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The Ethiopian Migrant crisis in Myanmar: a descent from aspiration to desperation

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article was to examine the unseen struggles of Ethiopian migrants in Myanmar, Southeast Asia. This paper is significant in offering theoretical insights for national and global stakeholders to address the hidden calamity of Ethiopian migrants in Myanmar. It employed a qualitative research approach with an exploratory research design, and data were collected through interviews and document analysis. The data was analysed through thematic analysis. Based on the analysis, the study found that the Ethiopian migrants in Myanmar seek better possibilities outside the country's extreme economic difficulties, political unrest, and lack of opportunities. Human traffickers and smugglers provide jobs throughout Southeast Asia, luring many with false promises, only to trap them in exploitative conditions. Due to ambiguous immigration laws and bigotry, migrants in Myanmar are not legally protected and may be detained, deported, or exploited. Poor living circumstances, mistreatment, and restricted access to medical care, diplomatic support, and safe repatriation are all faced by stranded migrants. Instead of improving livelihoods, the trip from Ethiopia to Myanmar commonly results in increased desperation. It suggested fortifying bilateral contracts, fighting trafficking networks, assuring human deportation, and refining Ethiopia's economic and political conditions for long-term solutions that lessen forced migration.

1. Introduction

Global migration continues to influence the 21st century due to a complex interaction between economic hardship, environmental stress, war, and the desire for opportunity. Furthermore, both legal and illegal immigration have recently turned into a global source of enmity (Collier & Betts, 2017). There is a growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the world. Recently, for instance, there was a two-day walkout against foreigners in Germany. Not to be overlooked is the recent announcement by the United States that it plans to deport over 8,000 immigrants (Cohen & Deng, 2012; Crawley, 2016; Omilusi, 2023; Van Heelsum, 2016).

Ethiopia has had a great deal of internal and cross-border migration in the past 40 years because of socioeconomic, environmental, and political challenges. When the monarchy was ousted by a military dictatorship in the middle of the 1970s, a mass exodus started. International migration has, however, surged since then, particularly in the past ten years. This movement's pattern has grown increasingly complicated, not only in terms of the volume of outflows and their drivers, but also in terms of the diversity of the movers, their countries of origin, and their countries of destination (Girmachew, 2018).

Ethiopians travel in despair in search of safety and opportunity, mainly to the Gulf, Malaysia, or Southern Africa, driven by conflict, drought, unemployment, and repression. With its weak borders, multinational smuggling networks turned Myanmar—rarely their original destination—into an unanticipated, hazardous transit point. Their circumstances deteriorated from hope to great despair when they were trapped there following the coup in 2021 (Arya, Cameron & van der Brug, 2024; Ogata, 2005; Yohannes, 2025). Myanmar's internal collapse after the 2021 coup, which resulted in extensive violence and institutional

failure, turned the country into a migration crisis area. Borders were closed by Bangladesh and Thailand, trapping people. Smugglers either sold their passengers into further exploitation or abandoned them due to restricted routes and increased risk (Mortensen, 2024; Suarez-Orozco, 2019).

In Myanmar, Ethiopian migrants usually have no legal status. They became extremely vulnerable targets in the tumultuous and xenophobic atmosphere, which was made worse by the junta's animosity toward foreigners and obsession with local strife. Constant fears of arbitrary arrest, long-term, filthy incarceration, extortion, physical and sexual abuse, forced labour, and possible refoulement to Ethiopia—where many are persecuted or in danger again—are a reality for them. There is a near-complete lack of international protection and humanitarian aid due to the overwhelming scope of Myanmar's domestic crises, access restrictions, and the lack of official recognition of this migrant group. Ethiopians who are stranded live in continual terror and lack access to essentials, including food, water, shelter, and medical treatment (Adem, Kebede & Kassa, 2023; Kumar, 2025).

The researcher tries to explore a decisive but little-studied intersection of crises: vulnerable people escaping one conflict-ridden state (Ethiopia) and getting stranded in another (Myanmar). Their story, which mostly went unnoticed during Myanmar's continuous unrest, depicts a terrible path from hopeful aspiration to absolute destitution. Therefore, this study aims to examine the Ethiopian Migrant Crisis in Myanmar, a journey from hope to despair.

Since Ethiopia is one of the countries with the highest number of refugees, it is common to hear that Ethiopian illegal immigrants are subjected to torture and death. It is frequently said that in the past six years, the number of Ethiopian immigrants in many countries of the world has doubled. The biggest challenge is that they are subjected to illegal immigration again after being illegally deported (Betts, 2013). For example, although work has recently been done to return many Ethiopians who have left the country illegally and are living without permission from Arab countries, the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs has announced that their illegal immigration again is a challenge (Gill, 2010; Toole & Waldman, 1990).

Ethiopia's crises and Myanmar's collapse have resulted in severe misery for Ethiopian migrants who are stuck in Myanmar. They are extremely vulnerable to arbitrary imprisonment, enforced labour, trafficking, sexual exploitation, violence, and abuse by employers, criminal networks, and armed organisations because they are living in legal limbo without status. They also constantly face the risk of being forced to return to Ethiopia, where they would be persecuted and in danger, as they have almost no legal protection or safeguards (Black & Collyer, 2014; Goodwin-Gill, 2018).

Ethiopian migrants who are stranded without resources or assistance endure appalling living conditions, including a lack of necessities, a lack of access to healthcare, and ongoing insecurity. They are severely lacking in sanitary facilities, food, clean water, and suitable housing. Near-complete absence of access to necessary medical care, such as care for illnesses, injuries, and mental health trauma, which is made worse by a fear of getting help. Migrants were unable to maintain a permanent living environment because they were compelled to hide or relocate frequently to avoid law enforcement or predators

(Adem, Kebede & Kassa, 2023; Wogene, 2018). Ethiopian migrants are stuck in Myanmar due to a disastrous institutional failure. International help is blocked, and protection is denied by hostile regimes. Thailand, Bangladesh, India, and other nearby nations block escape routes. Internally overburdened, Ethiopia is unable or unwilling to help its stranded population (De Haas, 2023; Collier & Betts, 2017; Wogene, 2018).

The International Organisation for Migration has recorded more than 350 migrant deaths and disappearances on the Eastern Route since the start of 2025. Seven Ethiopian refugees lost their lives due to malnutrition and dehydration after their boat broke down as they were travelling from Somalia to Yemen. Separately, 250 migrants—82 of whom were children—arrived in Yemen on Tuesday after a "hellish" seven-day journey from Somalia. They experienced trauma, terror, and exploitation, according to IOM's Yemen chief (Addis Standard, 2025)

In the last ten years, 3,435 migrants—mostly Ethiopians escaping oppression, poverty, or war in Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray—have died or disappeared while crossing the Red Sea. Without protection, they become victims of human trafficking and endure death, forced labour, torture, or sexual assault. Survivors frequently come back traumatised. Young people travel not to make money, but because they have no other option and must face a reality known as "leave and wait for death." This tragedy will continue until Ethiopia recognises that migration is a necessity rather than a choice (Kefale & Gebresenbet, 2021; Wogene, 2018).

Regarding the global migrant problem, there is a critical knowledge gap. Due to the covert nature of their travel, the risks of visibility in Myanmar, and the restricted humanitarian access, nothing is known about the size, exact locations, demographics, and unique needs of the stranded Ethiopian audience (De Haas, 2023). Thus, the government has an immediate obligation to safeguard Ethiopians, particularly from unauthorized immigration.

Scholars have conducted various studies to understand the migrant crisis all over the world. To mention a few, Mesay & Teferi (2017) conducted a study titled Illicit cross-border migration in Ethiopia. Petros (2020) found that political and socio-economic reasons are the main causes of irregular migration of Ethiopians to the other world. Girmachew (2020) conducted a study titled Irregular Migration, informal remittances evidence from Ethiopian villages. Even though such studies contribute to the understanding of the impacts of illegal migration from Ethiopia to the rest of the world, they fail to show the Ethiopian migrant crisis in Myanmar as a descent from aspiration to desperation. Deprived existing conditions, exploitation, and limited access to medical care, and no safe repatriation are all faced by stranded migrants.

Cognizant of this, the researcher examined the Ethiopian migrant crisis in Myanmar, a descent from aspiration to desperation, which is not considered by previous researchers. Thus, this issue is imperative because Ethiopian migrants, who were first driven by hopes for a better life, are now trapped in Myanmar and suffer from extreme desperation marked by severe humanitarian hardship, systematic violations of

their rights, and almost no protection or means of escape. Therefore, the objectives of this paper were to investigate the Ethiopian Migrant Crisis in Myanmar: a journey from hope to despair.

2. Review of related literature

"Migration" is usually defined as the movement of people from one place to another. It is the movement of people from their homes, their places of origin, either secretly or openly, to another place (Van Heelsum, 2016). The first migration in the world is the migration of the sons of Jacob, which we find in the Great Book. The main reason for the migration of the sons of Jacob is the occurrence of drought. Therefore, migration occurs for various reasons (Bhabha, 2018; Gutema & Idris, 2020). War, drought, instability, political isolation, and economic problems based on inflation and unemployment are the main causes of migration. Migrants usually migrate to a country where they think they will find a better life or security. In recent years, migration has become a major issue, especially in the modern world. Various international organisations, especially institutions such as the United Nations, have been working to prevent migration and to help migrants (Betts & Collier, 2017; De Haas, 2023).

There are two types of migration. One is called legal migration, and the other is illegal migration. When citizens travel from one country to another legally, they are safe and have government recognition, while when they move from one country to another by sea or land for various reasons, they are subjected to many hardships and even loss of life. It is said that this is the type of migration that is becoming increasingly difficult. As mentioned above, it is seen that developed countries and their large institutions are doing a lot of work to prevent this type of migration (Collier & Betts, 2017; Gutema & Idris, 2020).

Due to the Ethiopian migrant issue in Arab and Southeast Asian nations, many Ethiopians are travelling at great risk in search of work, frequently running the risk of being exploited, mistreated, imprisoned, and deported. The primary locations for low-skilled labour (construction, service, and domestic employment). Countries in Southeast Asia, primarily Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia, are frequently utilised as stopovers by migrants trying to travel by boat to Australia. Some, frequently without documentation, work there as well. The perilous "Eastern Route" to Saudi Arabia via Yemen (often via Djibouti or Somalia). This entails travelling through areas of conflict and being under the influence of people traffickers (Kefale & Gebresenbet, 2021; Van Heelsum, 2016).

High rates of unemployment, especially among young people, and few opportunities for economic growth in rural Ethiopia. Regional conflicts, like those in Amhara, Tigray and Oromia, have caused displacement and insecurity in the past and present; traffickers and recruiters have made false claims of simple, well-paying work; and there is a need for inexpensive labour (IOM, 2024).

South-east Asian migrants who are trying to get to Australia must travel dangerously in packed, unsafe boats run by smugglers, which can result in drownings. In Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand, migrants who are stopped or left stranded frequently endure extended periods of inhumane confinement. These nations are in legal limbo since they are not signatories to the Refugee Convention and do not provide permanent asylum. Risk of being abused, extorted, or trafficked while waiting or working illegally in

transit nations. Thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants were left stranded at sea, highlighting the scope of the situation. Ethiopians were also included in this influx, trying to reach Malaysia or Indonesia on their way to Australia (Girmachew, 2018).

Reports of unpaid salaries, long labor hours, physical and sexual abuse (particularly of female domestic workers), passport seizure, and travel limitations under the kafala (sponsorship) system are common in Arab Gulf States. Mass deportations back to Ethiopia follow crackdowns on undocumented migrants, which result in overcrowded and frequently cruel detention facilities (Saudi Arabia has deported hundreds of thousands in recent years). Particularly at risk for sexual assault, incarceration, and labour exploitation are female migrants, especially domestic workers. Language difficulties, fear of retaliation, immigration status, and the limits of the kafala system make it difficult to obtain justice or assistance (Mortensen, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Structural-Functionalism and systems of illegality

This theory looks at the systemic functioning of the irregular migration problem. From a critical stance, one may contend that corrupt governments and affluent economies profit from a supply of exploitable, illegal labour. Such an underclass may be operationally needed for cheap labour in some sectors (e.g., construction, menial employment) in Myanmar's political economy (and the world order). The migrant's aspiration is taken advantage of by a system that keeps them in a state of illegality and, consequently, desperation, as this status renders them both profitable and helpless. This framework does a good job of explaining the cycle component. It's a system that reinforces itself, not just bad luck. Corrupt officials may benefit from bribery, companies benefit from the inexpensive labour, and smugglers profit from the trip. The immigrant's ambition serves as the system's fuel (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993).

Theories of Intersectionality and Precarity

According to the theory of intersectionality, which was first put forth by Kimberlé Crenshaw, people are oppressed because of the intersection of several aspects of their identities, such as race, class, gender, nationality, and legal status. According to precarity theory, living in an unpredictable and insecure environment has an impact on one's ability to support oneself materially as well as psychologically (Misra, 2021).

This is the perfect framework for examining the "predicament." Because they are Black (facing racism), African (foreign and out of place), an irregular migrant (no legal protection), probably impoverished (economically desperate), and possibly of a particular gender (e.g., women facing specific exploitation risks, or men facing harsher labour conditions), Ethiopian migrants in Myanmar face compounding vulnerabilities. A distinct and severe kind of precarity is produced by the junction of various identities, which keeps people in a cycle of desperation (Stasiulis, Jinnah & Rutherford, 2020).

Theories of New Economics, Labour Migration's and Structural Violence

According to NELM's Aspirational Journeys of Migrants, households or families, not lone individuals, make migration decisions. It presents migration as a means of managing risk, diversifying income, and getting around obstacles in the nation of origin, such as a lack of insurance or credit. It's an idealistic plan for upward mobility and family security, not just individual desperation, which is why Ethiopian families could invest in sending a member to Myanmar (Abreu, 2012).

This theory is more appropriate for the Cycles of Desperation. The term "structural violence," coined by sociologist Johan Galtung and medical anthropologist Paul Farmer, describes how social structures—such as the legal, political, economic, and health systems—systematically injure and maintain inequalities against marginalised communities. It describes how migrants in Myanmar are unable to achieve their necessities because of their irregular status, language problems, racism, and institutional failures of the state. It is practically impossible to break free from the "cycle of desperation" that is created by the "violence" that is ingrained in the system (Alvarado & Massey, 2010).

To the best of my knowledge, this paper employs the theory of New Economics Labour Migration and Structural Violence to describe the Ethiopian Migrant Predicament in Myanmar, from aspirational journeys to cycles of desperation in a scientific manner. This theory is significant because it effectively connects the macro-level (global injustices, state institutions) and micro-level (household decisions). It describes the first logical decision and the subsequent decline into a state where repressive structures rob people of their agency.

3. Methods and Materials

This study uses qualitative research to understand the meanings people assign to a particular phenomenon and to answer research questions about social phenomena and their settings. The research aims to provide a comprehensive picture of investigating the Ethiopian Migrant Crisis in Myanmar, a journey from hope to despair. The study uses a case study approach, choosing the Ethiopian Migrant Crisis in Myanmar as a case study. The researcher employed a purposive sampling technique. Both primary and secondary data sources are used, including online blogs, books, journals, working papers, conference proceedings, news, and magazine opinions. A thorough data gathering tool is essential for assessing reliability, authenticity, and credibility. Data gathering tools include document review and thematic analysis. The primary data were analysed qualitatively through critical discourse analysis, while the data collected from secondary sources were analysed qualitatively through a systematic review.

4. Results and Discussions

To achieve the objectives of the study, the researcher tries to concentrate on the Ethiopian migrant's path from hope to despair in Myanmar. The information gathered using qualitative data collection methods showed that Ethiopian migrants in Myanmar are particularly vulnerable to systemic human rights

violations, such as arbitrary arrests and detentions, trafficking and exploitation, violence and abuse, and the potential for expulsion.

4.1. The main motives for Ethiopian refugees to migrate to Myanmar

Basically, Myanmar is not a target for migrants. Ethiopian migrants travel to Myanmar because of so many factors. Some of the factors are:

A. Unemployment

The main reason Ethiopian refugees travel through Myanmar on migration routes is unemployment (Girmachew, 2018), even though Myanmar is rarely the final destination. According to an Associated Press report (04 August 2025), youth unemployment is currently at over 20% leading to many risking dangerous waters trying to reach the wealthy Gulf Arab countries seeking a better life elsewhere. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Prevention of Illicit Trafficking and Support and Monitoring of Returning Office report, many of the citizens who illegally migrated to Arab and other world countries, including Myanmar, were able to return home after experiencing torture, incarceration, and other issues. They are being repatriated for a variety of reasons. The primary cause of these forced migrations, according to a new study, is unemployment. According to this report, 65 per cent of Ethiopian graduates had trouble finding employment (Ghion magazine, 06 March 2025).

Regarding this, the African Leadership University survey (2025), Ethiopian students' biggest obstacles to entering the workforce are a lack of employment possibilities (65%), poor economic situations (37%), and insufficient work experience (29%). Many young individuals are impacted by illegal migration in this setting. For instance, according to regional television, the Tigray Regional State Youth Affairs Bureau recently revealed that 32,000 young people migrate out of the region on average each month because of unemployment. According to some of the relatives of the young people who have fled illegally, human traffickers are currently holding their children in appalling conditions in Libya.

However, the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs clarified that one of the reasons why returnees migrate illegally again is the dearth of work possibilities, particularly in the provinces. In addition to unemployment, returnees find it difficult to perceive a ray of hope for their future lives when they return to their individual locations because of the conflicts that are present in practically every area. As was already established, there has been a rise in the number of citizens travelling illegally to other nations in search of work.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director General of Consular Affairs stated, even while the government has persisted in trying to help citizens in need after they have relocated, it has not been able to provide a long-term solution. It is significant that, thanks to government efforts, 38 Ethiopian refugees who recently fled their precarious condition in Myanmar and entered Thailand have returned home. Many people, including those in Myanmar, have been victims of a chain that runs from Addis Ababa to Taiwan,

according to a recent announcement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Work is underway with the Myanmar government and other partners to repatriate citizens who were suffering greatly in Myanmar. In this regard, the theory of New Economics, Labour Migration's and Structural Violence affirmed that an ideal trap is created by the motivation of unemployment. The lack of legal, protected employment, the very thing that migrants are escaping, becomes their new home, although in a more violent and harsh form. In Myanmar, they transition from the "employment" of exploitation in Ethiopia to the unemployed of destitution.

According to one Ministry of Foreign Affairs official indicated that tremendous efforts are being made to repatriate nationals through Thailand through the Ethiopian Embassy in Japan, but there are issues with completely removing citizens in challenging circumstances in Myanmar. In just three years, the Ethiopian government has repatriated over 450,000 nationals who were experiencing a variety of issues, according to a recent announcement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Additionally, 27,000 nationals who had departed unlawfully for other nations and were facing hardships were brought back to their home countries this year. But better outcomes can be obtained if the government works to lessen migration in addition to helping exiled citizens return (MOFA, 2025).

B. Conflict

IOM reported 3,435 deaths and unaccounted-for deaths at sea over the previous ten years, as well as 60,000 migrants landing in Yemen in 2024 alone. 1,416 of them drowned. "Most Ethiopians migrate to the Gulf countries through Yemen due to poverty, conflict, and climate change," IOM added, referring to the Ethiopians who are regularly murdered in boat accidents on this route. They experience violence, exploitation, and subpar living circumstances in these nations (Girmachew, 2018; Kefale & Gebresenbet, 2021). The organisation also pointed out that the demand for food, shelter, protection, and health care for migrants travelling through Yemen is not being met (IOM, 2024).

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) of the United Nations reports that although many Ethiopian refugees are economic in character, young people—particularly those from the Amhara and Oromia regions—are escaping conflict and incarceration. Djibouti is the primary entry point to Yemen; in 2023 alone, 106,000 Ethiopians travelled there.

Weeks pass before the migrants get to the Djiboutian border. They walk or take a bus to get there. To attempt to cross the perilous Gulf of Aden, migrants who have already done so pay smugglers $300 on the coast (BBC, 2025).

C. Broken Promises & Abandonment

Due to increased border security in Thailand and the chaos that followed the coup in Myanmar (checkpoints, armed groups), smugglers leave migrants in Myanmar after collecting fees of $3,000 to $8,000 per person. Exploitation of Trafficking is also another challenge for migration. In Thailand or Myanmar, stranded migrants are sold to criminal gangs for forced labour (mining, fishing) or sexual exploitation. No other options and closed borders; India, Bangladesh, and Thailand fortify their borders, trapping migrants inside Myanmar with no way out (Mortensen, 2024).

D. Low support for internally displaced people

The recovery assistance provided to internally displaced people (such as those from conflicts in Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, and Afar) is insufficient. They look for other places to live as they have no land, jobs, or social services. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) must escape across borders due to exploitation, famine, and violence caused by a lack of state assistance (Girmachew, 2018). Internally Displaced Persons camps are the focus of smugglers who offer "opportunities" in Arab nations, such as domestic employment in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. According to the IOM Migration Reports (2022), IDPs who are unable to use legal channels end up relying on smugglers. Travelling through Myanmar carries a significant danger of incarceration, extortion, or abandonment (IOM, 2022).

E. Low salaries for government employees

Even highly qualified professionals (such as doctors, teachers, and engineers) are forced into debt due to Ethiopia's low public sector earnings, which are degraded by inflation and fall short of meeting basic demands. For those who cannot afford it, relocation is the only way out. Public services are deteriorating due to this exodus, resulting in a vicious cycle. Although not the main cause of refugee flows, the corruption and governmental weakness that follow indirectly support movement networks, including those that pass-through Myanmar.

F. Smuggling Routes to Southeast Asia

As shown in Figure 1, Ethiopian migrants' smuggling routes to Southeast Asia are a dynamic and ever-changing network that is greatly impacted by border laws, conflict, and world economic conditions. This is a difficult and frequently tragic topic. The most popular and riskiest route is the Eastern Route, which passes via Yemen. It is a hazardous transportation route because of crooked border officers and permeable borders like those with Bangladesh (Tinti & Reitano, 2017). Routes used by smugglers are:

4.2. The sufferings of Ethiopian refugees in Myanmar

A. Dying while travelling

According to different sources on Sunday, August 03, 2025, a boat carrying 157 migrants capsized off the coast of Yemen, killing more than 60 people (see table 1). The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said most of the dead were Ethiopians. The boat capsized in the southern Yemeni province of Abyan, reportedly due to bad weather. About 12 of the migrants on board were rescued, but the rest are missing, the IOM's Yemen director said. The IOM, which said most of the victims were believed to be Ethiopians, described the incident as "heartbreaking". The boat was travelling along a dangerous coastal route often used by human traffickers. The bodies of 54 of the migrants were found on the coast of the southern Yemeni province of Kanfar, while the bodies of 14 others were taken to a hospital morgue in Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan province, the Associated Press reported. Ethiopian migrants have also lost their lives in frequent boat sinkings along the same route (BBC, 05 August 2025; Girmachew, 2018). In addition to the abuse and exploitation suffered by human traffickers, migrants also

face persecution in the countries they reach after crossing dangerous seas (Mixed Migration Centre Report, 2024).

In this regard, the theory of New Economics Labour Migration and Structural Violence assures that deaths among migrants are not regrettable occurrences; rather, they are deadly signs of a global system that commodifies migrant lives and puts border security ahead of public safety. The ideas demonstrate how policies and systems that push migrants into the hands of those who profit from their plight have a clear and predictable impact on the misery and deaths that occur during the journey. The following table clearly elaborates the recent data on the deaths of Ethiopian migrants while travelling.

Table 1: Recent data on the deaths of Ethiopian migrants while travelling

Date	Total number of migrants on the boat	Number of deaths while travelling	Number of survivors	Lost in the mist	Place of death
August 03, 2025	157	68	12	77	Southern Yemeni province of Abyan
March 2025	180	31 Ethiopians	-	-	Near the coast of Yemen
January 18 2025	37	20	17(15Ethiopians and two Yemeni crew members)	-	In the Dubab area of Taiz province
October 2024	320	48	197	75	Off the coast of Djibouti
June 09 2024	260 (145 Ethiopian & 115 Somalian)	49	211	-	Near the coast of Yemen
April 22 2024	77	24	33	20	Near the Djibouti coast
April 09 2024	-	38	-	-	Near the Djibouti coast

Source: IOM, France 24, NBC News, Times of India, BBC

B. Unexpected suffering after arriving in Myanmar

As shown in Table 4.1, human trafficking, deceit, and structural vulnerabilities are the main causes of the extreme, unanticipated hardship experienced by Ethiopian migrants upon their arrival in Myanmar. Although Myanmar isn't a popular travel destination, migrants frequently enter the country under pretences in hopes of passing through other Southeast Asian nations (such as Malaysia or Thailand). The harsh realities they encounter are trafficking and exploitation, legal detention and abandonment,

serious health and safety hazards, social exclusion and discrimination, psychological trauma and broken promises, and being stranded without a way out (IOM, 2024).

There was a widespread online scam that generates billions of dollars in revenue each year for Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report, there are several camps characterised by human and child trafficking, forced labour, torture, illegal gambling and money laundering. Sources assured that victims forced to commit online fraud & kidnapping in the camps come from different countries. Among African countries, the largest numbers are Ethiopians. East African countries such as Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania are the other East African countries listed in the report.

To compensate smugglers, many people take on enormous debts of at least $10,000 USD. Traffickers confiscate passports upon arrival and demand astronomical payback through forced labour. To repay the debt, victims are coerced into doing exploitative labour for little or no pay, frequently in harsh conditions on farms, fishing boats, or construction sites. Traffickers commonly rob migrants of their phones, lock them up in walled homes or compounds, and control them with sexual assault, violence, and threats. Those who enter through smuggling channels do not have legitimate visas. They are instantly viewed as "illegal immigrants," liable to be arrested at any moment. Myanmar's detention facilities are infamously filthy and overcrowded, with complaints of insufficient food, water, and medical treatment. Reporting offences to authorities is hindered by fear of deportation or additional violence. They don't have access to protections or legal aid (Adem, Kebede & Kassa, 2023).

As one victim assured this in an interview with the BBC:

At least 800 Ethiopians held in forced labour camps in Myanmar are being held by two different militant groups, aid sources in Thailand and Ethiopians under the control of the militants. Aid agencies are raising funds to buy plane tickets for 138 Ethiopians who crossed into Thailand from Myanmar two weeks ago. In Southeast Asia, Myanmar is home to more than 150 camps where cybercrime is carried out. These camps are home to citizens of various countries who have been tricked into believing they will find work, and it is estimated that there are around 3,000 Ethiopians. Ethiopians forced to commit fraud are subjected to various forms of torture, including beatings and electric shocks (Victim told the BBC, 28 February 2025).

Lack of access to safe or reasonably priced healthcare is also another challenge for migrants. Treatable injuries or illnesses turn into life-threatening situations. Help-seeking is hindered by fear of arrest. Inadequate food and exposure to illnesses that are rare in Ethiopia, such as dengue, are regular components of exploitative situations. Both smugglers and, occasionally government frequently use extreme brutality. There is a serious risk of sexual exploitation, especially of women (Girmachew, 2018; Omilusi, 2023).

They are totally isolated due to the lack of speakers of the indigenous language and their poor command of English and Burmese. They experience severe xenophobia, mistrust, and social isolation as Black

Africans in a largely Buddhist/Bamar community with intricate ethnic tensions, which makes them more vulnerable. Myanmar provides almost little community support networks, in contrast to places where Ethiopian Diasporas are well-established (Adem, Kebede & Kassa, 2023).

According to one victim, assurance during an interview with the BBC:

The three meals a day that were served in the first few days have been reduced to two in recent days. About 450 Ethiopians and citizens of other countries sleep on the floor in crowded rooms; there are only two toilets; and in recent days, people in the compound have been experiencing an epidemic-like outbreak of skin diseases. Skin swelling, blisters, and 'infections' have developed. The people themselves told us that this was caused by mosquitoes, which are like mosquitoes that carry malaria. But now this is getting worse. Children are getting sick. Yesterday alone, more than 10 children were rushed for treatment (Victim told the BBC, 28 February 2025).

When they discover they are stuck in Myanmar, frequently indefinitely, migrants who were hoping to transit to a safer or more developed nation (like Malaysia) are devastated. Serious trauma, depression, and suicidal thoughts are caused by a confluence of deceit, exploitation, assault, confinement, uncertainty, and isolation. Without outside assistance (such as IOM), voluntary repatriation is impossible due to financial constraints, passport confiscations, and fear of trafficking or arrest (Goodwin-Gill, 2018). The traffickers who hold them captive usually prevent them from making the planned subsequent trip (for example, to Malaysia).

Conclusion

Along the way, migrants are at grave risk, and in their new nations, they frequently experience abuse and exploitation. The cycle persists despite repatriation efforts because of Ethiopia's unsolved underlying issues, the ongoing need for cheap, exploitable labour abroad, and insufficient protection mechanisms. Addressing Ethiopia's poverty and war, creating safe and legal migration routes, changing exploitative labour practices, bolstering protection both in transit and at the destination, and greatly enhancing assistance for returns are all necessary for sustainable solutions.

In general, several Ethiopians were transported into Myanmar because of pretences of employment, including the returning Ethiopians, conflict, broken promises and abandonment, low salary for civil servants, and low support for internally displaced persons. After responding to job postings for customer service positions, many were compelled to labour in scam complexes, where they endured long working hours, physical abuse, and psychological trauma. Most Ethiopian migrants who enter Myanmar are victims of international trafficking organisations. They suffer in a serious violation of human rights because they are stranded in a nation they never meant to be in, deprived of their freedom, rights, and dignity, and confronted with legal persecution, terrible exploitation, and violence with little way out.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Citizens' escape from travelling to countries where employment contracts have not been fulfilled, and evade falling for deceitful propaganda from illicit human traffickers
- Creating awareness about the dangers of human trafficking in Myanmar and other countries via different platforms
- Opening Embassy in Myanmar. Ethiopians who had been detained in Myanmar under "difficult conditions" were repatriated to Ethiopia in cooperation with Ethiopia's Embassy in India and Japan.
- Address the principal causes of poverty and unemployment
- Work together with religious leaders and influential people
- Improving bilateral repatriation agreements with assistance from Myanmar
- Extend legal labour migration routes to states in the Gulf and other states
- Increasing International and Regional Cooperation
- Use international agencies (UNHCR, IOM) to locate victims, engage in negotiations with traffickers, and move them to safe havens & create safe shelters with partner INGOs
- Give medical/psychosocial support for victims by offering trauma therapy, emergency medical attention, and dietary assistance, for example, firming mobile clinics in cooperation with organisations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)
- Provide no-cost legal support for pursuing asylum applications or regularizing status. The UNHCR and other organisations need to speak out against arbitrary detention.
- Pressure on Trafficking Networks; smuggling rings need to be dismantled by regional task forces (ASEAN/IGAD) and Interpol.
- Recording Human rights violations for possible UN Human Rights Council or ICC action.
- Establish a special task force with UN-Led Coordination (UNHCR, IOM, OHCHR) to keep an eye on, document, and plan responses.
- Encourage Myanmar to enact anti-trafficking legislation and ratify the UN Refugee Convention.
- The International community must show concern for the migrant crisis in Myanmar.

Hence, helping Ethiopian migrants who are stuck in Myanmar requires immediate, concerted international intervention. Governments, non-governmental organisations, and regional organisations must coordinate victim protection, anti-trafficking initiatives, and diplomatic pressure. Every day of delay costs lives; therefore, no one actor can resolve this situation on their own.

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Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Data Availability Statement: All data supporting this study are included in this article.

Author Contribution

Author Contributions: All authors contributed to the study's conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by [Author A], Author B and [Author C]. The first draft of the manuscript was written by [Author A], and all authors commented on previous versions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Notes

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2. An interview with a lecturer and researcher of peace and Security studies at Woldia

University, 21 June 2025.

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4. An interview with an assistant professor of Political Science at Bahir Dar

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Figures

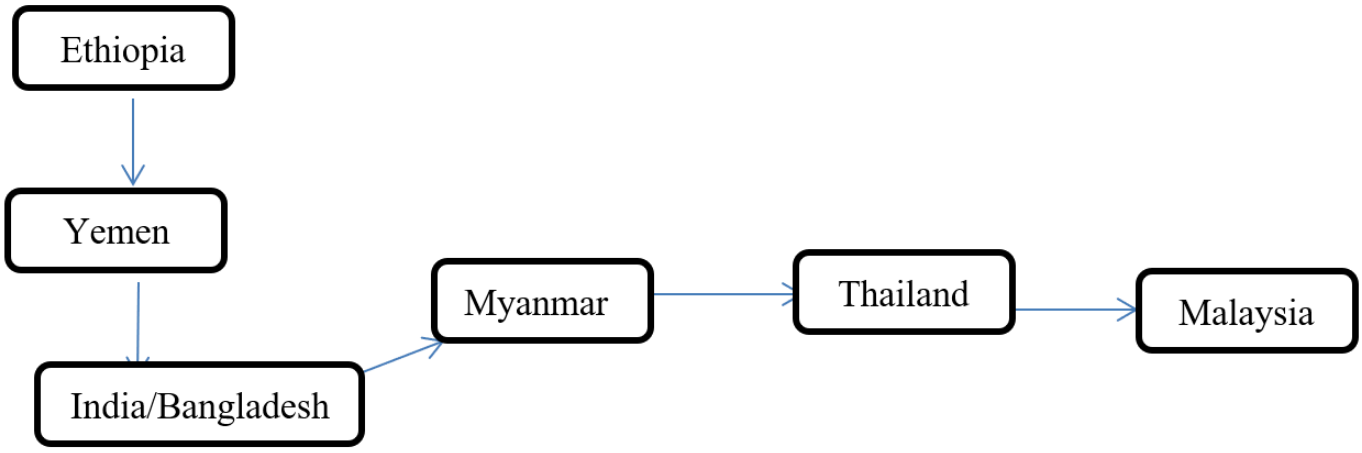


Figure 1

Most common & dangerous routes used by smugglers (created by the author)