

Somali refugees drowned after being forced off boat at gunpoint

By Barry Mason and Chris Talbot
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Reports from Somalia have confirmed that over 80 would-be migrants were drowned in the Gulf of Aden after being forced to jump off a boat at sea. On May 18 the wooden boat began floundering and the captain ordered his crew to force people to jump in the sea at the threat of gunpoint. This was done in an attempt to “lighten the load” and prevent the ship capsizing.

Local Somali fishermen from the remote village of Las Qoray were able to rescue around 70 people drifting in the sea. The boat, which had been adrift for 10 days, was towed back to Somalia. The bodies of five immigrants were found on the boat, having starved to death. It is believed that the boat had originally set off from the port of Bossaso in the autonomous Puntland region of north eastern Somalia.

The six-armed crew members are believed to have escaped. Many of the survivors who were taken to a school in Las Qoray are said to be exhausted and needing urgent medical treatment. They included a six-month old baby and two children under 10 years old. Of the missing people, searchers in the area have so far found 28 dead bodies.

Some of the survivors have now returned to Bossaso, where local journalists interviewed them. Seynab Husayn Muhammad told the United Nations news agency IRIN that when the engine of the boat had stalled in high seas the armed crew began forcing people into the water. She had paid \$300 dollars to be transported to Yemen from where she and the other refugees had hoped to get to Saudi Arabia to find work. "Almost everybody paid between \$300 and \$500 for the trip," she explained. Most of the people on the boat were originally from Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, and other towns in the south of the country. They had fled to the northern region to escape the decade-long civil war in the country.

With large numbers of refugees seeking to escape poverty and strife, smuggling to Yemen is a lucrative business. In October last year two people were killed and five seriously injured when a grenade was thrown into a shelter in Bossaso. The victims, who were thought to have been Ethiopians, were in the shelter prior to being taken by boat to the Yemen. Police said the attack was probably the result of a dispute between rival boat owners involved in the smuggling of refugees.

Somalia has one of the world's largest refugee populations—in 1999 there were nearly half a million people living in exile. Its total current population is around nine million. The main destination countries for Somali asylum seekers were Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti and Yemen. There are also many thousands of internally displaced people.

During the 1980s the United States and Western governments supported the Somali regime of Siad Barre as a bulwark against the pro-Soviet regime in Ethiopia. As the Cold War ended US support dried up and the Barre regime, already burdened by famine and thousands of refugees, was overthrown. By 1991 the country had descended into civil war, as various “warlords” fought to control different areas. In 1992 the UN's attempt to establish a peace mission was backed by a separate 30,000 strong US force, supposedly securing the delivery of food supplies but in reality attempting to impose a puppet regime. The intervention ended disastrously as the population of Mogadishu resisted the blatant attempt at western control. It resulted in more than 100 Western troops being killed, including 18 US personnel. Live television coverage showed the corpses of US soldiers being dragged through the streets.

By 1995 the UN was forced to pull out completely.

For the last decade Somalia has had no central state and a civil war continues to the present day.

The West has recently attempted to establish a transitional government in the country, following conferences in neighbouring Djibouti. Latest reports from Mogadishu, however, state that there has been heavy fighting between forces of the transitional government and one of the “warlords”.

In the early 1990s the north-western part of Somalia seceded from the rest of the country, based on the borders that were once the British part of Somalia. Called the “Republic of Somaliland” and bringing in its own currency, the breakaway region has so far failed to gain official Western recognition. Neighbouring Puntland, where the refugees were drowned, is also an autonomous region, although its leaders have not called for complete secession from the rest of Somalia.

Over the last few years these northern regions appeared to be more stable than the rest of Somalia and have attracted returning refugees from the west as well as from the south of Somalia. Their economy has been based on trade with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

However, recent reports from the aid agencies USAID and the European Union Food Security Assessment Unit (FSAU) have warned that there is now a dire situation facing people in northern Somalia—with urban poor and internally displaced people hardly managing to exist. One report refers to a growing North-South economic divide as, despite currency inflation, the southern region of Somalia has enjoyed a good harvest and has access to the Kenyan market.

Because of an outbreak of Rift Valley fever, there is a ban on the export of livestock to the Gulf States from Somalia. This had been one of the mainstays of the northern local economy. Rocketing inflation is also threatening the survival of people in the region. In the north west currency devaluation has led to a huge jump in the price of imported rice. The report states that 12 months ago a day's labour could buy eight kilograms of rice whereas in April this year it only bought two kilograms. Lateness of the “Gu” seasonal rains has led to water shortages and has meant families having to buy expensive trucked water leaving less money for food.

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