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The Islamist armed group Al-Shabab burned numerous homes in raids on villages in [Somalia's](#) Lower Shabelle region in late May 2017, Human Rights Watch said today based on witness accounts and satellite imagery analysis. Al-Shabab fighters abducted civilians, stole livestock, and committed arson in attacks that caused more than 15,000 people to flee their homes.

Starting on May 21, Al-Shabab forces raided villages in the Merka and Afgooye districts of Lower Shabelle. The region has long been the site of violence involving clan militias, federal government forces, Al-Shabab, and African Union forces, in ever-shifting alliances that have had dire consequences for civilians.

"There is no justification for Al-Shabab abducting civilians and burning down their homes," said [Laetitia Bader](#), senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Al-Shabab is responsible for causing mass flight, but the government needs to address communal tensions and hold those most responsible for abuses to account."

Human Rights Watch spoke to 25 people in person in Mogadishu and by phone who fled from the two districts to Mogadishu and to Lower Shabelle, as well as to local elders and area experts, and analyzed satellite imagery of 30 villages from the Merka district.

Inter-clan conflict, primarily between the Habar Gidir and Biyomaal clans, has increased in Lower Shabelle [since 2013](#). Both clans have [fought with and against](#) Somali government forces and Al-Shabab. Throughout this violence, civilians have been repeatedly targeted in retaliatory attacks.

Since September 2016, tensions and fighting between Al-Shabab and a militia linked to the Biyomaal clan have [escalated](#). In mid-May, fighting intensified around the Biyomaal stronghold in Afgooye district known as KM-50 and was followed by Al-Shabab raids. Al-Shabab attacked villages after several months of calling on their residents to leave their homes, Human Rights Watch said.

"Abdi," whose real name as with others interviewed is not being used for his protection, told Human Rights Watch that he fled his village, Ceel Waregow: "Al-Shabab accused us of being *murtads* [infidels] and accused us of joining the government. Some of our elders have talked to Al-Shabab and told them that those without guns should be spared. Initially they used to tax us, take livestock and money, but now they are burning our homes."

[The United Nations reported](#) that Al-Shabab abducted approximately 70 people, including women and children, from KM-50 village during fighting between May 21 and 23. Residents told Human Rights Watch that Al-Shabab stole large numbers of cows, goats and camels - critical for survival in the face of [ongoing](#)

[drought](#). Local elders said that hundreds of livestock were stolen, many died, and only a fraction have been returned to the community.

Human Rights Watch analyzed satellite imagery showing changes over time recorded between May 8 and July 12, 2017, and found evidence of widespread building destruction in 18 of 32 villages assessed in Merka district. Damage in all cases was consistent with arson attacks that resulted in the probable destruction of several hundred residential and community buildings. Because of partial cloud cover in available satellite imagery, it was not possible to assess the change in many locations in the area and it is possible that the total number of affected villages from the recent attacks is larger than the 18 locations currently identified.

An open source data collection [site](#) reported fighting between Al-Shabab and Biyomaal clan militia and government forces in two of the 18 villages in which Human Rights Watch identified property destruction. The UN found that about 100 houses were torched at the height of the attacks in the Merka [district](#) and that homes were also burned down in the village of Muuri and KM-50 in the Afgooye district on [May 23](#).

According to the UN, [15,240 people were displaced at the height of the raids](#) from May 21 to 24. A woman from Bullo Mudey, whose father was killed and home burned in an attack said: "How can you stay in a place where there are constant attacks and where children are burned in the houses?"

Many people are displaced within the Lower Shabelle region, with others moving toward the outskirts of the capital, Mogadishu. Those who fled the fighting said they were living in precarious settings where they received little, if any, assistance, lacked shelter, and faced serious health risks.

The international laws of war, which bind all parties to the conflict in Somalia, including Al-Shabab, prohibit attacks directed against civilians and civilian property. The forced transfer or removal of civilians, unless for legitimate military reasons, is a war crime. It is unlawful to take into custody civilians who pose no immediate security threat. Pillage - the forcible taking of private property for non-military use - also violates the laws of war. People who commit serious violations of the laws of war deliberately or recklessly are responsible for war crimes.

"Those who commit war crimes in Somalia should eventually be brought to justice," Bader said. "However, the government and its backers need to immediately assist the people who escaped the violence."

Lower Shabelle is a fertile region of Somalia that has been the site of inter-clan conflict over land, trade, and political power since the collapse of the Somali state in 1991. Since 2012, the African Union forces in Somalia (AMISOM) alongside Somali government forces have taken over key towns from Al-Shabab, which had controlled the region since 2008.

Al-Shabab's partial retreat and the start of the federal state-building process across Somalia have brought tensions in the region to the forefront, primarily between the powerful Biyomaal and Habar Gidir clans. Somali government forces and Al-Shabab have also fought against and supported these clan militias, with alliances [shifting frequently](#). Al-Shabab has often [presented itself](#) as a mediator within the local conflict and dynamics. The United States has also conducted military [operations](#), including [targeted airstrikes](#), against Al-Shabab fighters in Lower Shabelle.

All Somali parties to the conflict [have regularly attacked civilians](#), including killings and rape, and destroyed property. The UN Security Council Somali Eritrea Monitoring Group (SEMG), mandated by the UN Security Council to assess the arms embargo and use of official weapons stocks, [has repeatedly](#) raised concerns about Somali government forces' support for the Habar Gidir militia, and the significant impact this support has had on civilians, including the Biyomaal community. Human Rights Watch [reported](#) on Somali government force attacks on the predominantly Biyomaal stronghold of KM-50 in late 2013, including beating residents, and looting and burning homes and shops. Several civilians were killed witnesses reported, and many fled the area.

The Biyomaal clan militia was initially allied with Al-Shabab, but has increasingly shifted allegiance toward AMISOM, which is based near Biyomaal strongholds. Since September 2016, tensions and fighting between the Biyomaal and Al-Shabab have escalated.

AMISOM forces in Lower Shabelle, which are under Ugandan command, have also committed abuses against civilians. In July 2015, for example, Human Rights Watch [documented](#) the indiscriminate killing of six civilians by Ugandan AMISOM troops in the contested town of Merka.

The recent attacks in Lower Shabelle appear in part to be Al-Shabab's response to shifting community alliances in the region. Human Rights Watch was not able to determine Al-Shabab command structures during the May attacks, including possible involvement of specific clans within Al-Shabab and clan militia.

For several months prior to the May raids, Al-Shabab had warned residents to leave their villages. Several of the villages threatened with forced removal and targeted in May are along the strategic road from Merka toward Afgooye. A woman who fled to Mogadishu from Ceel Waregow in February because of the threatened evictions said: "Al-Shabab came three times before I left. First time, seven armed men came and warned us to move before noon. They threatened to kill any men they would find." A livestock keeper from Canbanaane village who fled a May 31 attack said Al-Shabab had repeatedly come to their villages and told them to "take their milk" to Al-Shabab controlled areas.

Accounts of abuses during the May and June 2017 attacks

From May 21, following increased fighting in the Lower Shabelle region, Al-Shabab forces torched homes, raided hundreds of livestock, and abducted dozens of men predominantly from the Biyomaal communities.

"Abdi" described an Al-Shabab attack around May 23:

At about 3 p.m. we heard they were burning houses in nearby villages [Nagad Weyne and Garaas Weyne]. Then, at about 5 p.m. they attacked us. I saw 20 [Al-Shabab fighters] come to our side of the village but I heard that another 20 went to the other side. We all ran away.

He said that the houses were burned after Maghreb, the evening prayer: "I could see the burning. It was like an inferno. Fifteen homes were burned. When I went back home, my house had been burned and I only found four of my *kitab* [Qurans] and a bag of clothes."

Two women said that their children had suffered superficial burns when trying to escape their burning home. A mother of seven from Muuri village said that her 3- and 4-year-old children had suffered burns while being pulled out of the house that had been set alight.

"I was with my livestock and two other boys, when masked men attacked," said a man from Bullo Mudey. "We ran away. We saw them taking our animals from afar. I lost 14 cows and goats too."

Two residents who stayed behind said Al-Shabab fighters ordered them to vacate their homes and to take their children out before setting their house on fire. "Halima," a 40-year-old woman from Sagarole, said that on May 24: "After telling me to leave, they poured petrol on my house, and then they threw a burning jerry can onto it."

Witnesses said the Al-Shabab fighters abducted dozens of civilians. Human Rights Watch was not able to confirm the exact number, but spoke to four men from Merka district who said they were among dozens of men, many elders, taken into custody at the time of the raids. They said they were held in makeshift facilities in the Al-Shabab-controlled town of Mubarak for between six days and three weeks. They said they were given no opportunity to contest their detention before an impartial Al-Shabab authority.

Former detainees said that water and food were scarce and that the guards only gave them food once a day. A middle-aged detainee, Rago Walaal Hilowle, died of dehydration caused by diarrhea while in captivity, the former detainees said. Witnesses said that masked guards denied him medical assistance when he fell ill and that he was left to die in a cell.

A man who was abducted from Merka district and held by Al-Shabab in a makeshift detention facility in Mubarak described the difficult conditions in which dozens of men were held:

When first arrested, we were ordered not to talk, told to go into a room. The hardest part was the hygiene, only one toilet, it was just open, it was just a room in which they had dug a hole. There was no water, so we

couldn't pray, no bedding, so [we] had to sleep on the black soil.

An elderly man said: "The hardest part was that we were not allowed to pray, we couldn't do our ablutions as there was little water, and were told just to sit down."

While at least two dozen of the men were released following the intervention by clan elders, an unknown number remain detained.

Witnesses said that the burning of their own homes was the main reason they had fled. "Halima" from Sagarole, whose village had been attacked on multiple occasions, said that when fighters had attacked the village previously, "we would just run and come back, but this time given that my house was burned, we decided to flee to Mogadishu."

Several people said they had been separated from their relatives, including their children, while escaping the attacks. Human Rights Watch interviewed two women who said that they were looking after neighbors' children. They believed that some of the neighbors had died in the village attacks or did not know the parents' whereabouts.

Some who fled said that they were forced to leave elderly parents and other relatives behind. One woman said her elderly father, a *maalim* [teacher], was killed by fighters when she fled Bullo Mudey around May 26 and he stayed behind to protect his livestock:

We ran away on the night that we were attacked. My father said that we should all go, he would stay back. The attackers came and slit his throat. We went back the following morning and that's when we saw my father's body.

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