

Saudi Arabia Migrant Expulsions: 'They Beat Us. I Want To Warn Others Not To Go'

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Abdulla Shahmola trudges up the road leading from Addis Ababa airport to the outskirts of the city, his battered black suitcase balanced precariously on his head. Weariness and relief are etched into his delicate features as he heaves his heavy bag to the floor. "I have so many possessions that I had to leave behind in **Saudi Arabia** – a television, a bed, a fridge," he laments, adding that he is thankful to be back in **Ethiopia**.

Abdulla is one of hundreds of men, women and children steadily streaming from the airport cargo terminal, where up to 20 flights have been arriving daily from Jeddah and Riyadh since 13 November. A kilometre's walk from the hastily erected transit centre, which has been processing some 7,000 returning migrants each day, a small crowd, held back by federal police officers in blue military fatigues, waits anxiously for a glimpse of a loved one.

As of 8 December, 115,465 Ethiopians – 72,780 men, 37,092 women and 5,593 children, 202 of whom were unaccompanied – had returned from Saudi Arabia, according to government figures. The migrants, most of whom were in Saudi Arabia without work permits, were expelled after a **tightening of labour regulations** in March and the expiration of an amnesty for illegal workers on 4 November.

More than a million migrant workers from across Asia have been expelled from the kingdom as part of the crackdown, which is designed to get more Saudis into jobs and reduce the high unemployment rate.

The **crackdown has triggered clashes** in the capital, Riyadh, in which three Ethiopians were reportedly killed, sparking outrage in Ethiopia.

"They beat us," alleges Abdulla. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out his mobile phone and opens images of badly beaten Ethiopians, singling out one man whose throat appears to have been slit. His friends do the same, thrusting forward their mobiles. "I saw people killed. They are murderers," he hisses.

He says he has spent the past month in an overcrowded Saudi prison. "There were 900 people in one place. After 24 hours they gave us small things – water, a little food. They called the embassy." He claims the detainees had to buy their own food and water at great expense.

Hawa Gizawi, 20, who worked as a domestic servant in Oman and Saudi Arabia for the past four years, also maintains that she was mistreated while in custody awaiting repatriation. "I spent 15 days in prison in Jeddah – no food, no toilet, no hospital. They don't respect our human rights," she says, adding that her employers withheld her wages for a year. "I don't want to go back to Saudi Arabia and I want to warn others not to go."

The International Organisation for [Migration](#) (IOM), which is supporting the Ethiopian government in dealing with the unexpected influx of returnees, has expressed concern about the physical and mental condition of the returnees, describing them as being "traumatised, anxious and seriously sick".

Merenasch Selfu, a nurse at one of the seven transit centres in Addis Ababa receiving repatriates, says many of her patients have upper respiratory tract infections. "The women say there were held in places with no latrines, poor sanitation and no air conditioning, and that is why they developed a cough," she explains.

She has also treated women with newborn babies as well as those in the late stages of pregnancy. "The day before yesterday one woman arrived at the centre showing the early signs of labour," Merenasch says. She estimates that some 2%-3% of those treated at the centre show symptoms of depression or psychosis and confirms she has examined women who claim to have suffered sexual abuse.

The Ethiopian government is providing additional medical and psychological support for the migrants who need it. However, officials admit to being ill-prepared for the massive influx of returnees.

"Frankly speaking, we organised ourselves for very few people – up to 25,000," says Tadesse Bekele, deputy director of the ministry of agriculture's disaster risk management and food security directorate. "Reception and transit centres may not have facilities equal to the number of people being accommodated so for that we are organising alternatives. For example, we are deploying mobile latrines in places where we may have only two or three [toilets] to serve a thousand people."

That said, the government – with assistance from UN agencies and NGOs, as well as contributions from the private sector – seems to be managing the emergency efficiently.

Negussie Kefeni, co-ordinator of a transit centre in the heart of Addis Ababa, says the previous night the facility housed 1,399 women and 80 children – more than double the number it was intended to serve. All traces of that inundation have vanished, however. Clean mattresses and blankets have been neatly laid out, the floors swept and washed, the bathrooms disinfected and the water tanks replenished.

"This kind of operation is not the first exercise of its kind in Ethiopia. We have been working with [refugees from Asmara](#) [capital of Eritrea] in three cities in Afar," says Negussie.

Rows of chairs are set up under the trees, *injera* and *wot* are ready to be served, and hundreds of dignity kits – containing basic hygiene necessities – have been assembled, and a 900birr (\$47) travel allowance awaits the new arrivals. As the first bus pulls up outside the transit centre, and the burka-clad women disembark, volunteers and staff from the Red Cross, International Rescue, IOM and various government departments welcome the disoriented returnees to the penultimate stop on their traumatic journey home.