

Fear and loathing in Djibouti · OneWorld Longreads



The daughters who disappeared

Refugee camp Ali Addeh, Djibouti

Every one of the eight women wants to talk at the same time. Kalsouma, 47, shouts: “We must tell them about our children!” while her neighbour, Yoroub, is discussing firewood. Kalsouma has six children. Three of them live with her in the Ali Addeh refugee camp; the other three are out of station, as she calls it, using the camp jargon term. They have left the camp in search of a better life. Her son Mohammed has been missing for three years. “He tried to cross the sea. I don’t have any information on his whereabouts.”

“My niece could not continue at school and has gone to Djibouti City, to make money”

The women are sitting on plastic garden chairs in the concrete office space of the UNHCR, the UN refugee organization. They have been selected to talk to me



about the problems of the refugee women in Ali Addeh.



“Fetch water. Look for firewood,” Yoroub says. “We don’t get fruit,” Zahra (32) says. “No protein.”



Kalsouma adds: “Children are like flowers. They must grow.” Nothing comes to fruition in Ali Addeh, the women agree. “My daughter was allowed to go to a primary school. She finished but she never got her papers. She was not allowed to continue learning.”

“My sister’s daughter was living with me”, says Folsa (35). Five years ago, she, her three children and her 10-year-old niece fled from southern Somalia to Djibouti. “We hardly received any help. My niece only had one set of clothes. She could not continue at school and has gone to Djibouti City, to make money.”



‘A commercial city state controlled by one man’

Ali Addeh has 10,640 inhabitants and has been Djibouti’s largest refugee camp for the last 20 years.



The host nation is the smallest country in the Horn of Africa and home to less than one million people. Djibouti is dry and hot



but it is safe in comparison with the neighbours: Eritrea, Somalia and Ethiopia. It is also safer than Yemen, across the Red Sea.

U.S. embassy cables published by WikiLeaks confirm that conditions in Djibouti are far from ideal. ‘UNHCR and ONARS [a government agency] do not have the requisite means to screen, house and feed refugees’, writes one diplomat working at the U.S. Embassy in 2008.



Another cable reads: ‘Djibouti is less a country than a commercial city state controlled by one man, Ismaïl Omar Guelleh.’ Since independence from France in 1977, Djibouti has had a grand total of two presidents. Guelleh has run the country since 1999; before him it was his uncle Hassan Gouled Aptidon.



Kalsouma’s sleeping place

Two straw mats

“This one belongs to me”, Kalsouma says, pointing at a small *tukul* of saplings intertwined with pieces of fabric sewn together for shelter. This is where she cooks. She shows an iron pot, a ladle and a small plastic container. She has had visitors from overseas before and so she does what ‘people from The

West' liked so much at the time: She squats and uses her ladle to stir the pot, smiling for the picture as she does so. The pot is empty, like the plastic bag of this month's food rations.

They leave little doubt about how often rape happens here

Kalsouma sleeps next to where she cooks: It's a similar *tukul*, only slightly larger. Two straw mats lie on the desert sand. "Our beds." On the highest branch inside the *tukul* hangs three soccer T-shirts and two *diracs*, traditional multi-coloured dresses and head-scarves Somali women use to cover themselves.



After 20 years, this is everything she and her husband own.

Yoroub shows me her place as well. She lives here without her husband. This is not a problem during the day. At night though, and left on her own, she sleeps with one eye open. Anyone who wants to enter her room only has to sweep aside one piece of fabric.

The women do not want to talk about sex. That is a taboo topic. They say, for example, that there are no girls in the camp who have sexual intercourse without being married. Still, they also talk about girls who are "suddenly pregnant, illegally". Between the lines, they leave little doubt that sexual intimidation and rape do happen in the camp. None of them dares to collect firewood by herself. And the fact that it is so dark at night, is perceived as one of the main problems.

Refugee shelters have no doors

Forgotten refugees

These thousands of Somali refugees in Djibouti are virtually invisible and this is not just because their camp has been built in the middle of nowhere, far away from the coast in between two mountain ranges. Outside the camp, no one talks about their situation.

Not a single story about Somali refugees in Djibouti in 15 years

Dutch newspapers, for instance, do not cover the Somali refugees in Djibouti, as there has not been a single story about them for 15 years. Elsewhere, attention is equally scant. Since 2000, *The Guardian* has published 26 articles about Djibouti on its website, less than two per year. None of the stories mentioned the Somali refugees in the Ali Addeh camp. *The New York Times* has one story (among 40) about 100,000 migrants who were deported from Djibouti in 2003. That's it.



Coverage of the much larger number of Ethiopians and Somalis who travel via Djibouti to Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, is similarly non-existent. "Vast numbers go through Djibouti," confirms the local IOM office when asked. The International Organization for Migration estimates that every year some 100,000 migrants transit through Djibouti to the Arabian Peninsula. "That is one migrant for every

eight citizens! They go to the port city of Obock and take a boat to Yemen. If that works, they continue to Saudi Arabia.” This is mixed migration, which means that not everyone crossing the Gulf of Aden to Yemen does so voluntarily. Economic migrant, refugees and trafficked people take the very same route.

Abused by human traffickers

The strait between Obock and Yemen is only 30 kilometers wide but the crossing is dangerous. Boats sink. Women and girls are raped. “Often the perpetrators are the same people smugglers they depend on to make it to the other side,” says an IOM representative.



“As soon as the migrants arrive in Yemen they are taken from the boats and kidnapped. They are sequestered and only released when the family pays them a ransom. Thousands of euros.”



Men who have gone to the IOM’s emergency center to tell their story indicate that on arrival in Yemen they and the women and girls are taken off the boats, we learn from another source. Where they are now, and how many have gone missing, is unknown. From reading the reports one can suspect that there may be more than 16,000 women and girls unaccounted for.



The trip to Yemen is relatively expensive and so the Ethiopian and Somali migrants stay in Djibouti City undocumented until they can pay a smuggler. IOM states that it is very difficult to have clear estimates. Other organizations also say that they ‘have no data’.



Missing children

“Some woman got crazy because their children are missing.”

Amine feels she can share this. “Since we are [in a group of] all women.” “Some go to Yemen. Others to Italy, via Sudan and Libya.”

“I’m ready to go too and cross the sea!” Zahra states. “It’s for my children,” Yoroub adds emphatically. “I have survived Somalia and I’m happy that I’m safe here. But I want a future for my children.”

As young as 15, young people disappear from the camp

There are teenagers who leave by themselves. Others are told by their parents to go and look for work.

“If a mother sends her daughter away, it is because the situation is desperate,” one of the women says.

“We must feed other children too.”



“Take a good look around the camp”, advises Amina.

“The age under fifteen is present in the camp. But from the age of fifteen, they are not present. They have gone.”

Most girls look for work as a maid, which is hard to find, even for local girls.



Yet, none of the girls returns to Ali Addeh.

Djibouti is a source, transit, and destination country for sex trafficking

Trafficking in Persons Report 2015

En route and on arrival, migrants and refugees are especially vulnerable to being trafficked, says an explanatory note in the 2015 Trafficking In Persons Report (TIP), an authoritative annual report by the US State Department. ‘While movement is not a required element of human trafficking – migrants and internally displaced persons fleeing situations of conflict, abuse, and crisis are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking— whether at home, in transit, or upon reaching their destination.’

‘Sexual exploitation is happening in Djibouti City, the port city of Obock and along the trucking route into Ethiopia’

‘All people on the move—whether refugees and asylees seeking safety, or economic migrants seeking improved livelihood—have a right to freedom from exploitation and abuse of all kinds, including human trafficking’, according to the Report.



With 100,000 migrants traversing the country every year, as the IOM says, Djibouti clearly is a high risk area. It is hardly surprising, then, that in the TIP Report Djibouti is highlighted as ‘a source, transit and destination country for men, women and children subjected to forced labour and sex trafficking.’

Forced sex work

The TIP Report indicates the scale of human trafficking in a country and the extent to which the government takes action against it. On the basis of these reports, every country is put in a so-called Tier; Tier 1 is the best category and Tier 3 the worst. A Tier 3 designation by the U.S. may bring consequences for future trade agreements and financial assistance to a country. Since 2011, Djibouti has been on the Tier 2 Watch List. If no measures are taken to prevent or to respond to trafficking, the country risks being downgraded to Tier 3.

The TIP Report says that in 2015 experts reported an increase in younger migrating children in Djibouti. They also talked about exploitation of migrant women and girls while they work as maids and about sexual exploitation in Djibouti City, the port city of Obock and along the heavy vehicle route between Ethiopia and Djibouti. There are also reports that human traffickers are abducting women and girls and forcing them into sex work to pay for their release. Human traffickers have also been known to pay these ransoms in Yemen and Saudi Arabia but then continuing to trade the girls in the Middle East.



The authorities in Djibouti do not have a system in place that can proactively identify victims of human trafficking, for example undocumented migrants or sex workers. Currently, these groups (including children) are deported after so-called round-ups. The authorities check their nationalities in order to remove them from the country, but they do not screen for human trafficking in their controls.

The long road

To Djibouti City by way of Ali Sabieh

There is sand, dust, rocks, and every hundred meters a small tree. The drive from the Ali Addeh Refugee Camp to the nearest town of Ali Sadieh takes 50 minutes, but we see no more than three people walking and four goats.

The road from Ali Sabieh to the capital Djibouti City looks equally deserted. In a landscape of rocks and red earth, while the road is tarred and smooth. This is for the trucks, as we soon discover. The aid organization's car in which we travel is soon stuck among the vehicles that try to get back onto the road after a stop at a rest area. "National Highway 1," the driver explains. "but also the Trans African highway to the only port in this region. All cargo that Ethiopia exports goes to the port of Djibouti, by truck."



From brothel to brothel

"One of the side effects of the transport route," says one of the women traveling with us. "The drivers stop here to eat or to sleep but mostly because of the sex workers." She points at the shacks next to the resting place.

There were 2,430 sex workers arrested. 408 were between 10 and 17 years old.

It is an open secret that sex work is widespread along the international trucking corridors and a major factor in the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa.



In 2013, a health center was opened at PK-12, a resting place for long-distance truck drivers, twelve kilometers from Djibouti City. Truckers may stay here for as long as five days, waiting for their load. 'It is

no surprise that many young people with few economic prospects are getting into the sex industry,' says USAID, which helped set up the health centre, in a press statement when the facility was launched.



Sometimes, when quoting other sources, we have kept the word 'prostitute', even when the source refers to underage girls. However, this term does not cover realities on the ground, as sex with underage children is illegal and punishable by law. Underage children who have transactional for money are not child prostitutes, according to official definition; they are victims or survivors of statutory rape and trafficking. Moreover, the word 'prostitute' can describe an adult who offers sex work by choice and not through coercion or force. In such cases, some experts and activists prefer the term 'sex worker'. Commercial sex work is against the law in Djibouti. The police have a habit of organizing random raids, during which brothels are (temporarily) closed and sex workers arrested. A significant number of these 'prostitutes' is under age, claims a children's charity, Humanium.



'In 2009 there were 2,430 arrests made because of sex work. 408 among them were between 10 and 17 years old.'

On the road from Ali Addeh to Djibouti City

From street kid to 'sex worker'

From PK-12 the Highway continues to the Ambouli International Airport, south of the capital. To the West is Balbala, an impoverished area where many undocumented migrants look for a place to stay. Others end up in Quartiers 1-7, in the African part of Djibouti City. 'Hardly anyone has water or electricity. But they still pay 30 to 70 dollars per month, for a shack.' Women who work as cleaners for 20 days or more every month earn between 35 and 70 dollars a month, leaving not enough money to buy food.



'Migrant girls are deported unless they pay the police with sex'

The homes of migrants double as brothels, writes N. Omar in his yet to be published memoirs.



(N. Omar is the pen name of an American military contractor who worked in Djibouti for six years.) According to him, the girls also work in the nightclubs downtown. 'They get into prostitution by simply going into nightclubs and posing as if they are there just to have a good time. Normally, they strike up a conversation with a man there and after he buys her a drink or two and maybe shares a dance together, the subject of sex arises and the negotiation follows.'

The girls do the negotiating themselves, says N. Omar. "But they may face pressure from the bar owner, who can say, for instance, that he will not allow a girl into his bar if she does not do certain things (like

parting with some of her earnings, have sex with the owner or someone the owner selects). And then there are the police raids,” he says. “Undocumented migrant girls who get arrested are deported unless they pay the police with money or sex.”

“European men give street kids money or food in exchange for sex”

Nobody knows how old these girls are, according to N. Omar. “The girls who are born in the rural areas do not have a birth certificate. They have no idea how old they are.” The same goes for girls who had to flee. There is no one checking their age. “I am certain that teenagers do sex work,” says N. Omar.

“During my six years in Djibouti I met street kids who sold stuff like cigarettes and chewing gum. Then I noticed them starting to wear make-up and going to clubs. Yes, they were certainly underage.” Locals told him that on the streets the children are already affected by the sex industry. “European men offered them money or food in exchange for sex. I know that this is common in Asia and it is not far-fetched to see this practice arrive in Djibouti.”

Djibouti received a waiver and was not downgraded to Tier 3

Trafficking in Persons Report 2015

‘The Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report is the U.S. Government’s principal diplomatic tool to engage foreign governments on human trafficking’, writes the US State Department on its website.



The report’s first version appeared in 2001. The U.S. created the TIP reports to raise its own profile as a leader against human trafficking. ‘The Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report is the U.S. Government’s principal diplomatic tool to engage foreign governments on human trafficking. Worldwide, the report is used by international organizations, foreign governments, and nongovernmental organizations alike as a tool to examine where resources are most needed.’

‘Djibouti has not shown evidence of increasing efforts to address human traffickers’
In 2015, Djibouti is listed on the Tier 2 Watch List for the fourth year in a row.



In 2013 a rule was introduced limiting the maximum number of years a country is allowed on that Watch List, to two years. After that follows either an upgrade to Tier 2 or automatic downgrade to Tier 3.



This has not been the case with Djibouti. In the 2015 TIP Report, we read that Djibouti ‘has not shown evidence of increasing efforts to address human traffickers’. Still, the country receives a waiver from the downgrade because ‘the government has written a plan that, if implemented, would constitute making significant efforts to bring itself into compliance with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking.’



Remarkably, in 2014 the country was also granted a waiver for the same reason.



It is mentioned in other reports

Equally remarkable is that TIP Reports for neighboring countries clearly indicated that there are many forms of human trafficking in Djibouti. In the chapter on Somalia, for instance, one can read that 'traffickers transport Somali women, sometimes via Djibouti, to the Middle East, particularly Yemen and Syria, where they frequently endure domestic servitude or forced prostitution.' The report refers to Somali refugee girls who human traffickers place in brothels.



There are 1,500 Ethiopians leaving their country every day and many of them travel through Djibouti, Egypt, Somalia, Sudan and Kenya, says the TIP Report on Ethiopia.



'Some become stranded and are exploited in these transit countries.' Ethiopian girls are forced into domestic and sex slavery in neighboring countries. Boys are also labor trafficked in Djibouti as shop assistants, errand boys, thieves or beggars, we read.

'Migrant children who have been arrested for sex work are abandoned at the border'

Other U.S. government reports are more forthright about the severity of the situation in Djibouti. For instance, the *Country Report on Human Rights Practices*, like the TIP Reports, a product of the U.S. State Department, states there are 'credible reports of child prostitution on the streets and in brothels'. Children are sexually exploited on arrival in Djibouti City or along the transport route from Ethiopia.



The Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, a report by the U.S. Department of Labor contains even starker language. Its introduction says: Children in Djibouti are engaged in child labor, including in street work and in the worst forms of child labor, including in commercial sexual exploitation.'



The report says also that it occurs frequently that the Djibouti authorities arrest and incarcerate underage sex workers and other potential victims of human trafficking. Undocumented migrant children are identified and then transported to Ali Sabieh, at the border with Ethiopia, and left 'abandoned and vulnerable to re-trafficking'.

Soldiers & surveillance

Place du 27 Juin, Djibouti City

The June 27 Square (Place du 27 Juin) is named after the day that Djibouti declared independence from France. It is the heart of the city's European neighborhood. On one side of the square are Hotel Résidence de l'Europe and Hotel Menelik, which is also a night club. On the other side: the French restaurant La Chaumiere.

This is where the upper and middle classes of Djibouti go for lunch. On the terrace sits an artist who doubles as a fixer and a government official. She is chain-smoking. "You see that man over there?" she says. "Intel. And that one, two tables away? Also Intel." 'Intel' means intelligence and here it means 'Djibouti government informer'. The woman insists that almost everyone does it. "Not fulltime, mind you. They just sit for a few hours on a terrace and listen"

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Top: Place du 27 Juin by day. Bottom: By Night.

The Djibouti government closely monitors its residents. The 2014 Human Rights Report confirms this. It writes: 'Government critics claimed the government monitored their communications and kept their homes under surveillance. [...] The government monitored digital communications intended to be private and punished their authors. [...] There were few government restrictions on access to the Internet, although the government monitored social networks to ensure there were no planned demonstrations or overly critical views of the government. Djibouti Telecom, the state-owned internet provider, reportedly continued to block access to the websites of the *Association for Respect of Human Rights in Djibouti* and *La Voix de Djibouti*, which often criticized the government.'



Djibouti Telecom is the country's sole Internet Service Provider and the only mobile phone network provider. Services that the provider cannot monitor, like WhatsApp, are blocked.

Suicide Attack

The terrace at La Chaumiere offers view of the entire square. In the middle of the square, a group of men is chewing *qat*, a stimulant that is freshly imported every day from neighboring Ethiopia. There is also a police station but nobody is there; The police only arrive when the scorching sun has set and the nearby street has come alive under pulsating red and green lights.

It is hard to imagine, then, that a year and a half ago an attack happened here. Two suicide bombers blew themselves up in the name of Al-Shabaab, while people were having dinner. Three people died [including the terrorists] and twenty were injured. Among the injured were three Spanish air force personnel, three German military personnel, seven French nationals and six Dutchmen of the naval warship "Zeven Provinciën" on shore leave.

The French were the target, Al-Shabaab said in a press statement, because of its presence in the

Central African Republic and the training they provide to the Djibouti Army, which it then uses in its fight against Al-Shabaab in Somalia. The French have the second largest army base in Djibouti with two thousand personnel and a Foreign Legion department.

A Front in the War on Terror

Only one military is even more present in Djibouti- that of the United States. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. turned Camp Lemonnier into its “only” permanent base on African soil.



The first 800 troops arrived in April 2002.

In his book *Tomorrow's Battlefield: U.S. Proxy Wars and Secret Ops in Africa*, investigative journalist Nick Turse explains that Djibouti is far more important to the U.S. than is widely thought. ‘After 9/11 the U.S. Army moved to three main regions: South Asia (mostly Afghanistan), the Middle East (predominantly Iraq) and the Horn of Africa,’ [all in the name of the War on Terror.] ‘Now the Americans are drawing down in Afghanistan and have all but withdrawn from Iraq. Africa, on the other hand, remains a Pentagon growth opportunity.’

The American military presence in Djibouti is now seven times larger than in 2002. A CJTF-HOA spokesperson replies, on behalf of USAFRICOM



, to our question regarding staff: “The camp [Lemonnier] has 4,000 personnel, including military, civilians of the Department of Defense and contractors [employees of private military companies]. We also have 1,100 local staff and third country staff working in the camp.” Leasing Camp Lemonnier costs the United States \$63m per year.



Rendition program

“Everyone in the camp contributes in one way or another to increasing capacity in the partner nation [Djibouti], promoting regional security and stability, conflict prevention or the protection of the U.S. and coalitions,” is the e-mailed reply of the CJTF-HOA spokesperson. ‘I can speak only for CJTF-HOA’s mission. A prime component of our mission is to help build the defense capability and capacity among our East African partners. The command conducts military-to-military engagements (e.g. training, sharing of best practices, military exercises, and advising), key leader engagements, and civil-military operations; and provides enabling support to other organizations to counter violent extremism in the region. Much focus is on supporting the militaries of countries that provide troops to the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), so that they are better trained and equipped to face Al-Shabaab. CJTF-

HOA supports African states and regional organizations so that they possess the will, capability and capacity to combat transnational threats, are able to execute effective peace operations, respond to crises, and are able to promote regional stability and prosperity.”

“Foreign militaries in Djibouti protect the global commons, especially the busy shipping lane off the coast of Somalia through the Bab el Mandeb against pirates, and the U.S. military supports African militaries that are leading the fight against the terrorist group Al-Shabaab through AMISOM. The U.S. government’s presence in Djibouti, including the U.S. military, is about partnership. This partnership includes combatting trafficking in persons and providing critical assistance to refugees and migrants in Djibouti. Djibouti has kept its borders open to people fleeing the violence in Yemen, thereby saving many lives.”

Deputy Chief of Mission, U.S. Embassy – Djibouti

A photo caption that USAFRICOM put on its own website tells us that there are 300 personnel stationed in Djibouti who work on intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance flights in the region.



The Intercept showed last October how the drone base at Chabelley Airfield in Djibouti, is expanding.



Reports by the Open Society Foundations and the United Nations add that Djibouti is part of the so-called Rendition Program, started by president George W. Bush. The program enables the transport, incarceration and interrogation in a foreign [cooperating] country of captured terrorism suspects, who have no recourse to their rights in the process.

According to the Open Society Foundations, Djibouti allowed the use of some of its territory for ‘secret incarcerations of individuals’. Djibouti would also have allowed the use, at least in 2003 and 2004, of its airspace and airport facilities by aircraft associated with CIA rendition operations.



There is, for instance, the story of Mohammed al-Asad, a Yemeni national. He was abducted, taken from his home in Tanzania where he had been living since 1985 and forcibly taken to a secret prison in Djibouti. He was put in solitary confinement and was not allowed any contact with the outside world, not even his family, the Red Cross or a lawyer. The only time he was outside his cell was when he was interrogated ‘by a white English-speaking woman and an Arab-speaking interpreter,’ as al-Asad later said in an official statement.

‘The first time I had a sense of where I was being held was when one of the guards told me I was in Djibouti. The guards all looked like they were from the Horn of Africa and they all dressed in civilian clothing. Also, while I was in the interrogation room I read the name Ismail, written in English letters, under a large official-looking picture of a man who looked like he was from the Horn of Africa. I believe it

was a picture of the President of Djibouti. The name of the President of Djibouti (now and at the time of my detention) is Ismail Omar Guelleh.'



A United Nations report says that some two weeks after his initial detention al-Asad was taken from his cell by two guards, blindfolded and transported to an airport, where he was handed over to individuals who stripped him naked, inserted something into his rectum, took pictures and then put diapers on him before he was made to board an aircraft that took him to another place for further detention.



Intelligence services cooperate

The Americans obtain information from the Djibouti secret service. This becomes clear when going through the secret embassy cables that WikiLeaks published. Local police do not receive a favorable review from the Americans.

'What the Djiboutian intelligence serves lack in experience, they make up for in cooperation'

'It is very common for law enforcement officers to request fees for services that should be provided without charge, particularly with the immigrant population. It is also known that law enforcement will sell fuel from their own official vehicles for profit. Such improper actions appear to be standard operating procedure for Djibouti's poorly paid law enforcement officers.'

On the other hand, there is lavish American praise for the Djibouti intelligence service.



'They have demonstrated the capability to deter terrorism and have been successful in intercepting and turning over suspected terrorists to U.S. authorities. [...] Yes, the National Security Service has been extremely cooperative with Embassy requests; what they lack in experience they make up for in cooperation. The Embassy enjoys a strong relationship.'

'American presence creates pressure to self-censor'

Freedom House | Djibouti 2014

Intelligence services may share a lot of information mutually, but hardly tell anyone else anything. Further, as already noted, mainstream media coverage about Djibouti is next to non-existent in the West.

'Journalists are discouraged from reporting on soldiers' activities.'

The Djibouti media are censored, according to Freedom House in its annual Press Freedom Report.

The 'watchdog organisation' has declared the press in Djibouti to be "not free." The opening sentence of its 2014 report reads: 'The media environment in Djibouti is among the most restricted in Africa.' Further:

'[t]he official media, which account for almost all of the country's outlets, practice self-censorship and do not criticize the government,' the Report states. 'Journalists generally avoid covering sensitive issues, including human rights. The economically important U.S. military presence in Djibouti creates additional pressure to self-censor, as journalists are discouraged from reporting on soldiers' activities.'



"We make every effort to protect our troops, accomplish our mission and be welcomed guests in our African partner nations," a CJTF-HOA spokesperson responds. "Maintaining good order and discipline is key to maintaining good relationships with our hosts."

'In their quest to secure base access around the globe, government officials have repeatedly collaborated with murderous, antidemocratic regimes and ignored widespread evidence of human rights abuses.' This statement comes from a book, written by Professor David Vine of the American University in Washington DC and published in August, 2015. Its title is *Base Nation. How U.S. military bases abroad harm America and the world*. 'Research by the John Hopkins political scientist Kent Calder confirms the 'dictatorship hypothesis': Consistently, "the United States tends to support dictators (and undemocratic regimes) in nations where it enjoys basing facilities.'"

Djibouti is no exception. Human Rights Watch made this known in 2011, as the United States geared up for the next presidential election. 'The (Djibouti) government has banned all public demonstrations. Peaceful demonstrators and leaders of the opposition are arbitrarily arrested and prosecuted. The French and US governments maintain military bases in Djibouti and provide substantial assistance to the government of Djibouti. Neither has issued public condemnations of the recent events and the deteriorating human rights situation in the country.'



Saturday morning 11 am: French soldiers enjoy their weekend at a pool of the Kempinski hotel. The persons in the photo are not part of the story.

Burgeoning sex trade

In his book *Base Nation*, Professor Vine dedicates one chapter to the commercial sex zones that appear wherever American military set up shop. 'Even during the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, there have been multiple reports of brothels and sex trafficking involving U.S. troops and contractors.'

According to Vine, it is the Vietnam War that contributed to the transformation of the Thai resort of Pattaya into 'one of the world's largest red light districts.' Pattaya was a favorite for R&R [rest and recreation]. 'Or, as some called it, I&I – intoxication and intercourse. When the military withdrew from

South Vietnam it left behind an estimated seven hundred thousand sex workers.’ Similar in The Philippines, where the Subic Bay Naval Base was abandoned by the U.S. Navy, leaving behind some 20,000 sex workers. ‘When the military withdrew from South Vietnam, it left behind an estimated seven hundred thousand sex workers.’

By the time the Filipino government evicted the U.S. military, in 1992, the country’s sex industry had become one of the world’s largests, with as many as twenty thousand sex workers around Subic Bay Naval Base alone.’

The girls enter the bathroom completely veiled, they come out wearing a glitter dress According to General Order Number 1, the code of conduct for USAFRICOM and CJTF-HOA personnel, American soldiers [and also contractors and other staff present on U.S. bases] are allowed a maximum of two alcoholic units a day, and are banned from possessing pornographic material or paying for sex.

There is no extensive party scene in Djibouti, stresses the CJTF-HOA spokesperson, while adding that staff must comply with the highest standards for behavior. “Everyone understands violating General Order [Number] #1 has repercussions. If incidents occur, it is our policy to address the issue immediately and hold violators accountable for their actions. [...] Your intent to paint a picture of U.S. personnel frequently engaging in inappropriate behaviors would be irresponsible journalism, as the words you have chosen— ‘significant and extensive party scene,’ ‘openly patronizing prostitutes,’ and ‘common practice’— are unsubstantiated. If these events are occurring, they are not being conducted by U.S. members assigned to Camp Lemonnier.’

No ‘Las Vegas’

‘No matter one’s opinions about the legality and morality of sex work, patronizing the sex industry means violating both military law and the law of most countries in which U.S. bases and troops are located,’ professor David Vine writes in his book *Base Nation*. ‘Given the prevalence of sex trafficking in the industry, troops also violate national and international prohibitions on supporting human trafficking. [...] Unlike the Las Vegas fantasy, what goes on in the camptowns doesn’t stay in the camptowns.’

The red and green lights illuminate the Rue d’Éthiopie, nearby Place du 27 Juin. The owners of Club Hermes, Club Oasis, Club Shams and many other nightclubs, sit themselves down on plastic chairs near the entrances. There are metal detectors and security gates, in order to prevent a repeat of the attack at La Chaumiere.

Two girls in multi-colored veils enter Hotel Menelik, which has a nightclub in the basement. The contents of their handbags do not need to go through the scanner. Once inside, they head straight for the bathroom to left of the entrance. Fifteen minutes later, they emerge in short glitter dresses. A piece of red cloth sticks out of one of their handbags- a veil. ‘Peggy’ and ‘Kelly’ from Ethiopia (“we’ve been here seven months”) seat themselves in a corner near the bar. Let the night begin.

Bargirls & Vodka-bull

Club Scotch, Djibouti City

“Empty your cup!” It’s midnight and I have downed two shots of tequila and two vodka-redbull. The three American contractors with whom I [Sanne Terlingen] am here have poured me many drinks already, but I try to inconspicuously lose them. Or I ‘accidentally’ spill them.

“Everyone is flat-out drunk. One contractor just left with an Ethiopian girl”

The men know I am a journalist producing a story about migrants and refugees, and also about sex work. “But tonight we have only one mission!,” yells the youngest member of the bunch. “Getting drunk!” They take me *downtown* Djibouti, on the condition that I do not reveal their identities, and also do not publish any pictures of them. We start in Club Shams on the Rue d’Ethiopie. Once we get there several more military men and contractors from varying nationalities join us. Three bottles of vodka are— interrupted by two rounds of tequilashots- consumed. Then one of the contractors suddenly wants to leave for another club. “We’re leaving here goddammit,” he brawls. His regular girl – one of the ‘bargirls’ – has left with a Spanish military guy. He’s furious.

In the next nightclub, Scotch, four new bottles of vodka are promptly ordered, together with a huge bucket of ice and cans of Red Bull. One of the contractors continuously refills the glasses of his friends. “Cheers,” says a man in a red shirt. “How much for her?,” he asks, pointing at me. “She is off limits,” a contractor retorts. “That’s an [Arabic] ambassador. Crazy guy,” he explains to me. He pays a Djiboutian fixer 30 U.S. Dollars to make sure I’m not bothered. The fixer even walks with me when I go to the bathroom at 1 a.m. to turn on my hidden voice recorder.

“It’s now one o’clock at night. I turn my voice-recorder back on. Everyone is flat-out drunk. By now I have flushed eight drinks down the toilet. Vodka-Red Bull. Four, I gave away to prostitutes. They [the contractors] get new drinks every time. I smoke like crazy to hide that I’m not drinking [much]. They just bought four new bottles of vodka. They are behind the bar. One just left with an Ethiopian prostitute. Four, five, prostitutes in the bathroom. I think there are more than thirty in this bar. [Knocking on the bathroom door] I am coming! Sorry, I am a bit slow!”

Top: Club Shams. Bottom: Sanne Terlingen in Club Scotch. The other persons in the picture have no role in the article.

Taking a bargirl home

Two o’clock at night. One of the guys leaves us. He just went away with an Ethiopian girl and now he is either too tired or too drunk to keep his eyes open. A Somali girl hits his hand when he tries to stroke her ear for the third time. He’s going to call it a night, he says. Stumbling off to his car.

“Sanne! Are you having a good time?”— one of the contractors checks with me for the sixth time in an hour. “Where is your cup? Where is your cigarette?” He has smoked two whole packs of Marlboros by now. Lighting one cigarette after the next. “Don’t worry! Drink! I take care of you. Where is your fucking

cup? Get a new cup!”

These contractors are the kings of the Djibouti City nightlife

At fifteen minutes past three, after sharing eight bottles of vodka with six people, the men offer to bring me back to my hotel by car. “We just have to wait for our friend,” the driver says. “Is that alright?” He wants to take that bargirl, but she first has to clean up.”

At four a.m. we, two American contractors, a foreign base employee and a bargirl, get into the car. “Fuck, we are late. We have to be at the base at five [5 a.m.]. We have work to do in the morning.”

These are not inexperienced boys, who are on their first mission with the other ‘boys’ and who smell the power of money and esteem for the first time. No, these men have been working for years on American bases worldwide, including in Iraq and Afghanistan.

They are also not ‘assholes’ that look down upon the locals and only care about their own pleasure. They know all the sex workers in the club by name and buy them vodka, even when they aren’t looking for a girl-for-one-night. A handicapped man who ‘watches the car,’ is given money, a big kiss on his head and a hug, every night.

These men are the kings of the Djibouti City nightlife. They have fun, in a country where there isn’t much to do. They do not see what could be wrong with that.

Against U.S. military rules

“All military personnel, DoD civilians, and contingency contractor personnel under the Combatant Commander’s (AFRICOM) authority abide by ‘General Order Number 1’, signed by the AFRICOM commander.” Is written by a spokesperson of USAFRICOM/CJTF-HOA in an email response to OneWorld. The CJTF-HOA commander also signed the document.

“If any misconduct such as you claim were true, these offices would know about the incidents”

According to General Order Number 1 (published in full below) it is illegal to:

- * Drink more than two alcoholic beverages within 24 hours
- * Operate a motorized vehicle within 8 hours after consuming alcohol
- * Consume alcohol less than 8 hours before work hours
- * Convince a person to have sexual intercourse in exchange for money or other payments (‘Patronizing a prostitute’)

“These orders restrict certain activities to ensure readiness, safety, force protection, good order and discipline, foster positive relations with our African partners, strengthen the bonds with our coalition partners, and maintain a consistently high operational tempo,” according tot the CJTF-HOA spokesperson.

“No such reports”

The spokesperson of CJTF-HOA denies that any persons participating in the American mission are misbehaving, whether they might be military personnel, civilian employees or contractors.

“With that said, we contacted every legal office, law enforcement agency and criminal investigation service on Camp Lemonnier to determine if any of these claims you make are accurate. If any misconduct such as you claim were true, these offices would know about the incidents. Every expert we asked all said there have been no such reports of misconduct for at least the past 18 months regarding U.S. personnel patronizing prostitutes.”

The spokesperson admits that there was an incident where American contractors were under the influence while off the base, several months ago. “That behavior is unacceptable and contrary to good order and discipline, but it is rare and would be misleading your readers to imply U.S. personnel regularly participate in such behavior.” According to the spokesperson, a criminal investigation service asked their Djiboutian contacts off camp. They “related that they rarely see Americans off camp at all.”

‘How old do you want me to be?’

To be clear: The wild night with the American contractors was no incident. No less than three times a week the men go out.



The clubs in Djibouti open their doors every night. In every club, there are dozens of bargirls and sex workers to be found. The girls talk openheartedly about their lives before Djibouti. Some girls say their parents are from Somalia. However, by far, the most recently arrived in Djibouti City were from Ethiopia. A young woman who calls herself “Kelly” shows a picture of her daughter, whom she had to leave behind. “She lives with my mum. I send money home.”

“French girls like Ethiopian pussy,” explains one of the bargirls

The girls speak less openly about how they earn money in Djibouti. They are fine with coming home with me and seem to think that is weird at all. “French girls like Ethiopian pussy,” one girl explains. But none of them shares her any real name. “Peggy”, “Kelly”, “Maria”, “Anna”, “Tanya”, are all 18 or 21, so they say. “How old do you think I am?”

“I have about 25 bargirls,” says the club owner. It’s “no problem” to take one of these girls for “jiggy jiggy.” The club owner confides he can also arrange a 16 year-old.

“If these events are occurring, they are not being conducted by U.S. members assigned to Camp Lemonnier”

“Military men from all the bases partake in this business,” says N. Omar, the contractor who was stationed in Djibouti for six years and is writing his memoirs now. “Not all of them, but a substantial

amount. The girls cannot be taken on the military bases. But they either take the girls to a hotel room they have already rented or the girls take the men to apartments.”



“If these events [i.e., drinking large quantities of alcohol, driving under influence and having sex with ‘bargirls’ or other girls in exchange for a payment] are occurring, they are not being conducted by U.S. members assigned to Camp Lemonnier,” the spokesperson of CJTF-HOA persists.



No response is given by Camp Lemonnier to follow-up questions by OneWorld.

The French ministry of Defense just thanks us for our questions. “We will keep our comments if necessary after your publication. We wish you a nice day.”

'U.S. State Department waters down human trafficking report'

Reuters, August 2015

American diplomats within the State Department overruled human trafficking experts, who are responsible for the yearly Trafficking in Persons Report, several times during the drafting of the 2015 report. This is what *Reuters* revealed last summer on the basis of interviews with ‘more than a dozen sources within Washington and foreign capitals.’



Experts allegedly disagreed on the Tier ranking of 17 countries; in 14 cases the diplomats’ opinion was decisive. Among the disputed countries were China, Cuba, India, Malaysia, Mexico, Thailand and Uzbekistan.



A political game

Malaysia was upgraded from Tier 3 to Tier 2 Watch List.



If Malaysia were assigned to Tier 3 again this year, then the country would have been barred from being part of Obama’s prestigious Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal.



The Tier upgrade of Cuba to the Watch List coincides with the rekindled relationship between Washington and Havana. The past year the U.S. even reopened its American embassy in the country.

Several members of congress suspect ‘political games’ are being played concerning the TIP Rankings. An important senator wanted all documents concerning the TIP Rankings to be made public.



‘The only reason to upgrade Malaysia to a Tier 2 country is to bypass the ban that is currently in U.S. law. President Obama and Secretary Kerry must do the right thing and not arbitrarily upgrade Malaysia as a means to secure the TPP’, congresswoman Rosa DeLauro wrote in a statement on her website. ‘This is an irresponsible, unacceptable political game.’ DeLauro asked Obama and Kerry for an explanation. She shared the letter she received as a response with OneWorld.

‘The Department has produced an accurate report this year,’ the letter states. The TIP Report shines a light on the efforts that should be undertaken around the world to combat human trafficking. ‘None of the tier ranking decisions, including for Malaysia, were made with regard to other considerations.’ DeLauro is thanked for her leadership on fighting trafficking in persons.

‘Key partner’

Maintaining a good relationship with Djibouti is essential for the U.S. This is clear from the text on the federal government’s website. ‘Djibouti is located at a strategic point in the Horn of Africa and is a key U.S. partner on security, regional stability, and humanitarian efforts in the greater Horn. The Djiboutian government has been supportive of U.S. interests and takes a proactive position against terrorism.



Could the U.S. political interests have influenced the Tier ranking of Djibouti?

The Djiboutian government equally values their relationship with the U.S., as is stated in a cable published by WikiLeaks dating from 2004. ‘[T]he only problem Djibouti appeared to have with the U.S. is the negative yearly Human Rights report.’



Could it be that U.S. political interests have influenced the Tier ranking of Djibouti? It wouldn’t surprise *Base Nation* author David Vine. “As far as I know the U.S. never reported on the role the American troops play in the growing prostitution business and human trafficking in Korea,” he tells OneWorld.

The TIP Office neither denies nor confirms the statement that its report is politicized. “The annual TIP Report reflects the State Department’s assessment of foreign government efforts during the reporting period to comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking in persons established under U.S. law,” a spokesperson writes in response to questions by OneWorld. “The Department strives to make the report as accurate as possible, documenting the successes and shortcomings of government anti-trafficking efforts. Over the past 15 years, the Report has raised the profile of this issue significantly and consistently drawn public attention to the realities on the ground. The attention that the Report generates demonstrates both the impact and importance of the issue and the U.S. government’s

efforts to address it.”

TIP visit to Djibouti

In the U.S. embassy cables published by WikiLeaks, readers can see how TIP report employees travel to Djibouti to inform themselves on human trafficking policies there. ‘[T]here [is] no hard evidence on the prevalence of child prostitution in Djibouti,’ it is proclaimed in these conversations. While also : ‘there may be girls as young as 12 or 13 in prostitution.’



That there is no evidence is due to the lack of official data on forced sex work and other forms of human trafficking. These kinds of data are non-existent.



Several aid agencies confirm that this is a problem.



Many children are clearly at risk of becoming a victim of human trafficking. ‘UNICEF estimated that there were approximately 33,000 Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) in Djibouti, of whom 5,000 were HIV/AIDS orphans.’ Most children living on the streets are of Ethiopian or Somali backgrounds.



A representative of the Djiboutian government pleads for a program that protects vulnerable women and children, ‘such as street children who may become involved in child prostitution’. This same representative was ‘dismayed to occasionally find young children hanging around the vicinity of the French military base.’



Only one conviction

The politicization of the report has to be put to a stop, is the message proclaimed by politician Chris Smith,



,author of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) which forms the basis for the TIP ranking, this November in The House of Representatives. The TIP Report of 2015, ‘has careened off into a new direction where the facts regarding each government’s actions in the fight against human trafficking are given almost no weight when put up against the President’s political agenda.’



'If you want proof these decisions were politicized just look at the numbers,' states Smith. 'China convicted 35 traffickers, Malaysia 3, and Thailand 151—but only Thailand is Tier 3.'



The observation that the presence of foreign militaries contributed to the demand for sex workers, was omitted from the Report

In Djibouti, only one person was convicted on human trafficking charges in 2014. 'The courts convicted a woman of trafficking in persons and aiding illegal migrants under Law 210 for aiding three non-Djiboutian women across the border into Djibouti, where she held the women against their will, forced them into jobs, and withheld their wages. The trafficker received a 24-month suspended sentence and served no time in prison.'



According to Smith another signal of the politicization is the practice of repeatedly grant a country a waiver because a plan to combat trafficking has been written. He names Burma as an example of this.



With Djibouti the same thing is occurring: The country has been on the Watch List for four consecutive years, and received a waiver in 2014 and 2015 due to a written plan—in the exact same words used with Burma.



Also striking is what is omitted from the 2015 edition of the Report: The sentence, '[m]embers of foreign militaries stationed in Djibouti contribute to the demand for women and girls in prostitution, including possible trafficking victims.' This observation was included in all reports from 2008 onwards.

Djibouti: Upgraded next year?

Djibouti has been on the Watch List for four years now—two of which it was granted a waiver. This means the country must be removed from the Watch List in 2016. This is confirmed by the TIP Office to OneWorld.



There are two possibilities: either Djibouti is degraded automatically to Tier 3, or Djibouti is upgraded to Tier 2.

"The U.S. and Djibouti are working closely in partnership to avoid a downgrade to Tier 3"

A downgrade to the lowest rank could have serious consequences for the relationship between the U.S. and Djibouti. It could effect bilateral, and non-humanitarian aid, the allocation of the assistance of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and—as would have been the case with

Malaysia would it not have been upgraded--signing trade deals.



The Deputy Chief of mission of the U.S. Embassy in Djibouti confirms to OneWorld “that the U.S. Embassy in Djibouti and the Government of Djibouti are working closely in partnership to avoid such a downgrade. The Djiboutian Government is currently redrafting their 2007 law on trafficking to strengthen it and then implement the law by prosecuting offenders, for example. The two governments are working hard to address this issue.”



This is the first in a series of investigations. Want to share information? Please [contact the authors](#) or use our secure [GlobaLeaks](#) software to [submit evidence](#).