

Fartuun: Taking Risks, Pursuing Hopes from Somaliland to Libya and Back Home



Migrant women in Somalia © IOM/Celeste Hibbert 2011

Aged 21, Fartuun,* a high school graduate and young mother, left her hometown in Somaliland in 2013 and set off on a journey to reach Europe, where she hoped to find work to eventually pay for further studies and realize her dream of becoming a teacher. Instead, her ordeal took her from her village to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and, eventually, Libya, a country in escalating crisis. Again.

At first, things seemed to go according to the original plan, and Fartuun was – as she requested – smuggled by a group of men from Somaliland to Saudi Arabia. From there, over the course of many days and nights, she crossed the Arabian Desert and eventually reached Libya two weeks later. But in Libya things began to fall apart. She tried to work odd jobs to pay for her passage to Europe, but with civil war raging across the country, safety – not income – became her top priority. The smugglers who had taken her to Libya grew impatient, finally making her their prisoner. It was at this point that her experience turned from one of smuggling to human trafficking.

During the summer of 2014, Libya witnessed relentless civil unrest due to fighting between rival militia groups, with a number of assassinations, kidnapping and armed clashes, particularly in Benghazi and Derna (Eastern Libya). In July, heavy fighting erupted in the

city of Tripoli, with militia shells attacking the international airport and violence gradually expanding to other parts of the city, directly affecting civilians. The crisis situation in Libya has also allowed human trafficking to flourish, with new actors becoming increasingly involved in the exploitation of migrants due to increasing lawlessness and insecurity across the country. The passage of the draft anti-trafficking law in Libya was put on hold as the country entered into a new phase of insecurity in 2014; and human traffickers now act with impunity.

Fartuun's identity documents were confiscated by the traffickers, a common tactic, who threatened to report her to the authorities if she tried to escape. She was held against her will for six months, repeatedly abused and eventually fell seriously ill. The crisis situation in Libya further rendered Fartuun's situation even more vulnerable.

While this was happening, back in Somaliland Fartuun's mother listened to an IOM radio programme on the risks and dangers associated with irregular migration. She had received no news from her daughter for months and, worried about her fate, she decided to contact the Organization. It took IOM in Libya over a month to locate Fartuun, in a crowded hospital; a process that was again compounded by the chaos of the crisis, and the limited presence of humanitarian actors due to the security situation in the country.

After all she had endured, her health condition was extremely serious and she found herself unable to pay the large medical bill she had incurred. At Fartuun's request, IOM offices in Libya and Somaliland, together with the respective national authorities, organized her return to her family in Somaliland a year and a half after she had left. The Somali Embassy in Tripoli issued her travel documents and addressed a request to the hospital that her medical treatment be free of charge. A medical escort also accompanied her during her travel back home. She has since returned home safely from a country in armed conflict and has received specialized reintegration assistance.

*Name changed to protect her identity.

Credit: IOM Cairo, MENA Annual Report, 2014