

From Somalia to Yemen: great dangers, few prospects

by Hanno (J H) van Gemund

Growing numbers of people are escaping conflict and poverty in Somalia and Ethiopia by making a hazardous journey across the Red Sea. Yemen, their initial destination, has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention – unlike its Arabian peninsula neighbours – but this poorest of Arab states lacks the means to provide support.



UNHCR/K. McKinsey

On 28 December 2006 four fishing boats approached the Yemeni coast, manned by smugglers planning to drop off their contraband: 515 people fleeing fighting, insecurity and poverty in the Horn of Africa. Yemeni security forces reportedly shot at two of the boats that had already offloaded their human cargo. In the ensuing panic smugglers on the two other boats tried to escape pursuing coast guards. Both capsized, leaving seventeen people dead and some 140 missing. Somali survivors said they came from central Somalia. Many claimed they had fled the fighting between the Ethiopian-backed Somali Transition Federal Government and the Islamic Courts Union.

Like so many before them they had made the 300 km journey from Puntland, a self-declared autonomous state in north-eastern Somalia. Many hope not to stay in Yemen but only to pass through on their way to the rich Gulf states. The crossing is extremely dangerous and many drown or die of dehydration. The smugglers often force people to jump off the boats a mile from the coast to avoid being arrested by the Yemeni

authorities. Sometimes the boats capsize as a result of overcrowding. Those who do make it safely ashore report how traffickers steal from them and verbally and physically abuse passengers during the crossing, sometimes even throwing ill passengers overboard into shark-infested waters. In 2006 alone, at least 330 bodies have washed up on the shores of Yemen while almost 300 people have been reported missing.

“Despite efforts to halt this horrible trade, brutal smugglers continue to prey on the desperation of poor people fleeing persecution and violence and those looking for better economic opportunities elsewhere. We urgently need a concerted international effort aimed at addressing root causes, educating would-be migrants and cracking down on the smugglers and traffickers based in Somalia.”

High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres

“What is happening in the Gulf of Aden is tantamount to murder at sea. Unlike Europe – where migration is the topic of the day – the Gulf of Aden seems to be off the radar. It is a sheer tragedy that not more is being done by the international community and local governments to turn the tide and prevent more people from dying or leaving their homes in despair.”

Ekber Menemencioglu, UNHCR's Middle East director

It is not clear whether the tough approach of the Yemeni authorities towards smugglers' boats will lead to a decrease of people coming to Yemen. Since the tragedy of 28

December weeks passed without any boats arriving off the coast of Yemen.

UNHCR has been working with local authorities in Puntland to inform people of the dangers of using smugglers to cross the Gulf of Aden. It appears, however, that many of the people who board the boats do not know about the risks but such is their desperation to leave Somalia that they are prepared to pay \$50-70 for the journey. In Puntland's main city of Bossaso thousands of displaced Somalis and Ethiopians live in make-shift shelters, most without clean water and sanitation. As hardly anybody considers returning to where they came from an option, crossing the sea is their only way out.

A young Somali girl who survived eight days adrift at sea in a smuggler's boat recuperates in Bossaso, Puntland's port on the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden. February 2006.

Since the beginning of October of 2006 the Puntland authorities have started cracking down on the people-smuggling business. Many people have been sent back to the Ethiopian border or to south Somalia. So far, however, this appears to have had little, if any, effect as the number of people crossing the Gulf of Aden is now higher than ever.

The Somalis who arrive in Yemen come mostly from the south of the country, where poverty and insecurity have been forcing people to leave for over 15 years. Recent months have seen more and more people fleeing the Somali capital, Mogadishu, and surrounding areas. They left in fear of the inevitable military conflict between the Islamic Courts of Justice – the militia controlling Mogadishu – and forces loyal to the Transitional Federal Government, Somalia's internationally recognised, government. The short war which followed in January 2007 has not yet brought peace and many more refugees from the south are expected. An increasing number of Ethiopians are also travelling to northern Somalia to board the smuggling boats. The majority of these do so in search of work, although there are some who are fleeing persecution.

Refugee life in Yemen

No one knows for sure how many Somalis have made their way to Yemen since the collapse of their country's unified government in 1991. The last months of 2006 saw a significant increase in the number of new Somali arrivals: UNHCR registered the arrival of 25,898 migrants in 2006. Yemen has a 2,400 km coastline and it is likely that far more have arrived of whom UNHCR is unaware. Of those officially recorded, no fewer than 13,976 crossed the Gulf of Aden after 1 September after the stormy summer season came to an end. The number of new Ethiopian arrivals is also substantial, with at least 11,727 having arrived on Yemeni shores last year. In total an estimated 95,000 refugees were present in Yemen at the end of December 2006.

The main point of entry is the coastal village of Bir Ali, directly north of Bossasso, 200 km from Yemen's main port of Aden. Close to Bir Ali UNHCR runs a reception centre at Mayfa'a. Here refugees and asylum seekers are registered and provided with basic assistance, including accommodation, food and medical care. Only approximately half of the new arrivals choose to go to

Mayfa'a, with many aiming straight for Sana'a, Aden and the northern border with Saudi Arabia. A mere 5% of the arrivals choose to live in the officially designated refugee camp at Kharaz, an arid and isolated region 165 km west of Aden.

Currently, there are close to 10,000 prima facie refugees residing in Kharaz camp, mostly Somalis. In the camp, UNHCR – with its four implementing partners and the World Food Programme – implements a monthly distribution of food along with a variety of non-food items and provides healthcare, primary education, a school feeding programme, water and sanitation, vocational training, horticultural and income-generating projects and projects specifically targeting and benefiting refugee women.

Yemen is the only country in the Arab peninsula to have signed the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees. In 2000 a National Committee on Refugee Affairs was established comprising representatives from the ministries of Human Rights, Justice, Interior, Foreign Affairs and political security. A legal committee was also set up to draft national refugee legislation. However,

progress on incorporating the Refugee Convention into national legislation has been slower than expected¹ and the draft law is still being discussed in parliament.

Yemen has granted prime facie refugee status to Somalis arriving in the country since the civil war in Somalia caused the first mass influx of refugees in 1988. This generous open-door policy still applies to all Somalis. However, asylum seekers from Ethiopia and Eritrea do not qualify for refugee status the moment they enter Yemen. They are, instead, required to go through UNHCR's refugee status determination process. Iraqis are still governed by the Temporary Protection Regime since the fall of the former regime in April 2003 and the Sudanese from Darfur are afforded similar protection.

At present many non-Somali asylum seekers do not get a chance to be interviewed by UNHCR, as Yemeni officials announced to UNHCR that all non-Somali new arrivals should be detained and deported to their home countries. Consequently, most Ethiopians are detained upon arrival and are waiting to be deported. UNHCR has urged the government to respect its international obligations and to continue keeping its doors

Henna skills-training for Somali refugees in Kharaz camp, outside Aden, Yemen. February 2006.



open, also to other nationals, who might fear persecution in their countries of origin. UNHCR has also reiterated its willingness to assist the government with the screening and registration of all new arrivals.²

In the cities, refugee children have access to education and in theory refugees have the right to work. Both in Sana'a and Aden, UNHCR cooperates with implementing partners³ to offer healthcare, language courses, vocational training, micro-credit projects for self-reliance and other services aimed at promoting independence and empowerment.

Yemen ranked 151st on the index of the 177 countries on the 2005 UNDP human development report.⁴ Things are getting worse. Poverty has increased dramatically in Yemen, while the population has grown by two and a half times since 1975. A growing number of Yemenis have no access to adequate housing, safe drinking water, healthcare services, education and sufficient nutrition. The natural resources of the country are overexploited and at risk of being depleted.

Despite having the right to work and assistance from UNHCR and its implementing partners, life for urban refugees is hard. Yemen itself has a huge rate of unemployment. A few years ago thousands of Somalis lost their jobs as teachers thanks to a government campaign offering these jobs to Yemeni citizens. Now Somali men are fortunate if they can find daily labour jobs in road or sewer construction and cleaning, or can make some money by washing cars. Both Somali and Ethiopian women often find work as domestic workers in Yemeni households but are severely underpaid and often work in very difficult circumstances.⁵

"In Yemen my husband was cleaning cars, and I was sometimes working as a housemaid. Then my husband divorced me because of our life of poverty and because one of our children died. We were fighting all the time. Now I am sick so I cannot work. I tried to sell incense. Later I started begging at restaurants. My children do not go to school. A friend helps me with the rent and we eat leftovers from restaurants."

Despite their evident contribution to the Yemeni economy and the very limited cost to the Yemeni government – for UNHCR secures funds for most health and other services – public opinion towards refugees is growing increasingly hostile. Discrimination against people of African origin is widespread.

In group discussions, most refugees state categorically that they consider resettlement the only possible durable solution. Some refugees in Kharaz camp and in urban areas are wary of local integration projects because they believe that investment in their lives in Yemen will diminish their chances of resettlement. However, hopes for resettlement in the US or another western country are most unlikely to be realised. Last year a rumour spread throughout Somalia and Yemen that 70,000 refugees were to be resettled from Yemen to the US. This caused a surge in the number of new arrivals and it has proved very difficult to convince refugees that resettlement activities are limited to a few very vulnerable cases. During 2006 only 350 individuals were submitted for resettlement.

For an increasing number of Somalis the situation in Yemen is now so bad that they opt to return to Somalia. UNHCR only assists those who want to return to relatives in Puntland and to the self-declared independent state of Somaliland. Many of these UNHCR assists are female heads of households whose husbands have gone to Saudi Arabia only to be deported to Somalia. In the last months hundreds have been leaving on UNHCR-booked flights to Bossaso and Hargeisa, flying over the Gulf of Aden and the incoming smugglers' boats.

UNHCR is working to improve the lives of refugees, focusing on building self-reliance. Under the terms of an agreement between the government and UNHCR signed in July 2005, all Somali refugees are now registered and six permanent registration centres will be opened. Refugees are to receive up-to-date refugee cards which enable them to travel freely inside Yemen and which, according to the Minister of Social Affairs, can be regarded as work permits. UNHCR Yemen is preparing a number of projects to improve the living conditions of refugees.

UNHCR wants to improve the process of reception of new arrivals, from the moment they disembark to the moment they register in planned registration centres near the coast. Shelters in the Kharaz camp and in Aden need to be improved and schools upgraded and better resourced. UNHCR is also planning to significantly expand primary and reproductive health projects.

Conclusion

As long as south and central Somalia is in political and social turmoil, more refugees will join the already large refugee population in Yemen. Therefore, more aid is needed in the short term to support the thousands of refugees who arrive in Yemen and live in very difficult circumstances, and to improve their position among Yemenis. Yemen's Foreign Minister Abu Bakr al-Qurbi has called on the Gulf states and the rest of the international community to help Yemen by providing better living conditions for the refugees and to assist it in patrolling its vast coastline and saving lives of those in peril in the Gulf of Aden. A more active approach from the international community is also necessary to support Puntland and Somaliland to receive and assist thousands of displaced people. In the long term, only stability and development in the Horn of Africa will stem the flow of packed boats over the Gulf of Aden. Unfortunately, the political situation is still far from stable. UNHCR, together with other UN agencies in Yemen, is preparing for a new mass influx.

Hanno (J H) van Gemund (gemund@unhcr.org) is a lawyer working as Associate Durable Solutions Officer with UNHCR Yemen. This article is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily represent the views of UNHCR.

1. See Nesyha H B Hughes 'Yemen and refugees: progressive attitudes', FMR 16 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR16/fmr16.12.pdf.

2. UNHCR Refugee daily 5 December 2006

3. These include the Adventist Development and Relief Agency International (www.adra.org), Marie Stopes International (www.mariestopes.org.uk/www/yemen.htm), the International Development Foundation (IDF), the Charitable Society for Social Welfare (www.cssw.org.ye) and SHS.

4. <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005>

5. See M de Regt (2006) 'Ethiopian women increasingly trafficked to Yemen', FMR 25, www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR25/FMR2521.pdf