

# Human Rights Watch

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

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/25/yemen-migrants-held-torture-camps>

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(Sanaa) Traffickers in [Yemen](#) hold African migrants in detention camps, torturing them to extort payment from their families, with the complicity of local officials, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today. Sometimes the torture ends in death. The Yemeni government should vigorously investigate and prosecute human traffickers and members of the security forces involved in the abuses.

The 82-page report, [Yemens Torture Camps: Abuse of Migrants by Human Traffickers in a Climate of Impunity](#), documents harms suffered by migrants, most from the Horn of Africa, who try to travel through Yemen on their way to Saudi Arabia for work. Human Rights Watch found that various Yemeni security agencies in the border town of Haradh, where dozens of camps exist, and at checkpoints, allow the human trafficking industry to flourish with little government interference.

Traffickers are holding African migrants in torture camps to squeeze money out of their painfully poor families, said [Eric Goldstein](#), deputy Middle East and North Africa director. When you see traffickers openly loading people into trucks in the center of Haradh, you know that the authorities are looking the other way.

In the coming weeks Yemens parliament is scheduled to debate an anti-trafficking bill that could enhance the protection of migrants and make it easier to prosecute traffickers and complicit officials. The proposed law should conform to international standards by criminalizing human trafficking. The law should also increase the governments capabilities to detect and prevent trafficking at the borders, Human Rights Watch said.

The human traffickers have constructed the camps in recent years. The traffickers pick up the migrants as they arrive by boat on the coast or buy them from security and military officers at checkpoints, charging the migrants fees on the promise of getting them to Saudi Arabia or other affluent Gulf Countries to seek work. In these camps, the traffickers inflict severe pain and suffering on the migrants to extort money from their relatives back home or friends already working abroad.

Except for some Yemeni government raids in 2013, the authorities have done little to stop the trafficking. Officials have more frequently warned traffickers of raids, failed to prosecute, and then released those they arrested. In some cases, they have actively helped the traffickers capture and detain migrants.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 18 male migrants from Ethiopia and 10 traffickers and smugglers, as well as government officials, activists, diplomats, aid workers, health professionals, and journalists between June 2012 and March 2014.

The migrants described horrific ill-treatment in the camps. Beatings were commonplace. One man described watching another mans eyes being gouged out with a water bottle. Another said that traffickers hung him by wire wrapped around his thumbs, and tied a string with a full water bottle around his penis. Witnesses said the traffickers raped some of the women migrants they held.

One migrant ended up trapped for seven days in a traffickers camp. They would tie my hands behind my back and lay me down on the ground. Then they would beat me with sticks, Said told Human Rights Watch, showing scars across his back. I saw the guards kick the face of one man who was on the floor, breaking his teeth.

#### Abuse of Migrants by Human Traffickers in a Climate of Impunity

Download the full report

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Aid workers told Human Rights Watch they observed signs of abuse in migrants consistent with their accounts of traffickers ripping off fingernails, burning the cartilage of their ears, branding their skin with irons, gouging out 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 molten plastic.

The torture sometimes ends in death. A migrant told Human Rights Watch that he saw traffickers tie a mans penis with 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 them with an axe. Migrants tortured near death are sometimes dumped outside a migrant center in Haradh that is run by the International Organization for Migration.

Extorting money from the families of captive migrants brings in large sums of money in Yemen, the Middle East's poorest country. Migrants told Human Rights Watch that their family members and friends paid ransoms for their freedom ranging from the equivalent of US\$200 to over \$1,000. A trafficker who negotiates ransoms said that he is often able to extract \$1,300 per migrant from their families.

Traffickers transporting Yemeni and African migrants pay standardized bribes to officials to allow them through checkpoints in border areas. But the complicity of officials goes beyond petty bribery. Smugglers and migrants alike said that some checkpoint guards had turned over migrants they intercept on the roads to traffickers for payment.

One migrant told Human Rights Watch that after he and a friend had escaped a torture camp in August 2013, Yemeni soldiers apprehended them at a checkpoint near Haradh. While the two were fed bread and tea, the soldiers made some calls. In a short while, two men arrived in a car, paid the soldiers cash in exchange for the two migrants, and drove them to a torture camp.

Involvement in trafficking appears to extend to elements within various state security forces in Haradh, including the police, military and the intelligence services. Traffickers, smugglers and Yemeni officials provided Human Rights Watch with the names of senior officials who they said were complicit in trafficking. Two officials also said that traffickers had bribed them so they would not be raided or arrested.

On May 20, Human Rights Watch received a [letter](#) from the Defense Ministry responding to questions sent to the ministry in April. The ministry reiterated the military's resolve to crack down on torture camps that it had identified but denied any government complicity, including that of checkpoint officers, in human trafficking. The ministry also stated that no officials had been investigated on charges of complicity with traffickers.

From March to May 2013, Yemeni security forces conducted a series of raids of traffickers camps. The Defense Ministry said that the security forces discontinued the raids because they were unable to provide the migrants with food or shelter upon their release. Officials acknowledged that many of the camps that security forces had raided are functioning again.

A judge who tries lesser felonies in Haradh said that he had seen only one case related to migrant abuse, and that the prosecutor had botched it. Nor did Human Rights Watch find any indication that more serious charges have been brought in the nearby higher criminal court. Interior Ministry and other officials could not cite a single case of disciplinary or legal action against officials for collaborating

with traffickers. The Yemeni governments failure to investigate and prosecute serious abuses committed against migrants by private parties and the involvement of government officials violates Yemens obligations under international human rights law to protect people from violations of their rights to life and to bodily integrity.

Saudi border officials have also been complicit in the abuse of migrants, by apprehending border crossers and turning them over to Haradh-based traffickers, migrants, traffickers, and Yemeni officials at the border told Human Rights Watch.

Yemens government should develop a comprehensive strategy to shut camps where traffickers detain and abuse migrants, including raids and prosecutions of traffickers and officials, regardless of rank, complicit in their activities, Human Rights Watch said. The government should work with humanitarian organizations to provide all migrants freed from captivity with adequate food, shelter, and health care.

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 shut all illegally operated places of detention for migrants and take steps to end the collusion of security force members with traffickers.

People desperate for work who pay smugglers arent consenting to being tortured and robbed along the way, Goldstein said. Yemen needs to show zero tolerance toward human traffickers who torture for profit and those who assist them.

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Suspicious Killings and Extrajudicial Executions by Egyptian Security Forces

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