



GMDAC
IOM Global Migration
Data Analysis Centre



RDH
IOM Regional Data Hub
East and Horn of Africa

2020 BRIEFING PAPER

Examining Missing Migrants in the East and Horn of Africa Region in the Context of COVID-19

IOM Regional Office for the East and Horn of Africa



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INTRODUCTION

Every year, thousands of migrants die or go missing in the course of their journeys abroad. Recording information about these incidents and the people involved provides an opportunity to identify where humanitarian and life-saving practices are most needed, as exemplified by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which put forward indicator 10.7.3, the “number of people who died or disappeared in the process of migration towards an international destination,” to measure progress towards the achievement of target 10.7 on “facilitating orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration.”¹



IOM team identifies the clothes of migrants who died in a shipwreck off the coast of Obock, Djibouti in October 2020 © IOM 2020/Alexander Bee

Each year, hundreds of thousands of migrants from the East and Horn of Africa journey along dangerous, irregular and mixed migration routes to reach various destinations around the world, with the most important and relevant migratory corridor being the Eastern Route which runs from the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, in particular to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Migration along this corridor is predominantly driven by economic reasons.² This paper therefore seeks to give a brief snapshot of the available information on the risks migrants face in the EHoA region and of deaths and disappearances during transit, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP)³ has collected data on migrant deaths and disappearances since 2014. While more than 40,000 migrant deaths have been documented worldwide since that time, there are still many more that have not been captured. The lack of official data sources on deaths during irregular migration journeys has necessitated the use of unofficial or unverifiable sources of information, such as news articles, civil society organizations, and surveys. Furthermore, people who die in remote areas of the world, or stories of fatalities that are not considered news-worthy by major media outlets likely go uncounted, leaving behind a very crucial data gap especially in the less developed areas of the world.

This is particularly true in the East and Horn of Africa (EHoA) region,⁴ where there is little awareness and attention on the issue of migrant deaths, which therefore means that unless there is a mass casualty event, many of these deaths are likely to go unreported. It is therefore important to clarify that the number of migrant deaths and disappearances that are recorded in the region is only a small fraction of the true number of lives that are lost during migration.

Recently, IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC), in close collaboration with IOM's EHoA Regional Data Hub (RDH), has expanded the MMP in the region by strengthening the network of key informants that can provide critical information about these incidents. There has been renewed effort and emphasis for more dedicated data collection on missing migrants not only in the EHoA region, but also across various parts of the world.

¹ <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/?Text=&Goal=10&Target=10.7>

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/region-move-2019-mobility-overview-east-and-horn-africa-and-arab-peninsula>

³ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int>

⁴ <https://ronairobi.iom.int/regional-data-hub-rdh>

MIGRATION TRENDS OVERVIEW AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Migration from the East and Horn of Africa occurs along three main routes: the Eastern Route via Yemen towards the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries, in particular KSA; the Northern Route, including movements through Sudan and sometimes Egypt to Libya and onward to Europe; and the Southern Route towards Southern Africa. According to IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) data⁵, the Eastern Route is used by the largest number of migrants each year. Of the almost 750,000 migratory movements tracked in the EHoA in 2019, 63 per cent were observed along the Eastern Route alone. The vast majority of migrants IOM documented along the Eastern Route are Ethiopian nationals, who accounted for 97 per cent of all migrants tracked in 2019 and 98 per cent of those tracked in 2020. The number of migrants recorded on the Eastern Route fell dramatically in 2020, when around 35 per cent of a total of 445,005 movements in the region were observed along this corridor. This marks a 40 per cent reduction in overall movements compared to 2019, and a 66 per cent decrease in movements along the Eastern Route. This is due to a sharp decrease in monthly movements as of March 2020, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaped the migration landscape in the EHoA in 2020, posing new challenges and dangers to migrants. Countries throughout the region responded to the pandemic by imposing lockdowns and travel restrictions in an effort to curb the spread of the disease. The rise in barriers to movement resulted in stranded migrant populations who were stuck in transit, unable to continue their journeys or return home.^{6,7} Stranded migrants have faced a reduction in available opportunities and services in host communities, such as access to informal work to sustain themselves and finance onward movement, access to health care and other basic services.

By the end of September 2020, IOM estimated that at least 3,000 migrants were stranded across the region, with a further 14,500 EHoA migrants stranded in Yemen, although these figures are likely underestimates.⁸ Media reports^{9,10,11} have highlighted how migrants from the EHoA have been subjected to inhumane treatment in COVID-19 detention centers in some countries leading to health complications and in some cases deaths, with detentions sometimes lasting for more than five months. These centers have also acted as hotspots for contracting COVID-19 given the poor health and sanitation conditions, leading to extremely high infection and death rates among migrants compared to locals.¹² Cases of discrimination, stigmatization and xenophobia were also reported,¹³ wherein migrants were believed to be carriers of COVID-19, both while in foreign countries and once they returned home.

This health emergency has been severe for mobile populations in fragile contexts, creating new challenges whilst, in parallel, exacerbating their existing vulnerabilities. Further, these challenges are compounded for individuals trying to migrate without state-recognized documentation. Recent evidence suggests that border closures and other mobility restrictions have led to a surge in the number of people using irregular routes to travel, as has been witnessed on the Central Mediterranean route, where the number of migrants arriving irregularly in Italy and Malta tripled in the first half of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.¹⁴

⁵ IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) constitutes the main methodology used to track and monitor displacement and population mobility, as it maps internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnee stocks, migration flows and the characteristics of the population on the move. Building on three years of continuous observations and analyses, DTM is now the largest data source of migration flows across the main corridors in the region. <https://ronairobi.iom.int/regional-data-hub-rdh/dtm>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52645702> [Accessed February 15, 2021]

⁷ <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/ethiopian-migrants-are-stuck-in-hell-between-saudi-arabia-and-yemen-40541> [Accessed February 15, 2021]

⁸ <https://ronairobi.iom.int/publications/2020-migration-overview-horn-africa-and-arabian-peninsula>

⁹ <https://www.devex.com/news/covid-19-is-largely-an-afterthought-in-camps-hosting-ethiopian-refugees-99030> [Accessed February 16, 2021]

¹⁰ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/06/east-africa-people-seeking-safety-are-trapped-at-borders-due-to-covid-19-measures/> [Accessed February 16, 2021]

¹¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/investigation-african-migrants-left-die-saudi-arabias-hellish/> [Accessed February 16, 2021]

¹² <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/migration-data-relevant-covid-19-pandemic> [Accessed February 15, 2021]

¹³ https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/issue_brief_return_task_force.pdf

¹⁴ <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/irregular-migration-into-eu-last-year-lowest-since-2013-due-to-covid-19-j34zp2> [Accessed February 16, 2021]

MISSING MIGRANTS IN THE EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA REGION

Challenges linked to data on migrant deaths

The data used in this report is from IOM's MMP global database which is available freely on the MMP website.¹⁵ The database is an incidence-based inventory, where each line describes an event involving migrants which resulted in fatalities or disappearances, such as road accidents or shipwrecks. The scope of this paper was constrained to those deaths that happened in any of the 10 countries¹⁶ belonging to the EHoA region (see Figure 2), including those which occurred in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden off the coast of Yemen, and in the Indian Ocean off the coasts of Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania because they all involved migrants from the region.

These data are collected from a variety of sources, including official records such as coast guards, border police and medical examiners. Other sources include media reports, NGO records, and surveys and interviews with migrants. In the EHoA region, data collection and verification at the country office level is coordinated by a dedicated focal person who relays the information to the regional MMP monitor for inclusion into the main database. While there is no universally accepted definition of "missing migrants," the MMP uses a working definition of only those migrants who die during their journey to a country different from their country of residence for inclusion into the main database.

Migrant deaths in the EHoA in 2020

Overall, MMP recorded a total of 58 migrant deaths and disappearances in the East and Horn of Africa region in 2020. This marks a sharp decline compared to the previous years, when 155 and 334 deaths were documented in 2019 and 2018 respectively. In 2020, the majority of deaths (88 per cent) were recorded in Djibouti, with Somalia and Rwanda the only other countries where migrant deaths were recorded (5 and 2, respectively). Except the two deaths recorded in February in Somalia, MMP did not record any incidents in the first half of 2020 as opposed to previous years, when a high number of migrant deaths were recorded, particularly in the first quarter of the year (Figure 1). This does not reflect the reality of deaths in the region and is likely due to the scarcity of sources reporting on missing migrants, especially regarding deaths that occur in remote locations in between transit hubs where IOM has a stronger presence.



A hygiene officer helps migrants prepare a burial, following a shipwreck off the coast of Djibouti in October 2020 © IOM 2020/Alexander Bee

¹⁵ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/downloads> [Accessed February 16, 2021]

¹⁶ Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.

The majority of the recorded deaths in the region (40) were attributed to drowning in three separate incidents, where the migrants were forcefully abandoned at sea by their smugglers near the Gueherere coast in Djibouti. Other incidents involving 11 migrant deaths were attributed to dehydration in the Obock region of the Djiboutian desert. These 11 deaths were amongst migrants returning from Yemen, and included the death of a newborn baby. Of all those who died during migration in the EHoA in 2020, most were young, Ethiopian men aged between 17 and 35 years. Only two women are known to have died during migration in the region throughout the year. However, it is likely that higher proportions of women and children are included in the data on unidentified migrants.¹⁷

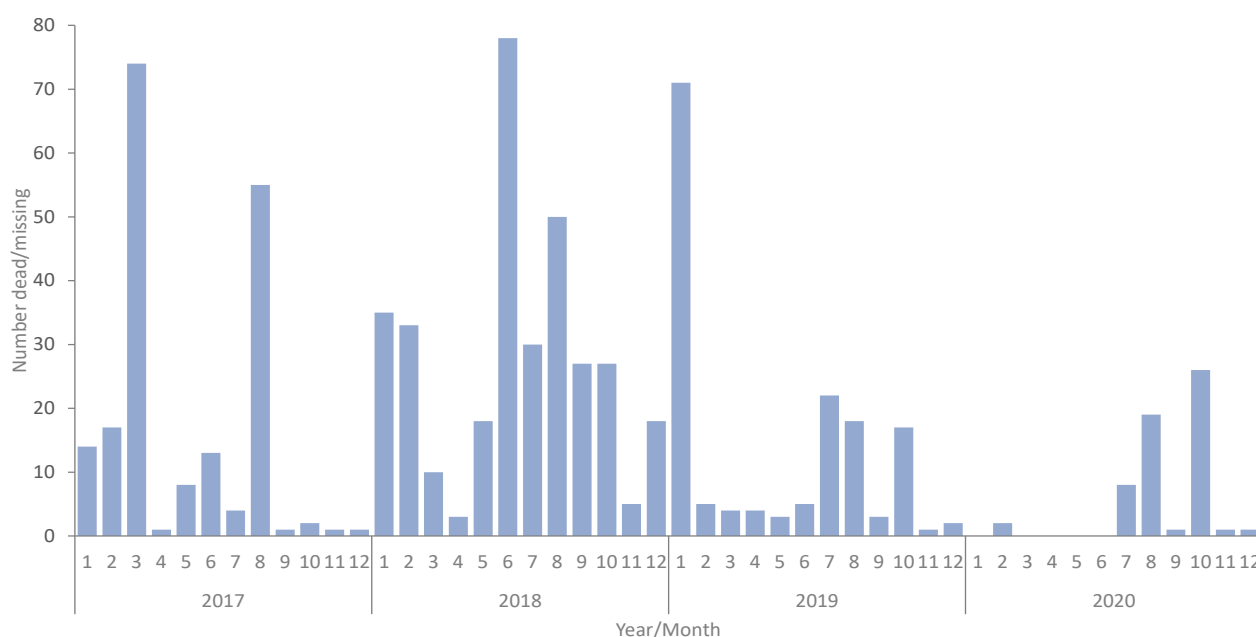


Figure 1: Migrant deaths in the East and Horn of Africa from 2017 to 2020.

Return migration and deaths

As some mobility restrictions began to lift in the second half of the year, the EHoA region witnessed a surge in spontaneous returns of migrants from Yemen to Djibouti and Somalia by sea. This was fueled by various factors, including a growing volume of stranded and detained migrants in Yemen who were unable to continue their journey to Saudi Arabia due to continued movement restrictions along the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, the intended destination for the vast majority of EHoA migrants entering Yemen. Migrants stranded in Yemen have experienced reduced support from host communities, widespread xenophobic and discriminatory treatment, arbitrary arrests and detention, and limited access to basic services, including life-saving medical services, in the country.¹⁸

Those who could afford to do so used the same network of smugglers to try and return to their areas of origin. This return journey is arguably even more perilous for the migrants who are already in precarious condition, often as a result of prolonged detention and/or abuse in Yemen. A total of 6,787 migrants were tracked returning from Yemen to Djibouti (5,902 movements, 87% of total) and Somalia (885 movements, 13% of total).¹⁹ Of the migrant deaths recorded by MMP in the EHoA in 2020, 96 percent involved migrants returning from the Arabian Peninsula to the Horn of Africa. These return journeys are very perilous for migrants, with reports of migrants being forced to disembark in offshore areas or to cross the Djiboutian desert on foot with little or no water or other resources for their journey.

¹⁷ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/fatal-journeys-volume-3-improving-data-missing-migrants-part-1>

¹⁸ IOM, Yemen Situation Report June 2020.

¹⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/2020-migrant-movements-between-horn-africa-and-arabian-peninsula-january-december-2020>

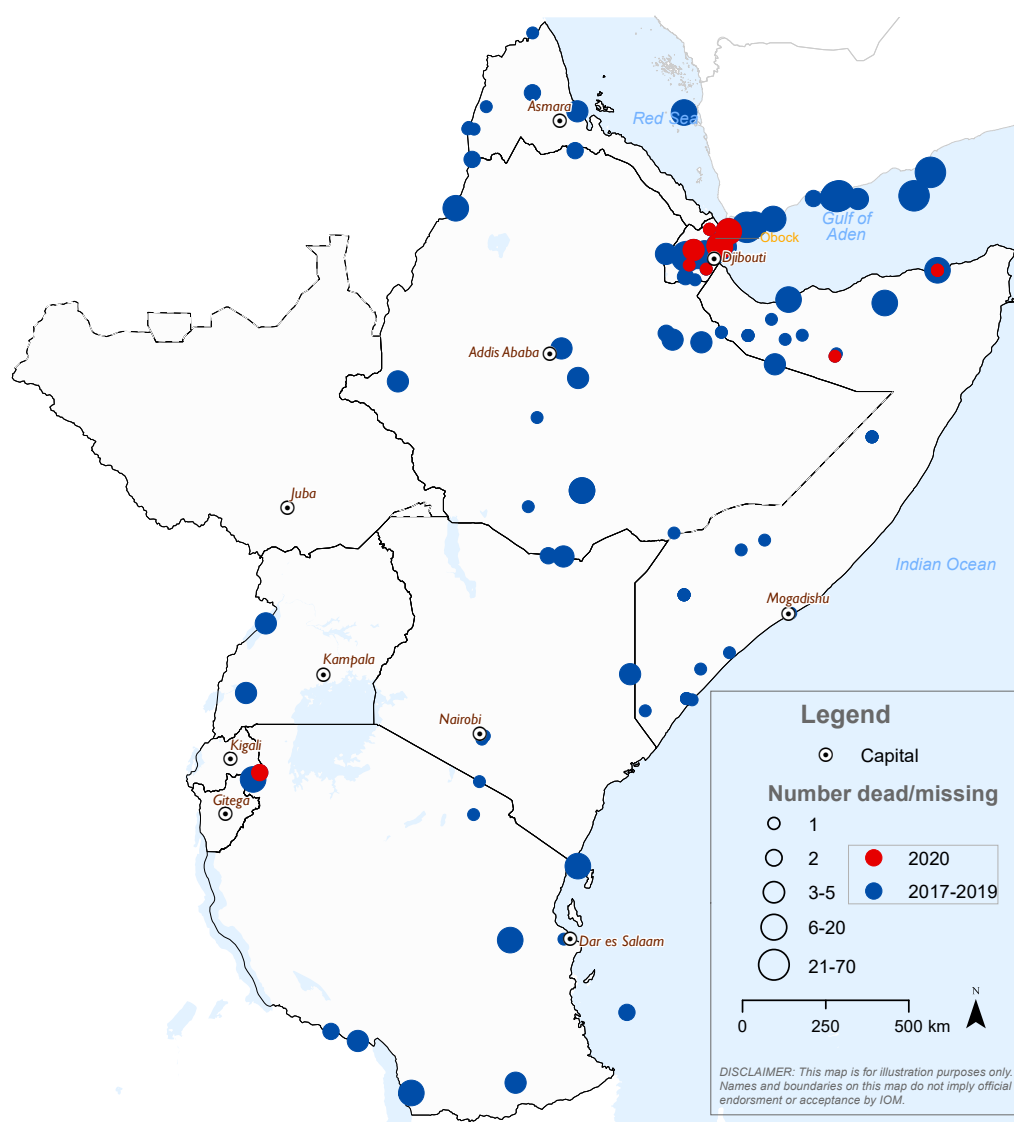


Figure 2: Location and number of migrant deaths and disappearances recorded in the EHOA.²⁰

Deaths unaccounted for

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a great impact not only on the MMP's capacity to collect data, but also on wider efforts to record and to understand migration flows and dynamics. The paucity of data in the first half of the year is by no means an indication that migrant deaths and disappearances were not happening. It could indicate that there were fewer people moving given the multiple lockdowns and travel restrictions imposed by governments across the region which not only made it difficult to travel, but also to collect data on migrants' whereabouts. For instance, there were some reports received about an unknown number of Ethiopian migrants who died near Lunga Lunga off the Kenyan coast in October as they attempted to cross over to Tanzania at night. They were found dead in the morning by local residents who put the bodies back into the sea, hence diminishing any chance of their relatives ever finding out what happened to them.

²⁰ Incidents that occurred in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden off the coast of Yemen are included because they involved migrants from the HoA region.

Missing Migrants in EHoA - Looking Forward

IOM is investing more efforts and resources to enhance MMP data collection, reporting and awareness in the EHoA region, even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Focal persons have been deployed in underreporting regions of the world to increase the capacity to capture and report migrant deaths and disappearances, explore local data sources and contacts and to try to verify migrant deaths that are reported accordingly.

The issue of migrant deaths and disappearances is truly a global phenomenon that requires both international and local cooperation. Collaborations with organizations and institutions that have an interest in missing migrants and migrant protection in general have been launched to increase reporting across multiple sources and cultivate mutual learning and cooperation.

Enhanced media monitoring tools that help search both mainstream media and social media networks to identify, in near real time, cases of missing migrants reported using selected keywords are now being used. Efforts to mainstream indicators about missing migrants incidents are being included within IOM information systems and data collection methodologies, including data collection guidelines¹ that will not only help improve MMP data collection in the field, but also increase awareness about migrant fatalities in underreported regions globally. Dedicated research and surveys have been launched by IOM and other organizations such as the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) in the past to capture missing migrants data in remote and hard to reach areas, including working with, and supporting families of those who have lost loved ones during migration.

Conclusion

Collecting data on missing migrants is becoming increasingly important, not only for understanding and identifying areas where migrants face highest risks, but also in informing policy responses that can lead to safe and humane regular migration routes that will prevent migrant deaths, as well as supporting the needs of families searching for answers about lost migrant relatives. It is hoped that this project will help raise awareness about reporting on migrant deaths and disappearances, both among civil society and policymakers.



Migrants prepare for the burial of fellow migrants who died during a shipwreck near the coast of Djibouti in 2020 © IOM 2020/Alexander Bee

¹ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/MMP-data-collection-guidelines>

