Routes of Risk: Land Migration from The Gambia

Risks along the journey, local and international policies, and the stories of missing migrants

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Their Voice Must Be Heard

Their Voice Must Be Heard is a non profit organization that conducts outreach programs and promotes social justice in The Gambia. In particular, they educate Gambians on the

dangers of embarking for Europe. TVMBH has acted as a bridge between us, the students, and those who have survived migration from The Gambia so we may amplify their testimonies of the harsh realities of the journey. Mustapha Manneh, founder and C.E.O. of TVMBH has been pivotal to our ability to construct this project. Our goal is to work with Mustapha and TVMBH closely to organize key information to promote transparency around migration and ensure the stories of missing migrants do not go untold.

> *I had a lot of dreams in life, and that is when I began to really be afraid.*

Sarjo Darboe

Sarjo was not fearful when he embarked on his journey from The Gambia to Italy. He witnessed the careless murder of other migrants by border control, was extorted for money under the threat of death, and arrived in Europe just to have his expectations of prosperity soured. However, he was not afraid, not until he returned to The Gambia and began carving out a livelihood for himself. He did not fear for his life until he had a vision for his future—a vision his younger self, like many young Gambians, struggled to form in his home country.

Geography



Major checkpoints from The Gambia to Europe

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1 The Gambia

Poverty and unemployment are major drivers. Many Gambians, particularly youth, face limited job opportunities and low wages at home. Many young

Gambians migrate in search of better educational opportunities or professional training, particularly in Europe.

2 Bamako

The Timbuktu corridor leading to Algeria's section of the Sahara Desert remains the predominant path for migrants traveling through Mali. However, going through Bamako there are informal smuggling networks which thrive, connecting migrants with transporters, document forgers, and guides.

3 Gao

Gao serves as a major transit hub because it offers one of the fastest and most affordable desert crossings. Around 900 migrants pass through Gao a month trying to make it north to Algeria. Some migrants report encountering 15 to 20 checkpoints along their route through Mali. At each stop, many report members of the Malian army demand bribes, threatening to remove those who cannot pay from the bus. Beyond Gao lies a six-day desert passage that has proven deadly for many; for migrants, it’s the final moment of relative safety.

4 Tamanrasset

Entering Algeria. Because of its strategic location and infrastructure, Tamanrasset has become both a stopping point and a bottleneck. Migrants often spend weeks or even months here, staying in overcrowded safehouses or makeshift camps while securing new smugglers, replenishing funds, or avoiding police patrols. The city is also a key site for Algerian security forces, who routinely conduct raids and deport undocumented migrants back across the southern border.

5 Sabha

Entering Sabha. Similar to Tamanrassat, migrants often stay in Sabha to rest, rather than a point of settlement. Only about 10% of migrants decide to stay in Sabha for the long term. Sabha is also a major site for migrant detention and deportation. In recent crackdowns, authorities have deported hundreds from the city as part of ongoing efforts to control migration and tighten Libya's southern borders.

6 Tripoli

Reaching Tripoli, Libya's capital, serves a dual role in the migratory journey across North Africa. For some, it is the final stop, a city where they settle and seek work in construction, domestic labor, or informal markets. For others, Tripoli is a temporary resting point after a harrowing journey across the Sahara, a place to regroup before attempting the dangerous sea crossing to Europe. While Libya's political instability has made the journey more perilous, Tripoli still offers job opportunities, particularly for those who remain undocumented and take on low-wage, high-risk work in a largely unregulated labor economy.

Key Transit Routes

Overview

The land migration journey taken by many Gambian migrants

is characterized by complex and hazardous progressions on a long journey through treacherous land. With the goal, for many, to end up in Europe, the lengthy journey is characterized by transit through different regions that offer different geopolitical dynamics, smuggling networks, and border enforcement all of which make the journey that much more difficult. As seen through the maps above the journey begins on an eastward travel through Africa via Senegal, Mali, and Niger, before moving north towards Libya; a key transit route despite the instability in this region. The UNODC's report, Smuggling of Migrants, shows cities such as Agadez as a central smuggling hub that Gambian migrants pass through where they are subject to extortion, detaining, and trafficking. Other organizations such as Frontex and ResearchGate show maps of routes that further illustrate how these routes converge in Libya where many migrants are exploited by militia-based control. UNHCR GIS portal and the Humanitarian Data Exchange reveal refugee camps and transit centers in Niger and Libya; however these are often inadequate in dealing with the amount of migrants coming through the region. Furthermore, border checkpoints through Mali, Niger, and Libya prove to be violent and exploitative points, as described by the UNHCR. These factors show how the Gambian migrants are just challenged by the distance of the journey but the structural obstacles that present themselves throughout the journey itself.

UNHCR WEST & CENTRAL AFRICA
FORCIBLY DISPLACED AND STATELESS PERSONS PRESENCE

Human Cost

The macro-scale data provides visual and contextual representation of the outcomes for many on the journey from The Gambia. The intimate struggles that individuals and families endure can often lead to fatal outcomes, making this already treacherous journey even more vicious. With the journey comes decision making, will they begin in the first place, how will they survive, and many other life altering questions that these migrants must consider. Taking all of this into account allows for a realistic, factual account of the risk that these migrants take, this risk being their life. They are willing to put that at risk to reach their goals, something that many of us do not understand. So, focussing on this and the migrants' dignity allows for us to paint a picture of the reality for many of these migrants.

Risks Along the Journey

What are the primary risks and dangers of the Gambian land migration route?

Refugee Camps

Many sources such as the UNHCR or Humanitarian Data Exchange address the poor conditions due to lack of resources and overcrowding in the refugee camps along the migration route that Gambian migrants often take. Camps are stretched beyond capacity in an effort to compensate for the dangerous conditions of the journey, causing outbreaks of disease, food insecurity, and lack of medical resources for those within the camps. The UNHCR data shows the stalling of individuals within the camps due to slow resettlement and stricter enforcements at European borders. These sites are not safe havens but rather holding places for mass amounts of migrants undermining the humanitarian purpose of these

camps.

Border Checkpoints

Along the journey migrants face many physical obstacles, one of growing concern is the internal checkpoints in countries like Mali and Niger. These checkpoints feature heavily policed borders where those who are often under control of the corruption within these countries are the ones interacting with the migrants themselves. The UNHCR reports of irregular migration trends highlights the extortion that many migrants face at these border checkpoints; many with a pay to pass policy that often leads to incidences of violence or forced labor. These obstacles create a larger effect on the safety of migrants, making many migrants seek even more dangerous or precarious ways of transit if they cannot afford to pay the border patrol fees. This highlights the concept of state

corruption and its influence on the safety of migrants, showing how the although border security is meant to be a good security measure it only perpetuates the abuse that migrants face along their journey.

Smuggling Hubs

The land migration route through West Africa and to Europe, often the route that Gambian migrants embark on, is riddled with dangers that prove to be life or death scenarios for many of these migrants. A main challenge these migrants take on is the smuggling hubs that are a key way in which military entities take advantage of the migrants. Along the land journey migrants will come across major smuggling hubs where they receive items such as fake passports and a guide to take them on the journey; neither of which come free. Major known smuggling hubs such as Agadez (Niger) and Sabha

(Libya) become pivotal for many Gambian migrants. The UNODC details Agadez as a smuggling hub where many migrants are extorted, detained, and trafficked before they embark on the rest of their journey through the Sahara. This includes being sold into forced labor, robbed, and being tortured by the smugglers; showing the exploitative measures that these migrants go through. Migrants often rely on smugglers to get them through militarized zones along borders, many times succumbing to the conflict of the regions they travel through; this includes being forced into abusive detention centers where they can be exploited for money or imprisonment which is controlled by militias profiting off of migration routes. These smuggling structures survive because state structures are weakened, meaning migrants are treated as a commodity in the vulnerable structures of these states. Sarjo attests to the nightmarish hardships of smuggling hubs, where many lives are valued by the money and possessions that belong to them. He describes multiple scenarios where he barely escaped with his life; his physical and emotional scars display how the experiences at supposed transit destinations stick with many for the rest of their lives.

The Sahara Desert: Heat, Hunger, and Abandonment

One of the deadliest parts of the land migration route is the Sahara Desert, which migrants must cross to reach Libya. The extreme heat, lack of water, and long travel hours in poorly maintained vehicles make this part of the journey extremely dangerous. Many migrants suffer from dehydration, hunger, and exhaustion. Some are abandoned by smugglers if the vehicle breaks down or if they are unable to keep going. According to surveys by the Mixed Migration Center , over 1,000 people died in the Sahara between 2021 and 2024, though many experts believe the real number is much higher, as many deaths go unreported. Despite being less visible in the media, the desert has become a silent graveyard for many Gambians attempting this journey.

Libya: A Zone of Violence and Detention

Conditions often worsen when migrants reach Libya. This country is known for its high levels of violence, especially against irregular migrants. Many are captured and placed in militia-run detention centers where they are beaten, tortured, starved, or even electrocuted. Girls and women face even more horrific abuse, often experiencing repeated sexual violence. Some are forced into prostitution by guards or smugglers. Migrants are also frequently kidnapped and held for ransom, with smugglers or militias contacting their families and threatening to kill or torture them unless money is paid. If the ransom is delayed, victims may be severely harmed or even killed. Libya, instead of being a transit point, often becomes a trap of suffering and abuse.

Bribery, Extortion, and Unlawful Detention

Another major risk along the Gambian migration route is the widespread corruption at border checkpoints. Migrants traveling through Mali and Niger often encounter heavily policed border zones where they are forced to pay bribes to continue their journey. Those who cannot pay are sometimes jailed or turned back. In countries like Libya, Sudan, Mali, and Niger, arbitrary detention by state forces is common. Migrants are locked up without being charged, denied access to lawyers, and kept in inhumane conditions without proper food or healthcare. These legal abuses make the journey even more unpredictable and unsafe.

Robbery and Violence in Remote Areas

Migrants must also navigate the threat of robbery by armed groups or bandits, especially while crossing remote parts of the desert. These attackers often steal money, phones, and other belongings, leaving migrants with nothing. Being robbed makes it harder for migrants to continue traveling or to seek help if they are in danger. These assaults also increase the emotional burden on migrants and their families, many of

whom go into debt trying to support the journey.

Role of Religion

> *I am very confident because I have the trust in God.*
>
> *Djiby, from "It's a Journey That Only God Knows: Understanding Irregular Migration in Senegal Through a Religious Lens."*

Blessings Before the Journey

Many migrants in the Gambia seek a blessing from an elder within their community, noting that the ancestors bless the journey and give their approval of the embark on challenges ahead. This allows the migrants to find meaning in their decision to migrate even with the known risks, considering the central role religion plays in their daily lives. Many Gambians perceive migration as a personal calling and communal responsibility, with mystical protection along the way.

Coping Mechanism During the Journey

The role of religion during the physical journey proves to be a vital coping mechanism for many migrants who face harsh conditions and violent challenges. Whether it is the conditions of the desert or the dangers in crossing the Mediterranean, prayer is used as a way to reassure, manage fear, and navigate trauma. Engaging in daily prayer is something that offers a sense of stability in unknown circumstances, providing migrants with comfort in times of need. Prayer can be seen as a way to foster resilience for groups of people at a time, reinforcing solidarity and hope during treacherous times.

Role of Religion on Land vs. Sea

For many Gambian migrants, the land journey is seen as a test of faith, with the embracing of endurance and divine trial as a road to spiritual purification. With the reliance on prayer and guidance from blessings, the navigation of the treacherous journey proves to be a test of faith. On the contrary, the sea journey is seen as a surrender to God's will. The dangers of the sea must only be navigated through the divine will, making survival reliant on God's mercy. This journey also encourages intense prayer much like the land journey, both with reflections to the trust in God and need for spiritual guidance.

Historical Context

Migration in the 19th and 20th centuries was shaped by conflict, colonization, and economic hardship. After independence in 1965, some Gambians, including President Dawda Jawara, moved to the UK for work or study. But immigration became harder as restrictions tightened from the 1960s onward.

The economy struggled in The Gambia, especially in agriculture which was the main source of income. Deforestation, population growth, and poverty pushed many to migrate. Economic reforms in the 1980s stabilized finances but increased hardship for everyday people, driving more internal and international migration.

The 1994 coup led to a rise in asylum seekers and stricter visa policies in Europe. Since then, migration—both regular and irregular—has remained a key response to limited opportunities in The Gambia.

The Evolution of Smuggling Networks and Trade Routes

Contemporary trade and mobility between Casamance and The Gambia are rooted in colonial-era border arrangements and rivalries. During the late 19th century, conflict and forced displacement disrupted the region as British and French colonial powers competed to control trade and attract settlers.

Post-independence efforts at political and economic integration, such as the Senegambia Confederation, ultimately failed, and neoliberal reforms in the 1980s expanded informal trade instead of formal cooperation. Currency differences and colonial legacies have continued to drive informal cross-border activity. While regional initiatives like ECOWAS and the AfCFTA aim to liberalize trade, weak infrastructure, governance, and corruption limit their impact, leaving many to navigate or bypass formal border systems in their pursuit of livelihood.

Local and International Policies

How do international and regional actors regulate or block the movement of these migrants?