



Mounting Crisis: The Surge of Youth Immigration and Human Smuggling in Somalia

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The scale of human smuggling from Somalia to overseas destinations, particularly Europe, has surged to its highest point, marking record-breaking levels for the first time in decades. Current smuggling trends are shaped not only by historical factors of Somalia such as persistent violence, poverty, and unemployment, but also by a variety of relevant issues that have recently emerged. Well-coordinated networks involved in human trafficking have developed across the region, creating new routes for illegal transportation of Somali migrants. These criminal networks facilitate their harrowing journeys within Somalia and across borders, which ultimately aimed at reaching Europe.

This escalating phenomenon has raised significant concerns both within the Somali community and beyond. I decided to write this article after I came across information about dozens of my neighbors in the Shibis District of Mogadishu whose children traveled secretly and illegally to Libya and Algeria during October 2025, facilitated by criminal networks targeting young generation aged between 15-25 years old. Abdirahman Abdishakur, the leader of Wadajir Opposition Party, recently accused officials from the Somalia Immigration and Naturalization Agency of being involved in smuggling of youths abroad. However, these allegations have been firmly rejected by the federal authorities, who described them as baseless and nonsensical.

Despite the influx of Somali migrants to Europe, this journey is increasingly associated with life-threatening risks at every stage. From violence in Somalia to exploitation and even death in transit countries and at sea, the challenges are overwhelming. Even after reaching Europe, migrants continue to face uncertainty, legal obstacles, and barriers to social integration.

Key Historical Factors

Over the past three decades, the primary reasons driving young Somalis to emigrate have remained largely unchanged. The political instability that erupted following the collapse of central government of Somalia in 1991 has been a major driver of migration, creating an

environment of prolonged conflict and violenceⁱⁱ. Recently, there have been significant concerns among young Somalis regarding the potential political uncertainty, surrounding the upcoming controversial national elections. As a result, this perception has played a crucial role in motivating many to seek immigration abroad.

Another key factor is the presence of terrorist groups, particularly Al-Shabaab and ISIS, which pose significant insecurity in the country. The Al-Shabaab faction, affiliated with Al-Qaeda, continues to wage an insurgency, controlling substantial regions and perpetrating terrorist attacks against key government institutions and civilians, including children, women, and the elderly.

Unemployment and poverty pose considerable economic challenges in Somalia, prompting many young Somalis to seek better opportunities abroad. The persistent cycle of poverty and widespread unemployment threatens not only individual livelihoods but also the stability of the entire region, as some individuals are drawn into extremist ideologies. Currently, Somalia's unemployment rate is approximately 18%ⁱⁱⁱ, significantly higher than the global average of 6.8%.

New Trends and Routes

Despite many Somalis immigrate to Africa and Asia for the aforementioned reasons, the current wave of immigrants is exclusively heading toward destinations in Europe and North America, as they seek better job opportunities and improved living conditions.

The migration routes originating from Somalia are diverse and complex, influenced by various networks and the economic capabilities of migrants. A newly discovered route extends from Somalia through Ethiopia and Nigeria, ultimately reaching Algeria, which serves as a primary hub for crossing into Spain. Another significant route runs from Somalia via Ethiopia and Egypt, leading to Libya as a gateway to Italy. An additional corridor begins in Somalia and proceeds through Turkey to Serbia, while a separate route connects Somalia through Turkey to Greece. Previously, there was a smuggling route that stretched from Somalia, passing through Turkey and extending to Latin American countries, with the ultimate goal of entering the United States. However, this pathway has been notably disrupted by immigration restrictions implemented during the Trump administration.

Human Smuggling Networks

Criminal networks involved in human trafficking and smuggling activities operate both within Somalia and across regional borders. These networks collaborate with international hands based in countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, Egypt, Turkey, and Libya, offering transportation, forged documents, and temporary shelter for migrants. There is a widespread perception that these networks maintain cooperative links with border authorities in their respective countries.

Practically, these criminal elements are active in major cities across Somalia, where they frequently target youths, students, and fresh graduates. They entice these individuals with promises of jobs, education, and a brighter future in Europe and North America. In a discreet

manner, they facilitate the journey of migrants by covering various expenses, including passports, clothing, visas, tickets, and meal costs.

Once migrants are transported, they are handed over to criminal networks, such as the Magafe gunges team based in Libyaiv, who detain them in unknown locations. In these places, the migrants endure severe abuse, including rape, extortion, and various forms of torture until they pay a required ransom, typically ranging from \$5,000 to \$15,000 per person.

Dangers on the Road

Somali immigrants face numerous dangers as they embark on perilous journeys from their homeland to intended destinations, primarily in Europe. The initial risks stem from Somalia's complex socio-political landscape, since the country has been plagued by decades of civil war, clan-based conflicts, and the existence of extremist groups.

Once they leave Somalia, immigrants encounter significant hazards in transit countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Yemen, and Nigeria. Risks during this phase include kidnapping, robbery, exploitation by smugglers, extreme starvation, detention by border security, and both sexual and physical abuses. Upon reaching Libya, Tunisia, and Algeria as a final station of moving to Europe, migrants face severe intimidation from smugglers who often demand ransoms from their families. Those unable to pay would suffer horrific consequences, including torture, blackmailing, sexual violence, physical abuse, and even death, all are captured through photographs used to coerce families into swift payment.

The journey becomes increasingly perilous when immigrants attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa to Europe. This portion of the journey is also marked by high risks, including mass drowning, detection by coast guards, abandonment by smugglers, and significant death tolls. As the result, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that over 20,000 people have perished on this route since 2014v, highlighting the dangerous nature of these crossings.

Upon arrival in Europe, Somali immigrants face additional risks and challenges. They often encounter asylum barriers characterized by long delays in processing claims, discrimination, post-traumatic stress disorder, homelessness, and long family separations.

Recommendations

Addressing these pressing issues necessitates strengthening Somalia government institutions through unwavering support to tackle the root causes of conflict, poverty, and climate change. Equally important is the need for urgent regional cooperation to combat criminal networks involved in smuggling and human trafficking, both within Somalia and among neighboring and regional countries. In addition to that, a comprehensive awareness campaign is essential to educate Somali young migrants about the risks and dangers they face during their transit journeys to Europe, particularly at sea and upon reaching their intended destinations. A tightening border security is also crucial in preventing illegal migrants crossing smoothly the borders of Somalia, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Ethiopia, Tunisia, Nigeria, and Algeria. Finally,

Urgent policy enhancements are required, with the Somali government and its regional counterparts prioritizing the issuance of new policies to effectively address these critical issues.

References

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