‘Fired on like rain’: Saudi border guards accused of mass killings of Ethiopians

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<https://www.theguardian.com/law/2023/aug/21/fired-on-like-rain-saudi-border-guards-accused-of-mass-killings-of-ethiopians>

Saudi border guards have been accused of killing hundreds of Ethiopians using small arms and explosive weapons in a targeted campaign that rights advocates suggest may amount to a crime against humanity.

The shocking claims are made in [a detailed investigation by Human Rights Watch](https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/21/saudi-arabia-mass-killings-migrants-yemen-border), which interviewed dozens of Ethiopian people who said they were attacked by border guards while they tried to cross into Saudi Arabia from Yemen.

Last week Downing Street confirmed that Rishi Sunak plans to welcome Saudi Arabia’s crown prince Mohammed bin Salman to London “at the earliest opportunity”. It would be the first visit since the death in 2018 of the Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi, who [US intelligence believe was murdered](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/26/jamal-khashoggi-mohammed-bin-salman-us-report) and dismembered by Saudi agents in Istanbul on the orders of Prince Mohammed.

Using satellite imaging, photographs of deaths from more than 20 incidents, witness testimony by survivors and forensic experts’ examination of survivors’ wounds, HRW has built up a compelling and horrific picture of an escalating campaign of extreme violence aimed at people trying to cross the border.

Witness testimony describes mass killings, with women and children dying in shelling, and dead people and body parts spread along trails.

“I saw people killed in a way I have never imagined,” Hamdiya, a 14-year-old girl who crossed the border in a group of 60 in February, told researchers. “I saw 30 killed people on the spot.”

HRW’s lead researcher on the report, Nadia Hardman, described the findings as “obscene”.

“I cover violence at borders, but I have never come across something of this nature, the use of explosive weapons including against women and children,” Hardman said.

The report builds on a mounting body of evidence of extremely serious human rights violations on the Saudi-Yemen border. Last year UN special rapporteurs[wrote to the Saudi government with allegations about the killing of hundreds of migrants](https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownLoadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27562).

In June the International Organization for Migration’s [Missing Migrant Project](https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/49687/iom-3800-deaths-recorded-on-migrant-routes-from-mideast-north-africa) issued its own estimate of fatalities on the Saudi border. It said that at least 795 people, “believed to be mostly Ethiopians”, had died.

The Guardian has contacted the Saudi ministry of foreign affairs and Saudi embassy in London for comment.

In March the Saudi government “categorically denied” claims from the UN rapporteurs of an apparent “systematic pattern of large-scale, indiscriminate cross-border killings by Saudi security forces against migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, and victims of trafficking”.

The latest investigation into abuses in an area largely shut off to foreign journalists and aid workers is the most detailed picture yet of what is happening at the border.

Among the most shocking claims are that:

* Saudi border forces shelled a group of people who had been arrested, detained and expelled even as they attempted to cross the border back into [Yemen](https://www.theguardian.com/world/yemen).
* Saudi border forces forced a young person who had survived an attack to rape another survivor under threat of execution.
* People detained after crossing the border were shot at close quarters, and survivors were told by border forces to choose a limb to be shot in.

Hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians live and work in [Saudi Arabia](https://www.theguardian.com/world/saudiarabia). Many migrate for economic reasons but some have been driven to leave by rights abuses in Ethiopia, including during the recent brutal war in the north of the country.

The alleged killings have occurred on a major migration transit route used by people traffickers and smugglers between Al Jawf in Saudi Arabia and Sa’dah in Yemen, a region controlled by the Houthi Ansar Allah movement that borders Saudi Arabia’s Jizan province.

HRW’s researchers interviewed 42 Ethiopian people who had tried to cross into Saudi Arabia from Yemen, or the friends and relatives of those who tried to cross, and analysed more than 350 videos and photographs posted to social media or gathered from other sources filmed between 12 May 2021 and 18 July 2023.

These included pictures of dead and wounded people scattered along trails used by people-trafficking groups, as well as injured survivors in camps and medical facilities, some with horrific injuries consistent with shrapnel from mortars and similar weapons.

“Saudi border guards have used explosive weapons and shot people at close range, including women and children, in a pattern that is widespread and systematic,” HRW’s report says. “If committed as part of a Saudi government policy to murder migrants, these killings would be a crime against humanity. In some instances, Saudi border guards first asked survivors in which limb of their body they preferred to be shot, before shooting them at close range.

“While Human Rights Watch has previously documented killings of migrants at the border with Yemen and Saudi Arabia since 2014, the killings documented in this report appear to be a deliberate escalation in both the number and manner of targeted killings.”

Shown video and photographs of injuries sustained in the attacks, the Independent Forensic Expert Group (IFEG) of the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims, an international group of forensic experts, concluded that injuries were consistent with small arms fire and explosive weapons.

IFEG’s report for HRW describes 22 images of sufficient quality to analyse. “A range of weaponry appear to have been used,” it says. “Some injuries have characteristics consistent with gunshot wounds, while others exhibit clear patterns consistent with the explosion of artefacts with capacity to produce heat and shrapnel.”

The estimated scale of the killings was provided by witnesses.

In one of the incidents, a survivor said that from his group of 170 people, “I know 90 people were killed, because some returned to that place to pick up the dead bodies – they counted [about] 90 dead bodies.”

Those killed and injured set off from two camps run by people smugglers and controlled by Houthi forces close to the Saudi border – Al Thabit migrant camp located in a wadi about 4 km (2½ miles) from the border and Al Raqw, a tented encampment 17km (10 miles) south of Al Thabit, also located on the border.

In one alleged incident from early June interviewees said Saudi border guards fired explosive weapons on a group of people who were preparing to re-enter Yemen having just been released from Saudi detention.

Munira, a 20-year-old-survivor who suffered facial injuries consistent with shrapnel during the alleged incident, said it happened after the group was put on a minibus heading back towards the border.

“When they released us, they created a kind of chaos; they screamed at us to get out of the car and get away,” she said.

“When we were 1km away, the border guards could see us. We were resting together after running a lot … and that’s when they fired mortars on our group. Directly at us.

“There were 20 in our group and only 10 survived. Some of the mortars hit the rocks and then the [fragments of the] rock hit us … The weapon looks like a rocket launcher, it had six ‘mouths’, six holes from where they fire and it was fired from the back of a vehicle – it fires several at the same time. They fired on us like rain.”