REGIONAL BUREAU FOR THE EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

Eastern Route (from Horn of Africa) to Yemen and the Gulf

July 2026

OVERVIEW: Movement on the Eastern Route toward Yemen and the Gulf is one of the world's most active and dangerous mixed-movement corridors. Journeys are rarely linear: people pause, change course, or remain in Djibouti and Somalia for months or years, depending on their access to protection, legal status and resources. Evidence gathered along the route shows onward movement is a response to unmet protection needs, not a simple choice - and that timely access to asylum can change the course of a journey.

The evidence is consistent across Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti and Yemen: risks accumulate as people move further along the route, and the great majority of urgent needs go unmet along the way. Protection interventions early in the journey - not only at the final destination - are what change outcomes.

Given the above, it is critical to continue to identify and protect people with international protection needs, preserve access to asylum, strengthen specialized protection services, and reduce risk through timely, coordinated action along the entire Eastern Route.

KEY FIGURES

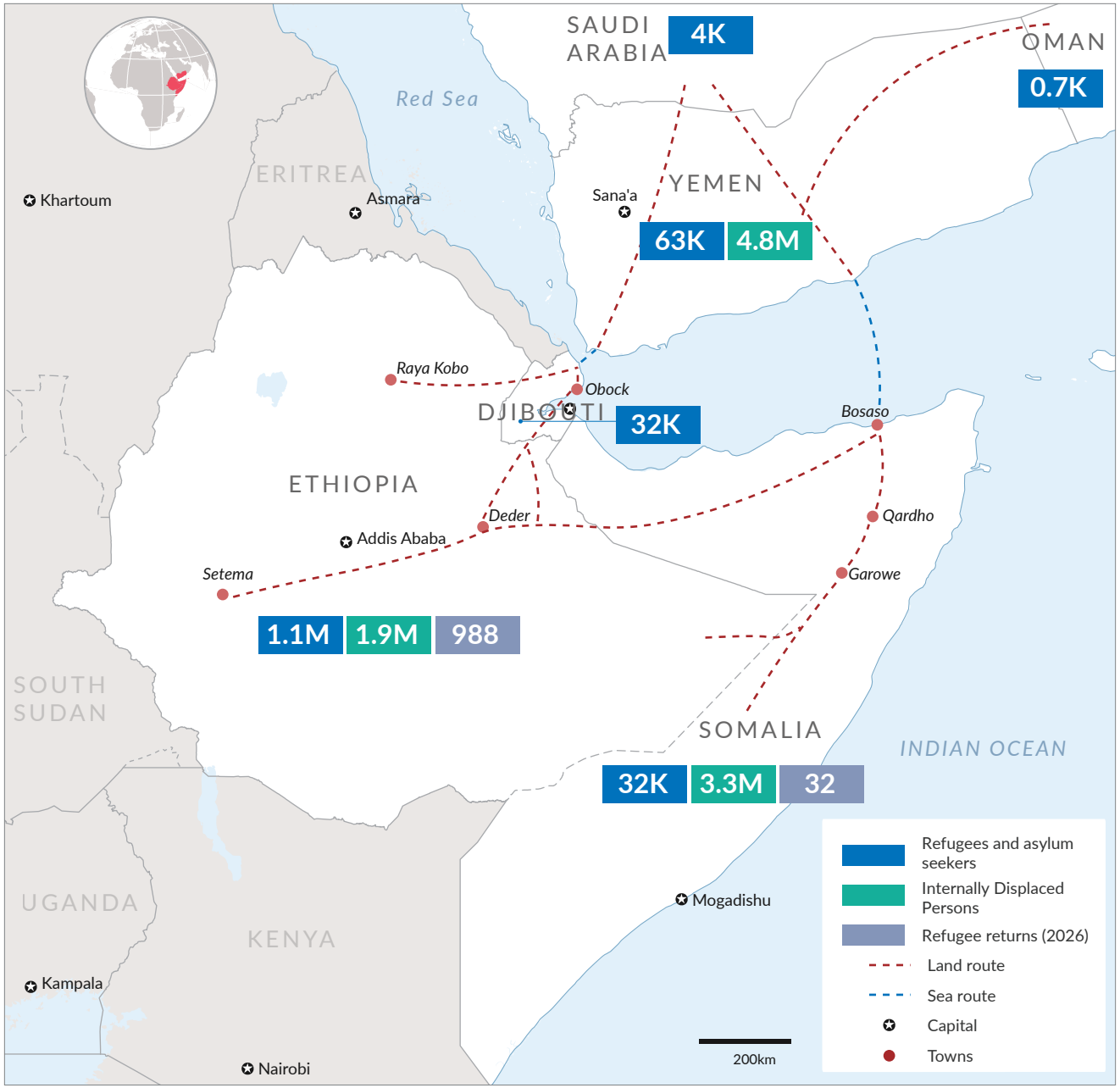
200-300
arriving in Obock each day to attempt the Red Sea crossing to Yemen

900+
dead/missing at Sea in 2025 (Djibouti-Yemen)

329K
refugees and other people in need (2026 Yemen HNRP)

30%
of arrivals in Yemen opt to seek asylum / approach UNHCR for protection

73%
travelling alone through Somalia



UNHCR RBESA DIMA | rbesa-dima@unhcr.org

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

REGIONAL BUREAU FOR THE EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

Eastern Route (from Horn of Africa) to Yemen and the Gulf

July 2026

DRIVERS OF THE MOVEMENT ALONG THE EASTERN ROUTE

Conflict, insecurity & political instability - Ongoing violence, including forced recruitment, drives people to leave in search of safety.

Limited access to protection & legal status - Without registration or legal status, many see onward movement as their only option. Survey respondents say they would stay if they had access to asylum and protection.

Socio-economic vulnerability & lack of opportunities - Few jobs, limited education and livelihood opportunities, especially for young people, combine with protection concerns.

Family & community networks - Family reunification and diaspora networks shape destination choices.

Perceived opportunities in the Gulf - Perceived jobs, higher income and Gulf reconstruction activities and labour demand remain a strong draw, despite widespread awareness of the dangers.

PROTECTION RISKS ALONG THE ROUTE

Risks start before the sea crossing

Insecurity in Oromia, Amhara and Tigray - combined with limited documentation and few economic opportunities - continues to push people out of Ethiopia. Trafficking networks along the Eritrea - Tigray - Addis Ababa - Afar - Djibouti corridor expose people, especially young adults, to extortion and abuse.

Somalia and Djibouti: not just transit countries

People increasingly remain here for months or years, not just pass through:

- Financial constraints, insecurity and legal barriers extend journeys through Somalia - during which people face violence, robbery, detention and trafficking.
- People who obtain refugee status are more likely to stay rather than risk irregular onward movement
- Djibouti's Obock is the main departure point to Yemen. Daily arrivals continue despite deaths at sea - a sign that protection monitoring, information and safe pathways are urgently needed.

Risk keeps rising after Yemen

Yemen is both a country of asylum and a major transit hub as well as a destination country. An estimated 90% of new arrivals initially intend to continue to Saudi Arabia or Oman, but many have protection needs and require screening and referral. Risk increases further along the route as people run out of money and become more reliant on smugglers.

PILLARS AND KEY INTERVENTIONS OF THE ROUTE-BASED APPROACH

1 Entry and admission

- Registration and referral for asylum
- Border monitoring
- Disembarkation support

2 Asylum systems

- Transition to government refugee status determination system
- Strengthening of national asylum system

3 Protection and assistance, anti-trafficking

- Legal and case support (including for children, GBV survivors and VoTs)
- Health
- Shelter

4 Inclusion and Development

- Documentation
- Economic inclusion / livelihood
- Education

5 Safe, regular and complementary pathways

- Resettlement
- Complementary Pathways
- Family reunification

6 Return, voluntary repatriation and re-integration

- Return counselling and referral
- Return monitoring and data collection
- Re-admission