

Ghanaian woman dies of hypothermia attempting to walk across US-Canada border

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The body of 57-year-old Mavis Otuteye was found near Noyes, Minnesota last week, less than a mile from the Canadian border. While a preliminary examination indicated that the woman died of hypothermia, a final autopsy is still pending.

Otuteye, originally from the West African country of Ghana, was reported missing on Thursday. Her body was found Friday by Kittson County sheriff's deputies and US Border Patrol agents in a ditch on the US side of the border, just west of the highway which leads to Emerson, Manitoba.

The tragic death of Mavis Otuteye comes amid a spike in the number of immigrants leaving the US and seeking asylum in Canada, with many fleeing out of fear of being caught up in the Trump administration's anti-immigrant crackdown.

Under the Safe Third Country Agreement, signed in 2004, refugees are required to claim asylum in the first safe country they reach, whether it is the United States or Canada. As a result, attempts to claim asylum status at a legal US-Canada border crossing, with a few exceptions, are rejected.

However, the UN Refugee Convention prevents Canada from rejecting asylum claims from those who enter the country somewhere other than at an official border crossing, pushing many refugees to make the treacherous trek across the land border and through waterways in hopes of being detained and processed by the Canadian border patrol.

Since January the Royal Canadian Mounted Police report that more than 2,700 people have risked severe harm and death crossing illegally from the US into Canada. In the first four months of this year the RCMP detained 1,993 people illegally crossing the border into Quebec, 477 in Manitoba and 233 in British Columbia. This already tops the 2,362 who were stopped illegally

crossing in all of 2016 across the three provinces.

Another 850 asylum seekers were stopped at official border crossings just in the month of April.

The largest numbers crossing into Canada have come from the Horn of Africa, including Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Ethiopia. Others have come from Nigeria, Ghana, Sudan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. There has also been an uptick in the number of immigrants from Latin America crossing the border.

With open farm fields on either side of the US-Canada border, Emerson, Manitoba has become a popular spot for asylum seekers attempting to cross. The government of Manitoba announced in May that it would open a reception center in nearby Gretna that could provide temporary shelter for as many as 60 people at one time, as well as cooked meals and assistance with filling out the necessary asylum paperwork.

The greatest risk to asylum seekers comes from exposure to the elements. Those who cross during the winter months, in hopes of evading detection by US police and border agents, risk losing limbs to frostbite or succumbing to hypothermia.

Seidu Mohammed, an asylum seeker from Ghana, lost all 10 of his fingers and a toe to frostbite after walking for seven hours through subzero temperatures on Christmas Eve last year in his effort to reach Manitoba.

According to CBC News, he had been living in the US since 2015 after fleeing his home country, where he feared for his life after being outed as bisexual. Mohammed decided to make the dangerous trek to Canada after his visa expired and a US judge rejected his request for asylum.

Bashir Yussuf described to MPR News his treacherous trek from Somalia to the US and ultimately

onward to Canada, which took him from the jungles of Panama to the freezing snow of northern Minnesota.

After having been severely beaten for having a relationship with a woman of a different tribe, he decided to flee for the US. He escaped by flying to Colombia and then made the more than 3,000-mile trek north to San Diego, where he worked odd jobs waiting for his asylum status to be decided.

With his claim denied in 2015 and the election of Trump in 2016, Yussuf decided that he would be better off fleeing the US for Canada than being deported back to Somalia where he feared being killed.

“Why I take this risk?” Yussuf asked rhetorically. “(It) is because there was no humanity in the United States any longer because of the new administration.”

Elsewhere, Mamadou, an immigrant from the Ivory Coast who had been living in New York City for the last decade, nearly froze to death in March after illegally crossing the border from New York state into Quebec. He was found barely conscious by Canadian border guards, and suffered frostbite on his feet.

A day before his risky attempt, Mamadou had tried to claim asylum at an official border crossing between the US and Canada, but was rejected.

These harrowing stories and many others are ultimately the outcome of more than two decades of military interventions by American, Canadian and European imperialism, which have destabilized a vast swath of the planet stretching from Central Asia to West Africa. Just in the last decade, millions have been forced from their homes by multiple wars waged by the United States and its allies, including in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Somalia. At the same time, millions of others have been forced to flee famine conditions across Africa and persecution under dictatorial regimes propped up by the Western powers.



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