

Smugglers toss Africa migrants overboard

By AHMED AL-HAJ, Associated Press Writer

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Smugglers taking illegal migrants from Somalia to Yemen forced hundreds of Africans overboard in stormy seas in an effort to make a fast getaway from security forces, officials said Monday. Thirty-one bodies have been found and nearly 90 people remained missing.

Passengers who resisted the smugglers were stabbed or beaten with wooden and steel clubs, then thrown into the water where some were attacked by sharks, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees said, citing survivors.

"Several recovered bodies showed signs of severe mutilation," UNHCR said. "Survivors also reported that several Ethiopian women and at least one Somali were raped and abused by the smugglers during the voyage from Bosaso in Somalia's Puntland region. Survivors also alleged that some Yemeni security forces confiscated their money once they reached shore."

Yemeni officials said several boats were involved in Thursday's incident. The dead and missing came from a single wooden boat that was carrying around 120 people, said an official from the local government in coastal Shabwa province.

Eight bodies were found Thursday, and another 23 were taken out of water over the past couple of days, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the press.

Another 450 people forced out of other boats at the same time have been rescued, he said. The UNHCR put the number of dead at 29, with 71 missing.

It was the latest case of smuggler brutality involving boats carrying people across the Gulf of Aden from Somalia and the Horn of Africa. It brings the total number of dead and missing among people trying to reach Yemen so far this year to 264.

"We are horrified by this latest tragedy," said Erika Feller, the UNHCR's assistant high commissioner for protection.

The victims are people "who are desperate to escape persecution, violence and poverty in the Horn of Africa," she said.

A similar incident occurred on Saturday, when smugglers forced 140 people into the water elsewhere along the coast. All the migrants were believed to have been rescued, Yemeni officials said. Two other boats carrying 330 Somalis and Ethiopians arrived in Yemen on Saturday, but no casualties were reported, the UNHCR said.

Since January 2006 at least 30,000 people have fled violence and hardship in Somalia and Ethiopia for Yemen, according to UNHCR. About 500 people have died and at least 300 are missing and believed dead.

Out of 88,000 registered refugees in Yemen, about 84,000 are Somali, UNHCR said.