

GUN-TOTING SMUGGLERS FORCE MIGRANTS OVERBOARD OFF YEMEN, DROWNING AT LEAST 39 - UN

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In yet another grim episode of asylum-seekers and migrants dying while trying to cross the Gulf of Aden from Somalia to Yemen, people-smugglers forced some 140 Ethiopians and Somalis at gunpoint to jump overboard, drowning at least 39 of them, the United Nations refugee agency has reported.

They were part of a group of 349 people on three different smugglers boats making the hazardous crossing over the weekend.

One of the survivors told UN High Commissioner for Refugees (<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=445f6a622>) UNHCR) staff in Yemen that one of the boats developed mechanical problems, but assisted by the smugglers on the other two boats managed to cross the Gulf.

Close to shore, the faster two boats rushed ahead to avoid coast guards, and quickly dropped their passengers off, but the smugglers on the third boat could not get close to shore. Not wanting to be left behind with a broken boat, they forced all the passengers overboard at gunpoint.

"The boat was still in deep sea when they were thrown overboard and only those who could swim managed to reach safety," UNHCR field officer Mohammed Godboudin said in Yemen. "At least 39 people drowned. The bodies were picked up by our staff and buried in a traditional ceremony on the spot."

The 98 survivors are staying at UNHCR's Mayfa'a reception centre for two to three days, until they recuperate and feel ready to continue their journey. They are being provided with meals and medical assistance. UNHCR has no information on the whereabouts of the remaining people from the boats.

The tragedy is not an isolated incident. In recent months UNHCR has drawn attention to the urgent need for international efforts to address the problem of smuggling and minimize the number of innocent victims. From September until April, 241 boats arrived from Somalia in Yemen - an average of 30 boats a month. Hundreds of people died during these trips, although an exact figure is unavailable, the Agency said.

In February, UNHCR reported a similar case when smugglers forced 137 men, women and children into deep waters off Yemen, killing at least 33, with another 30 missing.

Bossaso, the chief commercial port of Puntland, a self-declared autonomous area in north-east Somalia, is one of the world's busiest smuggling hubs. For at least three years, thousands of Somalis and Ethiopians, some fleeing violence in their homelands, have set off in little open fishing boats hoping to reach Yemen. From there many want to move on to work illegally in Saudi Arabia or in the Gulf States.

UNHCR has been working closely with the authorities in Puntland to inform people about the dangers of using smugglers. In January, it produced a video and radio programme to raise awareness among Somalis and Ethiopians of the risks involved in such crossings.

At the same time, it has called on donors to support the international community in efforts to improve protection and assistance to internally displaced persons in Puntland living in very difficult circumstances.

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