

Saudi Arabia

Saudi forces accused of killing hundreds of Ethiopian migrants

Human rights group says border guards at frontier with Yemen opened fire on unarmed civilians



Ethiopian migrants arrive on Yemen's coast. People attempting to reach Saudi Arabia on this route have reported mass shootings by the kingdom's border forces © Nariman El-Mofty/AP

Andrew England, Middle East editor 8 HOURS AGO

Saudi border forces have killed hundreds of Ethiopian migrants attempting to cross into the kingdom from Yemen over the past 18 months, according to a human rights group.

New York-based Human Rights Watch alleges in a 73-page report that the security forces “fired explosive weapons” at migrants and in some cases asked them which of their limbs they would prefer to be shot.

“Saudi officials are killing hundreds of migrants and asylum seekers in this remote border area out of view of the rest of the world,” said Nadia Hardman, refugee and migrant rights researcher at HRW. “Saudi border guards knew or should have known they were firing on unarmed civilians.”

[Saudi Arabia](#) did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The kingdom is home to hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian workers. While many migrate for economic reasons, a significant number are fleeing human rights abuses by their government, including during the recent [armed conflict](#) in northern Ethiopia, according to HRW. Migrants and asylum seekers from the country have for decades used the route from the Gulf of Aden, through Yemen and into Saudi Arabia, the

group said.



The allegations in the HRW report will heap more scrutiny on Riyadh's human rights record at a time when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's day-to-day leader, is increasingly being welcomed back into the international fold five years after Saudi agents murdered veteran journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

US intelligence agencies concluded that Prince Mohammed must have authorised the 2018 operation to capture or kill Khashoggi as the journalist visited the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The crown prince denied any involvement and Riyadh blamed the murder on a rogue operation.

But in recent years, western leaders have been engaging with Saudi Arabia as they seek the kingdom's co-operation on issues ranging from energy stability to regional policies and Russia's war in Ukraine.

The Financial Times revealed last month that the UK government, which is keen to attract investment from the oil-rich Gulf, has [invited Prince Mohammed to London](#) this autumn, although the trip's schedule has yet to be finalised.

US President Joe Biden, who pledged to treat Saudi Arabia as a pariah as he campaigned in the 2020 presidential election, held talks with the crown prince in

Jeddah in July last year, and French president Emmanuel Macron hosted Prince Mohammed in Paris last year and again in June.

HRW said its report was based on interviews with 42 people, including dozens of [Ethiopian](#) migrants, who tried to cross the Saudi-Yemen border between March 2022 and June this year. It said it had also analysed more than 350 videos and photographs posted on social media or gathered from other sources, as well as satellite imagery of the border region.

One migrant told HRW that of one group of 170 people who tried to cross the border, he knew at least 90 were killed “because some returned to pick up the dead bodies”. Others recounting separate incidents described bodies “scattered everywhere” and children being among the dead.

The report quoted Dahabo, a 20-year-old Ethiopian, as saying: “Immediately after we arrived [at the border], they fired on us . . . A lot of people were dying. In a group of 200 migrants only 50 people survived.”

“The people who shot us were Saudi government military,” she told HRW. “Everyone knows it is Saudi military — the smugglers told us, they are Saudi military, they are border guards.”

Yemen, the Arab world’s poorest country, has been blighted by civil war since 2014, with Iranian-backed Houthi rebels controlling most of the north, while Yemeni factions backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates control the south.

Saudi Arabia led an Arab coalition that intervened in the war in 2015 to back the ousted government and fight the Houthis. Its conduct of the conflict has drawn widespread criticism, with coalition air strikes blamed for thousands of civilian deaths. A fragile truce has held for more than a year.

HRW said that the Houthis also “play a significant role in perpetrating abuses against migrants along this migration route”.

“Houthi forces’ role in co-ordinating security and facilitating access to the border for smugglers and migrants in Saada governorate [in Yemen], coupled with its practice of detaining and extorting migrants, amount to torture, arbitrary detention, and trafficking in persons,” the report said.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.
