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The State of the World's Human Rights; Somalia 2023

The conflict between the government and Al-Shabaab continued, and all parties committed serious abuses of international humanitarian and human rights law with impunity. Insecurity, drought, floods and food insecurity caused the displacement of over 2.9 million people and a dire humanitarian crisis. Internally displaced people faced human rights violations; women and girls were particularly exposed to gender-based and conflict-related sexual violence. The right to freedom of expression was restricted, and journalists were attacked, beaten, and arbitrarily arrested and prosecuted. In Somaliland, a new conflict erupted in the city of Las Anod in Sool region, leading to civilian casualties, destruction of civilian property and massive displacement. Somaliland authorities also restricted the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Background

In February, the government announced plans for a comprehensive military operation against Al-Shabaab and established a frontline states-level initiative, comprising military forces from Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya.

In Puntland, the first one-person, one-vote district council elections were held in May.

The African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) concluded the first phase of the plan to transfer security responsibilities to Somalia's army and police force, withdrawing 2,000 troops in June which raised concerns about civilian protection. ATMIS resumed the withdrawal of a further 3,000 troops in December, a process which had previously been halted following a request from the government for a three-month pause.

Political tensions increased in Somaliland due to elections planned for 2024 and a new conflict in the Sool region.

Unlawful attacks and killings

Civilians continued to bear the brunt of the ongoing conflict between the government and its international allies on one hand, and the armed group Al-Shabaab on the other. Massive civilian casualties were reported throughout the year. There was no accountability for violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

In March, the president announced the second phase of the offensive against Al-Shabaab, referred to as "Operation Black Lion", which aimed to liberate the remaining territories under Al-Shabaab's control throughout the country.

Al-Shabaab increased its targeted attacks against government and allied forces and also carried out indiscriminate attacks against civilians. According to the UN, there were 945 civilian casualties (342 killed and 603 injured) between February and October. Al-Shabaab was responsible for 312 civilian casualties, while the rest were attributed to state security forces, clan militias, and international and regional forces.

On 23 September, a truck bomb explosion in the central Somali town of Beledweyne killed at least 18 people and injured 40 more.

On 29 September, a suicide bombing inside the Bar Bulsho tea shop, near the presidential palace in the capital, Mogadishu, killed at least seven people. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack.

Right to food

Drought, floods and the impact of the war in Ukraine on food imports created a dire humanitarian crisis. According to the UN, nearly 8.25 million people, almost half the population, needed immediate life-saving humanitarian and protection assistance. The drought devastated the agriculture sector, which provides up to 90% of Somalia's exports, and led to increased displacement and loss of livelihoods. One third of all livestock died in the worst-affected areas. An estimated 5 million people experienced food crisis or worse outcomes, including 96,000 people facing catastrophic hunger. An estimated 1.8 million children, including infants, faced acute malnutrition, with almost 478,000 children likely to be severely malnourished. Meanwhile, Al-Shabaab restricted humanitarian access in areas under their control, compounding the crisis.

Internally displaced people's rights

Internally displaced people continued to face significant human rights violations and abuses. More than 2.9 million people were displaced due to the floods, drought, conflict and food insecurity. According to the UN, over 105,000 individuals – the majority already internally displaced people – were forcibly evicted between January and December across the country.

Most of those displaced were older people, children and women, including pregnant women and lactating mothers. The lack of adequate shelter and privacy in overcrowded internally displaced people's settlements increased women's and children's vulnerability to violations such as gender-based violence, including rape and physical assaults.

Sexual and gender-based violence

Gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls, continued. Between February and June, the UN reported four conflict-related sexual violence incidents affecting nine women, including a pregnant woman with disabilities, and four girls. Five of the survivors had been internally displaced as a result of the drought.

The ongoing drought increased the vulnerability of internally displaced people to gender-based violence. Women and girls were at heightened risk of sexual violence and abuse when travelling long distances to fetch water for their families.

In August, the UN Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia reported that sexual and gender-based violence was pervasive, with rape, gang rape, female genital mutilation and domestic violence among the most common forms.

The federal parliament failed to pass the sexual offences and the female genital mutilation bills.

Freedom of expression

The right to freedom of expression and media freedom was restricted. Journalists were occasionally attacked by security forces and were subjected to threats, harassment, intimidation, beatings,

arbitrary arrests and prosecution.

On 13 February, the Banadir Regional Court in Mogadishu sentenced Abdalle Ahmed Mumin, a journalist and secretary general of the Somali Journalists Syndicate (SJS) to two months' imprisonment for "disobeying government orders" pursuant to article 505 of the penal code. He was taken to Mogadishu Central Prison, where prison officials refused to detain him, saying he had already served more than two months as he was first arrested in October 2022. On 23 February, Abdalle Ahmed Mumin was re-arrested while attending a public meeting convened by a senatorial committee and was detained at Mogadishu Central Prison where he remained until his release on 26 March. The following day the court lifted a travel ban against him.

In March, the president signed the National Security and Intelligence Agency (NISA) Act into law. The Act contains overly broad provisions, including prohibiting anyone from disseminating information about intelligence activities and NISA officers. Such provisions are likely to be used to prosecute journalists, political opposition members, and human rights defenders and activists who publish information about government abuses. The mass surveillance powers given to the agency – including the authority to monitor communications, including internet and postal communications – could also be used to violate the rights to freedom of expression and privacy.

On 16 April, police in Mogadishu arbitrarily arrested four journalists while they reported from a bomb blast site in Hamar Jajab neighbourhood. Two of them, Mohamed Said Nur and Qasim Ibrahim Adan, worked for the Risaala Media Corporation; and Mohamud Abdirashid Sofeysane and Isaq Rashid worked for 5TV. They were all released the same day without charge.

On 17 August, plain-clothes security officers arrested Mohamed Ibrahim Osman Bulbul, a journalist with Kaab TV and the SJS's secretary of information and human rights.¹ He was arrested the day after he had published a story about alleged misappropriation of EU funds intended for police training. On 19 August he was brought before the Banadir Regional Court, which granted a request by the police to hold him for seven days pending further investigation. During his detention, officers from the Criminal Investigation Department confiscated and searched his phones to access the sources of his reporting. On 25 September, he was charged with offences under the penal code including bringing the state into contempt, and circulating false and tendentious news. He was transferred to Mogadishu Central Prison on 28 September, but the court dismissed the charges and released him on 11 October.

On 16 October, Abdifatah Moalim Nur, director of Somali Cable Television, was killed in an Al-Shabaab suicide attack at Mogadishu's Blue-Sky restaurant. At least four other people were injured in the same attack.

Somaliland

Freedom of peaceful assembly

The assassination on 26 December 2022 of Abdifatah Abdullahi Abdi, a politician from the Dhulbahante clan in Las Anod, Sool region, by unidentified armed men triggered widespread protests. Somaliland security forces responded by using excessive force. The UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) said 12 protesters were killed and 59 injured during the protests between late December 2022 and early January 2023. The Somaliland authorities withdrew security forces from Las Anod in early January in response to continuing anger and widespread protests over the killings. This paved the way for prominent Dhulbahante personalities including clan elders to enter the town. The elders held consultative meetings between 28 January and 5 February and issued a declaration that the Sool and Sanaag regions were not part of Somaliland's administration.

Indiscriminate attacks

Following the Dhulbahante clan elders' declaration, clashes between Somaliland security forces and armed fighters affiliated with the Dhulbahante clan began on 6 February, escalating into a situation of non-international armed conflict.²

Somaliland security forces indiscriminately shelled Las Anod, resulting in the unlawful killing and injuring of civilians, including women, children, older people with health conditions, and healthcare workers. Most were killed in indiscriminate attacks involving rockets, mortars and other explosive weapons with wide-area effects. According to UNSOM, 36 civilians were killed and 270 injured.

On 6 February, seven-year-old Rayan Abdullahi Ahmed was killed by munitions while inside her aunt's house in the Samalay neighbourhood, in southern Las Anod. On the same day, Amina Jama Ibrahim was killed by munitions inside her house in the Ex-Control neighbourhood in eastern Las Anod. On 11 February, Abdisalam Saed Muse, a nurse volunteer with the Somali Red Crescent Society, was killed when a stray bullet hit him at Gargaar hospital. On 21 February, Saynab Yusuf Dheeg was killed by munitions while sitting with four other women near her house.

Violations of international humanitarian law

Somaliland forces carried out indiscriminate ground attacks that damaged or destroyed civilian infrastructure.

The Las Anod general hospital was hit several times between February and August. Doctors Without Borders said that the hospital was hit during fighting on 28 February, causing partial damage to the structure, and bringing work in the pediatric ward and the blood bank to a standstill. Hundreds of other civilian buildings including two mosques and three schools were also damaged.

The indiscriminate attacks and fighting led to between 154,000 and 203,000 people being displaced to neighbouring towns and villages, and to Ethiopia. Most of the displaced started returning to Las Anod in late August due to a pause in hostilities.

Freedom of expression

Somaliland authorities continued to restrict the right to freedom of expression and media freedom by arbitrarily arresting, detaining and prosecuting journalists and critics.

In particular, they restricted reporting on the conflict in Las Anod. On 30 January, the Ministry of Information issued a directive, warning "against the dissemination of news, reporting and opinions that could fuel the situation in Las Anod."

On 15 May, the authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained journalist Busharo Ali Mohamed (also known as Busharo Baanday) in Wajaale on the border with Ethiopia. She was transferred to Hargeisa where she was detained for three months. On 16 July she was charged with several offences under the Somali penal code including circulating false and tendentious news and for disobeying laws. The Maroodi Jeh Regional Court in Hargeisa convicted her and sentenced her to one year in jail, but she was released on 15 August after paying a fine of SOS 123,788 (around USD 217).

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1. ["Somalia: Free journalist jailed for investigative report: Mohamed Ibrahim Osman Bulbul", 6 October](#)
 2. ["Somaliland: Urgent investigation needed as fighting takes heavy toll on civilians in Las Anod", 20 April](#)