



Migration, Kidnap, Relief: Amina's Story

When her husband left her alone with four children, Amina decided to leave her home country of Nigeria to seek a better life for her family. Unfortunately, Amina and her children fell victim to one of the smuggling networks that operates between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Gulf. They were held captive for three months by a gang who tried to extort money from Amina's family. Eventually, after a dramatic rescue, Amina and her children were referred to IOM Yemen's Migrant Assistance and Protection team. They are now receiving food, water and shelter thanks to IOM's assistance.

Migration for a Better Life

"I have four children. I am their only provider since my husband left us four years ago," says Amina of her situation in Nigeria, "I left my homeland with three children to go to Saudi Arabia, so that we might find work and have a good life instead of the miserable life we had in Nigeria."

Amina left her oldest son to look after the family's house in Nigeria while she travelled with her two other sons and one daughter to Sudan. From there, she hoped to find a way of reaching Saudi Arabia or another Gulf country.

She travelled to Sudan where she came across many migrants trying to reach Saudi Arabia, and the promise of work and a good salary. With work visas hard to obtain, Amina contacted a smuggler

who promised to take her to Jizan, in Saudi Arabia.

The smuggler took Amina, her young children, and 25 other migrants on a small boat across the Red Sea from Sudan. The trip was arduous. Amina recalls, "We suffered a lot in the boat. There was no food or water; only two or three times they gave us water in two and a half days. We were about to die."



Amina and her young family. ©IOM 2015

However, the end of the boat journey would prove to be just the beginning of Amina's ordeal. Instead of taking the migrants to Jizan in Saudi Arabia, the smuggler delivered them directly to a criminal gang in Yemen who immediately abducted Amina and her children along with the 25 other migrant travel-

ers. They were taken to a house in Abs District of Hajja Governorate, where they were locked in a room with a number of other migrants. In total, the kidnappers held 36 people from Nigeria, Sudan, and Somalia, in the basement of the house.

Amina had fallen victim to one of the many criminal gangs that operate in the Red Sea area, targeting vulnerable migrants often travelling without proper documentation from Africa to the Arabian Peninsula. The kidnappers then force their victims to contact relatives back at home, asking them for ransom money and brutally torturing their victims if the money is not handed over; this is exactly what Amina was to endure throughout her ordeal.

"The smugglers started beating us," she recounts, "They chained men and women together, beating us horribly. Even my children were badly beaten."

The brutality continued for three months. As well as beating the captives, the gang withheld food and water, giving them only enough to survive day-to-day. Amina's children were not spared the hardship.

Left with no other option, Amina called her eldest son in Nigeria and pleaded with him to sell their farm. He refused as it is the family's only source of income. Amina began to lose hope that she would ever escape captivity.

A Lucky Escape

Luckily for Amina and her children, two of the captives managed to escape one night. Destitute and lost, they approached the local community for assistance, and were directed to the house of a local volunteer who often works with migrants. The volunteer informed the local police who moved quickly to shut down the kidnapping operation. During an afternoon raid on the house, three kidnapers were arrested and all 36 migrants freed.

Soon after their release, local volunteers aware of IOM's capacity to assist vulnerable migrant contacted IOM's Migrant Assistance and Protection team, which currently has personnel based in nearby Hudaydah, to make them aware of the case of Amina and the 35 other migrants. Staff immediately travelled to Abs to assess the newly released captives and deliver much needed aid.

"We were very happy when the IOM team visited us there and provided us with food and drink," says Amina of her first contact with IOM's team, "We were very happy when they said they would come back to help us again."

A member of IOM's team in Hudaydah added; "We found the migrants in a miserable condition. They needed food and water, and were terrified when we found them. We felt sorry that they had come

to Yemen not expecting to be abducted and tortured; we felt especially sorry for the children who were also exposed to this merciless treatment."

Local authorities assisted in arranging transport for the most vulnerable migrants – including Amina and her young children – to the port city of Hudaydah, around 100 kilometers to the south, where they were transferred to the care of IOM's Migrant Response Point (MRP). The remaining migrants received assistance initially, but turned down any further assistance at the MRP.

Now Amina and her children are being hosted at IOM's Migrant Response Point and receiving regular meals, water, and non-food items such as clothes. They are recovering from the physical and psychological trauma inflicted on them by their captors over many months.

Regional Challenges, Local Assistance

For Amina, the intercession of Yemeni police and local volunteers was enough to end her ordeal. Now she and her young children hope to return home to her eldest son in Nigeria – IOM will aim to support this process as far as possible. IOM is currently liaising with the Nigerian government to coordinate the family's emergency return. In 2015, IOM has already assisted 2,215 vulnerable migrants

in returning home by sea from Hudaydah.

Unfortunately, Amina's case is not unique. Every year, thousands of vulnerable migrants are kidnapped by these gangs. Between January and October 2015, IOM encountered 731 individual cases of kidnap and 1,118 cases of extortion among the 3,368 migrants screened. These figures are higher as a proportion than in previous years; since the escalation of the conflict in Yemen and the chaos that has accompanied it, smugglers and kidnapers have taken advantage of the weakened law and order to profit from the vulnerable migrants passing through the country.

With the generous support of the UK Department for International Development, the European Union, the US Department of State, the Government of Japan, Swedish Development Agency, the Central Emergency Response Fund, and the US Association for International Migration, IOM's protection team in Yemen strives to provide lifesaving food and water to as many of these migrants as possible. More must be done at the international level to counter these complex international criminal operations. Countering transnational smuggling networks is challenging under normal circumstances; since the outbreak of conflict in Yemen, it has become almost impossible.



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