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country summary

Somalia

2007 was a bleak and turbulent year for Somali civilians, particularly in the volatile south-central region of the country, following the December 2006 invasion by Ethiopian forces in support of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which ousted the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) from Mogadishu. The TFG was formed in 2004 following extensive negotiations between Somali factions and clans mediated by the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Kenya. Before the government was able to impose its authority in Somalia, in 2006 the Islamic Courts emerged as a powerful political force in Mogadishu and surrounding areas, disarming warlords and bringing about unprecedented local stability. Their emergence threatened the existence of the TFG, and their links with Eritrea and Ethiopian opposition groups triggered Ethiopian military intervention.

Since January 2007, Ethiopian forces deployed in Mogadishu have become increasingly embroiled in a violent counter-insurgency campaign. In one of the world's most ignored human rights and humanitarian crises, residents of Mogadishu have been indiscriminately attacked by all of the warring parties, leaving hundreds dead and more than 500,000 displaced according to UN estimates. Escalating attacks on Ethiopian and TFG forces precipitated a massive Ethiopian bombardment of residential neighborhoods in the capital in March and April 2007 that failed to quell the insurgency, but took a heavy toll on civilians. As part of the crackdown, Ethiopian and TFG forces also harassed and arbitrarily detained civilians. Tens of thousands of people suffered widespread looting, sexual violence, and lack of access to humanitarian relief while fleeing the clashes in Mogadishu, which escalated again in November and show no sign of abating.

The violence and lawlessness of Mogadishu is extending to other regions. The southern port town of Kismayo remains in the hands of clan militias opposed to the TFG. Another port town, Merka, located 100 kilometers south of Mogadishu, witnessed growing fighting in October between two rival groups affiliated to the TFG.

Two formerly peaceful regions, Somaliland and Puntland, clashed over Las Anod, a town on the border which is claimed by both regions. Puntland is reportedly regrouping after Somaliland forces took the town on October 15.

But Mogadishu remains the focal point for the country's seemingly endless cycle of violence. There, representatives of the media and civil society are increasingly under threat from all the warring parties, particularly the TFG, which has repeatedly tried to suppress independent reporting of events in Mogadishu.

Violations of International Humanitarian Law in Mogadishu

Since January 2007, a coalition of insurgent groups including the extremist Al-Shabaab militia has waged almost daily attacks on Ethiopian and TFG forces, including several suicide bombings, and killed TFG civilian officials. In March, members of the insurgency summarily executed and mutilated the bodies of several captured TFG soldiers. Hit and run attacks by insurgency forces using remotely detonated roadside devices, small arms, and heavy weaponry have also killed and injured many civilians. The insurgency has repeatedly launched mortar attacks from urban neighborhoods, further jeopardizing civilian security.

The Ethiopian and Somali government have responded to the insurgency by besieging entire neighborhoods with heavy weaponry and conducting mass arrests and detentions. Ethiopian forces launched two major offensives on large areas of Mogadishu in March and April 2007. Densely populated neighborhoods perceived to be insurgent strongholds were indiscriminately bombarded with "Katyusha" rockets, artillery, and mortar fire, with no apparent effort to distinguish between insurgents and civilians. On several occasions Ethiopian troops have occupied hospitals, looting them of desperately needed medical equipment.

The Ethiopian military was mainly responsible for the bombardment and civilian casualties in March and April, but TFG officials failed to provide effective warnings to civilians in combat zones and also looted property, impeded relief efforts for displaced people, and mistreated dozens of people detained in mass arrests.

Many of those arrested have been transferred to known and secret detention centers where they are held without charge for long periods. The Ethiopian and TFG forces have not disclosed the number of people detained—believed to be in the hundreds—or their whereabouts. Although dozens of people were released in late June 2007 after the TFG offered an amnesty, hundreds more have been detained since then and many people have disappeared.

The ongoing mayhem has crippled the economy. Tens of thousands of displaced people remain in desperate circumstances without sufficient food, water, or medical supplies, and have become easy prey to extortion and abuse by the warring parties and by other armed groups outside the capital.

Threats to Freedom of Expression

The environment for journalists and independent media outlets in Mogadishu, already difficult under the Islamic Courts Union, worsened dramatically with the intensifying conflict. The TFG repeatedly closed major independent media outlets such as Shabelle Media Network, HornAfrik, and other smaller radio stations serving Mogadishu, claiming the broadcasts incited violence. Several journalists were detained for long periods without charge, apparently in an effort to suppress independent reporting.

At least eight journalists were killed in the course of the year, making it the most dangerous year for Somali journalism since 1991. On the morning of August 11, Mahad Ahmed Elmi, a talk show host with HornAfrik radio, was shot in the head by two men armed with pistols. Just a few hours later, Ali Iman Sharmake, one of the owners of HornAfrik, was killed in a roadside explosion as he returned from his colleague's funeral. On October 19, the acting manager of Shabelle Media Network, Bashir Nur Gedi, was shot dead at close range outside a cafe in Mogadishu. Several high profile journalists from Shabelle Media Network and HornAfrik fled the country after the killings.

Threats to the media continued with a series of brief detentions of journalists and raids on local radio stations. On September 16, Somali government troops fired on the Shabelle Media compound and briefly detained 16 staff members, alleging that a

grenade was thrown from the building, which Shabelle vehemently denied. The following day, government troops besieged the station with gunfire, allegedly injuring one staff member slightly and damaging equipment. Shabelle radio was closed for two weeks and returned to the air on October 2, after government troops withdrew from the area. On November 12, TFG forces again closed Shabelle radio without any explanation.

Attacks on Human Rights Defenders and Civil Society

Human rights defenders and members of civil society organizations also came under increasing attack in 2007. On March 14, Isse Abdi Isse, a founder of KISIMA, a non-governmental organization based in Kismayo, was shot dead at close range in Mogadishu by unknown assailants.

In September, a well-known lecturer at the Somali Institute of Management and Administration Development, Professor Mohammed Ahmed Hussein, was gunned down as he walked through Mogadishu's central Bakara market. Professor Hussein had played a significant role in reviving higher education in the city following the collapse of public services in the early 1990s.

On June 18, TFG and Ethiopian troops raided the offices of SAACID-Somalia, one of the largest nongovernmental organizations in the south-central region. Several SAACID staff members, including the director, were arrested and briefly detained. The soldiers smashed doors and windows, destroyed office equipment, and confiscated property.

On August 18, TFG officials raided the office of the Somali Red Crescent in Bal'ad town, 30 kilometers north of Mogadishu, temporarily closing the office and detaining a staff member. The staff member was released and the office reopened two days later.

In October the TFG ordered the closing of one of Somalia's oldest human rights organizations, Elman Human Rights, citing "security reasons."

Key International Actors

Somalia's internal crisis is exacerbated both by the ongoing tension between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and by US counterterrorism initiatives in the region. The failure to resolve Ethiopian-Eritrean tension has led to each country supporting opposing sides in Somalia: Ethiopia, backed by the US, supports the weak, but internationally-recognized TFG, while supporters of the ICU reportedly rely on substantial military and financial support from Eritrea.

US policy on Somalia is dominated by counterterrorism concerns, including the presence in Mogadishu of several allegedly high-level suspects wanted for involvement in the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. US backing for Ethiopia's December 2006 offensive became obvious when US aircraft launched several airstrikes in southeastern Somalia in January 2007 and again in Puntland in June 2007. US intelligence agents also participated in interrogations of some of the dozens of people rendered from Kenya and Somalia to Ethiopia in early 2007 (see Ethiopia chapter).

While most key government and international institutions ignored or downplayed the serious crimes committed in Mogadishu in 2007, some policymakers have recognized the urgent need to replace the Ethiopian forces with a neutral force. The African Union sent 1,500 Ugandan troops to Somalia in March as part of a proposed 8,000-member African Union mission known as AMISOM. However, by year's end the force remained at only 1,700 members, with most African states reluctant to provide further forces in the volatile context.

On August 20, the United Nations Security Council voted to extend the AMISOM Mission in Somalia by six months and approved contingency planning for a possible UN takeover of the mission. However, few observers anticipate that a UN mission will materialize in the short term.