, the car had left. He then started walking, and to his incredible luck, was picked up three days later by another car which was driving through the Sahara. Many migrants also claimed that the smugglers would not provide the migrants with sufficient and proper drinking water when travelling through the desert, and that they would, for example mix the water destined for the migrants with fuel, so that they would drink less. In the "safe houses", as well, which are typically used by smugglers to collect migrants, the latter are often subject to severe mistreatment. Often migrants are kept in animal-like conditions in these safe houses, and rape and other forms of physical abuse seem frequent

Finally, sub-Saharan migrants travelling through countries such as Libya are often confronted with a generally racist and hostile society. Often it is difficult for the irregular migrants to even move in public, given the constant harassment they face from ordinary people on the streets and other public spaces. The situation of African migrants in Libya seems to have become even more desperate in the aftermath of the Libyan crisis which erupted in early 2011. Not only have many African migrants reportedly been

stuck in the country, whereas foreigners from most other parts of the world have been evacuated by their governments, but there also seems to have been a violent backlash against migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. According to media reports and human rights organizations, dozens of African migrants have reportedly been targeted and killed in Libya because they were suspected of being foreign mercenaries hired by Muammar Qaddafi to fight his opponents.

III. Irregular Migration as a Human Security Challenge

Looking at irregular migration across the Mediterranean from the perspective of the migrants themselves thus reveals that their journey from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe is fraught with severe and often deadly dangers. The fact that many or possibly even most migrants leave their countries for economic reasons—and as a result are denied international protection—should not obscure the reality that these migrants often—willingly or unwillingly—risk their lives in attempting to reach Europe. While irregular migration has come to be seen in many European countries, as well as increasingly in north African countries, as a “threat” to their security, the security of migrants is also equally under threat. This also means that any attempt at addressing the current “migration crisis” in the Mediterranean in a comprehensive manner should take into account not only the security of the receiving states, but also the “human security” of the migrants seeking to reach Europe from the African continent.