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## Migration Industry in Nigeria: The Cartels, the Capital and the Oaths

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### **Abstract:**

*Nigeria has the fifth highest number of citizens who cross the Mediterranean and the highest number of migrant's flow within the ECOWAS sub-region in the bid to search for greener pastures. These migrations are often perilous. This work offers a comprehensive conceptualization of why migrants ignore the clear danger in the movement from Kano (Nigeria) through Agadez and Qatroun (Niger) to Serbha, (Libya) and the Mediterranean Sea to Lampedusa (Italy). This work proposes the concept of a closed-option migration industry in Nigeria as the ensemble of entrepreneurs, businesses and services which, motivated by the pursuit of commercial motive, left migrants at the mercy of the cartels. The precept is that in spite of the capital-intensive nature and cost of migration, migrants are charged only registration fee of \$120 for a service and investment which reek in \$40,000 for the cartels. This work links the desperation and perils of the migrants to the quest to pay back the total cost of investment and this leads to the casting of an inviolable pact in form of oath-taking. The paper contends that migration is actually precarious and is directed by the consequences of oath breaking and economic despondency of migrants. This work is exploratory as primary sources of data are interviews with deportees who had used the migration routes, interviews and access to the data of the IOM, National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), Nigeria Immigration Service etc. and secondary data which include books and articles.*

**Keywords:** Migrations, Nigeria, cartels oaths, capital

### **1. Introduction**

Studying migration industry in developing countries presents a dramatic classic, albeit developing issues reveal the obvious dialectics in analysis of migration flows. First concern is the fact that government policies like fiscal indiscipline, unbridled management of the country's resources etc. have fundamental impact on migration flows. The other view, which of course, authorities in third world nations do not like to hear, is that their inactions put undue pressure on economies of other nations, which incidentally, are not also in perfect conditions. The basic somatic sensation here remains the pressure which migration flows place on international relations, especially in the area of human rights violations which often accompany border control rights of states.

Migration flows often smack of inept management of government, thus, addressing migration flows from other dimension is just being purely apologetic for systemic and governmental failures of the third world nations. If in doubt, this paper poses the question: How many citizens of stable economies embark on perilous migrations in search of greener pastures? There is nobody who will declare such hazards on himself and embark on a journey through the utterly dangerous desert of Agadez to the stormy strait of Lampedusa waters, to the Mediterranean Sea and ignore the perils and the danger.

Migrations from Nigeria blur causative precept as the degree of migration from Nigeria equates one from nations at war, yet Nigeria is not at war except for the terror of Boko Haram in north-eastern part of the country. Migration from Nigeria is listed alongside Afghanistan and Somalia in the grotesque features of the political upheavals in those countries. The European Union recorded that 22,500 Nigerian illegal migrants crossed the Mediterranean Sea to Europe between January and September 2018. The deputy head of the EU delegation to Nigeria, Mr. Richard Young, presented the geometric rise of illegal migration from Nigeria since 2012. He said 800 illegal migrants from Nigeria crossed the Mediterranean Sea in 2012, this number rose to 23,000 by 2013 and it has oscillated between that figures to 22,500 till 2016. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) also disclosed that 26,589 illegal migrants from Nigeria entered Europe between January and March 2017. (IOM Migration Reports on Nigeria, 2017)

Country	Total Number of Nigeria Asylum Applications
Italy	26,975
Germany	12,910
France	1,930
Austria	1,850
United Kingdom	1,835
Switzerland	1,105
Other	2,120
Total	48,725

*Table 1: European Countries with the Most Received Asylum Applications from Nigeria in 2016*  
*Source: IOM Reports on Nigeria 2017*

By its title, this paper speaks to a social process and investigates the simple disappearance of a girl in a remote village and the appearance of such girl in big cities in Europe. Understanding these dynamics is not straightforward because migration industry in Nigeria equally creates complex interplays. This work examines the different parts of migration industry in Nigeria and the network.

## 2. Migration Industry in Nigeria: The Network

Migration to European countries and the United States by Nigerians reflect demographic realities in Nigeria as different ethnic groups migrate predominantly to countries of their ethnic preference. This narrative presents Igbo of Nigeria as predominantly going to the United States, while the Yoruba prefer the United Kingdom. The *Bini* ethnic group is predominantly in Italy, Spain, Germany and other European countries.

Illegal migration of Nigerians is essentially new phenomenon which gained currency in the late 1990s to the early 2000s when Nigeria returned to democracy, most migrations of this period were formal and structured and deeply embedded in procurement of documentations to facilitate issuance of visas. Embassies and consulates were ill-equipped to detect the intricacies which lurked around visa issuance at that time. Cartels emerged as facilitators of this process. These comprised, travel agents, money lenders, legitimate and false documents providers, smugglers, lawyers and notaries, all involved in these illegal services. This group distorted objective assessment of visa application, to the point that all documents are regarded as fake before a consular. The onus and burden lie with applicants to prove that they are genuine.

Data gathering in Nigeria is often not accurate even for regular migrations. However, there are institutions which provide some respite on emigrations of Nigerians. The National Population Commission (NPC), embassies, the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), the Diaspora Desk of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and initiatives of Nigerians in Diaspora Organisation in Europe, abound which have created a web portal to generate a database of Nigerians abroad.

To developed Regions	679,165
To developing Regions	414,479
To other Sub-Saharan African Countries	371,137
To Asia	38,803
To Europe	398,476
To Northern America	271,841
To other parts	13,387
Refugee population (incl. refugee like situations)	167,942
Asylum seeker population	51,821
Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)	2,219,272
Total	4,626,323

*Table 2: Migration Statistics Nigeria (end of 2018)*  
*Source: UNDESA, International Migrant Stock 2019, UNHCR, Population Statistics 2019*

Those data however do not address the central issue in this paper for two reasons: one, the data are collection of information on merely professionals and two; there is no record of aftermath of emigrations (that is we do not know what happen to a migrant after such migrant has been recorded to have entered Europe). The alternative is to rely on local statistics through interviews with individuals who have been either cartels or illegal migrants and who have used channels of migrations described in this work.

Cartels have used the platforms of well-structured institutions like government ministries, academies, religious organisations and institutions that are non-governmental. For instance, there have been cases of musicians who take advantage of the orchestra feature of their genre to stuff their bands with individuals who are not members of the group in favour of agreement with migration industry cartels (Personal observation, 1990-2017). There are also reports of government and other non-government but structured organisations which include names of individuals who are not original members of the organisations to provide visas for purposes of migration to western countries. Latest reports also show that football academies have been acting lately as funnels for emigration of young Nigerians, churches and Islamic

missions are participants in this sphere and they do these in connivance with cartels of migration industry in Nigeria. Supporters clubs of Nigeria's National teams have also engaged in this practice. (Punch Newspapers, 2017).

Beginning from 1999 Nigeria's migration industry entered a fresh threshold. Very large numbers of young Nigerians embarked on irregular migrations to varied degrees of uncertainties. This situation was propelled more than anything else, by their state of economic despondence. Rather than despair, these young Nigerians, despite the associated risk, traverse the scorching Saharan desert and plunge into the Mediterranean, in search of a future.

By 2008 statistics available showed that there were 59,000 Nigerians without travel documents in Northern African states. The statistics showed that 8,000 were in Morocco, 16,000 in Algeria 20,000 in Libya and 13,000 in Mauritania all in transit to Europe (Adejumoke, A., Ikwuyatum, G., & Abejide, O. 2008). According to the National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) records, 46 percent of the Nigerians seeking emigration are children with the majority of them being girls trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation (NAPTIP, 2017). It is essential to point out that some of them are actually not Nigerians but foreigners from Benin Republic and Ghana who take advantage of Nigeria's porous borders to transit to Northern African states. Also, some of foreign emigrants rely on Nigerian cartels and networks to get to European states, hence their preference for Nigerian routes. The alternative routes are the Gabon and Gambian routes that are now subject of strict and crude border control measures which are replete with human rights violations (Banulescu-Bogdan, N., & Fratzke, S., 2015).

The success or otherwise of migrations on these routes depends largely on a very strong link both at point of origin (Nigeria) and the destinations (Europe). Observers of migrations in Nigeria like Nightingale, Kreutzer, Kastner, Okojie, the IOM, NAPTIP, UNESCO, United States, Department of State etc., have identified Edo, Kano, Kaduna, Calabar and Lagos as sources of and officially recognised routes of illegal migrations in Nigeria. Edo state is a primary source of women and girls who are trafficked to Italy for sexual exploitation; they also extend to European countries like Netherlands, Germany, Spain and Austria (DTM Nigeria. (2017).

### 3. Illegal Migration Routes

The details provided here are sourced from interviews with returnees and deportees from North Africa and Europe who all have used these routes. There is also a snow-ball sampling from officials who have collected data and interacted with the users of the routes. The information has been cross-checked and found relatively reliable and could be major sources for future researches on Migration (NAPTIP, IOM, NEMA Reports, 2019). Kano is reported to be the starting point of illegal migration routes from Nigeria to Europe. From here migrants embark on a 700-kilometer journey to Agadez in the Republic of Niger and through the Saharan desert. There is nothing so secret or clandestine about this route. The passage to Agadez wrecks of official connivance and surreptitious corruption without limit. Everything is regulated and open to official scrutiny, if the goal is to check irregular migrations. The trip to Agadez is undertaken only on Mondays (IDIs, 2019). Crossing over to Agadez is easy with sleazy Nigerien gendarmes who partner with the cartels. Although Agadez is a slave city where slavery appears to have a rebirth, a migrant is not likely to be sold to slavery except if he/she is unable to pay his/her way through (IDIs, 2019).



Figure 1

Illegal migrants from other parts of Africa converge at Agadez for onward transportation to Europe en route Libya. Most passengers come from Benin, Ivory Coast, Senegal, the Gambia, and Mali, they are known locally as *les*

*aventuriers* - the adventurers. They are lodged in some hidden compounds while the cartel goes to find a human smuggler or connect with his regular trustworthy smuggler, if he already has one (Pax-List, VIE-LOS-BJL, 2019)



Figure 2: A Truck Packed with Migrant's Tears through the Sahara, North of Agadez, Niger  
Photo by Mackenzie Knowles-Coursin

The journey next is to Qatroun where migrants are packed in an open pick-up van with lower and upper cabins. On these routes many migrants die as a result of exhaustion and falling off while sleeping and not being able to have a good grip of ropes which support stability on the trip. Migrants learn the danger of these routes through the sight of rotten bodies of humans who had fallen off in earlier trips (IOM, (2018).

The trip to Sebha is considered most dangerous because unlike in Agadez where slavery is accidental, Sebha is home to kidnapers who operate with AK. 47 guns and would stop the travelling van to take hostage of migrants and eventually sell them off as slaves between \$200-\$300. There is of course a political explanation to the lawlessness in Sebha. This is a volatile insurgent's region and it is not under the control of the central authority in Tripoli. AK 47 constitutes authority and anyone in its possession direct affairs around the area. Women are also raped and forced to marry insurgents, while some men are forced to join the militants in their rebellion (Pax-List, VIE-LOS-BJL, 2019). Victims of Sebha militants can buy their freedom because money is respected in the area. The insurgents need money to prosecute their war and kidnapped migrants are the major source of funding of bandit's war in Sebha. Captured migrants pay around \$800-1,500 to secure their freedom (Pax-List, VIE-LOS-BJL, 2019)

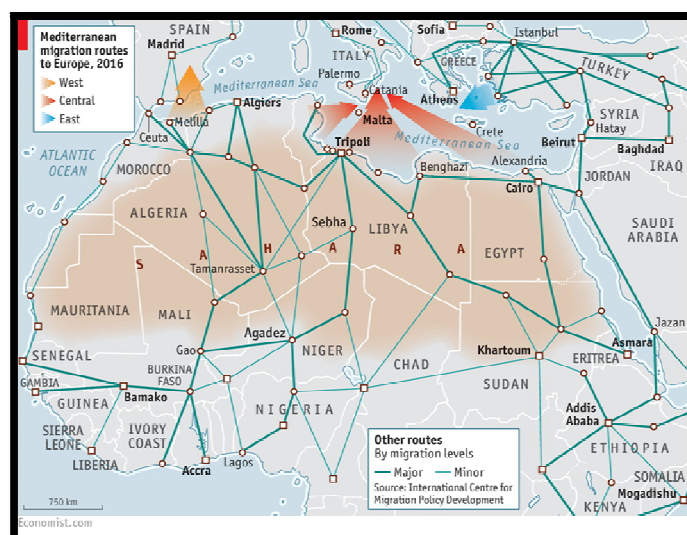


Figure 3

From Kano to Libya the journey of a migrant is just a completion of a phase. Majority who aspire to make it to Europe end their journey in the North African nation, whether as slaves, labourers, mercenaries or as prisoners in Libyan immigration camps. Tragically, some end their sojourn in life at this phase. For the lucky ones, the next phase is how to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Italy (Malakooti, A. 2016).

The hazards associated with crossing the Mediterranean Sea are well documented (Fargues, P., & Bonfanti, S.2014). The aggregate of all the reports is that certain deaths await migrants who seek to cross the Mediterranean illegal.

Those deaths may be as a result of the rickety nature of the fishing boats used for human transportation. Or as a result of the dinghy-style small boats which often capsize on the sea. Far more compelling hazard on the Mediterranean is operation of border control agents who often appear like they have no life savings mandate. The IOM has described the Mediterranean Sea as "by far the world's deadliest border" (Malakooti, A. 2016). The IOM has reported that more than 33,000 migrants have died at sea trying to enter Europe since 2000 (IOM. (2017)). At the end of 2017 the organisation, again, reported more than 3,180 deaths crossing the Mediterranean in that year alone (IOM. (2018)).

Lampedusa is a Mediterranean Island of Italy. It is the southernmost part of Italy and here, most illegal migrants from Libya and Tunisia berth first in Europe. Since 2000 this Island has served as a primary European entry port for migrants of African origin. Although Lampedusa is a major tourist centre in Italy, this fortune has dwindled as tourists resent the huge presence of police who are sent there for immigration patrol duties (Crawley, H., Düvell, F., Jones, K., McMahon, S., & Sigona, N., 2016).

#### 4. The Travel Cost

Although in the rubric of this industry, there are occasional and accidental dots of activities of nonprofit making organisations like religious bodies and accredited non-profit making health institutions. Notwithstanding, financial gain remains the principal motivating factor for migrations industry around the world. In fact, Portes (1995) maintains that the industry is built around profit to be made immediately or later, and not by altruistic value.

Although the process of irregular migration is highly capital intensive; in Nigeria's migration industry, migrants need not have the capital to finance their migrations. This practice, when compared to the smuggling policy of the *coyotes* (smugglers) in Mexico-US borders where the coyotes demand full payment for their services (Ruben Hernandez-Leon, 2005), appears as human-faced initiatives in an industry that is considered to be both savage and vicious. However, a closer look reveals something else. In the case of Mexico, smugglers treat migrants as pure economic transaction while in Nigeria; smuggling in most part is seen as a social process. This practice creates highly exploitative hierarchies of social indebtedness that are marked by the language of confidentiality and oath taking (IDI, Osagie 2019). The economic logic behind the relaxing of registration fee at the point of embarkation promotes eternal servitude of migrants.

In Nigeria, the initial capital required to embark on migration is often the sum of \$120 - N50, 000 (IDIs, FGSS 2019) but the actual and net cost of the trip is roughly about \$40,000 - N15 million in local currencies (IDIs, FGSS 2019). The implication here is that the cartels pay through international borders to get their clients through the migration process. They pay for transportation, feeding, accommodation, travel protection etc. Migration industry in Nigeria thrives on the wings of corrupt border control institutions and personnel. Border officials are reported to have made some fortune in the business of illegal migration. While they are statutorily engaged to uphold immigration policy at the borders, they compromise under the reward of ill-gotten gains. Irregular emigrations often lead them to extort and exploit the desperation of emigrants and their cartels (IDIs, FGSS 2019). This is the same situation throughout the land borders of Republic of Niger where the gendarmes openly collect passage fees from migrants. According to a report (IOM, 2017), the gendarmes are so brazen in corruption that one might be tempted to believe that the money they collect are official tolls for migrants' passage. As earlier noted, the Libyan borders are militarized and one could not talk of corruption since insurgents control the areas. Any money paid at the Libyan borders is an investment in life, otherwise death, kidnapping, rape, forced labour and other atrocious acts are the alternatives. Up to this point, there is no fixed fee per head of migrant; cartels are engaged in price haggling to ensure passage of their "goods". However, most respondents put the cost of the trip from Nigeria to Libya around \$350-\$400 (IDIs, FGSS 2019).

The migrants who make it to the beaches of the Mediterranean in Libya pay around \$300-\$400 to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe (Italy). We can therefore say that cartels spend close to \$1000 to ferry a migrant to Europe but a migrant will have to pay close to \$40,000 to secure his/her freedom (IDIs, FGSS 2019, and Ystehede, P. J., & Fosse, M. 2016).

#### 5. The Cartel and the Oaths

Investigations (IDIs, FGSS 2019) and reports (UNHCR. 2015, EUROSAT, 2017) reveal that the beam of illegal migrations in Nigeria is the structure provided by migration cartels. This structure is designed cliff-like with delicate precipices of rape, death, brutality and oath taking. This trajectory more than anything else, catapults migrations to closed combative consciousness. The roles of the migration cartels and oath taking commingle into a writ which explains the concealed trait of migration industry in Nigeria. It is also important to note that these two have produced a synergy which makes migrants utterly fear the repercussion of having to face their wrath. In fact, their roles explain why a return is not considered, notwithstanding the agony in the process.

In August 2017, the operatives of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) announced the arrest of Monday Ugbo in Benin City, Edo state of Nigeria. The arrest of Mr Ugbo followed regular mentioned of his name in a number of human trafficking cases being investigated by NAPTIP. It was also reported that he was preparing to take his clients to a river for oath taking before they could embark on the journey to Europe (IOM Country Report, 2017). Focused group discussions and interviews carried out at various deportation centres and IOM returnee facilities explain the importance of oath taking in migration industry in Nigeria. Respondents claim that migration cartels forced their victims to take oath before embarking on a journey for two reasons: one, because most victims of irregular migrations are used as sex slave investments, these victims need to sign an agreement (bond of five years) before a shrine inside a river. Two, oaths are administered in order to keep the secrecy of the industry (IDIs, FGSS 2019). It was gathered that rivers are preferred spot of oath taking for victims because of the belief that all rivers of the world are linked together and therefore no one would escape their wrath when oath is broken. In a related but different study, this writer

pointed out that there is hardly any victim in migration industry. The study maintains that the claims to being victims are defences in the event of prosecution after illegal migrants have been caught at international borders (Lawal O., 2017). In this regard, a recent study amongst rescued migrants to Italy, Russia, Germany and Spain revealed that parents are also a major chain in the migrants, cartel and oath rings (NAPTIP, 2017).

Often parental support for illegal migration is predicated on the material benefits accrued in such migratory process. Perhaps as antidote to squalor, parents provide money for their wards to travel out to engage in sex trade and make returns home to pleasing parents who see this as recouping of an investment. In the words of an officer of NAPTIP:

*"It will shock Nigerians to know that most of the girls who get trafficked to Europe to engage in prostitution are often encouraged or pushed into it by their parents."* (NAPTIP, 2017).

However, since human behaviour is still analysed within a cultural context, a Nigerian parent cannot openly admit that he/she sends her ward to Europe to engage in sex trade. Hence to sustain the justification of the act and develop an allure around it, a euphemism is coined around it and it is called *"hustling"* (Osagie J. 2019). Again, oath plays a critical role in this process. Most parents have to take their wards to shrines to swear to oath that they will not abandon the purpose of their migration when they get to Europe. This oath is done before a cartel or his representative who reports to their counterparts in Europe. After the oath, these migrants embark on this journey (Osagie J. 2019).



Figure 4: This Map Shows the Oath Capital (Benin City) of Illegal Migrants and Movement to Italy

Identifying a migration cartel is indeed herculean. This is because most of them have other jobs they do and they openly identify with. Most cartels for instance are car dealers, hoteliers, travel agents, transporters but their migration cartel-ship is blurring to an uninitiated. In places like Edo and Cross Rivers states, money leaders and female hoteliers are generally believed to be migration cartels (Sule Blessing 2019). However; migration observers have established links between travel agencies and money lenders who advance funds needed for immigration as the epicenter of migration cartel-ship. Not only do they make travel arrangement (which often include the fetish, shrine and oath agreement especially during signing of agreements), they procure counterfeit documents for migrations (Sule Blessing 2019).

It is often difficult to identify cartels that provide other services in the course of the journey. This is because migration cartels are clandestine and their operations are encrypted. Only in few areas are migrations cartels identifiable, like where state structures have collapsed, in Libya for instance, there is a report of a specialized militia which targets vans of migrants in Qutroun and collect transit fees from these vans.

In Tripoli and other coastal regions in Libya, there is a class of cartels popularly known as the *"Arabu"* (a coinage by Nigerians which refers to Arab). In practice and depending on the context, the *Arabu* serve as agent to ensure passage to the Mediterranean. The *Arabu* also operate as masters and labour recruiters where migrants are stuck in Libya (FGD, 2019:2). After crossing the Mediterranean to Europe, migration cartels are found in transatlantic transportation companies, notaries, money lenders and labour recruiters (Sahan., 2016).

In Nigeria migration cartels are mostly women who often are regular visitors to Europe. They are called *madams* and they are well organised with gangs who operate like mafia. These gangs are made up of young men and women who operate illegal prisons for their madams. They beat, torture and rape some recalcitrant victims to allow them accept the terms of their migration agreement. These madams have their counterparts in Europe who reinforce the terms of migration agreements. The agreement in Europe is generally about years of service for the migrant and this range from three-five years by which the migrants is expected to have paid back the total investment on her/his head. These migrants are often reminded, at the stage, of the oath they have sworn to at shrines back in Nigeria. In principle, it is expected that these migrants are free after paying the total cost of investment on them. In reality, most of them are not able to pay up the money, thereby living in perpetual bondage under the madams and cartels (FGD, 2019:2).



## 6. Conclusion

Migration industry in Nigeria presents its own spectre. The general explanation that migration in Nigeria is a response to a descript economy is nitpicking because such analysis disregards the social process milieu around migrations in Nigeria. Disregarding this primary framework often produces easily defeasible outcome. For instance, it is defective to arrive at the conclusion that the migration industry produces victims. The victims of migration industry (if any) are victims within the operations of the industry. Most of them are often aware of the details of the adventure but only lay claims to being victims whenever it is profitable to say so. This is not however to say that there have been no cases of individuals who find themselves unwillingly in the cartels' contraption. This is often common in the red market where human organs are being harvested. The desperation and extreme urgency attach to great need or desire to embark on migration to Europe, suggest that irregular migration is free of victims in Nigeria.

In addition to the above point is the fact that illegal migration enjoys general acceptance in some culture of Nigeria and it is generally celebrated. In fact, it is difficult to ascribe vices to illegal migration when some communities have standing edifices and structures as proof of the virtues accruable from illegal migrations. To the extent that parents struggle to enlist their wards in the industry is evidential of promotion of communal values of illegal migration. Migration is both an economic and a social industry in Nigeria because it is largely considered socially appropriate for families to sell land and other collective patrimony to raise funds for the purpose of illegal migrations.

For a casual observer of migration industry in Nigeria, is it not really so clear why migration is a social process in Nigeria. The inability to understand this, ultimately leads to difficulty to decipher why migration industry is such a closed-loop-system with extreme repercussions at every stage considering all the measures and processes of migration industry. It becomes clear therefore, why migrants do not often consider returning even when that is the right thing to do. Returning for migrants is laced with both visible and invisible danger and this explains why migrants take the reckless plunge.

The fundamental factors of social process and the closed-loop-system of migration in Nigeria should prompt government to reassess its migration policies. This reassessment should be focused more on intervention which can encourage the migrants to consider the option to return home. To do this, government needs to seek cooperation with actors of industry using subtle approach to break the clogs of bondage around migrants. Traditional rulers also have important roles to play in the areas of breaking the oaths, spell and curses around the migrants. A foremost traditional ruler of Benin Kingdom recently took the initiative, however this needs to be sustained.

Finally, authorities in Nigeria should address the asymmetric structure of government which produces accountability gap, deficient institutions, governance deficit, dependent citizens and desperate migrants.

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