



University research paper

**Trans-Saharan voyages of vulnerability:  
The serial victimization of 'boat people' before the boat**

Brandon STINCHFIELD, ICMC Policy Intern  
bmstinchfield@gmail.com  
May 2009

*This paper presents research work done by the author over the course of his internship with the International Catholic Migration Commission. It does not necessarily represent the official views of the organization.*

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## INTRODUCTION

As reported by members of the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) at both ends of Afro-European migratory routes, including Bishop Giorgio Bertin of Djibouti and Somalia and the Association Catholic Episcopal Commission on Migration (ACCEM) in Spain, the experience of “boat people” in southern Europe begins long before they step on an unstable boat in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. The many sub-Saharan Africans among those who board boats must first make the journey to North or West Africa. Since 2000, sub-Saharan Africans have replaced North Africans as the largest group of boat people.<sup>1</sup> According to the IOM, as many as 120,000 sub-Saharan Africans enter North Africa each year, and up to 38% (45,600 people) of them continue on to Europe.<sup>2</sup> So while not all trans-Saharan migrants become boat people, many boat people cross the Sahara region before boarding boats. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the trans-Saharan experience of boat people is as important to research and understand as their perilous sea journeys.

### I. MIGRATION ROUTES AND TEMPORARY SETTLEMENT

In “Trans-Saharan Migration to North Africa and the EU: Historical Roots and Current Trends” and “The Myth of Invasion: Irregular migration from West Africa to the Maghreb and the European Union,” Hein de Haas presents the history of trans-Saharan migration in an effort to establish a historical foundation that is a pre-requisite to understanding current migration routes through North Africa. De Haas is persistent in clarifying that trans-Saharan migration is far from a new phenomenon. During the 1970s and 1980s, trans-Saharan mobility increased due to the forced and voluntary settlement of nomads, wars in the Sahel, and droughts. This migration was epitomized by impoverished nomads, such as the Tuareg, travelling to Algeria and Libya to work at construction sites and in oil fields. The continuous warfare in the Sahel and the Sahara led to thousands of migrants settling in camps, towns, and cities in Libya, Algeria, and Mauritania beginning in the 1970s. Libya became “North Africa’s migration pole” after the 1973 oil crisis as Egyptians and Sudanese migrated into the country to work at its oil wells.<sup>3</sup> Trans-Saharan migration into Libya continued to increase in the 1990s, when the UN Security Council air and arms embargo (1992-2000) contributed to a “consolidation of migration routes and networks” as Muammar al-Quaddafi welcomed sub-Saharan migrants into Libya as a component of his pan-African policy.<sup>4</sup>

However, Libya has not historically been the only North African destination of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Migration to Morocco rose in 1997 after the fall of Mobutu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the war in the Great Lakes District. Wars in Sierra Leone (1991-2001) and Liberia (1989-1996) and violence in Nigeria, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa also influenced trans-Saharan migration in the 1990s. Before 1999, the Ivory Coast served as a primary destination of labor migrants in West Africa, but civil war and economic decline pushed the direction of the migration flow towards North Africa.<sup>5</sup>

A major shift in trans-Saharan migration patterns occurred in the early 2000s as the result of a sharp backlash against immigrants in Libya that led to the government enforcing what de Haas

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<sup>1</sup> De Haas 2007

<sup>2</sup> IRIN

<sup>3</sup> De Haas 2006

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

described as “more restrictive immigration regulation, lengthy and arbitrary detention of immigrants in poor conditions in prisons and camps, physical abuse, and the forced repatriation of tens of thousands of immigrants.”<sup>6</sup> While Libya’s role as a major migration hub in North Africa is far from over (de Haas notes that sub-Saharan migrants “have increasingly tried to cross to Europe from the Libyan coast”), these events did effectuate a shift westward of migration routes through Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.<sup>7</sup>

Although trans-Saharan migration is mainly characterized by the south-north migration of sub-Saharan Africans, the flow of migrants has recently become more diverse. Migrants from China, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh fly into West African capitals and join the trans-Saharan migration through Niger, Algeria, and Morocco. Furthermore, increasing numbers of Kurds, Iraqis, and Palestinians are entering North Africa from Egypt and passing into Libya and Tunisia before crossing the Mediterranean to Italy and Malta.<sup>8</sup>

A plethora of maps detailing boat people migration routes can be found in a basic internet search. Many include both the sea routes followed by boat people as well as the trans-Saharan migration routes taken by so many of them. A July 2007 BBC News article entitled “Key facts: Africa to Europe migration” outlines the following five separate routes taken by migrants to Europe, categorized from west to east.<sup>9</sup>

Migrants on the “West African route” originate in a number of countries: Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, the Gambia, Mauritania, and Western Sahara. From these starting points, migrants headed to Europe travel north to Morocco and travel by boat to Spain’s Canary Islands. A smuggler typically charges 1,000 – 1,500 Euros for a boat ride from Africa to the Canary Islands.<sup>10</sup>

The “Western Sahara route” is taken primarily by West Africans originating in the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin. From there, they migrate through Mali, Mauritania, Western Sahara, and southern Morocco with some ultimately crossing the ocean to the Canary Islands.<sup>11</sup>

The “Central Sahara route” is followed by sub-Saharan Africans from countries south of Cameroon and Nigeria, who migrate through these two countries into Niger before choosing between a number of other routes. Travelling through Niger is often mentioned in studies on trans-Saharan migration and boat people, so this route stands out especially. From Niger, migrants face three choices. They may migrate through northern Mauritania, Western Sahara, and southern Morocco on to the Canary Islands; through northern Morocco across the Mediterranean into Spain; or, through Tunisia and Libya across the Mediterranean into Italy. Transportation by boat from northern Morocco to Spain is estimated to cost 1,000 Euros. However, the priciest average sea crossing is from Libya to Italy, at 1,500 – 2,000 Euros.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> De Haas 2007

<sup>9</sup> BBC News

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

Unlike those who follow the Central Sahara route, sub-Saharan migrants who take the “Eastern Sahara route” bypass Niger and head straight into Libya and Tunisia before many board boats to Malta, Lampedusa, and Sicily.<sup>13</sup> Migrants on the “Horn of Africa route” also end their journeys on Malta, Lampedusa, and Sicily. They begin in Somalia and Ethiopia, and travel through Sudan before reaching Libya.<sup>14</sup>

So while there is no concrete listing of the origin countries of boat people in the Atlantic and Mediterranean, most appear to come from West Africa and the Horn of Africa. The following countries and territories are known to be common points of origin: Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, the Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, and Western Sahara. While two thirds of Africans in Europe are North African, most sub-Saharan Africans on the continent have been found to be from the West African countries of Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal.<sup>15</sup> However, the term “sub-Saharan migrant” also applies to Africans further south on the continent, and is often used very liberally without specifying which countries south of Nigeria and Cameroon produce the most migrants. Even if the majority of sub-Saharan Africans who board boats to Europe are of West African origin, more research is necessary to determine to what extent sub-Saharan migrants are from countries further south on the continent and specifically which countries.

The overland journey to the Mediterranean may take a boat person as short as a month or as long as several years. How do trans-Saharan migrants make this journey and what are they subjected to? This will be dealt with in a later section, but for now a brief explanation is warranted. Despite popular belief, most trans-Saharan migrants are not trafficked, but migrate on their own account: their migration is facilitated by smugglers who “are usually not part of international organized crime or centralized, hierarchical mafia-like structures, but tend to be locally based and operate alone or in relatively small networks.”<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, it is paramount when looking at these maps and examining these routes to remember that not all trans-Saharan migrants become boat people. Indeed, it is very possible for a sub-Saharan migrant to take any of the five defined routes without completing the last leg. De Haas is persistent with this point:

*It is a myth that all West African migrants crossing the Sahara to North Africa are ‘in transit’ to Europe. There are probably still more sub-Saharan Africans living in North Africa than in Europe. Libya in particular is an important destination country in its own right, in particular for Chadians, Nigeriens, and Sudanese. Other North African countries house smaller but growing West and Central African communities.*<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, some trans-Saharan migrants who settle in North Africa do so only temporarily and eventually do attempt to reach Europe by boat. Thus, temporary settlement, like trans-Saharan migration, is another important aspect of the journeys of boat people. De Haas writes

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> BBC News

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> De Haas 2007

<sup>17</sup> De Haas 2007

that “migrants and refugees often settle temporarily in towns located on migration hubs to work and save enough money for their onward journey, usually in trucks or pick-ups.”<sup>18</sup> Temporary settlement also does not only occur in the North African countries like Algeria, Libya, and Mauritania. It can occur anywhere along the migration route, such as in Cameroon or Nigeria, which implies a multiplicity of temporary settlements for migrants moving through these countries over time. Along the way, migrants are employed in a number of occupations, including bricklaying, security, shoemaking, tailoring, and cleaning.<sup>19</sup> The experience of temporary settlement will also be dealt with independently in the final section.

## II. MOTIVATIONS FOR MIGRATION

Images of boat people struggling across the Mediterranean or Atlantic to Europe often provoke images of escapes from genocide, political turmoil, and poverty. The November 2007 Regional Workshop on Migration Between West Africa and the Maghreb in Lagos, Nigeria, considered persecution, conflict, and insecurity to be among the prime incentives to migrate.<sup>20</sup> De Haas also notes how fear of persecution and violence motivate migration.<sup>21</sup> A September 2006 Human Rights Watch report on migration in Libya presents several cases of Eritreans fleeing mandatory military service in their country. For example, in 2002, an Eritrean named Abraha left his country after protesting mandatory military service. After being detained by Libyan security forces for longer than three months in Libya, participating in a 15-day hunger strike, and almost being deported to Sudan, Abraha paid \$200 to reach Tripoli and another \$1000 to reach Italy on a boat with more than 150 others. Once in Italy in March 2003, Abraha was granted refugee status.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, researchers observe that not all boat people are escaping modern crises. While De Haas cites fear of persecution and violence as reasons for migrating, he likes to remind his readers that the media often overemphasizes this point:

*It is common to portray regular and irregular migration from West Africa to Europe as massive and to attribute this ‘African exodus’ to circumstances of extreme poverty, high unemployment, and (civil) war. Drought, environmental degradation, and increasingly, climate change are frequently mentioned as factors driving African migration.<sup>23</sup>*

It cannot be denied that the urgency of boat people migration is influenced by the modern crises occurring in Africa. Nonetheless, to further support his argument, de Haas asserts:

*If poverty and underdevelopment were the main causes of migration, how can it be explained that West Africa, despite its (extremely) poor and often unstable status, has much lower rates of out-migration to Europe and North America than considerably wealthier countries in, for instance, North America, Latin America, or Asia?<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> The Hague Process on Refugees and Migration

<sup>21</sup> De Haas 2007

<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch

<sup>23</sup> De Haas 2007

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

Clearly, some boat people are fleeing their homes for very simple reasons: their lives are in danger. However, others are fleeing for more complex and often less urgent economic and social reasons. De Haas insists that analysts of boat people place far too much emphasis on the push factors of migration without examining the pull factors.<sup>25</sup> In reality, the motivations behind boat people are the result of an intricate system of push and pull factors.

Predictably, economic and financial situations play a significant role in the trans-Saharan and boat people migration process. De Haas argues that among trans-Saharan migrants and boat people there is a “general lack of perspectives for self-realization in their origin countries and the concomitant inability to meet their personal aspirations.”<sup>26</sup> It should not come as a surprise then that most trans-Saharan migrants and boat people are young men and, increasingly women and young children.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, the 2007 Regional Workshop noted an “unexploited resourcefulness of the youth and a remarkable desperation in the face of the so-called closed door migration policy in Europe.”<sup>28</sup> A lack of job opportunities and high unemployment rates are among the migration push factors cited by the workshop.<sup>29</sup> In his International Migration Paper “The challenge of labour migration flows between West Africa and the Maghreb,” Aderanti Adepoju blames the public sector, as the dominant employer in ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) countries, for not being “able to provide viable employment opportunities to meet the demands of the rapidly-growing labour force, thus generating large numbers of unemployed youths.”<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the push factor of local unemployment corresponds very fittingly with the pull factor of employment opportunities in North Africa and Southern Europe. Migration to North Africa and Southern Europe is largely influenced by a steady demand for migrant labor. Most migrants who enter Libya for economic reasons stay there or move on to Europe. Human Rights Watch conducted a number of interviews with migrants who had hoped and failed to find work in Libya but moved north to Europe in search of a job.<sup>31</sup> In addition to the pull factor of employment opportunities in Europe, the European Union’s elimination of its internal borders only serves to make looking for a job in Europe even more attractive.

However, there is a growing sense that boat people do not come from the most deeply impoverished parts of society:

*Migrants are rarely from the most destitute families. Migrants tend to be from moderate socio-economic backgrounds and are often from urban areas in their countries of origin. A substantial portion has followed secondary or higher education.*<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> De Haas 2007

<sup>28</sup> The Hague Process on Refugees and Migration

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Adepoju

<sup>31</sup> Human Rights Watch

<sup>32</sup> De Haas 2007

The reasoning behind this is straightforward: it is difficult for the very poorest of the poor to migrate because it is often very expensive. Therefore, those who choose to migrate are generally at least well-off enough to finance their journey, whether with accumulated resources, the sale of assets, or debt that often draws on (and burdens) others in the migrant's family or community.

Trans-Saharan and boat people migration are heavily influenced by family and community networks. These networks are also characterized by their own push and pull factors:

*Migration within and from West Africa to Europe is generally a deliberate choice and an investment by reasonably prosperous households and families to enhance their livelihoods. Household savings are often mobilized and assets such as land sold to be able to pay for the migration of one family member. Also at the destination, settled migrants facilitate the passage of other family members and friends through providing information and access to housing. They also play an important role in facilitating migration, either through securing visas and residence permits, or through paying for their passage to North Africa and Europe.*<sup>33</sup>

In a working paper entitled "Migration and Information: Images of Europe, migration encouraging factors and en route information sharing," Joris Schapendonk and David van Moppes apply this perspective to Senegalese migrants and provide several motivations for migration related to family and community networks. They find that many young Africans primarily want to improve their lives and help their families by migrating. And yet, the decision to migrate is often made not by the individual, but by the family and community. In the Senegalese *Lebou* community, the second wife in a polygamous family pressures one of her sons into migrating. In other ethnic groups, this role belongs to an uncle or oldest brother – either way, money for the first leg of the journey is collected by the family.

An additional complication to this situation is the competition that develops among sons to migrate. A son who is not chosen by his family to migrate may decide to do so independently, certainly putting himself at greater risk than his brother, whose journey is financially and materially supported by the family. In addition, Senegalese religious leaders, called *marabouts*, play an important role in migration: "Many marabouts encourage migration on the community and individual level, often combined with financial purposes for their own community. Senegalese migrants often not only send money to their families but also to their religious leaders and communities."<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the family and community network provides a pull factor in migrant communities that are established at migration destinations:

*Due to complex social and cultural factors, settled migrants send prejudiced positive information from Europe to the African continent. People mostly provide false information, because they do not want to disappoint their relatives back home, who are*

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<sup>33</sup> De Haas 2007

<sup>34</sup> Schapendonk and van Moppes

*often co-financing their migration project. In this way, the already strong biased image of Europe is confirmed, stimulating other Senegalese to migrate as well.*<sup>35</sup>

Schapendonk and van Moppes even interview a Senegalese woman living in Spain who returns to Senegal with only her “most beautiful dresses” to give her family the impression that she is “doing more than fine.”<sup>36</sup> Schapendonk and van Moppes mention the “strong biased image of Europe” reinforced by migrants who project false experiences to their families at home.

Undoubtedly, this image is part of the reason that they migrated themselves. Modern media (television, radio, and internet) have disseminated “Western music, fashion, cars and other images of luxury” throughout the world, including in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>37</sup> Young men and women in both urban and rural sub-Saharan Africa sitting in internet cafes browsing the websites of European universities, exchange programs, and dating networks.<sup>38</sup> In Algeria’s report to the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families in July 2008, “images projected by European satellite television channels” and “distorted image returned by those who have successfully reached European coasts” are considered two causes of emigration to Europe.<sup>39</sup>

The extent to which smuggling networks play a part in motivating trans-Saharan and boat people migration is debatable. The 2007 Regional Workshop on Migration Between West Africa and the Maghreb found that, in addition to disparities in development levels, pull factors to migrate to Europe include the “increasing professionalism of traffickers” and “scams and bogus travel intermediaries.”<sup>40</sup> De Haas’ analysis of smuggling networks presents a less accusatory conclusion:

*Smugglers are usually not part of internationally organized crime or centralized, hierarchical mafia-like structures, but tend to be locally based and operate alone or in relatively small networks. Smugglers are often former nomads, migrants or ex-migrants who cooperate with local corrupt police and border officials.*<sup>41</sup>

De Haas’s description of migration networks tends to veer away from the “increasing professionalism of traffickers” in favor of a more loosely-organized system with local emphasis. It is arguable that such a system may actually be more likely to stimulate trans-Saharan and boat people migration than a mafia-like migration network would. The local ties of smuggling networks should facilitate business for the smugglers, and a migrant may feel more comfortable travelling with someone from the same region as them or someone who has already experienced the migration. Nevertheless, however comfortable migrants feel, their experience migrating to North Africa will almost certainly be a trying one.

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria

<sup>40</sup> The Hague Process on Refugees and Migration

<sup>41</sup> De Haas 2007

### III. THE TRANS-SAHARAN EXPERIENCE

*The Algerian authorities of the locality of Tranroufat reported on 12 November that they had found the bodies of six sub-Saharan migrants in an advanced state of decomposition in the south-eastern Sahara region of Adrar. Two of the bodies were those of women but the absence of any documents made it impossible to identify them.*<sup>42</sup>

Crossing the open sea to reach Europe is generally assumed to be the most harrowing part of what boat people experience. However, some would-be boat people never make it to the sea. In 2005, Moroccan and Algerian security forces began reporting that they were finding “dehydrated corpses of would-be immigrants in the desert.”<sup>43</sup> Although it is impossible to know if these sub-Saharan migrants were headed to boats to reach Europe, it is important to consider that the majority of boat people now come from sub-Saharan Africa and are likely to face the same dangers these migrants to which fell prey.

The risks boat people take to cross the Sahara and reach North Africa are numerous. Migrants illegally entering Algeria and Libya must pass through Niger’s Air mountains, circumventing a mountain rebellion, increased mountain banditry, and North African border crackdowns.”<sup>44</sup> Information collected on trans-Saharan migration tends to come directly from interviews, as there is not a sufficient amount of academic research conducted on the subject. Still, the manifold interviews bear many striking resemblances to one another.

Trans-Saharan migrants often describe their journeys as travelling through the desert in pick-up trucks. Migrants leaving Agadez, Niger for Libya or Algeria describe gathering 30km outside of Agadez in the middle of the night to begin their trips in tarpailin-covered Toyota 4x4’s.<sup>45</sup> Other migrants, entering Libya from Sudan, tell of groups of 25 to 45 people being packed into Toyota Landcruisers for 10-day trips. Sometimes they are transferred at the border into a new vehicle with Libyan license plates. These trucks break down often, which is extremely dangerous considering the very limited supplies of food and water being carried.<sup>46</sup>

*The basics of food and water are severely rationed, primarily due to lack of space on the truck to transport large quantities of food and water for each passenger. Some respondents added that they were advised to consume the strict minimum amount of food and water since too much of either can be harmful to the health on such a journey. One respondent, A.K., claimed that the smugglers mixed the water with petrol to discourage people from drinking too much.*<sup>47</sup>

In addition to running out of food and water, trans-Saharan migrants can find themselves at the whims of corrupt officials. A 23-year old Ghanaian migrant identified as Freddy Kasserri claimed he was stripped of “everything of value” when the truck he was travelling in was stopped by

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<sup>42</sup> PICUM

<sup>43</sup> IRIN

<sup>44</sup> IRIN

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Hamood

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

army interceptors in 500km outside of Agadez in August 2008. According to Kasserli, the interceptors also took five Ghanaian women and five Nigerian women into the desert.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, trans-Saharan migrants appear to be at alarmingly high risk of being abandoned in the desert. Less than a week before the six bodies of sub-Saharan migrants described earlier were found in Adrar, Algerian police had come across a group of *eighty* sub-Saharan Africans in the same region claiming to have been abandoned without food or water by traffickers who were supposed to bring them to Southern Europe.<sup>49</sup>

The UN Integrated Regional Information Networks reported the story of a man named Abdoulaye who attempted to cross the desert several times to Algeria and was abandoned on one trip. His driver left the group in the Algerian village of Tchmilkom: “We did not have any petrol. The driver collected more than US\$200 from us, and said he was going to buy enough petrol and that it was too dangerous for us to accompany him because of the security checkpoints.”<sup>50</sup> Abdoulaye’s group ended up having to take commercial convoys back to Niger. Abdoulaye was undoubtedly not the only member of his group to persist in reaching Algeria and risk being continuously subjected to the same treatment.

#### **IV. THE EXPERIENCES OF TEMPORARY SETTLEMENT**

The IOM estimates that there are currently as many as 1.5 million irregular migrants working in Libya.<sup>51</sup> For many of these migrants, Libya is only a temporary home, where they can save money before taking boats to Europe. Across North Africa, potential boat people settle temporarily as an interlude between their trans-Saharan trek and their sea crossing. There, they find work for the most part as dishwashers, domestic workers, baby-sitters, construction workers, shoemakers, tailors, and mechanics.<sup>52</sup>

After surviving the trans-Saharan journey, the greatest immediate danger common to migrants during temporary settlement is their legal status. In fact, the danger is that they have *no* legal status; the related lack of protection under national laws makes irregular migrants in North Africa especially vulnerable to housing and work exploitation, discrimination, and detention and expulsion.

In the East Moroccan city of Oujda, near the Algerian border, sub-Saharan migrants rendered immobile by the strengthened Spanish borders congregate on a university campus that is avoided by police and divided linguistically. There, they have formed small communities based on nationality and ethnicity.<sup>53</sup> However, not all sub-Saharan migrants living in North Africa have such organized living arrangements. Most temporary settlers “work and live in highly degrading circumstances in overcrowded house, or, sometimes, in improvised camps.”<sup>54</sup> In Morocco for

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<sup>48</sup> IRIN

<sup>49</sup> PICUM

<sup>50</sup> IRIN

<sup>51</sup> Pfeiffer

<sup>52</sup> De Haas 2007

<sup>53</sup> The Hague Process on Refugees and Migration

<sup>54</sup> De Haas 2006

example, landlords rent apartments to irregular migrants for double or triple the amount they would require a Moroccan to pay.<sup>55</sup>

One of the most alarming issues affecting sub-Saharan Africans during temporary settlement is the xenophobia many face constantly. Xenophobia, discrimination, race-based violence are especially prominent in Libya, an extremely popular country for temporary settlement. According to one Ethiopian who sought out asylum in Italy after a period of living in Libya, “the older generation are decent but the teenagers are problematic. They don’t let you pass by on the street. Each time you make any movement in your daily life, like going to a shop, you face a problem.”<sup>56</sup> Migrants from Sudan and the Horn of Africa staying in Libya have reported having stones thrown at them, being spit at, and being called *abeed/’abd*, Arabic for slave.<sup>57</sup> Non-Muslim women from sub-Saharan Africa are especially at risk in Libya, where they are often mistaken for sex workers.<sup>58</sup>

Interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch reveal that the xenophobia and discrimination that sub-Saharan migrants face in Libya and other parts of North Africa only motivates them to continue on to Europe:

*Most of the non-Libyans interviewed for this report complained of unchecked discrimination and racist violence in Libya. For some, whether their motivation to be in Libya had been work or refuge, the xenophobia has inspired them to move onto Italy. ‘At first I had no clear idea to go to Italy,’ said Marta T., an Eritrean woman now recognized as a refugee in Italy. ‘I stayed in a private house with six other people [in Tripoli]. We couldn’t go outside because we were afraid. The one time when I went to buy something with my friend, they threw Coca-Cola at her head.’<sup>59</sup>*

Were law enforcement more diligent in protecting migrants like Marta, perhaps they would not persist in continuing to Europe. Yet, migrants cannot take their problems to law enforcement. According to de Haas, the “corrupt and abusive policemen, soldiers, and border officials [...] take bribes and assets like mobile phones from migrants.”<sup>60</sup> The abuses that migrants suffer are only accentuated by their statuses as foreigners: “Without tribal support, and considered unwanted outsiders by many Libyans, sub-Saharan Africans are particularly vulnerable to abuse.”<sup>61</sup>

This abuse is most evident in the detention and expulsion policies of a number of North African countries. Arrested migrants are often transported to detention camps in one of three varieties of containers, described by Fortress Europe as a pick-up car, another as the equivalent to a minivan, and lastly a “real container, blue color, with three windows on each side, pulled by an articulated lorry.”<sup>62</sup> Detainees face “overcrowding in detention facilities, poor sanitation and food, not knowing the reasons for their detention and not having access to a lawyer or legal

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Hamood

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Human Rights Watch

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> De Haas 2007

<sup>61</sup> Human Rights Watch

<sup>62</sup> Fortress Europe

review.”<sup>63</sup> Libya has chartered planes to deport large groups of migrants, and had been using cargo planes without seats to do so before other African governments complained.<sup>64</sup>

In Nouadhibou, Mauritania, Amnesty International representatives conducted interviews at a detainee center, and found that most migrants detained there “had been robbed of some of their possessions and many said that they had been arbitrarily arrested in the street or at home when they were not making preparations to try and reach Europe irregularly.”<sup>65</sup> The representatives also discovered a group of 35 people who had been expelled from Morocco and were being detained in a room measuring 8m by 5m with only 17 bunk beds for the 35 of them.<sup>66</sup> A 27-year old Malian detainee explained: “You have to urinate in a bucket on the spot. For other personal needs, we are obliged to bang on the door and beg the guards to let us go to the lavatory. Sometimes they make us wait 20 to 30 minutes before opening the door for us.”<sup>67</sup>

Despite facing a forced return home, some migrants simply refuse to return to their families, and even home countries if they can avoid it. Amnesty International also interviewed an Ivorian migrant arrested by Mauritanian authorities in Nouadhibou who seemed completely crestfallen about his prospects:

*Now I've been caught, I can't return home penniless. Maybe I'm going to grow old here, that's in God's hands. If peace returns to Cote d'Ivoire, I'm ready to go back, but only to some place where my family won't see me, because otherwise I'd be so ashamed.*<sup>68</sup>

For this young man, the pressure of his family network back home in the Ivory Coast is stronger than the Mauritanian government's determination to detain and likely deport him. He may follow in the footsteps of many other sub-Saharan migrants, who repeatedly attempt to enter North African countries, despite the number of times they are detained and deported.

Lastly, what if any of these detained and deported sub-Saharan migrants are actually refugees? If so, North African countries conducting these mass detentions and deportations are violating international law and Refugee Convention obligations, including *non-refoulement*.<sup>69</sup> North African countries widely label refugees as “economic migrants,” meaning they “frequently ignore that a substantial proportion of sub-Saharan migrants have escaped persecution or life-threatening circumstances.”<sup>70</sup> Additionally, potential refugees in some parts of North Africa are not aware of or do not have access to UNHCR. Migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in Libya and Italy told Human Rights Watch that they were completely unaware that UNHCR existed in Libya: “Other refugees and asylum seekers told Human Rights Watch that they knew of UNHCR's office but they did not go because they knew the agency could not provide help.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Human Rights Watch

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Amnesty International “Mauritania”

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Amnesty International “Mauritania”

<sup>69</sup> *Non-refoulement*: the international practice of not returning migrants to places and situations in which their lives will be in danger.

<sup>70</sup> De Haas 2006

<sup>71</sup> Human Rights Watch

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that it is possible to extensively discuss boat people without ever discussing their experiences on the boats they take to southern Europe. That is because boat people are in fact *people*, whose lives are not solely defined by the snapshots the media presents of them hanging onto sinking ships in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Before they reached that pivotal moment, most were subjected to a myriad of countless other life-threatening situations along the way.

Potential boat people must first have a reason for migrating. Generally they are young men coming from financially insecure families, though not necessarily the poorest of the poor. Often they are pressured by their families, communities and religious leaders to find employment in Europe. Although many are aware of the dangers they will face, they believe the ultimate reward—working and living in the perceived land of opportunity that is Europe—will be worth it.

Many are from countries other than those from which the boats depart, meaning they have crossed large expanses of land even before getting to the boats. Along the way, they risk severe shortages of food and water, abandonment by those smuggling them, and run-ins with corrupt and dangerous border officials. Once they have reached North Africa, they often settle temporarily before continuing to Europe by boat. During this period of temporary settlement, it is not uncommon for sub-Saharan migrants to be subjected to xenophobia, discrimination, and race-based violence, in addition to exploitation in housing and work situations based on their lack of legal status. Finally, they risk being detained and deported, even though they often refuse to return home and disappoint their family, in debt and in shame.

All the same, many of these migrants persist in their efforts to pass through North African countries and board boats to Europe, just so that, after all they have experienced on land, they can confront the well-reported horrors and risks to their lives on the sea. Several thousand, counted and uncounted, will perish in the crossing, while more than a few of the others will end up clinging to the side of a sinking boat, waiting to be rescued by a passing ship or patrol that will in all likelihood set the process in motion for the return to a place from which...the voyage of vulnerability only begins again.

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