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Somalia

Events of 2008

An increasingly brutal conflict pits a deeply fragmented insurgency against Somalia's weak Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and Ethiopian military forces that are in Somalia to support it. All sides to this conflict have regularly committed serious violations of international humanitarian law amounting to war crimes with complete impunity and with devastating impact on Somalia's civilian population. The human rights and humanitarian situation in Somalia deteriorated to levels perhaps unseen since the collapse of the country's last unified central government in 1991.

Since the beginning of 2007 more than 870,000 civilians have fled war-torn Mogadishu alone and more than 6,000 civilians have been killed in the fighting. Untold numbers of Somalis bear the scars of seeing family members killed or raped. Several key international players-most notably Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the United States-have exacerbated the crisis through their policies and actions.

In 2008 violence escalated in scale and brutality while internationally supported peace talks struggled to get traction. Even traditional systems of clan protection have broken down in many areas. Key civil society activists whose talents are essential to hopes of rebuilding were killed or driven out of the country. The number of Somalis in need of humanitarian assistance surpassed 3 million, even as criminal violence, rampant piracy off the northern coasts, and targeted attacks on humanitarian workers impeded the flow of aid. Somalis attempting to flee this chaos faced brutal attacks by freelance militias along the roads.

Abuses by TFG Security Forces and Militias

TFG police, military personnel, and militias linked to leading TFG figures such as former Mogadishu mayor Mohammed Dheere are implicated in widespread abuses against Somali civilians. Throughout 2008 these forces carried out killings, murder, rape, and looting during operations across many Mogadishu neighborhoods. Following an insurgent mortar attack launched from near the Al-Mathal school in Mogadishu in June, TFG police sacked the school, smashing and burning educational materials, and shooting one child in the leg.

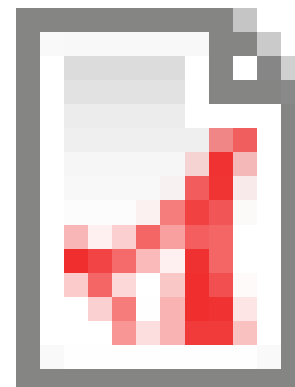
TFG forces repeatedly killed and wounded civilians during fighting against insurgent forces. In March, following an insurgent ambush, TFG police forces indiscriminately fired their weapons, killing four passengers in a passing minibus and injuring its driver.

TFG police and intelligence officials carried out widespread arbitrary arrests, often for the purpose of extracting ransom payments from detainees and their families. Intelligence operatives under the command of TFG National Security Agency head Mohammed Warsame 'Darwish' maintain a dungeon-like detention facility in southern Mogadishu. Conditions in this facility are appalling and intelligence personnel subject many detainees to torture during interrogation.

Abuses by Ethiopian Military Forces (see also Ethiopia chapter)

Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) personnel in Mogadishu have continued to use mortars, artillery, and "Katyusha" rockets indiscriminately in response to insurgent attacks, devastating entire neighborhoods of the city. Ethiopian bombardments regularly fall on civilian homes and public spaces, sometimes killing entire families. In July ENDF forces bombarded part of the strategic town of

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Beletweyne after coming under attack by insurgent forces based there, displacing 75,000 people.

In 2008 ENDF personnel were implicated in numerous acts of murder, rape, and looting of Somali civilians, often alongside TFG forces. In an April raid on a Mogadishu mosque, ENDF soldiers reportedly killed 21 people; seven of the dead had their throats cut.

Since late 2007 ENDF discipline has eroded. Ethiopian soldiers frequently react to insurgent attacks by firing indiscriminately into crowds of civilians. In August a group of ENDF soldiers hit by a roadside bomb near the town of Afgooye responded by firing wildly and killing up to 60 civilians, including the passengers of two minibuses.

Abuses by Insurgent Forces

Insurgent forces have kept TFG and Ethiopian forces pinned down in heavy fighting in Mogadishu for nearly two years, gaining ground in 2008. The insurgents are deeply fragmented, but many of the worst abuses have been committed by groups linked to Al-Shabaab ("Youth" in Arabic), a militant Islamist group.

Insurgents in Mogadishu routinely fire mortar shells from populated areas towards TFG and Ethiopian installations without adequate spotting, indiscriminately killing and wounding civilians, and placing civilians under their control at risk from Ethiopian and TFG counter-battery fire. Insurgent groups, some of which are illegally recruiting-sometimes by force-under 18-year-olds, also use landmines and remote-detonated explosive devices along roads in populated areas. In August a roadside bomb in southern Mogadishu killed 21 women working as street-cleaners and wounded more than 40 other civilians.

Insurgent forces have also carried out targeted killings of civilian TFG officials, perceived TFG collaborators, and individuals the insurgents view as un-Islamic. In January a man working as a messenger among different TFG offices was shot outside of his home in Mogadishu after receiving several death threats ordering him to stop his work. In April Al-Shabaab fighters killed four foreign national teachers in the town of Beletweyne.

In October a simultaneous wave of bomb attacks struck a government office in Puntland as well as government, UN, and Ethiopian consular offices in Hargeisa. At least 28 people died in the attacks.

Attacks against Humanitarian Workers, Civil Society Activists, and Journalists

Humanitarian workers and civil society activists became the targets of an unprecedented wave of attacks in 2008. Between January and November, 25 humanitarian workers were killed in Somalia and at least 24 NGO staff were kidnapped. In January a roadside bomb in Kismayo killed three Médecins Sans Frontières staff and a journalist. In June armed men assassinated civil society activist Mohamed Hassan Kulmiye in his office in Beletweyne. In July unknown men shot dead Osman Ali Mohamed, the head of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) office in Somalia, as he left a mosque. The head of the Somalia office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was kidnapped in June and held for more than two months.

Al-Shabaab and its more militant splinter groups are believed to have carried out many of these attacks. But many Somali activists believe that elements within the TFG are also profiting from the current environment of confusion and impunity to threaten and murder critics in civil society. Prominent activists who fled into exile in 2008 cite their inability to identify the origin of threats as the primary reason they had no choice but to leave.

At least two Somali journalists were killed in 2008, bringing the total number of journalists killed since early 2007 to 10. In June gunmen shot and killed BBC stringer Nasteh Dahir Farah outside of his home in Kismayo. TFG police and intelligence personnel have imprisoned several other journalists. In 2008 TFG security services detained the directors of two independent radio stations, Radio Somaliweyn and Radio Shabelle. A reporter from Radio Somaliweyn was also jailed, for covering an opposition meeting in Asmara. In general, however, TFG Prime Minister Nur Hassan Hussein has made efforts to reduce the level of harassment TFG security forces mete out to Somali journalists.

Key International Actors

The US, the United Kingdom, the European Commission and other key donors have failed to condemn ENDF or TFG abuses or address the scale of the Somali crisis. Instead, they have sought to support the TFG even where this risks empowering abusive TFG actors and institutions. In 2008 several donors, including the European Commission, pressured UNDP to pay the salaries of 4,000 Ethiopian-trained TFG security personnel without adequate monitoring.

US policy on Somalia is dominated by counterterrorism concerns and tends towards unwavering support for the TFG and for Ethiopian policy in Somalia. The US military has continued its practice of targeted air strikes on alleged terrorist suspects, launching two attacks on Somali soil in 2008. One attack in March injured six civilians but did not hit any suspected terrorist targets, while another in April killed Al-Shabaab's commander, Aden Hashi Ayrow, as well as several civilians.

Somalia's neighbors have played mixed roles in the ongoing crisis. Eritrea uses Somalia as a convenient theater in its proxy war against Ethiopia. Eritrea hosts a breakaway faction of the opposition Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) and actively stokes the violence. Kenya closed its border with Somalia in January 2007, but continues to accommodate nearly 7,000 new Somali refugees each month in the sprawling refugee camps around the northern town of Dadaab.

The African Union has authorized a force of 8,000 peacekeepers for Somalia, but thus far only 2,450 Ugandan and Burundian troops have been deployed. Those troops are largely limited to protecting a few key installations in Mogadishu.

The United Nations' Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Somalia, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, has successfully brought together the Djibouti-based ARS with TFG representatives for peace talks. The talks, hosted by the government of Djibouti, currently represent the best hope for a negotiated end to the armed conflict in Somalia. However, thus far there has been a lack of concrete progress and they have been hobbled by the fact that some factions within the TFG, along with Al-Shabaab and other powerful opposition groups, have rejected the process altogether.

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