SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Human trafficking into the Southern African region

June 2021

OPERATIONAL REPORT

This summary is based primarily on collaborative work with the Malawi Police, its Criminal Intelligence Analytical Unit and their national analysis of organized crime related to trafficking in human beings. As such, a redacted account is provided to inform the reader of the threat posed by this activity extended to the Southern African region whilst maintaining the integrity of ongoing investigations.

Throughout the course of 2020 and 2021, there have been developments in the transnational organised crime activity focused on the trafficking of Ethiopian nationals from Ethiopia to Southern Africa. Organised crime groups have developed new methods that exploit vulnerabilities in the regions of Eastern and Southern Africa to facilitate this illegal activity.

This summary will provide an overview of findings relating to this illegal activity and the associated methodologies. It is based on a criminal intelligence analysis conducted by the Malawi police into an organised trafficking in human beings network following the occurrence of a large number of fatalities.The analysis focused on identifying and tackling the transnational organised criminal network associated to this activity. The Malawi criminal intelligence analytical unit (CIAU) and the ENACT-INTERPOL team combined efforts to analyse intelligence and identify elements of the network in Malawi and other member countries in Eastern and Southern Africa on the human trafficking route.

Thanks to the support of the European Union, the INTERPOL ENACT Project continues to develop analytical capacity in INTERPOL member countries across Africa. As part of this project, INTERPOL assisted the Malawi police to establish their analytical unit in 2018 and has provided training, guidance and mentoring since.

The activities of organised crime have been focused on the trafficking of Ethiopian nationals to South Africa via Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique.

The CIAU received a request for assistance from the investigation teams in the Malawi Police Service to support the investigations by identifying suspects and criminal methodologies in the trafficking of human beings.

The activities of transnational organised crime in this field are a threat to many countries in Eastern and Southern Africa. The organised criminal network in question has not only put the lives of economic migrant victims at risk, but also compromised border security and the integrity of certain law enforcement officials. This analytical report suggests that Ethiopia and South Africa are key INTERPOL member countries affected by the activities identified in this report and the ability of transnational organised criminal networks to commit human trafficking offences. The activities of organised crime have been focused on the trafficking of Ethiopian nationals to South Africa via Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique.

KEY FINDINGS

The following are the key findings resulting from the analysis:

❖ Organised criminals are facilitating the illegal movement of people overland from Ethiopia to South Africa via Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique.

❖ Victims are sourced in Ethiopia by agents offering work opportunities in South Africa due to its position as the industrial powerhouse of the continent.

❖ The primary demographic of the victims are Ethiopian males aged between 18 and 30, which reflects the dominant age range of the working population.

❖ Kenya and Malawi play key roles in the trafficking routes of these victims. This is reflected in the volume of linked suspects identified in Kenya and the levels of access to corrupt officials in Malawi.

❖ Human trafficking facilitators in Ethiopia are increasingly focusing on the southern route due to its increasing popularity for economic migration and Ethiopian law enforcement efforts on the Eastern and Northern route.

- ❖ The organised criminal network involved in this activity follows a non-hierarchical structure. They operate in a decentralized and dispersed structure with different members having different levels of access to other members of the network. This is apparent in the multiple links between members and a number of key individuals, facilities and locations. What associates these different organised crime groups is the utilisation of key individuals, facilities or locations. These entities act as key enablers in this organised criminal activity and create the network.

- ❖ Access to and the location of key entities within this criminal network have collectively determined the trafficking route for Ethiopians to South Africa. This route is seen to be less than optimal in terms of logistics, but benefits from the position of key refugee camps and the levels of access to corrupt police and immigration officials.

- ❖ The socio-cultural links between key criminal actors in Kenya and Malawi to Ethiopia are crucial in facilitating this illegal activity.

- ❖ International financial transfers via mobile money services and bank transfer facilitate this human trafficking.

KEY ROLES OF ETHIOPIA AND SOUTH AFRICA

Ethiopia and South Africa likely represent key member countries in relation to human trafficking activities, as source and destination, in the Eastern and Southern regions of Africa.

In recent years, Ethiopia has seen an important increase in the number of migrant domestic workers going to the Middle East, in particular to Saudi Arabia. Migration in and out of Ethiopia is due to several factors, however the lack of employment appears to be the main one. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' estimation around two million Ethiopian migrants live abroad. Over the last two decades, although Ethiopia has been one of the fastest growing economies in Africa, the employment rate remains low, with very few decent job opportunities for the up to 3 million young Ethiopians entering the labour market every year[i].

Ethiopia and South Africa likely represent key INTERPOL member countries affected by human trafficking activities in the Eastern and Southern regions of Africa

Organised criminals are dependent on strategic points throughout the journey south

As part of its "Saudization" politic aiming at creating job opportunities for young unemployed Saudis and regularizing the labour market, the Government of Saudi Arabia decided to expel undocumented migrants. As such, between November 2013 and March 2014, more than 163,018 Ethiopian migrants were forcibly repatriated[ii].The International Labour Organization reported that "*Given the sudden and unprepared nature of this forced repatriation and with little or no fallback position, the seamless reintegration of these returnees has been painfully slow and largely unaddressed*"[iii]. This has obvious implications for the motivation within Ethiopian communities to identify additional migration opportunities.

Effective Ethiopian law enforcement efforts have served to deter traffickers from using the Eastern route to the Middle East, which was previously more prominent than the Southern route. However, it is also important to consider the impact of COVID-19 restrictions. The Middle East has attempted to lessen the impact of the pandemic through the restrictions of movement, curfews, lockdowns, contact tracing and suspension of public transit[iv]. This appears to have motivated Ethiopians to migrate in search of new economic opportunities and criminal networks to exploit opportunities for human trafficking.

South Africa, home to 75 per cent of the largest African companies[v], has continued to represent an appealing destination for economic immigrants due to its leading economic position within the continent of Africa, having only recently been replaced as number one by Nigeria. Whilst South Africa remains in some cases a transit country for human trafficking, the Malawi CIAU and ENACT have identified a thriving illicit activity. This activity capitalises on Ethiopians seeking socio-economic improvements by migrating to South Africa. This journey takes them through Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique.

OVERLAND ROUTE – ROLE OF KENYA, TANZANIA AND MOZAMBIQUE

The analysis has identified that organised criminals involved in this trafficking in human beings on the southern route, are dependent on strategic points throughout the journey south. Such strategic points
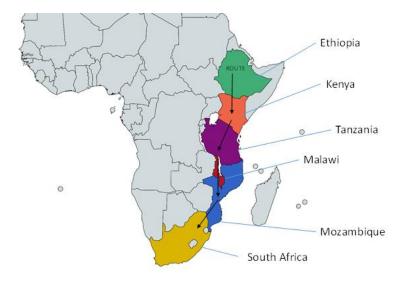
include border crossings and Ethiopian diaspora in Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa.

Kenyan authorities have identified the threat posed by the trafficking of Ethiopians through Kenya on route to South Africa for years and enforcement efforts have been made since 2017. However, Ethiopian nationals remain the most prominent nationals trafficked through Kenya.

Tanzania represents an important transit country in the route taken by traffickers in this human trafficking network. Dar es Salaam represents a significant transit point as depicted in this investigation.

The organised criminal network in the case studied for this analysis crossed over five international borders on route from Ethiopia to South Africa. This would suggest that there are significant challenges to border security in the region and that irregular immigration poses a threat to national security.

Organised criminals likely depend on access to corrupt officials to facilitate the movement of victims along the Southern human trafficking route including the crossing of international borders. This access is almost certain to have been key in facilitating the specific route used by transnational organised crime, sacrificing the most efficient, direct route for the one that exploits higher levels of corruption and key border crossing points. Key individuals within the network coordinated and enabled access to corrupt officials. This access represents the primary modus operandi utilised by the network to address the challenge presented by five international border crossings along the route.

Map 1: Southern trafficking route

The network maintains contacts with local agents in each of the African countries along the route. These agents are crucial in providing social, geographical expertise, legal and cultural insight

ORGANISED CRIME MODUS OPERANDI

The role of the Ethiopian diaspora is significant to this human trafficking. Agents in Ethiopia can be single operators or employ several facilitators at different stages of a victim's journey. They additionally offer an option of payment at 'milestones' of the journey when it is sold to them as a people smuggling service. As such, Ethiopians are increasingly seeking support from 'hosts' based in South Africa for payment assistance towards the Southern trafficking route.

Transnational organised criminals involved in this trafficking are almost certain to utilise this Ethiopian diaspora in Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa. This network is maintained through telephone contacts and highly likely to be essential in the logistical arrangements needed to move a high number of Ethiopians through five countries after victims have left Ethiopia.

The diversities of INTERPOL member countries along the Southern Route is a vulnerability that could be exploited by transnational criminals. INTERPOL member countries along the Southern Route have an unique set of laws, languages and cultures that represent challenges to the organised human trafficking network. These could potentially bring the activities of the network to the attention of authorities during the route south.

The network maintains contacts with local agents in each of the member countries along the route. These agents are crucial in providing social, geographical, legal and cultural insight and support that enables the network to traverse the route uninhibited by police and other state authorities and address the challenges above.

Due to the considerable distance between Ethiopia and South Africa, transnational organised criminals make use of staging posts during the journey. Such staging posts draw on Ethiopian diaspora communities as discussed but also enable coordination of the extensive onward journey.

Access to strategically important locations, be their staging posts or border crossing points, are highly likely enabled by access to corrupt officials in this transnational organised criminal trade. Such officials include police officers and immigration officers. The access to facilities as described above has been identified as highly exploited by human trafficking groups and other forms of criminal groups.

The methodology employed by the network to move victims consists mostly in transporting a group of between 30 – 60 Ethiopians in a container. This can have lethal consequences, as seen in Mozambique in March 2020, where police officers intercepted illegal immigrants who were being ferried in a container; approximately 60 of the undocumented immigrants died due to lack of oxygen. These victims are only able to exit the container rest at strategic points along the route.

DEVELOPING THREATS

The increasing popularity of South Africa as a destination for economic migrants from Ethiopia is influencing the activities of human trafficking agents in Ethiopia by encouraging a focus on the Southern route. Further, human traffickers who source victims in Ethiopia are increasingly using violence and abduction as means to extort money from victims' families in addition to the profits made from trafficking. This methodology capitalises on the vulnerability of victims during transit, who are reliant on the network for their security.

Crowd funding is widely used in Ethiopia in order to pay the demanded ransom for trafficked victims. Previous analysis conducted by INTERPOL in the framework of the ENACT project has indicated the extent to which the cyber environment has enabled human traffickers including those in the Eastern and Southern Africa regions.

Organized crime groups in Africa use social networking websites to study the profiles of potential victims, tailor their approach towards them and eventually recruit them online. Criminals have access to a wide pool of potential victims online, using emails, instant messaging applications and social networking sites, etcetera. The analysis of available information on potential victims online (i.e. location, contacts, images, personal taste, etc.) allows traffickers to tailor their approach to fit the victim's expectation and/or exploit their emotional vulnerabilities[vi].

Ethiopian authorities reported an increase in human smuggling and migrant trafficking cases facilitated by online activities. From 2017 to 2018, the number of cases grew from 35 to 45 cases, representing a growth of nearly 30 per cent. These cases are mostly related to online advertisement of fake jobs abroad.[vii]

Agents in Ethiopia offer victims an option of payment at 'milestones' of the journey. As such, Ethiopians are increasingly seeking support from 'hosts' based in South Africa for payment assistance towards the Southern trafficking route. This will be to finance the entire journey or secure release from captors.

CONCLUSION

This analysis was conducted together with the Malawi police, following investigations into the death of a large number of Ethiopian immigrants. The existence of a sophisticated transnational organised crime network operating in the region was evidenced. This network is trafficking victims from Ethiopia to South Africa via Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique and operated on multiple occasions other than the case highlighted above in Mozambique.

This network is large and non-hierarchical, relying of the specialist access to key individuals, locations and facilities. This has included refugee camps as well as access to corrupt immigration and police officers. This network extends its reach into all member countries on this trafficking route and makes use of cultural and ethnic links with the Ethiopian diaspora as well as local native residents in member countries along the route in order to facilitate human trafficking. The Southern trafficking route from Ethiopia is becoming increasingly popular in the context of frequent Ethiopian police successes to tackle the Northern route to Europe and Eastern route to the Middle East. Ethiopian immigrants are attracted by the prospect of work opportunities in South Africa's strong continental economy. Key traffickers in Ethiopia are re-orientating their focus on the Southern route and are in a position to benefit from the access to facilities and corrupt officials, established by criminal networks. There is further risk that this criminal network will adapt to the arrests of key individuals highlighted.

The level of access to key actors, including corrupted ones, and to certain facilities within Malawi, has largely determined the route used by traffickers. Even though this is not the most efficient route to South Africa, it serves the network well in facilitating movement by enabling reduced possibility for law enforcement intervention.

i ‘Covid-19 in the Middle East’, Daniel Habib, *Policy forum*, August 2020, https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/www.policyforum.net/covid-19-in-the-middle-east/amp/ (accessed on 9 May 2021).

ii International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2014, *Emergency post-arrival assistance to vulnerable Ethiopian migrants returning from Saudi Arabia*, External situation report, 7-9 January, Addis Ababa, International Organization for Migration (accessed on April 2021).

iii Situations and Needs Assessment of Ethiopian returnees from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’, *International Labour Organization*, 2018, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/---ro-abidjan/---sro-addis-ababa/documents/publication/wcms_670539.pdf (accessed on 16 April 2021).

iv‘Covid-19 in the Middle East’, Daniel Habib, Policy forum, August 2020, https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/www.policyforum.net/covid-19-in-the-middle-east/amp/ (accessed on 9 May 2021).

v The economic context of South Africa’, *Nordea*, March 2021, https://www.nordeatrade.com/en/explore-new-market/south-africa/economical-context (accessed on 15 March 2021).

vi Project ENACT Strategic Assessment: Online African Organized Crime from Surface to Dark web, 2020/379/OSA/CAS/ENACT, public version, June 2020.

vii Ibid.

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