

The Journey of Exile: Plight of Exiled Somali Journalists

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On average one journalist in one month flees from Mogadishu into Kenya, Uganda or Djibouti fearing for their lives after having received death threats from militias and extremist groups using armed youngsters and warlords. Some manage to leave only after being injured in targeted attacks by the protagonists in the unending violence and insecurity in Somalia, while some have to live with the trauma after seeing the bodies of their dead fellow journalists.

The exodus has left the country's media in the hands of very young and inexperienced journalists who have to be trained on the job to perform their duties. Also, this exodus has resulted in a very big population of Somali journalists suffering and wasting away in the capitals of the neighbouring countries, especially Nairobi, Kampala and Djibouti. Most of them cannot get employment because of language barrier while those who work do some very basic reporter duties from which they earn pittance, hardly enough to afford them three meals a day.

Fleeing from Mogadishu and Baidoa

Typically, the fleeing Somali journalist leaves Mogadishu for Elasha Biyaha settlement, some 20 kilometres south of Mogadishu, where they take a minibus ride through many towns and rough roads. They sneak through roadblocks manned by Islamist rebels before arriving in Dhobley, a town at the border between Somalia and Kenya.

These journalists from Mogadishu pay approximately 180 US dollars to get transported from Somalia to Kenya. They first enter into the refugee camps in Kenya and then travel to Nairobi after they have established their contacts. Their journey from Somalia to Kenya takes between 7 to 8 days.

Fleeing journalists from Baidoa come to Kenya by road. They take two main roads depending on the security situation. Sometimes they take the road coming from Baidoa to Mandera via commercial district of Bula Hawa that borders both Kenya and Ethiopia. However, many fleeing journalists from Baidoa came through Buale town so as to reach Dhobley town.

On the journey, these fleeing journalists are singled out, stopped and even asked questions by the militias as they are known by their faces. Some of the questions asked include; "where are you going to?", "what do you want to do there?" and "why are you going there?"

In many instances, journalists are forced to answer tougher questions, which sometime result in the minibus leaving them behind. In such cases, they get stranded in a town that they don't know anything about. A town they have nowhere to stay, and a place where their personal security is not guaranteed. Many fleeing journalists have been forced to change their looks by either shaving their hairs, beards or by dressing differently to camouflage their identity. Women journalists wear the veil to hide their faces from the marauding militias. However, sometimes they are compelled to remove the veil and put to task through questions, if one is not lucky.

The journalists have fled from Somalia in the largest numbers since the beginning of this year, especially after Islamist militants consolidated their power as they control 8 of the 10 regions in southern and central regions and operate in the capital city Mogadishu. Six journalists were murdered in Mogadishu, Afgoye and Beledweyne in this year alone.

Those fleeing from Kismayo

The journalists from Kismayo, 500 kilometres south of Mogadishu, have left the city after being ordered by the Islamists to either join them (as fighters through the media) or leave the locality altogether. Some of these journalists undergo very difficult conditions as they have to travel on foot from Kismayo to the border town of Dhobley, a distance of about 200 kilometres. On the way, they sometimes get caught by the militants manning the towns who interrogate them for hours before they are released. Between Kismayo and Dhobley, each of the journalists pay 100 US Dollars to bribe their way into the refugee camps in Kenya, before travelling to Nairobi through Garissa town. This journey may take about 7 hours.

All the exiled Somali journalists living in Nairobi are facing many difficulties and challenges including lack of housing, education, healthcare and legal status. But many journalists get shocked when they arrive in Nairobi and see many people, whom they had never seen practising as journalists back in Somalia, claiming to be "journalist". This is because such imposters think it would be easier to pose as a journalist in order to get easy passage and to get access to opportunities including being granted refugee status.

Once in Nairobi, the Kenyan police often arrest these journalists since most of them do not have the legal papers to enable them live in Nairobi.

But going into exile is also a source of trouble for their family members they have left behind. The family members of the journalists are subsequently subjected to harassment and intimidation by the militias and the extremists. Some of those affected family members have often fled and found their way into Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya in search of safety.

Those fleeing to Uganda

The journalists who have the money and can afford it pay up to 800 US dollars to purchase an air ticket to Kampala, Uganda, and pay another 50 US Dollars for visa fee as Somalis are allowed to obtain visa upon arrival at the Entebbe airport, unlike Kenya where they would be required to apply for a visa 3 months in advance before they leave their country. Some of these

journalists prefer to live in Nairobi rather than Kampala due to family ties and strong presence of Somali community in Kenya, so they cross the border between Kenya and Uganda. They pay a further 120 US dollars to reach Nairobi.

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