

“We Want to Go Back Home.” Ethiopian Migrants Stranded in Yemen



Stranded migrants at the Al Hudaydah Migrant Response Point. © IOM Yemen, January 2016

A soaring number of stranded migrants have been coming to the Migrant Response Point that IOM operates in Al Hudaydah, a seaport and the fourth most important city in Yemen. Each day, hundreds of them come to plead for a way to return to Ethiopia. They say that they cannot stay in Yemen any longer, the local population maltreats them on the streets, and criminal gangs kidnap and abuse them for monetary extortion. They declare they cannot go forward or backward. Their frustration mounts with each passing day, trapped inside Yemen that has been in the midst of an intense conflict since March 2015.

The migration flows between the Horn of Africa and Yemen have existed for decades, if not centuries. Over 80,000 migrants were estimated to have crossed the sea and landed in Yemen in 2015 despite the conflict, an influx that equals 2014's estimate. The overwhelming majority of the new arrivals are males between the ages of 15 and 30, and mostly from Ethiopia. They trek overland to Somaliland to cross the Gulf of Aden in small boats, disembarking along the Yemen's southern coast to then walk hundreds of kilometres or catch a ride to reach the northern border. It takes a few months along the

northwesterly route that bisects Yemen to arrive at the border with Saudi Arabia. If they come through Djibouti to cross the Red Sea, their overland journey can find them at Yemen's northern border in a matter of weeks. Migrants can be seen walking along Yemen's main roads, in small groups of 5 or 10 because the assumption is that there is safety in numbers.

Unaware of the conflict's impact, the migrants who come to the Migrant Response Point say they arrived in Yemen in the last few months with the intention of finding a job as a manual labourer in a Gulf country. Upon arriving in Yemen, they discovered that overland travel was hindered by ground fighting, airstrikes, and an unwelcoming Yemeni population that is suffering from conflict-induced food insecurity, crippled infrastructure, and other scarce resources.

Desperation has been growing in parallel with the migrants' frustration. Their desperation stems from their inability to continue their journey north as the borders areas have become military zones. They are also desperate because many of them have gone into debt in order to migrate.

Media reports and rumours claim that the migrants are fighting in the conflict. The circulation of such reports and rumours could put migrants at risk of becoming scapegoats or strategic pawns of parties in the conflict. The reaction of local authorities is increasingly to detain and hold the migrants in prison and in detention facilities, to maintain them in safety. However, the conflict has impacted all government sectors, including the resources needed to operate detention facilities. Unable to provide food and other basic necessities at the detention facility for any significant duration, some authorities have appealed for help so the migrants who want to return to their home country can do so.

Having suffered human rights violations and been robbed of personal items and money, the migrants in Al Hudaydah, who so desperately want to go home, lack the wherewithal to return. They do not have money to pay for sea or air passage. They do not have documents that can prove their nationality and their Embassy in Sana'a closed months ago because of the conflict. They cannot, therefore, buy food and water and are often found sleeping outside on the ground, near a mosque or another safe place. But perceived places of safety cannot always protect them from the conflict and some migrants have died, indirect casualties of the conflict.

After evacuating more than five thousand stranded migrants from Al Hudaydah between June and September 2015 and again between March and April 2016, resource and logistical challenges forced IOM to stop operations. With no other viable way home, the number of stranded migrants is swelling at alarming rates in Al Hudaydah and they are desperate for help to enable them to return to their country of origin.