



HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH

YEMEN'S TORTURE CAMPS

Abuse of Migrants by Human Traffickers in a Climate of Impunity

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ethiopian migrants outside the Migrant Response Centre
in Haradh, May 2013.

Photographs by Michael Kirby Smith

For decades, migrants from Africa have passed through Yemen to seek work in Saudi Arabia. Since 2010, more than 337,000 migrants and refugees have landed on Yemen's coastline from the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Their numbers rose significantly, and then dipped in July 2013, most likely due to a Saudi crackdown on undocumented migrant workers, only to rise again in March 2014. A multi-million-dollar trafficking and extortion racket has developed in Yemen based on the migrants' passage. Its locus is the hot and dry northern Yemeni border town of Haradh, where one government official estimated that trafficking and smuggling make up about 80 percent of the economy.



above: Ethiopian migrants praying outside the Migrant Response Centre in Haradh, May 2013.

left: Ethiopian migrants outside the Migrant Response Centre in Haradh, May 2013.

Since 2006, Yemeni traffickers in and around Haradh have found a particularly horrific way to make money: by taking migrants captive and transporting them to isolated camps, where they inflict severe pain and suffering to extort money from the migrants' relatives and friends in Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia.

In interviews with Human Rights Watch, migrants who survived or escaped these places referred to them as "torture camps." Their accounts, along with those of traffickers, smugglers, government officials, and health and aid workers, paint a picture of an enduring network of illegal operations that, according to them, is bound together by Yemeni officials of various ranks and positions who at a minimum take bribes to turn a blind eye, or may play a more active and insidious role in the operations.

Except for a spate of Yemeni government raids that ended in 2013, the authorities have done little to stop the trafficking. Officials have more frequently warned traffickers of raids, freed them from jail when they are arrested, and in some cases, have actively helped the traffickers capture and detain migrants.

Between June 2012 and March 2014, Human Rights Watch interviewed 67 people for this report, including 18 male mi-

grants from Ethiopia, of whom 4 migrated when boys, 10 traffickers and smugglers, as well as health professionals, government officials, activists, diplomats, and journalists.

Migrants told Human Rights Watch that armed men greeted them as they waded onto shore from rickety boats on the Yemeni coast. “They kept pointing their guns at us and yelling to get onto the backs of the trucks,” said Ali Kebede, a 21-year-old farmer from Ethiopia who landed on the Yemen coast in August 2013.

“Welcome to hell,” one trafficker told a migrant upon his arrival at a camp. An official shared with Human Rights Watch information on 12 such camps, and thought the total number in the area was 30; a long-time aid worker put the number of camps in and around Haradh at 200. Some camps consist simply of a walled yard where traffickers hold dozens or even hundreds of migrants, sometimes with only a tarp hanging over posts to shelter them from the blazing sun. Sometimes there is no shelter at all. The more elaborate camps have guard towers and concrete buildings.



An Ethiopian migrant at a local medical facility in Haradh, who said she survived rape, May 2013.



A 25-year-old Ethiopian migrant at in Sanaa, May 2013. Officers at a checkpoint in Haradh detained him and sold him to smugglers, he said.

These armed men are from gangs of smugglers and traffickers whose networks extend to Djibouti, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Saudi Arabia. They sell African migrants from one gang to the next, through a syndicate, as the migrants pass from country to country. But in Yemen, the migrants cease to have any choice in the matter. The smugglers and traffickers on the Yemeni shore pay the boat crews for each migrant and then demand money from the Africans. They forcibly take those who cannot pay or who refuse to pay to their isolated camps to be tortured.

Brutality is the trafficker’s tool. The migrants who Human Rights Watch interviewed described how their captors had tortured them to force them to phone relatives to ask for money. Beatings were commonplace. One man described having his eye gouged out with a water bottle. Another said that traffickers looped metal wires around his thumbs and hung him for up to 15 minutes, and tied a string around his penis from which they suspended a full water bottle. Others described watching or hearing traffickers rape women from their group.

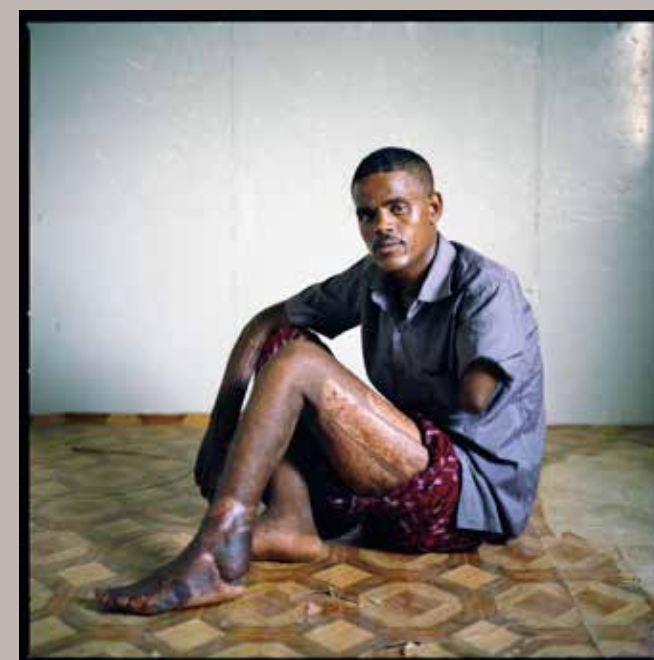
Aid workers told Human Rights Watch they observed signs of abuse in migrants consistent with their accounts of traffickers ripping off their fingernails, burning the cartilage of their ears, branding their skin with irons, gouging out their eyes, and breaking their bones. Health professionals at a Haradh medical facility said they commonly saw migrants with injuries including lacerations from rape, damage from being hung by their thumbs, and burns from cigarettes, and hot, melted plastic. One medical worker told Human Rights Watch about treating more

wall of the Migrant Response Centre in Haradh, which is run by the International Organization for Migration, and dump the person there.

The use of torture against migrants is highly profitable. Migrants who spoke to Human Rights Watch said their family members and friends paid ransoms for their freedom ranging from US\$200 to over US\$1,000. A trafficker who negotiates ransoms said that he is often able to extract US\$1,300 per migrant from their families.



Ethiopian migrant with her three-week-old baby in Haradh, May 2013.



An Ethiopian migrant, 26, at the Migrant Response Centre in Haradh, May 2013. He said that for two days soldiers in Saudi Arabia tied his wrists, beat him, and burned his leg and arm with acid. Eventually he was taken to a Saudi hospital where his burned arm was amputated. Authorities later transported him to the Yemeni desert and left him there, he said.

than 1,100 migrants in Haradh over the last four years and said that well over half of them reported torture.

The torture sometimes ends in death. An Ethiopian man told Human Rights Watch that he saw traffickers tie a man’s penis with a string and beat him with wooden sticks until the man died before his eyes. Another said that traffickers killed two men in his group by hacking at them with the blade of an axe. The chief doctor at the Haradh hospital said that the hospital receives the bodies of at least two migrants per week. Traffickers occasionally torture an African to near death and then drive to the

Many of the migrants trapped in the camps come from poor families who lose their property or go deeply into debt to pay a ransom. Eighteen-year-old Sisay Mengesha, who had sold his ox to pay smugglers for his passage to Saudi Arabia, was held as a hostage in a camp until his mother sold the family’s small farm to secure his release. Others simply have no resources to pay off the traffickers. Araya Gebremedihin, 16, said that when he phoned his mother from the camp, she said, “I have only one cow



Dr. Syed Mohammed Ali examines a 19-year-old Ethiopian migrant at the Migrant Response Centre in Haradh after he collapsed from heat exhaustion, May 2013.



An Ethiopian migrant tends migrants who are sick outside of Aden, June 2012.

and nobody will buy it. If they hurt you, they hurt you. I can't do anything for you." He was particularly fortunate to escape and survive.

When migrants go free, they face new perils, including navigating the extreme heat of northern Yemen on foot with insufficient water and food, and inadequate clothing and shoes. Hagos Gebremedihin, 28, from the Ethiopian village of Qoro in West Tigray, told Human Rights Watch that his captors realized that they would not get money for him and simply released him one night around 2:30 a.m. He ran all night, he said. "It was sandy and extremely hot," he said. "My leg was wounded and my

knees were shaking; my body was very tired. I felt like I was unconscious, like an animal moving by instinct." He and other migrants are also often aware of the danger that another group of traffickers may pick them up and force them to another torture camp to repeat the ordeal.

The abuses associated with the camps are well-known to the Yemeni government. A government official in Haradh provided Human Rights Watch with a list of 14 individuals who run 12 torture camps in the vicinity. Some have been arrested, but only one was in custody at this writing. The camps are usually run by the Yemeni owners of the land, who typically come from local families known to officials.

Traffickers pay checkpoint officials similar rates for permission to drive through carrying Yemeni and African mi-

grants to the Saudi border. But the level of government complicity in the trafficking operations goes beyond petty bribery: smugglers and migrants alike described some government officials themselves holding migrants in custody before turning them over to traffickers for money.

One migrant, Ali Kebede, told Human Rights Watch that he had escaped a torture camp with a friend in August 2013 and they walked for 10 days before Yemeni soldiers at a checkpoint near Haradh apprehended them. While the two were fed bread and tea, the soldiers made some calls and a car appeared with two men. The men discussed the hawala money transfer system with the soldiers, then handed the soldiers Saudi cash. The soldiers forced Kebede and his friend into the car, and the men drove them to their torture camp.

Involvement in trafficking appears to extend to elements within all the state security forces in Haradh: police, military and the intelligence services. Traffickers, smugglers, and Yemeni government officials named senior officials as being complicit and two officials admitted to Human Rights Watch that traffickers had bribed them in order to ensure they were not raided or arrested.

There appears to be total impunity for security forces involved in trafficking. Interior Ministry and other officials could not point to a single case of disciplinary or legal action against officials for collaborating with traffickers.



Ethiopian migrants sleeping on a street in Hodaida, Yemen, May 2013.

From March to May 2013, Yemeni security forces engaged in a series of raids of traffickers' camps, but little information has been provided about the outcomes. The security forces discontinued the raids, according to the Defense Ministry, because they were unable to provide the migrants with food or shelter upon their release. Officials acknowledged that the camps that security forces had raided were now functioning again.

Border Guard commander Ali Yaslam, who coordinated the 2013 raids, said about 50 to 55 camps were raided and 7,000 migrants released, figures other officials consider inflated. While Yaslam said that all property owners and some of the traffickers present at the raided camps were sent to the Criminal Investigation Department, a local Haradh official said only 14 to 20 traffickers were charged. Human Rights Watch has yet to verify a single successful prosecution of a trafficker.

In 2013, a Border Guard commander in Haradh sent information to the local prosecutor on 36 traffickers and landowners arrested in torture camp raids. This information was shared confidentially with Human Rights Watch. "The prosecution did not do its job in holding the criminals accountable and they did not cooperate with the security and military bodies even though they knew of serious crimes committed against migrants by traffickers and camp-owners," the frustrated commander said in a letter to his superiors. Even though traffickers killed a number of soldiers during the raids, he said, "all of that was ignored by the prosecution and instead they acquitted the criminals and became de facto protectors of the smuggling gangs."

A judge at the trial court in Haradh, which handles minor felonies, said that he has seen only a single case related to abuse against migrants, and that the prosecutor in that one case botched the prosecution. Human Rights Watch found no indication that more serious charges have been brought in the nearby higher criminal court.

The Yemeni government's failure to investigate and prosecute serious abuses committed against migrants

by private individuals and entities or to investigate and prosecute involvement of government officials in this abuse violates Yemen's obligations under international human rights law. International rights bodies have made clear that governments have positive obligations to protect individuals from acts, such as infringements on the rights to life and to bodily integrity, committed by private persons. A government's failure to prevent, investigate, or punish such abuses may itself give rise to a violation of those rights.

Although Yemen is not a party to the United Nations Trafficking Protocol, the crimes described in this report nonetheless constitute trafficking. They include the transport, transfer, and harboring of migrants by using force or the threat of force for the purpose of slavery. The practice by traffickers in Yemen of effectively "selling" migrants to each other amounts to slavery under international law.

The Yemeni Constitution and international law prohibit torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. While the intentional infliction of severe pain or suffering by someone not a public official is not technically "torture" under the Convention against Torture, the convention nonetheless places obligations on governments to adopt measures against such acts by non-state actors. The Committee against Torture has been clear that government officials can be complicit in torture and other ill-treatment carried out by non-state actors.

Saudi border officials have also been complicit in the abuse of migrants, by apprehending border crossers and turning them over to Haradh-based traffickers. They also frequently shoot at migrants. Migrants described seeing dead bodies strewn across the desert border region, and aid workers and officials said the local morgue housed dozens of bodies of migrants shot on the border.

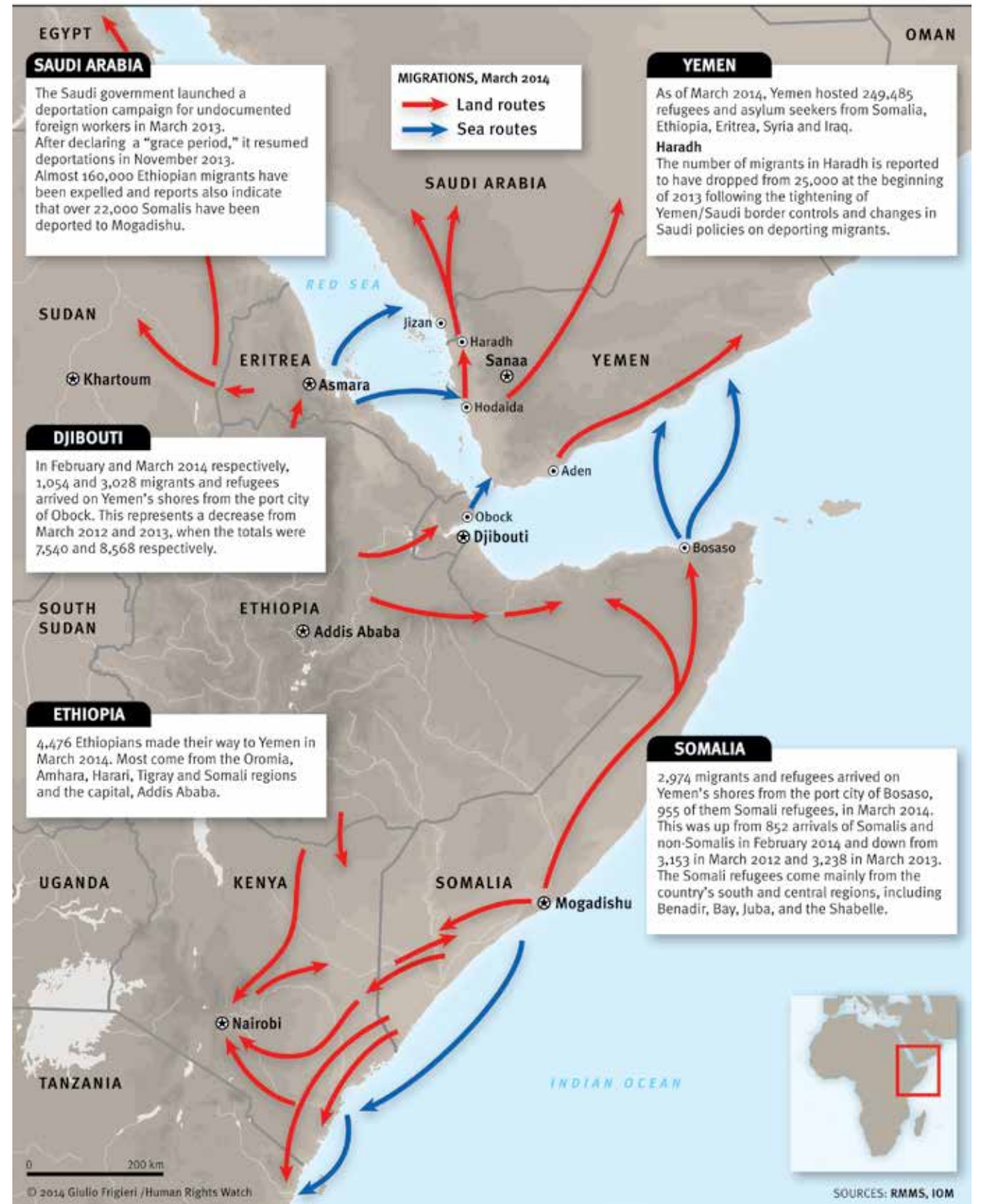
To end the horrific abuses committed against migrants in Yemen, the Yemeni government should develop a comprehensive strategy, including raids, to stop the functioning of torture camps. Officials should work with humanitarian organizations to provide all migrants freed from captivity with adequate food, shelter, and health care.

The government should launch a concerted law enforcement effort to investigate and prosecute traffickers, as well as members of the security forces, regardless of rank, suspected of collusion with traffickers. Yemen's attorney general should initially focus on trafficking in and around the town of Haradh. The police, military, and intelligence agencies should take appropriate disciplinary action against personnel implicated in trafficking and assist in the investigations.

Parliament should pass the draft anti-trafficking law, pending before parliament, and finalize a draft law on refugees and asylum seekers. Yemen should ratify the UN Trafficking Protocol.

International donors to Yemen, including the United States, the European Union and its member states, and the Gulf Cooperation Council states, including Saudi Arabia, should call on the Yemeni government to take steps to end the collusion of security forces with traffickers, and ensure that the military and police shut down the torture camps once and for all.

Map of Horn of Africa Migration Patterns



RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Ministry of Interior

- Ensure that law enforcement agencies actively investigate and prosecute perpetrators of crimes against migrants and refugees. Discipline or prosecute as appropriate officials who fail to investigate such crimes or are themselves implicated in such abuses.
- Ensure the protection of survivors of sexual violence and provide them with medical and psychological support.
- Strengthen the search-and-rescue capacity of the Coast Guard, as well as awareness of migrants' human rights.
- Uphold the rights of all migrants, particularly those held in Yemeni detention facilities.
- During the release or return of migrants to their home countries, set up functional mechanisms to identify asylum seekers and refugees and grant all individuals claiming asylum access to fair and efficient asylum procedures.

To the Ministry of Defense and Office of the Attorney General

- Investigate military and police collusion with traffickers and discipline or prosecute as appropriate those responsible, regardless of rank.
- Create safe and secure mechanisms, such as telephone and Internet hotlines, for the general public and government officials to report corruption and other illegal practices.

To the Ministries of Justice, Defense and Human Rights

- Coordinate to develop a comprehensive strategy, including raids, to stop the functioning of torture camps. Allot enough resources to provide migrants freed from captivity with adequate food, shelter, and health care access until they can be repatriated.

To the Criminal Investigation Department

- Monitor with judicial warrant, cash transfers from African countries to the town of Haradh through cash transfer companies with offices in Haradh in order to locate and identify traffickers extorting money from migrants.

To the Parliament

- Ratify the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.
- Enact a national anti-trafficking law that is in line with international standards, including significant penalties for violators.

To the Governments of Saudi Arabia and Yemen

- Prosecute appropriately perpetrators of human trafficking, including members of the security forces complicit in abuses.
- Publicly raise awareness of the gravity of rights violations against migrants.
- Improve the capacity of the security forces and other law enforcement officials to differentiate between smuggling, which is voluntary, and trafficking, which is not, so they may better protect victims of trafficking.

To the Government of Saudi Arabia

- Order military and other law enforcement operations in border regions to rescue migrants who are the victims of trafficking when they encounter them and to arrest their captors when feasible.
- Order border guards to end any "shoot on sight" policy against migrants at the border that may be in place; appropriately discipline or prosecute those responsible for issuing such orders.
- Stop detaining migrants in inhumane and degrading conditions in deportation centers.
- Immediately introduce procedures allowing refugees to seek asylum or other forms of protection.

To the Governments of Ethiopia and other Sending Countries to Yemen and Saudi Arabia

- Urge transit and receiving countries to enact and implement laws to protect migrants, regardless of whether their entry was legal.

- Launch targeted information campaigns, combining the efforts of governments, donor countries, intergovernmental organizations, and nongovernmental organizations to ensure that prospective migrants are informed both of the risks of migration and their rights to freedom of movement, and protection and assistance from officials in each country through which they pass.
- Closely monitor private employment agencies (PEAs) and hold them responsible for ensuring safe transit to their destination. Monitor and prosecute brokers who knowingly send migrants into the hands of traffickers.

To Donor Countries

- Support improvements in the way that nongovernmental organizations can better assist the humanitarian needs of migrants in Haradh.
- Call on Yemeni and Saudi Arabian authorities to investigate and prosecute traffickers responsible for the abuses against migrants and hold accountable members of state security forces who carry out or facilitate these abuses.



Tens of thousands of African migrants pass through Yemen each year to seek work in Saudi Arabia. A multi-million-dollar human trafficking industry has developed in Yemen based on their passage. Its locus is the hot and dry northern border town of Haradh. Here Yemeni traffickers have found a particularly horrific way to make money: by taking migrants captive and transporting them to isolated camps, where they inflict severe pain and suffering and extort ransom from the migrants' relatives and friends.

Yemen's Torture Camps describes how Yemeni officials have conducted only sporadic raids on the camps, and have frequently warned traffickers of raids, and freed them from jail when they are arrested. In some cases, officials actively helped the traffickers capture and detain migrants. It also documents abuses of migrants by Saudi border officials, who apprehend border crossers and turn them over to Haradh-based traffickers.

The report is based on interviews with 67 people, including 18 Ethiopian migrants who survived torture in the camps, and 10 traffickers and smugglers, as well as health professionals, government officials, activists, diplomats, and journalists.

Human Rights Watch calls on the Yemeni government to launch a concerted effort to investigate and prosecute traffickers, as well as members of the security forces, regardless of rank, suspected of collusion with traffickers. It also calls on police, military, and intelligence agencies to assist in the investigations and take appropriate disciplinary action against personnel implicated in trafficking.

(above) Ethiopian migrants outside the Migrant Response Centre in Haradh, May 2013.

(front cover) Ethiopian migrant, 19, at a local medical facility in Haradh. He said he was tortured for a month and shot in the leg by traffickers trying to extort money from family members abroad, May 2013.

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