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Somalia

The impact of explosive weapons on children in Somalia

News and Press Release

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Somalia is one of the most politically fragile countries in the world. Prolonged tensions between Somalia's federal government, regional authorities and clans, coupled with the ongoing conflict with Al-Shabaab, have hampered state-building efforts. The east African country has been named among the [top 10](#) most dangerous countries in conflict to be a child. This report explores the scale of explosive violence in recent years, as well as its impact on the lived experience of children.

Explosive weapons use in Somalia has occurred in the context of civil war, with threats from militant groups such as Al-Shabaab. According to the UN, Al-Shabaab remains the main threat to security and stability in Somalia today. The group exerts effective control over large parts of rural areas in southern and central Somalia. Al-Shabaab has resorted to largely asymmetrical means of warfare, such as suicide attacks and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Its presence has exacerbated unrest in Somalia and represents a specific threat to children, between 2016 and 2019 Al-Shabaab committed 10,462 grave violations against children. During the same period [2,916 children](#) were killed or maimed in armed violence in Somalia. In 2019 alone, some [222 children were killed and 481 were maimed](#) due to

IEDs

The [UN reported](#) that IEDs were the leading weapon causing child casualties in Somalia; 158 children were killed or injured as a result of IEDs in 2019. Alan MacDonald, [the Head of UNMAS](#) in Somalia, stated in 2018 that, "The biggest problem that Somalia has is the IED threat." In Somalia, IEDs are built using material from explosive remnants, unexploded ordnance, and landmines. This explains the increasing application of IEDs by militant groups; attractive for both their accessibility and their potential for mass destruction according to the [United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs](#). MacDonald asserted that eliminating these elements would help deter the increasing IED problem in Somalia, and this was corroborated by the [Director General](#) of the Somalia Explosive Management Authority, who indicated an insufficient investment in the disposal efforts of landmines in Somalia.

Somalia's capital, Mogadishu, suffered one of Africa's [most serious](#) IED explosions in the form of an Al-Shabaab suicide truck bombing in October 2017. The bomb killed around 600 civilians, including [25 children](#). 15 children were also injured. The bomb detonated near shops and restaurants, and destroyed other vehicles including [a school bus](#). On 25 February 2016, Al-Shabaab [mortar shells](#) destroyed a madrassa in Banadir state; killing 3 boys and injuring 2 boys and a girl.

Children were also harmed in the preparation of IED attacks. On 15th March 2019, [10 boys were killed and 18 were wounded](#) during a bomb-making training session for Al-Shabaab.

Airstrikes

Not all attacks against children were conducted by terrorists. On 16th October 2017, [3 children died](#) in an airstrike: the explosive device was targeted at an Al-Shabaab convoy. Indeed, the UN notes that an increase in international air strikes aimed at Al-Shabaab bases has [caused child casualties](#), and U.S. air strikes to fight Al-Shabaab forces have raised [moral questions](#) of their violent impacts on civilians. The nature of these is hard to monitor, yet there were [23 identified child deaths and 21 identified child casualties](#) caused by air strike between 2016 -- 2019. The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) reported that drone strikes on Somalia by the U.S are increasing, with [45 strikes](#) in 2018. The risk of these explosive strikes, both to civilian children and children under the recruitment of Al-Shabaab, is therefore potentially increasing too.

ERW & Mines

In 2019 explosive remnants of war (ERW) resulted in 54 child casualties. The [Mine Action Review](#) states that as of 2019, Somalia is not on track to meet its deadline in clearance of mines and explosive remnants of war, and that there is a need for much greater support for the Somali Explosive Management Authority (SEMA). Without appropriate mine action, IEDs may continue to play a key role in Somalia's Civil War; causing mass destruction and having a long-lasting impact on children's lived experiences.

Impact on Children

Al-Shabaab deliberately targets humanitarian agencies, schools and hospitals; severely impacting children's lives, education, health and their communities. Globally, in 2019 there were 927 attacks on schools and hospitals, [88 were in Somalia](#), making Somalia's schools and hospitals some of the most attacked in the world, alongside Syria, Palestine and Afghanistan.

Education

Between 2013 and 2017, over [100 schools](#) were attacked in Somalia. Between 2016 and 2019, the number of school attacks reached 203, whilst 80% of these were carried out by Al-Shabaab forces. School attacks increased in this period largely due to attacks by Al-Shabaab in order to recruit children for military operations. Explosive weapons such as car bombs and IEDs were frequently used.

Such attacks lead to [long-lasting disruption to children's education](#), causing schooling to be either cancelled indefinitely or suspended for long periods of time. They expose teachers and students to physical and mental damage, and cause severe physical destruction of the school environment, thus 'eroding their sanctity as safe spaces', according to [the UN](#). In 2019, [school attacks](#) in Somalia involved the abduction of teachers and pupils, killing and threats against teachers, and destruction and looting of school facilities; marking a distinct targeting of children's access to education and the associated social mobility this brings.

Access to Humanitarian Agencies

A trend in violent attacks on humanitarian agencies has had indirect impacts upon the lives of children in Somalia. [Incidents increased by 100%](#) from 2017 to 2018, and [50 incidents](#) of denial of humanitarian access were identified in 2019 alone, of which almost half were attributed to Al-Shabaab. Additionally, the use of [IEDs](#) in these attacks has increased. The use of explosives attacking personnel and facilities prevents the [distribution](#) of humanitarian aid, and the CFR has argued that such violent attacks exacerbate the [ongoing famine](#). The insecurity caused by explosive violence has far-reaching consequences, for instance, Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) announced it would pull out of Somalia due to violence against staff; MSF had previously cared for 30,090 malnourished children in 2012. Attacks on humanitarian aid therefore deny children of support needed in the context of famine, poverty, conflict and displacement.

Abductions and Child Soldiers

Explosives do not only act as the means of direct violence but can facilitate other dangers to children. During attacks such as IED explosions, children have been abducted for military recruitment, or captured and arrested. Somalia had one of the highest rates of child abduction. Between 2016 and 2019, 6,143 children were recruited by armed forces and armed groups. The main perpetrator was Al-Shabaab, with 80% of verified cases (4,910), followed by the Somali National Army (391), the Somali police (172). In 2019 alone, 1,442 boys and 53 girls were abducted, predominantly for recruitment purposes, sexual violence and ransom by non-state actors.

Abductions during explosions can lead to children being estranged from families, losing their access to education, becoming fighters or working in support roles, and being forced into marriage and sex slavery. If children are subsequently arrested for their association with armed groups, they are often subject to a lack of justice and maltreatment by the state, with prolonged detention periods, heavy prison sentences and death penalties.

Displacement

IED explosions and Al-Shabaab violence have also caused children and families to migrate away from urban centres. As of December 2019, there were [2.6 million](#) internally displaced people (IDPs) in Somalia, two thirds of which caused by conflict, violence, droughts and floods, and fear of child recruitment to Al-Shabaab. An official from the coastal town Adale said that his community was hosting roughly [500 children](#) who had fled forced recruitment. The displacement caused by explosions and recruitment can cause children to live in poor conditions in IDP camps.

Gender

Boys represented 74% of child deaths and casualties in 2019. The gendered impacts of explosive violence may represent the surge in recruitment of young boys into military roles, whilst girls have been disproportionately used in Somali conflict as sexual violence victims.

Conclusion

The UN has expressed continued concern over the increasing rate of explosive weapon use in Somalia. IEDs and other explosives can cause long-lasting damage to children's lives, not only in their ability to inflict deaths and casualties. Explosives have attacked children's access to education, health, community, and have forced children to be abducted, captured or migrate to unstable areas.

Peacekeeping agencies and legislators in Somalia have made strides to tackle the impact of explosives and conflict in Somalia, as well as ensure the protection of children. In November 2017, the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development began drafting a [child rights bill](#), with attempts to criminalize the grave violations against children in Somalia.

For more research on the impact of explosive violence on children, please visit AOAV's category page on this matter [here](#).

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