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All parties to the armed conflict carried out indiscriminate attacks killing hundreds of civilians. The right to freedom of expression was suppressed; two journalists were killed and others were beaten, threatened, harassed and intimidated, and subjected to arbitrary arrest. The government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic remained inadequate and only 5.1% of the population had been vaccinated by December; health workers were particularly exposed to infection risks and suffered poor and unsafe working conditions. Hundreds of thousands of people were displaced. In Somaliland, the authorities continued to censor critics and journalists and carried out large scale forced evictions and transfer of people in Las Anod town.

Background

Heightened political tensions between federal authorities, regional authorities and opposition leaders rose to new levels, leading to the postponement of presidential and parliamentary elections. Political infighting between Somalia's president and his prime minister prevented the implementation of necessary judicial, constitutional and human rights reforms. Their public disagreement about the apparent enforced disappearance of a woman officer in the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) threatened to create political divisions including within the security forces.

In May, Somaliland held long-delayed parliamentary and local council elections for 82 members of the House of Representatives and Councillors in 21 districts. On 5 June, the opposition won 52 of the 82 parliamentary seats, none of which were held by women, a fact which further undermined women's voices at the legislative level.

Indiscriminate attacks

All parties to the armed conflict continued to commit crimes under international law with impunity. According to the UN there were 536 civilian casualties (241 deaths and 295 injuries) between February and July, 68% of which were the result of indiscriminate attacks by the armed group Al-Shabaab, while the rest were attributed to state security forces, clan militias, and international and regional forces including the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

Al-Shabaab launched repeated attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, including restaurants and hotels. The group also carried out targeted killings of people with perceived links to the government, and journalists, among others. On 2 March, Al-Shabaab members killed at least 20 people and injured 30 others in the popular Luul Yemeni restaurant in the capital, Mogadishu, in a suicide car bombing. On 25 September, at least eight people were killed in another such attack in Mogadishu. Among the dead was Hibaq Abukar, an adviser on women and human rights affairs in the prime minister's office.

On 10 August, allegations emerged that AMISOM soldiers had targeted and killed seven civilians in a retaliation attack against Al-Shabaab in Golweyn town, in the Lower Shabelle region. On 21 August, AMISOM said it constituted a Board of Inquiry to investigate the incident. On 21 October, the Board made public its findings, admitting that “the seven people killed were civilians and the conduct of the personnel involved was in breach of the AMISOM Rules of Engagement.” On 13 November, AMISOM announced that a Ugandan court martial in Mogadishu had found five Ugandan soldiers guilty of the killings, two of whom were sentenced to death and three to 39 years in prison, and that they would serve their sentences in Uganda.

Enforced disappearances

On 12 July, a woman announced in the media that her 25-year-old daughter, Ikran Tahlil Farah, an officer with the NISA, had been missing since 26 June when she was abducted by unidentified people in a car outside her residence in Mogadishu. The family alleged repeatedly that NISA officers were behind the abduction and disappearance because she was taken from a secure location near the heavily guarded NISA headquarters, accessible only to screened visitors and NISA personnel. On 2 September, an announcement was made in state media saying that Ikran Tahlil Farah had been kidnapped and killed by Al-Shabaab, a claim immediately denied by the group.

A public outcry prompted the prime minister to replace the NISA director, following which the president appointed the former NISA director as his National Security Advisor. The prime minister referred the disappearance to the Military Court Prosecutor for investigation. On 21 November, the Chief Prosecutor announced that preliminary investigations found no evidence that NISA was involved in Ikran Tahlil Farah’s alleged disappearance.

Freedom of expression

Two journalists were killed and others faced beatings, threats, harassment and intimidation, arbitrary arrests and prosecution as a means to silence them.

On 22 February, Puntland police arrested freelance journalist Ahmed Botan Arab in Bosaso town after he posted interviews on Facebook showing Bosaso residents commenting on the Puntland president’s speech about regional political developments and a stalemate on the implementation of an electoral agreement between regional and federal leaders. He was detained at Bosaso police station and released two days later without charge after clan elders intervened.

On 1 March, independent journalist Jamal Farah Adan was shot dead by unidentified armed men at a shop in Galkayo town, Mudug region. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the killing. Before his death, Jamal Farah Adnan said he had received anonymous threats and that an attempt had been made on his life by an Al-Shabaab member. On 6 March, the President of Puntland said that the authorities had arrested suspects in Galkayo and investigations into the circumstances of the killing were underway. The outcome of the investigations was not made public by the end of the year.

On 20 November, radio journalist Abdiaziz Mohamud Guled, also known as Abdiaziz Africa, was killed in a suicide bomb attack, and two of his colleagues were injured. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for his killing.

On 3 March, Kilwe Adan Farah, a freelance journalist, was sentenced to three months in jail by a military court in Puntland. He had been arrested and detained in December 2020 by the Puntland Intelligence Agency, a day after he covered protests in Garowe town against the government’s perceived mismanagement of local currency. He was charged with five offences, including “publication of false news and bringing the nation or the state into contempt”. He was released from Garowe Central Prison on 22 March following a presidential pardon.

On 3 July, NISA officers in Balad Hawo town, Gedo region, arrested Mohamud Mohamed Sheikh also known as Lafagari, a journalist for the Star Media Network. The next day, he was transferred to a detention facility in Dollow town where he was detained for three days and released without charge and without being provided with any explanation for his arrest and detention.

On 5 September, a group of journalists covering a protest in Mogadishu were beaten and their equipment confiscated by Somali Police Force officers. Following the incident, a video circulated on social media showed police beating and dragging Bashir Mohamud, a Goobjoog Media producer, along the ground.

Right to health

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted a range of pre-existing weaknesses in Somalia’s public healthcare system. By August, according to government records, 15,294 people had contracted the virus and 798 people had died since the beginning of the pandemic. However, given the limited testing capacity, and under-reporting and registration of deaths, the real figure was expected to be much higher. Over the last four years, the budget allocated to health was on average 2% as compared to the 31% devoted to the security sector.

The government’s response to the pandemic was wholly inadequate. There was almost no capacity to test, treat and manage Covid-19 cases and patients’ access to health facilities remained severely limited. For much of the year, only one hospital in Mogadishu handled all Covid-19-related cases across south-central regions, which lacked essential medicines and basic equipment like ventilators and oxygen. From August, two more hospitals, also in Mogadishu, were able to manage Covid-19 patients. Access to emergency transportation and ambulance services in Mogadishu and the regional states was almost non-existent and the city had only two ambulances which operated free of charge for Covid-19 patients and served nearly 3 million people.⁴

Access to vaccines was severely limited. Only 5.1% of the population was fully vaccinated by December at which point almost all the vaccines donated through COVAX and by China had been used. Limited public awareness compounded by a lack of public information about the virus contributed to people’s hesitancy to get vaccinated, even among health workers.

Health workers

Many health workers contracted Covid-19. They faced multiple challenges during the pandemic and put their own health and lives at risk. Some of them said they had not been given enough appropriate training on handling Covid-19 patients and the impact on their own health; they worked prolonged hours. In many cases, the payment of their salaries was delayed.

Internally displaced people’s rights

The impact of drought and floods driven by climate change, conflict and the loss of livelihoods exacerbated the protracted humanitarian crisis. In addition to more than 2.6 million people who were already internally displaced in previous years, 573,000 people fled their homes between January and August, according to the UN. Of those, over 70% were fleeing conflict, including around 207,000 who were temporarily displaced in Mogadishu due to election-related violence in April. Around 50% of all those displaced in 2021 were women and girls who faced an increased risk of sexual violence and harassment. Humanitarian access to most of those affected was restricted because of insecurity, severely limiting their access to food, water, sanitation, housing and healthcare.

Somaliland

Freedom of expression

Authorities in Somaliland severely restricted freedom of expression, particularly targeting individuals perceived to be promoting unity with Somalia. The Human Rights Centre, a local human rights organization, reported that 42 individuals were arrested in Borama town, and 15 in Las Anod town, on 26 June and 16 July, respectively, for wearing outfits made from the Somali flag. They were released without charge.

On 19 August, the authorities in Burao town arbitrarily arrested independent journalist Abdimalik Muse Oldon for the second time in two years. He was held in connection with an altercation over social media with the president when he alleged that the management of Barwaaqo University was spreading Christianity. On 12 October, he was charged with offences including “spreading false information and anti-national propaganda”, and “criminal defamation”. His trial was ongoing at the end of the year and he remained in detention. In 2020, he had been released from prison following a presidential pardon having served one year of a three-and-a-half-year sentence on charges related to his criticizing the president on Facebook.

Forced evictions and transfer of population

On 2 and 3 October, Somaliland authorities forcibly evicted, rounded up and transferred over 7,000 men, women and children from Las Anod town and its surrounding areas in the Sool region to locations in Puntland. The Somaliland government said those targeted for this exercise were “non-locals” from southern Somalia who posed a security threat to Somaliland. Some of the families had lived in Las Anod for 20 years and have since lost their property, business assets and livelihoods. According to the UN, the majority of those displaced initially arrived in Galkayo, Puntland, most of whom proceeded to Hirshabelle and Banadir in the South West State, and were in need of urgent protection and humanitarian assistance. Somaliland authorities neither gave notice to the families nor allowed them to take their belongings with them.

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