## EASTERN ROUTE

African migrants risk everything for a better life in Gulf States

Under the scorching Somali sun, a young boy standing on the side of a highway is asked why he chose to migrate. "Why we left? Because life is making us this, it is taking us from place to place in search of a living," he responds. His decision to leave everything he knew behind and embark on an uncertain journey was not his choice. Faced with poverty, conflict, and the effects of climate change in his home country, it was a lack of choice that pushed him to contact the smugglers that would make his life agony for months on end.

Confined in a crowded house with fellow migrants, the young boy endured torture at the hands of his captors who demanded money from his anguished family on speakerphone.

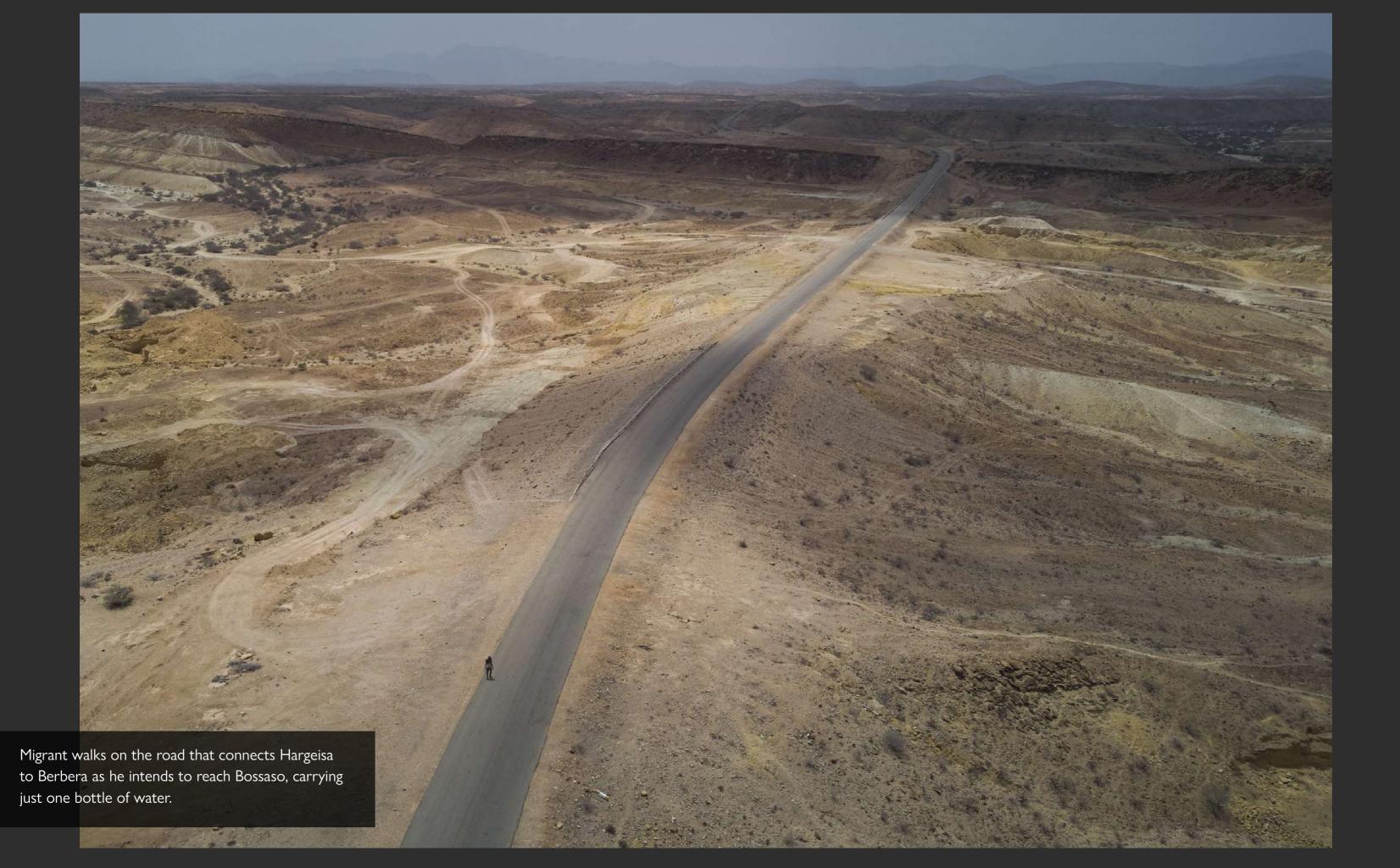
As the days passed, his dreams of a fulfilling future grew more distant. When he was finally allowed to leave - after his family had paid the ransom - he had enough. His quest for a better future abroad ended there. Time to go back home. But without the money to pay for his return ticket, he found himself stranded in a distant land, and had to beg on the streets to survive.

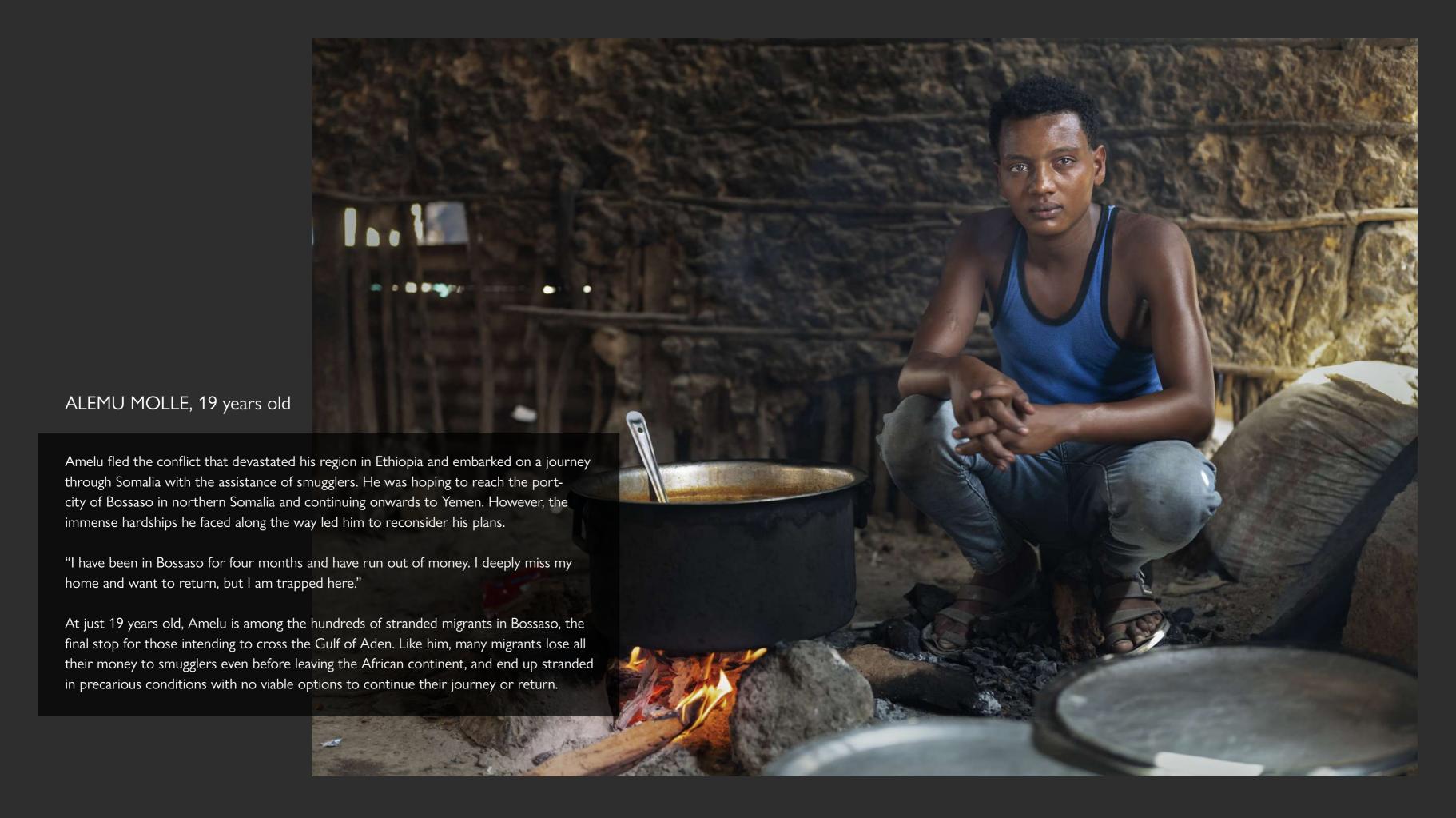
The young boy's story represents the plight faced by tens of thousands of migrants who embark on the treacherous Eastern Route every year. With little access to food, water, or a place to sleep, most migrants rely on smugglers on the arduous journey through Somalia, Djibouti, and Yemen, with Saudi Arabia or other Gulf States as final destination.

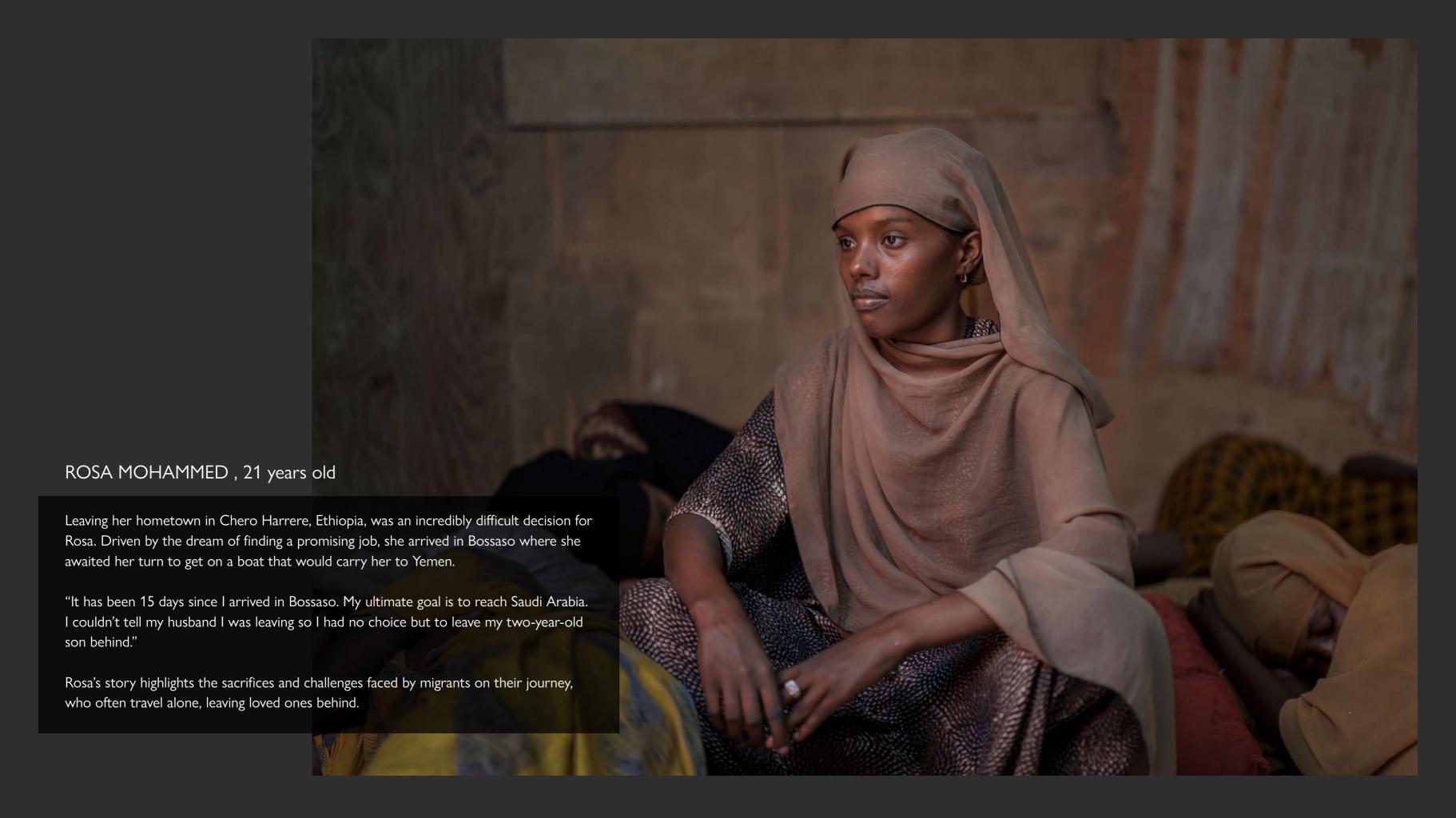
Exploiting their vulnerable situations, smugglers subject migrants to violence, including torture, extortion, exploitation, forced labor and sexual abuse, while making a profit of millions of dollars annually at their expense.

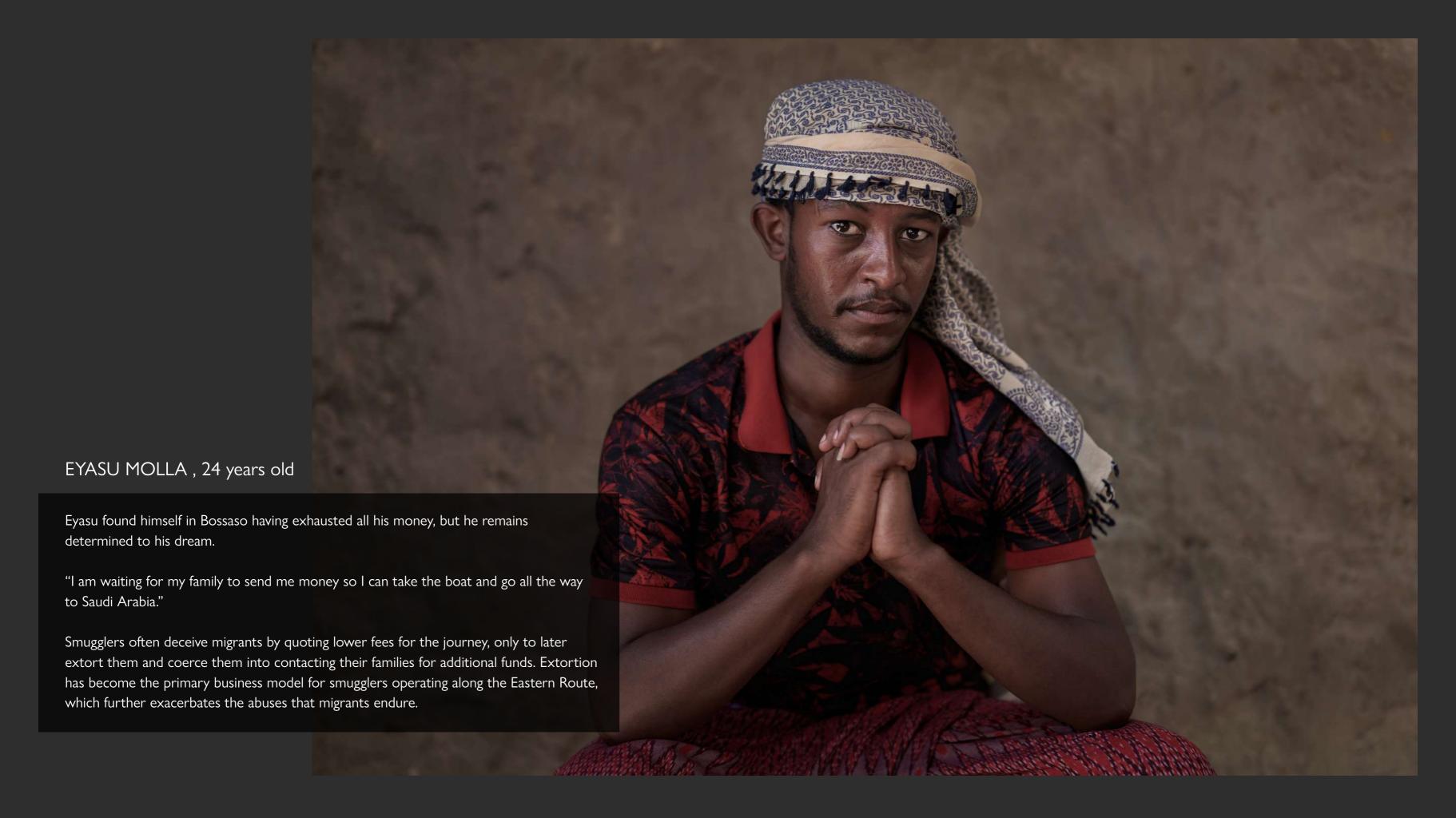
Despite the risks, the Eastern Route has steadily gained popularity in recent years, particularly among young Ethiopian men. Since 2019, an estimated 276,648 migrants took this route from Somalia and Djibouti to Yemen according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Through testimonies of migrants collected in Somalia, this photo essay offers a glimpse into the hardships along the route. Their stories shed light onto one of the world's most forgotten irregular migration routes and emphasize the urgent need for attention and action.

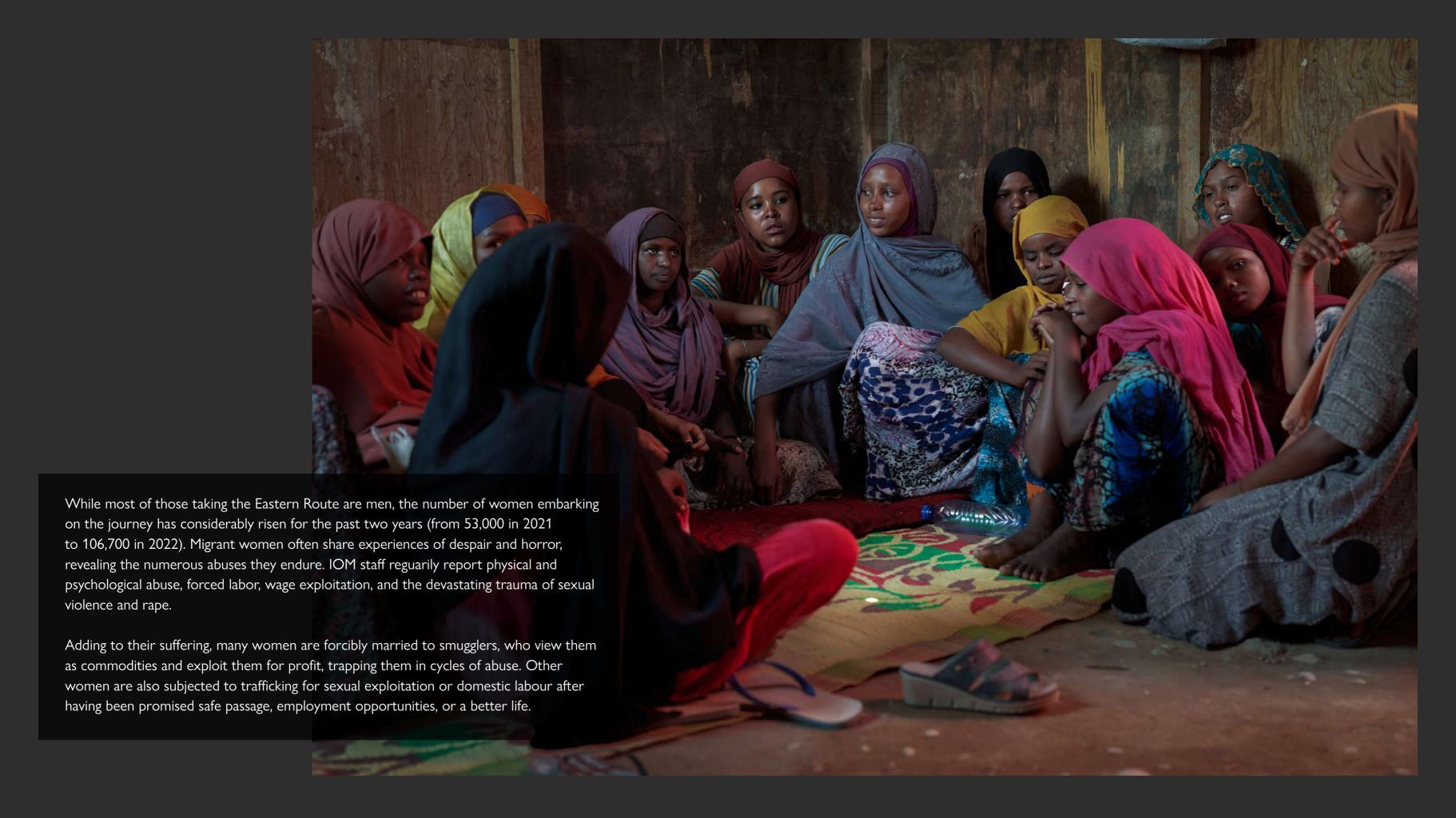


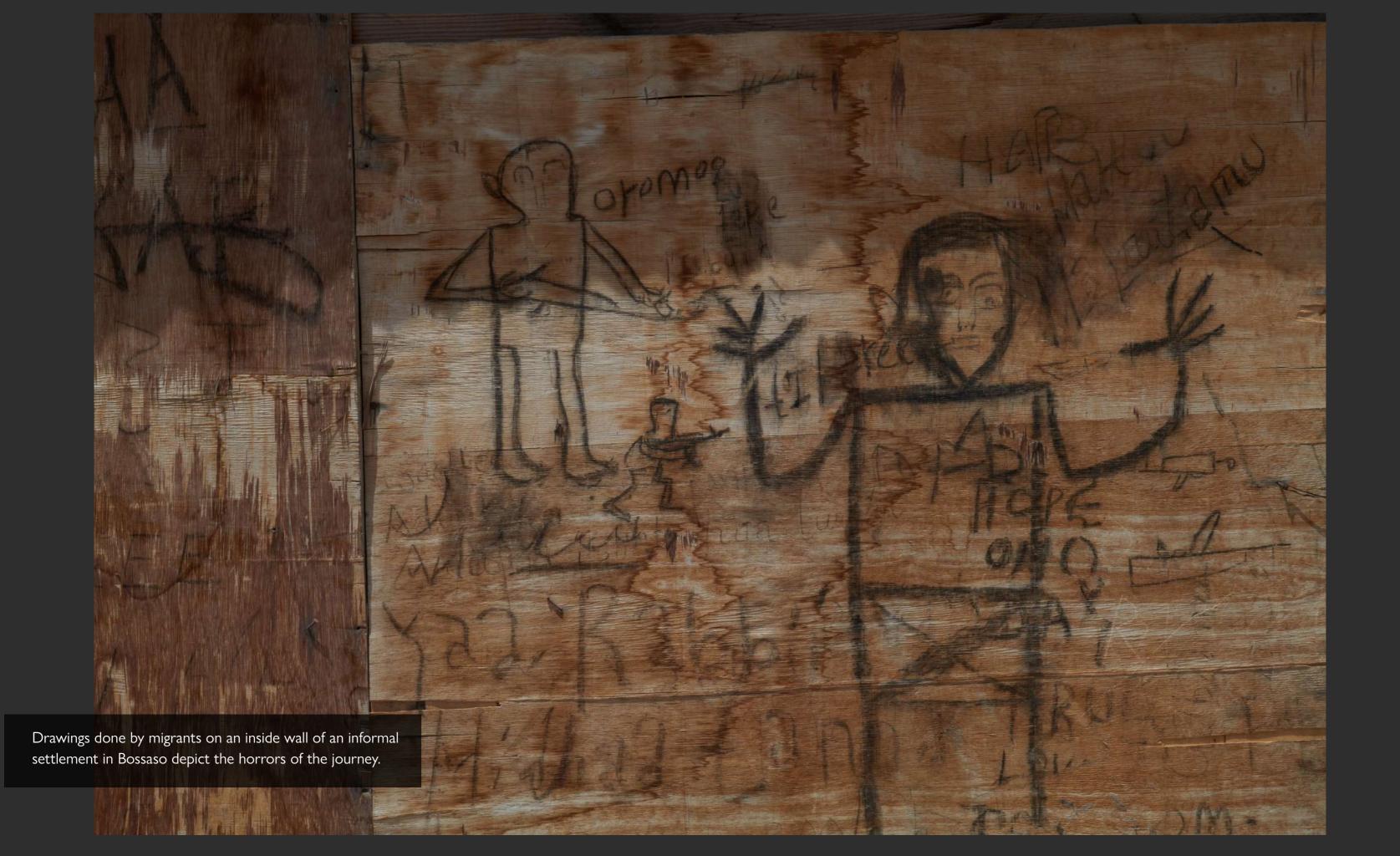




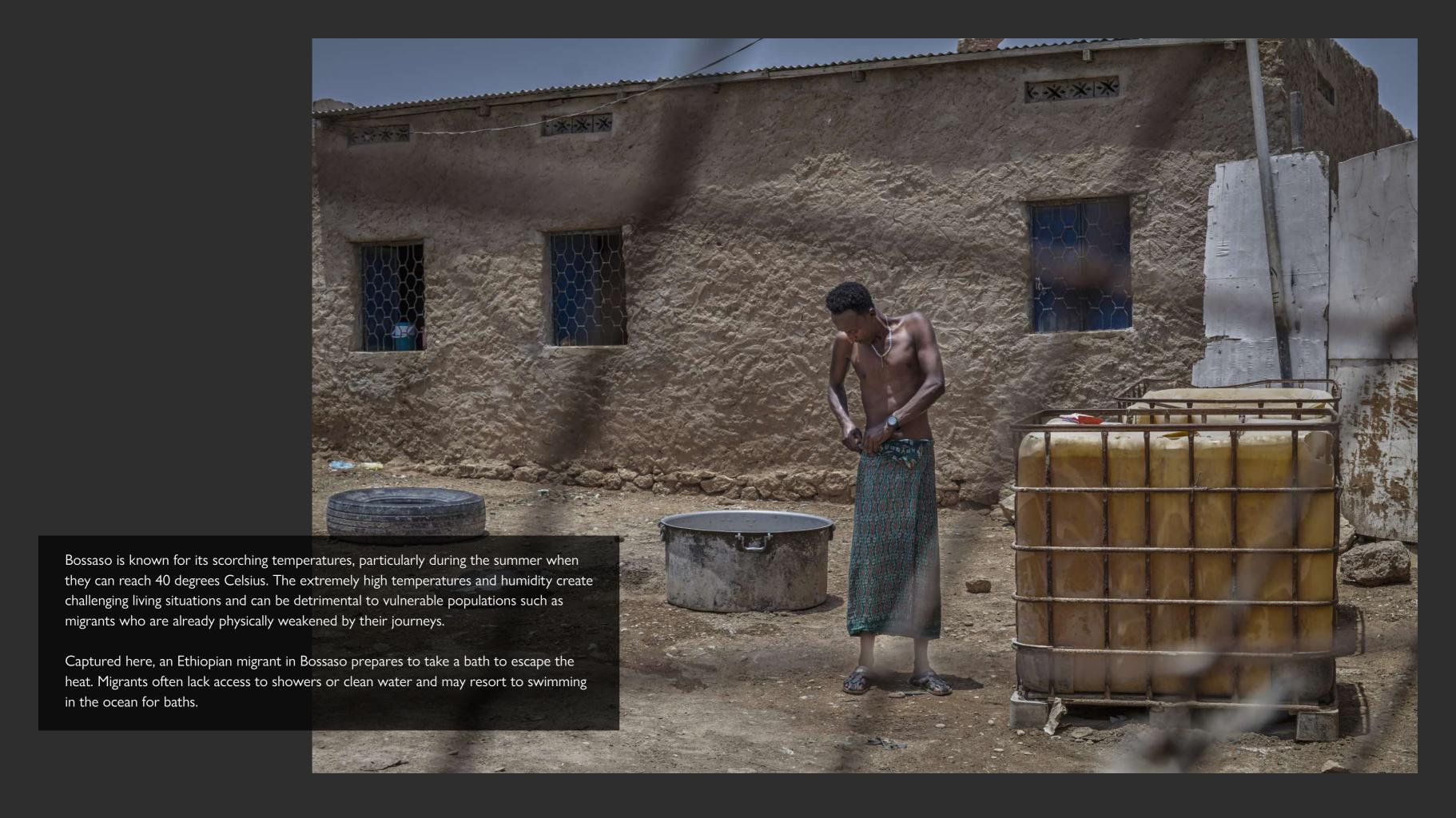


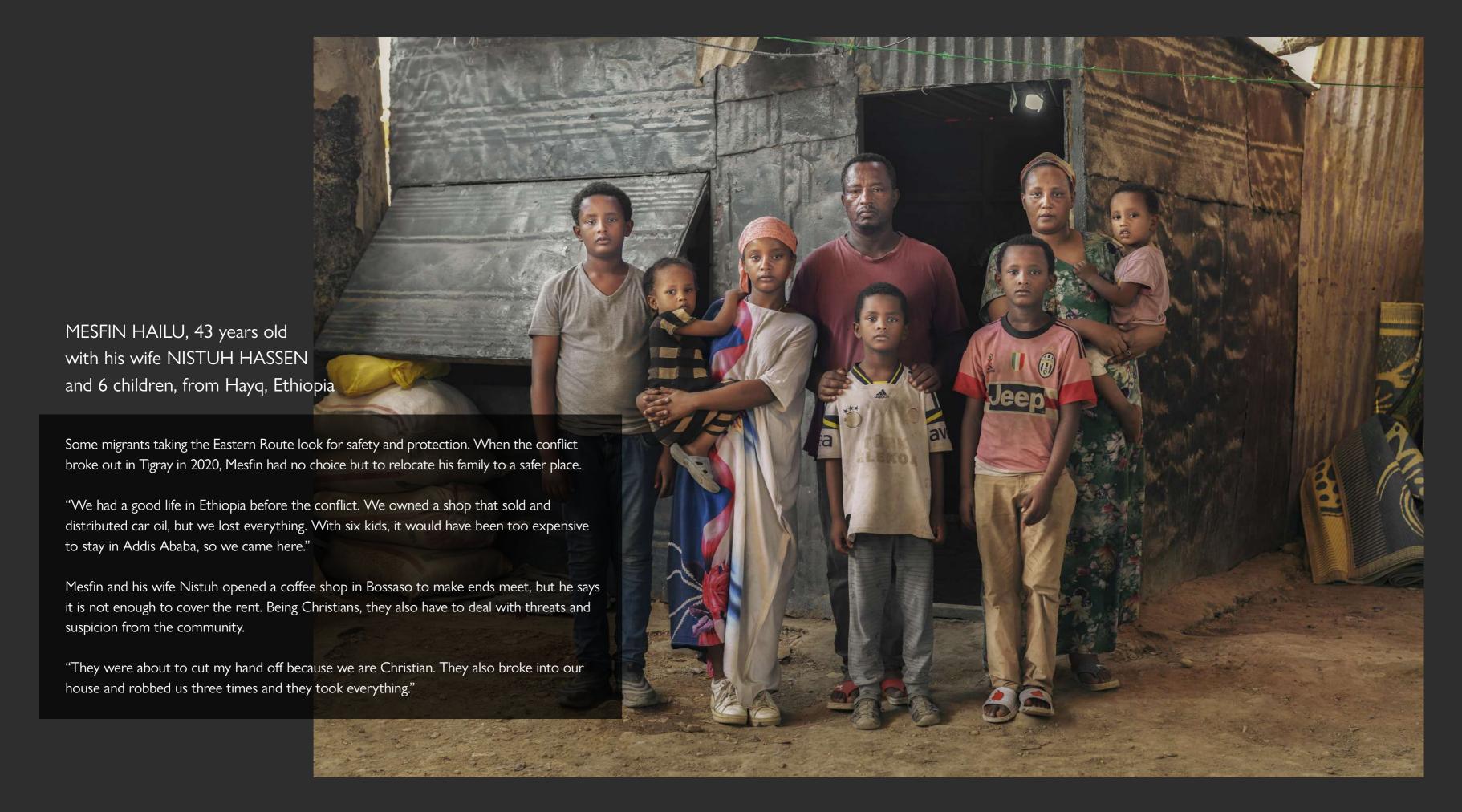


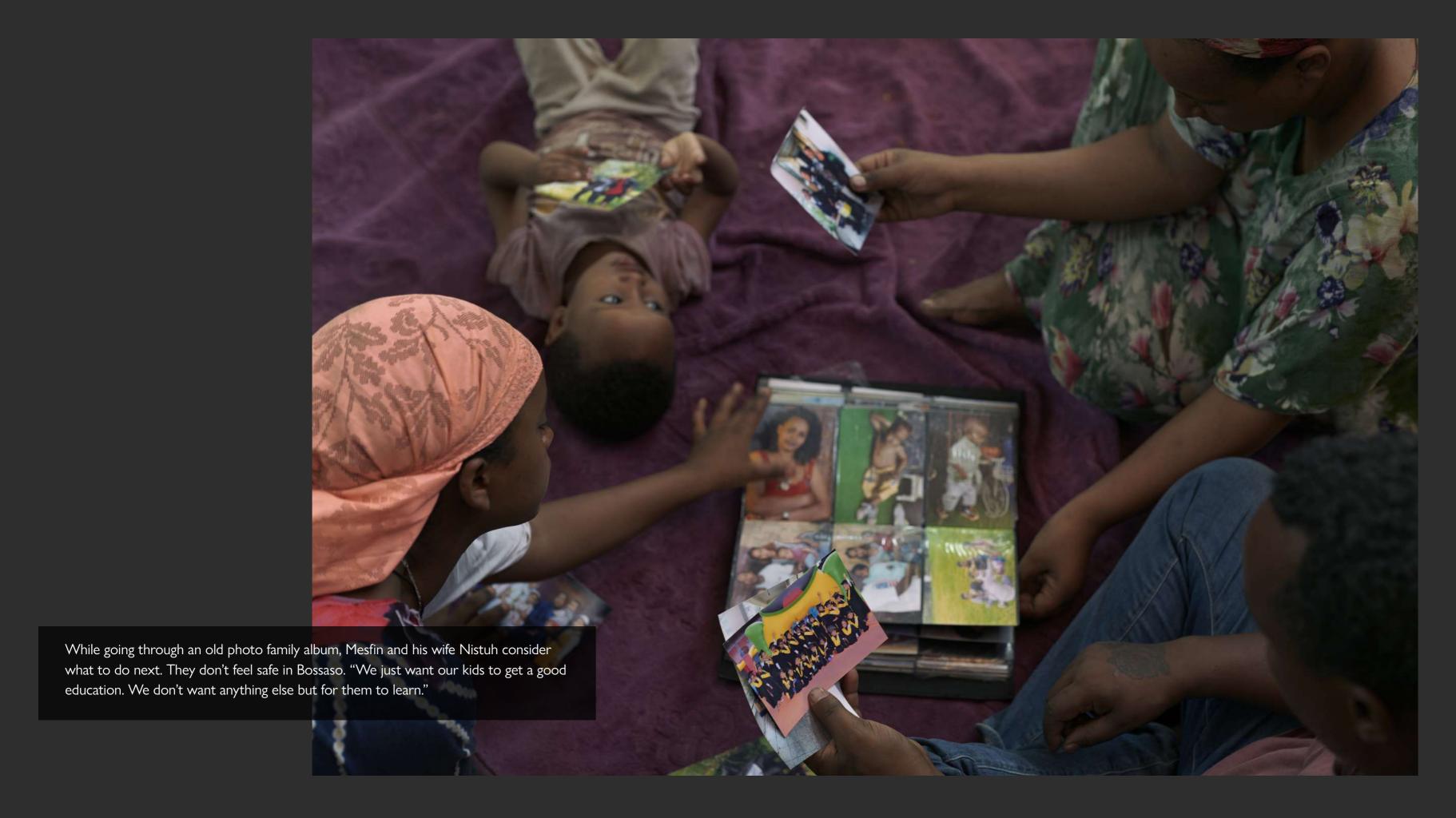












HABTHAM, 17 years old (right) ABEBA, 25 years old (left)

When women and girls embark on this route, they often choose to travel in groups, and it is less common to see them walking alone on the road compared to men. Throughout their journey, smugglers play a role in facilitating their movement but they also subject them to exploitative conditions.

Habtham (right, 17 years old) and Abeba (left, 25 years old) met through their brothers who encouraged them to make the journey so they can met the rest of their family in Saudi Arabia.

"I went to school until I was 9 years old and then I had to start working. My aunts and sister are in Saudi Arabia," said Habtham.





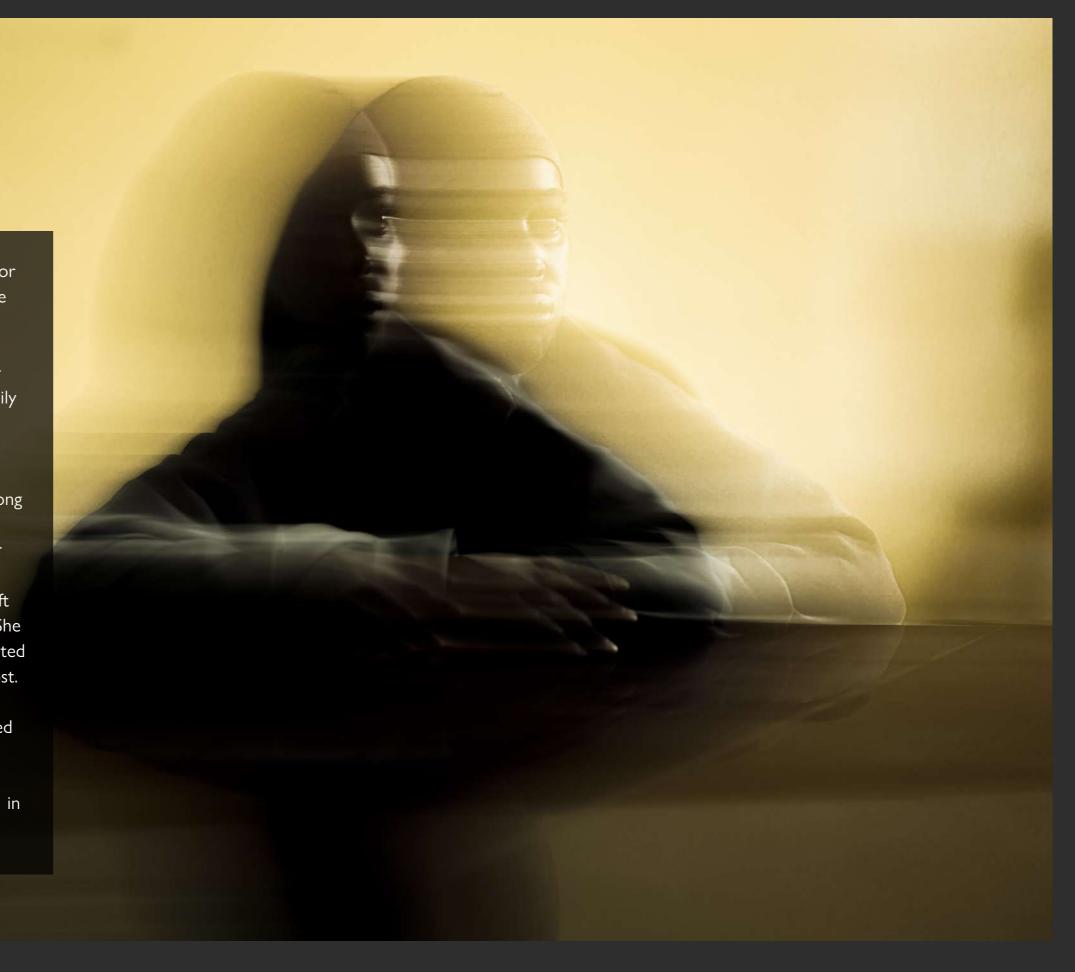
## YASMINE ADAN, 14 years old

Yasmine Adan, a 14-year-old girl, was held captive in a smuggler house in Las Anod for more than five months. Originally from Harar in Ethiopia, her family wouldn't pay the ransom to secure her release, and eventually the smugglers got tired of her.

"One of my relatives managed to escape when they were beating him, and the other decided to go to Bossaso after he paid his ransom. The smugglers contacted my family for money, but they wouldn't pay. They let me go when I fell ill and they could no longer use me."

Yasmine shared her experiences when she was found in Burao, a main transit city along the Eastern Route in Somalia. She had walked alone for the past days to reach the city, hoping someone would help her to pay for a ticket back to Ethiopia. During her captivity, Yasmine witnessed the mistreatment and exploitation of many girls her age who were forced to work and suffered sexual violence. This traumatic experience left her frightened and reluctant to return home due to her family's expected reaction. She was supported with some cash by community members to get to Hargiesa who alerted IOM about her situation. But once she arrived in Hargeisa, her whereabouts were lost.

The number of children travelling alone the Eastern Route doubled in 2022 compared to the previous year (from 7,300 to 14,900). The increased number of children and women migrating along the Eastern Route is linked to the lack of livelihood opportunities and income sources at home, as well as incidents of localized violence in some parts of the region.



"How am I going to go back to my family if I have not even changed my clothes," said Abdi, 39. It's been three years and five months since he saw his wife and six children, the day he left Ethiopia to embark on a journey across the Eastern Route to provide them with a better life.

"I traveled from Ethiopia to Djibouti, and from there to Yemen and Saudi Arabia. My journey took a terrible turn when I was arrested in Saudi Arabia and I got shot in the hand. I spent one year and eight months in prison before being forcibly returned to Addis Ababa."

Large return migration flows from Saudi Arabia began in 2016, when the Government of Saudi Arabia tightened its immigration policies. Forced returns from the country began in 2017 and over half a million migrants are estimated to have been returned since then.

Determined to get a better job in Saudi Arabia, Aden tried the route again, this time through Somalia.

"After three months in Addis, I attempted another journey to Saudi Arabia, but I was severely beaten in Las Anod for over two months. We were only getting one meal a day with a lot of salt that would've made us thirsty. I've changed my mind and no longer wish to go anywhere but home."

As the harsh realities of their migration journeys become apparent, tens of thousands of migrants find themselves compelled to return to their home countries. But a lack of financial resources often leaves them with limited options. Many end up relying on the same smugglers who initially facilitated their journey or embark on perilous journeys on foot to reach the border.

IOM has played a vital role in facilitating the safe and voluntary return of Ethiopian migrants from Somalia in recent years. However, the organization's efforts have faced significant challenges due to limited funding. IOM has been forced to temporarily suspend its return operations, leaving hundreds of stranded migrants in vulnerable situations.









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