RETURN OF ETHIOPIAN MIGRANTS FROM THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA
MIDYEAR OVERVIEW 2023

IOM Regional Office for the East and Horn of Africa

IOM UN MIGRATION

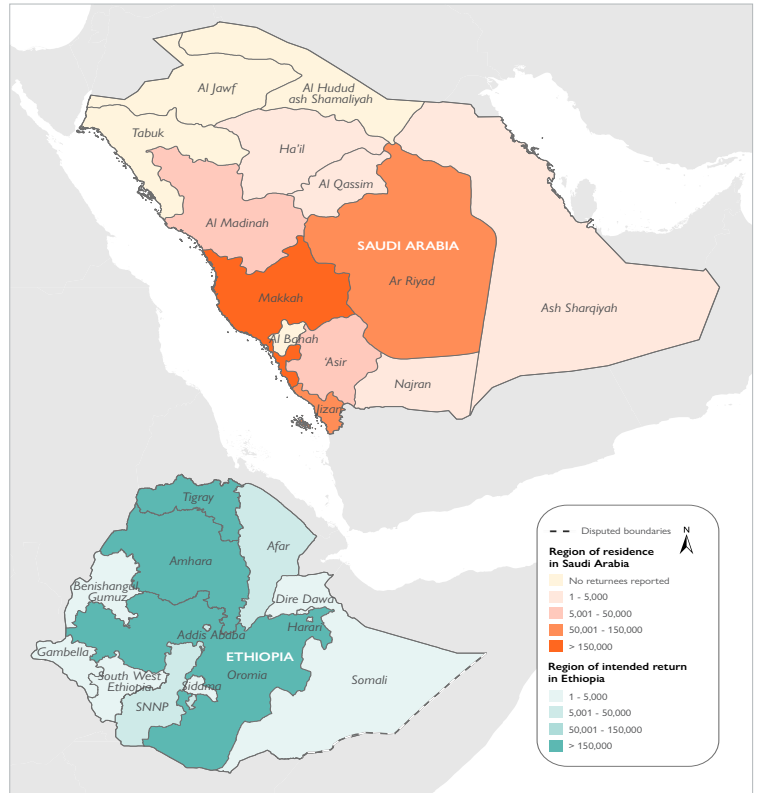RDH — IOM Regional Data Hub — East and Horn of Africa

Background

In 2017, the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia launched a large-scale airlift operation to forcibly return irregular migrants to their countries of origin in a bid to curb unemployment in Saudi Arabia. Ethiopian migrants have been returned to Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa, where they are registered by IOM before continuing to their destination and the most vulnerable are extended travel assistance.[1] Between May 2017 and June 2023, 558,000 migrants were returned to Addis Ababa.

From January to June 2023, 39,200 migrants were forcibly returned, 11% less than the same period in 2022 (44,000). At the start of 2023, nine flights took place per week, amounting to 3,000–4,000 returns per week. Returns were suspended on 3 April 2023, with no official statement on the reason for the suspension, and it is unclear when returns will resume.[2] In March 2022, the Governments of Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia agreed to return 102,000 more people, a target that was surpassed by mid-2023 by 31,000 people. Women and girls (9%) formed a smaller share of returnees at midyear 2023 than at midyear 2022 (22%) and decreased in number by 65%.

In late 2022, conflicting parties in northern Ethiopia signed a peace deal, allowing for renewed access. Still, many will return to communities devastated by conflict and drought, making reintegration extremely challenging. As of June 2023, 62% of returnees intended to return to the regions of Amhara, Tigray and Afar affected by tensions and violence.

Returns by Region of Residence and Intended Destination, May 2017 – June 2023[3]

Region of residence in Saudi Arabia
- No returnees reported
- 1 - 5,000
- 5,001 - 50,000
- 50,001 - 150,000
- > 150,000

Region of intended return in Ethiopia
- 1 - 5,000
- 5,001 - 50,000
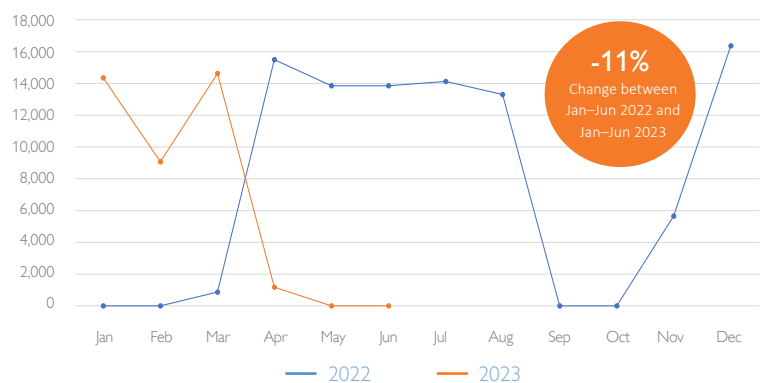- 50,001 - 150,000
- > 150,000

-- - Disputed boundaries

Disclaimer: This map is for illustration purposes, only. Names and boundaries on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.
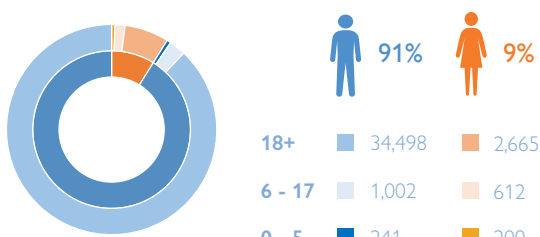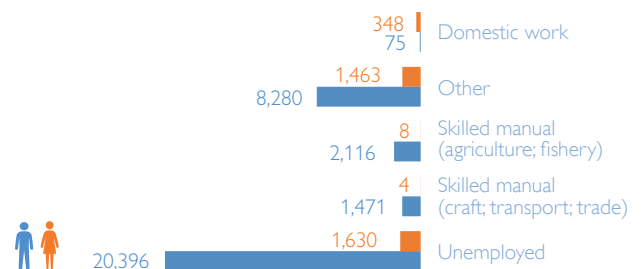
Numbers at a Glance

🖊	**557,984**	electronically registered by IOM from May 2017 to June 2023
🖊	**39,218**	electronically registered by IOM in 2023
👪	**2,055**	children registered by IOM in 2023
✈	**9,805**	returnees arriving at Bole Airport on average each month in 2023

Monthly Registrations in 2022 and 2023

-11% Change between Jan–Jun 2022 and Jan–Jun 2023

— 2022   — 2023

Migrant Sex and Age Breakdown

🧍 **91%**   🧍 **9%**

	Male	Female
18+	34,498	2,665
6 - 17	1,002	612
0 - 5	241	200

Occupation in Saudi Arabia

Occupation		
Domestic work	348	75
Other	1,463	8,280
Skilled manual (agriculture; fishery)	8	2,116
Skilled manual (craft; transport; trade)	4	1,471
Unemployed	1,630	20,396