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Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Late one night last fall, I sat on a half-rotten mattress in a desolate square in the northern Yemeni town of Haradh as a 20-year-old high school student from a rural Ethiopian town lets call him Shikuri told me his story. He had left home to find work in [Saudi Arabia](#), but when he landed in [Yemen](#) en route, he found himself caught up in unimaginable horror.

Human traffickers abducted him and took him to an isolated camp in the desert where they torture African migrants to get ransom money from their relatives and friends. He paid, but was sold to a second group, paid ransom, was released and then was captured by a third.

The third group hung Shikuri with metal wire by his thumbs every day, for up to 15 minutes at a time. They tied his genitals with a rope and suspended a full water bottle from the rope. All of this to force him to give up the phone number of a family member who could wire money for his release.

After 15 days of refusing to give his torturers a number, he was so weak he could no longer eat, talk, or move. The traffickers dragged him by his legs and dumped him on the nearest road, where a group that helps migrants rescued him.

Haradh is a small town seven kilometers south of the Saudi border. A local government official estimated that about 80 percent of the towns economy is based on trafficking and smuggling people and goods.

In recent years, Yemeni traffickers have built these torture camps in the desert around Haradh. One local official described 12 such camps, and estimated there might be about 30 in the area.

Government officials are well aware of the camps, but have raided them only sporadically, the last time a year ago. They said that because of governments failure to prosecute the traffickers, the camps are up and running again within a week.

The traffickers wait on the shores of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden for the migrants, who have paid smugglers large sums for safe passage to Saudi Arabia, a rich country where they hope to find work. The traffickers work with boat crews, smugglers and others who form networks that often extend from Djibouti, Somalia and Ethiopia all the way to Saudi Arabia. They demand money from the migrants as they leave the boats, and take those who cannot or refuse to pay to their desert camps.

Shikuri said he had encountered government forces colluding with the traffickers. After being released from the second torture camp, Shikuri was walking toward the Saudi border with nine other Ethiopians when they reached a checkpoint outside Haradh.

Four checkpoint agents in military uniforms grabbed the men, stole their money, and forced them into a white Toyota Hilux pickup truck that pulled into the checkpoint. As the driver of the Toyota passed through checkpoints closer to Haradh, Shikuri saw him pay cash to the guards. Shikuri feared the truck was driving straight to a torture camp.

When the car slowed for the last checkpoint before Haradh, Shikuri and several of his friends managed to jump out. A checkpoint agent who saw them tumble out of the truck told them they were at risk of being kidnapped again, and that his colleagues would drive them to the Red Cross. They got into a marked police vehicle, and one of the officers drove them off. But he took them to another traffickers camp in the desert.

Shikuri was one of 18 migrants I interviewed for a report about the torture camps in Yemen. I also talked with aid workers, local officials, smugglers and traffickers. The migrants said they had witnessed rape and suffered torture and other abuses, and the accounts of migrants, officials, smugglers and traffickers alike indicated that the trafficking gangs operate with impunity and with Yemeni government complicity.

In the coming weeks, the Yemeni parliament is scheduled to open a two-day debate on a draft anti-trafficking law that could significantly increase protection for trafficking victims.

Yemen needs to pass a law with criminal penalties for traffickers and their accomplices. And it should carry out a high-profile campaign to punish officials at all levels implicated in the torture camps.

Yemen has spent the last two years trying to create a new system that respects the rule of law and the rights of its people.

Respecting and protecting the rights of migrants should be part of this effort.

Belkis Wille is the Yemen researcher at Human Rights Watch and the author of a new report about the torture camps in Yemen.

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