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Somalia: Authorities must end arbitrary arrests and persecution of journalists in Puntland

Authorities in Somalia's Puntland regional state have escalated their attacks on media freedom by intimidating, harassing and arbitrarily arresting journalists ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections, Amnesty International said today.

The spike in arrests of journalists in Puntland shows an escalating crackdown on media freedom. These arrests will have a chilling effect on the work of journalists before, during and after the election

Four journalists have been arbitrarily arrested in Puntland's capital Garowe and the sea-side town of Bosaso in the past two and a half months in what is a worrying development for media freedom in the region as the country inches towards delayed elections.

"The spike in arrests of journalists in Puntland shows an escalating crackdown on media freedom. These arrests will have a chilling effect on the work of journalists before, during and after the election," said Deprose Muchena, Amnesty International's Regional Director for East and Southern Africa.

"The arrests are a threat to the work of journalists, media freedom and the right to freedom of expression. Authorities must bring this practice to an end, and respect, protect, promote and fulfil the human rights of everyone and media freedom."

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Kilwe Adan Farah, a freelance journalist, has been in detention since 27 December 2020, when he was arrested by Puntland Intelligence Agency (PISA) officers, a day after covering [protests](#) in Garowe town against what demonstrators said was government mismanagement of the local currency. He was charged with five offences, including "publication of false news and bringing the nation or the state into contempt", and five days later on 3 March, he was sentenced by a military court to three months in jail. In the court judgment, the court noted that no evidence was presented before it to prove any of the allegations. However, the court still sentenced him to three months' imprisonment starting from the date of his arrest citing Article 165 of the overly broad and outdated Somali penal code, which gives judges discretionary powers to impose security measures on individuals deemed to be a "danger to society." The prosecutor who was dissatisfied appealed the sentencing on 4 March and Kilwe remains detained at Garowe Central Prison.

On 22 February, police arrested freelance journalist Ahmed Botan Arab in Bosaso town. His arrest came after he posted [video interviews](#) on his Facebook page showing some residents of Bosaso commenting on a speech Puntland President Said Abdullahi Deni had made the previous day. The speech touched on political developments in the region and the ongoing stalemate on the implementation of an electoral agreement between Somalia's regional and federal leaders.

On 25 February, another journalist, Abdifatah Abdullahi Farah, also known as "Jiib", was arrested by police officers at his office in Garowe in connection with [his coverage of the same presidential speech](#). The Somali Television Network (STN) journalist was detained and interrogated for several hours at Garowe central police station and later released on the same day without charge. He told Amnesty International that he was released only after he had agreed not to publish reports critical of the Puntland government and its leaders.

Another journalist, Ahmed Botan, was arrested and detained at Bosaso police station for two days and released without charge on 24 February after clan elders intervened on his behalf. He told Amnesty International: "Authorities in Puntland do not want critical reporting. I was detained for doing my work and for interviewing individuals critical of the president."

"Puntland authorities must drop all the baseless charges against Kilwe Adan Farah and immediately and unconditionally release him from detention. They must also stop harassing and intimidating other journalists, including by subjecting them to military trials in violation of international human rights law," said Deprose Muchena.

Puntland authorities must drop all the baseless charges against Kilwe Adan Farah and immediately and unconditionally release him from detention

In a related development, on 1 March, independent journalist Jamal Farah Adan was shot dead by unidentified armed attackers as he sat chatting with a group of friends at a shop in Galkayo. The armed group Al-Shabaab [claimed responsibility](#) for the killing. President Deni on 6 March said some individuals had been [arrested](#) in Galkayo and were being investigated in connection with Jamal's killing.

Al-Shabaab and all other armed groups must stop targeting journalists. Puntland authorities should swiftly conclude their announced investigations into Jamal's killing and bring suspected perpetrators to justice in fair trials.

Amnesty International has previously reported on [violations of the right to freedom of expression](#) and media freedom in south-central Somalia. As the country prepares for elections, it is important for authorities at both regional and federal levels to allow journalists to do their work without restrictions.

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during the past 3 months

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