

Afghanistan Investigating Claims Migrants Were Killed by Iranian Guards

About 50 Afghan migrants crossing into Iran illegally were beaten and thrown into a river, local news media and witnesses say. As many as half did not survive, they said.

By Mujib Mashal and Asadullah Timory

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The foreign ministry of Afghanistan on Saturday said it was investigating claims that dozens of Afghan migrants detained in Iran were tortured by that country's border guards and thrown into a river, where many of them drowned.

Afghan news media reported that about 50 migrants being illegally smuggled into Iran — a frequent destination for Afghans escaping the war to seek work — were caught by Iranian border guards, beaten and thrown into a river that flows between the two countries.

Those reports included grainy cellphone footage showing a half-dozen corpses. Details were conflicting, but several reports suggested that as many as half the men had drowned or were unaccounted for.

"They kept hitting us with pipes and saying, 'Don't come back to our country,' and kept pushing us into the river," one of the survivors, Abdul Wahed, 20, said in a phone interview.

Mohammed Hanif Atmar, Afghanistan's acting foreign minister, has assigned a delegation to look into the reports, the foreign ministry's statement said.

Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan rejected the claims based on the initial information, but promised to investigate further, Iran's Fars news agency reported.

Afghanistan shares more than 500 miles of border with Iran. About three million Afghans — a mix of refugees and illegal migrants — live in Iran, a large number of them having arrived after their country plunged into conflict in the 1980s.

Young Afghans constantly flow across the border to seek work, many of them smuggled through dangerous deserts, often traveling for a week at a time packed into the back of pick-up trucks.

In recent months, as the coronavirus gutted Iran's economy, the flow was reversed. Between January and April, about 240,000 Afghans had returned from Iran.

But Iran has started slowly reopening its economy, and Afghanistan remains in deep poverty. An estimated 80 percent of the Afghan population lives on \$1.25 a day, a flimsy margin above the poverty line of \$1. So migration to Iran has started anew.

Mr. Wahed, the survivor, said a group of 50 young men — including eight from his home district of Rabat e Sangi in the western Afghan province of Herat — were set upon by Iranian guards after entering Iran late last week. They were detained and beaten repeatedly by the guards, some of whom said, "We have no sleep because of you."

"They put us face down and stomped on us and kicked us and kept asking, 'Why are you coming to our country?'" Mr. Wahed said. "And we kept saying, 'We are only coming to your country because of our own misery.'"

The men were packed into a bus and brought to the banks of the Harirod river late on Friday afternoon, Mr. Wahed said, when they were forced into the water. He said he saw only 12 men come out alive, and he helped retrieve the bodies of seven others, including those of five people who had traveled with him from his district.

"The water brought me downstream, where I clung to a tree and then Baluch swimmers came to my rescue," Mr. Wahed said, referring to a local ethnic group. "I think 30 are still missing — I don't know where they are, probably they died."

Mujib Mashal reported from Kabul, and Asadullah Timory from Herat, Afghanistan.