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**Federal Republic of Somalia**

**Joint Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review**

**52<sup>nd</sup> Session of the UPR Working Group**

**Submitted 10 October 2025**

Submission by East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project  
(DefendDefenders), NGO in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC

And

Coalition of Human Rights Defenders in Somalia (Defenders Coalition  
Somalia)

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**The East and Horn of Africa Human  
Rights Defenders Project  
(DefendDefenders)**

**Hassan Shire**  
[HassanS@defenddefenders.org](mailto:HassanS@defenddefenders.org)  
**+256 393 265 820**  
[www.defenddefenders.org](http://www.defenddefenders.org)

**Coalition of Human Rights  
Defenders in Somalia (Defenders  
Coalition Somalia)**

**Edil Ga'al**  
[EdilG@defenddefenders.org](mailto:EdilG@defenddefenders.org)



## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1** The East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (DefendDefenders) is a regional CSO registered and based in Uganda. Established in 2005, DefendDefenders seeks to strengthen the work of human rights defenders (HRDs) throughout the East and Horn of Africa region by reducing their vulnerability to the risk of persecution and enhancing their capacity to defend human rights effectively. DefendDefenders focuses its work on 12 countries, including Somalia.
- 1.2** The Coalition of Human Rights Defenders in Somalia (Defenders Coalition Somalia) formerly known as National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders - Somalia (NCHRD-S) was founded in 2015 to provide a strong platform to protect HRDs including those working in remote areas who often lack access to protection mechanisms and support systems.
- 1.3** In this submission, we examine the Government of Somalia's compliance with its international human rights obligations to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment for civil society. Specifically, we analyse Somalia's fulfilment of the rights to the freedoms of expression and unwarranted restrictions on HRDs since its previous universal periodic review (UPR) examination in May 2021. To this end, we assess Somalia's implementation of recommendations received during the 3<sup>rd</sup> UPR cycle relating to these issues and provide a number of follow-up recommendations.
- 1.4** During the 3<sup>rd</sup> UPR cycle, the Government of Somalia received 27 recommendations relating to civic space. Of these recommendations, it accepted 25 and noted two. An evaluation of a range of legal sources and human rights documentation addressed in subsequent sections of this submission demonstrates that the Government of Somalia has failed to implement the recommendations relating to civic space. While the government has failed to address unwarranted restrictions on civic space since its last UPR examination, acute implementation gaps were found regarding the right(s) to freedom of expression and issues relating to HRDs.
- 1.5** Somalia remains one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, and we are gravely troubled by the persistent threats they face. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranks Somalia 136<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in its 2025 World Press Freedom Index.<sup>i</sup> Somali journalists continue to endure arrests, harassment, torture, sexual violence against female reporters, and even murder. Those unwilling to censor themselves are particularly vulnerable to targeted attacks by Al-Shabaab, the main perpetrator of journalist killings, or to arbitrary detention by state authorities. Reporters investigating sensitive issues such as corruption are at heightened risk. In Somaliland and Puntland, local authorities exert especially heavy pressure on local media, further entrenching repression and silencing independent voices.

**1.6** We are deeply concerned by the deliberate misuse of the 1964 Penal Code and the Anti-Terrorism Law to criminalise independent journalism. These laws are being applied to obstruct access to information and to curtail public oversight, undermining both transparency and accountability in Somalia.

**1.7** We are further alarmed by the growing number of journalists targeted, prosecuted, and in some cases tried before military courts on ambiguous, fabricated, and politically motivated charges. Accusations such as “insulting public officials,” “subversive propaganda,” “criminal defamation,” and “propagating terrorist ideas” not only violate journalists’ fundamental rights but also undermines the public’s right to access information.

**1.8** As a result of these issues, civic space in Somalia is currently classified as ‘*repressed*’ by CIVICUS’ Civic Space Monitor, indicating the existence of significant civic space restrictions.<sup>ii</sup>

- Section 2 of this submission examines Somalia’s implementation of UPR recommendations and compliance with international human rights standards concerning the freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information.
- Section 3 examines Somalia’s implementation of UPR recommendations and compliance with international human rights standards related to the protection of HRDs, civil society activists and journalists.
- Section 4 contains recommendations to address the concerns raised and advance implementation of recommendations under the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle.
- An annex on the implementation of 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle UPR recommendations related to civic space is in Section 5.

## **2. Freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information**

**2.1** Under the 3<sup>rd</sup> UPR cycle, the government received 27 recommendations relating to the freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information. Among other things, the government pledged to “take necessary measures to end violence against journalists and review provisions in the new media law, and other laws, that impede freedom of expression and media freedom, to bring them in line with Somalia’s human rights obligations” and “ensure the freedom of the media and the safety of journalists, including by ending arbitrary arrests and addressing the impunity around attacks against journalists”. However, as outlined below, the government failed to take meaningful steps to implement the 25 recommendations it accepted in this area.

**2.2** Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantees the right to the freedoms of opinion and expression. Article 18 of

Somalia's Provisional Constitution also guarantees the right to freedom of expression.

- 2.3** In practice, however, restrictive laws undermine these provisions, granting authorities broad powers to suppress independent journalism and critical voices. Journalists and HRDs continue to face arbitrary arrests, harassment, and censorship. At the same time, terrorist groups remain a major source of human rights violations, severely curtailing freedoms of expression, association, and assembly through intimidation, targeted killings, and attacks on media outlets and civil society. The combined actions of state authorities and non-state armed groups have reinforced a climate of repression and impunity, undermining institutional safeguards and delaying Somalia's compliance with international human rights obligations.
- 2.4** Somalia's Penal Code contains several provisions that undermine freedom of expression by criminalising defamation and other speech-related offences. Journalists are frequently investigated and prosecuted under Articles 215 (subversive propaganda), 269 (insult to political, administrative, or judicial bodies), 321 (instigation to disobey the laws), 326 (intimidation of the public), 328 (publication of false or tendentious news), 452(3) (defamation by means of the press), and 505 (non-observance of official orders).<sup>iii</sup> These provisions have been used to impose prison sentences ranging from six months to three years. Their vague and overly broad wording gives authorities wide discretion to silence critical reporting, particularly when it exposes abuse of power or official misconduct.
- 2.5** While the Somali Anti-Terrorism Law was introduced to strengthen national security and improve the State's ability to respond to terrorism, in practice it has entrenched restrictions on freedom of expression. The law's overly broad definitions of "terrorism" and sweeping powers granted to security agencies allow authorities to conflate legitimate journalistic activity with criminal conduct. Journalists reporting on security issues, armed groups, or military operations risk prosecution for "propagating terrorist ideas" or "supporting terrorist narratives." Its vague provisions foster a climate of fear and leave journalists at constant risk of criminalisation.<sup>iv</sup>
- 2.6** Contrary to the 2020 Media Law, which provided for the establishment of a Somali Media Council (comprising nine members with equal representation from public media, private media, and civil society),<sup>v</sup> in March 2024 the Minister of Information unilaterally appointed six government allies to the Council, including a former Senator.<sup>vi</sup> The appointments were therefore made in direct contravention of the law.<sup>vii</sup>
- 2.7** In March 2024, the Council of Ministers approved the Official Information Bill (OIB) and submitted it to the Federal Parliament's House of the People for consideration. While presented as a framework to advance access to information, transparency,

and accountability, the Bill significantly undermines these objectives. It provides excessively broad exemptions that allow authorities to withhold information on grounds of “confidentiality” or “national security,” without sufficient oversight.<sup>viii</sup> The Bill’s ambiguous definitions enable misuse, including to shield government activities from scrutiny. This erodes public accountability. Furthermore, the legislative process was deeply flawed: the Bill was drafted in secrecy without meaningful public consultations or stakeholder engagement, contrary to best practices.

- 2.8** On 6 March 2025, the Minister of Information imposed sweeping restrictions on media outlets, journalists, and the public, prohibiting the reporting of security incidents in Mogadishu. The directive, issued under Article 12 of the Somalia Media Law, warned against the “misuse or fabrication of information” across all platforms, including social media, and threatened violators with prosecution and severe penalties. This order came two days after the U.S. Embassy issued security alerts warning of imminent attacks in Mogadishu, alerts that had already been covered by Somali media and led several airlines to suspend flights. On the same day, the Banadir Regional Police Commissioner also threatened to detain anyone reporting on security issues. These measures severely undermine press freedom and deprive the public of vital information on security risks at a time of escalating Al-Shabaab attacks near the capital. By criminalising independent reporting, the government has placed civilians at greater risk and further restricted the space for journalists.
- 2.9** On 18 March 2025, armed police officers stormed the *Risaala Media* station in Mogadishu’s Hamar Jajab district, forcibly taking it off-air and arresting five journalists without a court warrant.<sup>ix</sup> The arrested media workers included Ali Ibrahim Abdullahi Suheyfa, Hamda Hassan Ahmed, Mohamed Said Nur, Liban Abdullahi Hussein, and Abdalla Sharif Ali, who were taken to Hamar Jajab police station and subjected to intense interrogation about their coverage of a bombing earlier that day. *Risaala Media* had been the first outlet to report on the attack targeting President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud’s convoy at the entrance to the presidential palace, which resulted in casualties. The raid came just one week after Minister of Information Daud Aweis issued a public warning threatening legal action and severe punishment against journalists who report on security failures in Mogadishu.
- 2.10** Journalist Mohamed Abukar Dabashe, a former reporter for *Radio Risaala*, was among several people killed in the 18 March 2025 bombing attack targeting President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud’s convoy in Mogadishu. Dabashe’s death was the first killing of a journalist in Somalia in 2025.<sup>x</sup>
- 2.11** On the same day as the bombing attack, Mogadishu police launched a crackdown on journalists who had arrived at the scene to report.<sup>xi</sup> 19 journalists were rounded up, forced onto a police truck, and taken to Hamar Jajab police station. There, officers

confiscated their equipment and deleted all footage and photographs related to the attack before releasing them.

**2.12** Between January and April 2025, the Somalia Journalists Syndicate (SJS) recorded a sharp rise in media repression. Authorities arrested 46 journalists, kidnapped two, and shut or raided several outlets, including *Universal TV* and *Radio Risaala*. More than 30 reporters lost equipment, while others faced beatings and intimidation. Government ministries actively targeted critical reporting, pushing many journalists into self-censorship or exile. Online spaces also narrowed, with Meta restricting pages critical of the government. Female journalists faced particular risks, with six cases of targeted attacks and harassment.<sup>xii</sup>

**2.13** On 26 October 2024, suspected Al-Shabaab militants shot journalist Amun Abdullahi Mohamed multiple times as she walked to her farm in Abdu. Witnesses reported that two armed men confirmed her identity before killing her.<sup>xiii</sup> Amun had relocated to Somalia from Sweden, where she was a prominent journalist known for exposing Al-Shabaab's recruitment efforts. Amun is the second journalist killed in Somalia in 2024, following Abdikarin Ahmed Bulhan's murder in March 2024. This also marks the twelfth journalist killed in Somalia since 2019, making the country one of the most dangerous in the world for journalists.

**2.14** The government's repression extended to financial restrictions, as authorities froze SJS's bank accounts on 13 April 2024, claiming the organisation was not registered and demanding an investigation into its transactions.<sup>xiv</sup> Despite seeking clarification, SJS received no response. In the same month, following orders from Somalia's Office of the Attorney General, Premier Bank and Dahabshil Bank International also suspended SJS accounts for "using fake documents and conducting illegal press activities". In a similar incident, IBS Bank also suspended SJS accounts for the same reasons.

### **3. Harassment, intimidation and attacks against human rights defenders, civil society activists and journalists**

**3.1** During Somalia's previous UPR, the government received four recommendations on the protection of HRDs, journalists and civil society representatives. It accepted them all. The government committed to "take effective steps to create an enabling environment in which HRDs and journalists can operate in a safe and secure manner, free from harassment, violence and reprisals" and "guarantee press freedom and end the harassment and detention of journalists and HRDs; fight against the impunity of perpetrators of human rights violations against them". However, as examined in this section, the government is yet to operationalise these recommendations.

- 3.2** The ICCPR guarantees the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Article 12 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders requires states to take the necessary measures to ensure the protection of HRDs. In practice, however, the Somalia government continues to subject journalists, civil society activists, and HRDs to harassment, intimidation, and reprisals. Those who expose corruption, or criticise state policies face arbitrary arrest, surveillance, smear campaigns, enforced disappearances, and sometimes death.
- 3.3** The environment for HRDs and journalists remains highly repressive, with both state and non-state actors responsible for violations. In 2024, 23 cases of enforced disappearance were documented, many of the victims still unaccounted for.<sup>xv</sup> In the same year, six human rights advocates were assassinated. Reports implicate both Al-Shabaab and state-backed militias in these abuses.
- 3.4** In Somaliland, authorities curtailed discussions on controversial issues arresting governments, perceived critics, HRDs, and political opposition. For instance, in January 2024, police detained Mohamed Abdi Ilig alongside two colleagues, reporter Mohamed Abdi Abdullahi (known as “Andar”) and cameraman Ilyaas Abdinasir, after he moderated an X (formerly Twitter) discussion on the Somaliland-Ethiopia memorandum of understanding (MoU), hosted by *MM Somali TV*.<sup>xvi</sup> On 9 January 2024, the two were released without charges. Subsequently, on 30 January 2024, Ilig appeared before the Maroodi Jeex Regional Court in Hargeisa, where his detention was extended for an additional seven days without legal representation. However, on 20 February 2024, a court in Hargeisa declared Ilig innocent and released him after 43 days of imprisonment.
- 3.5** On 9 March 2024, five members of the Somaliland Lawyers Association issued a legal recommendation declaring that Somaliland’s National Intelligence Agency (NIA) and the military court have no lawful authority to detain or investigate civilians, including journalists. They cited the arbitrary detention of *MM Somali TV* journalists in Hargeisa, among other cases and urged an end to unlawful arrests targeting dissenting voices. In retaliation, on 16 March 2024, the military court prosecutor authorised the Attorney General to file criminal charges against the five lawyers after a request from the NIA Director-General.<sup>xvii</sup> The lawyers face the risk of losing their licences, marking a direct attack on legal professionals who challenge abuse of power.
- 3.6** In August 2024, the Somaliland region’s security services detained opposition MP Mohamed Abib in Hargeisa. The Attorney General formally petitioned the House of Representatives to lift Abib’s parliamentary immunity in order to press criminal charges against him. He alleged that Abib met with Somali and Djiboutian officials and criticised Somaliland’s handling of the conflict in Las Anod.<sup>xviii</sup> The Somaliland Supreme Court ordered his release on 30 September 2024.<sup>xix</sup>

## **4. Recommendations to the Government of Somalia**

DefendDefenders and NCHRD-S call on the Government of Somalia to create and maintain, in law and in practice, an enabling environment for journalists and HRDs, in accordance with the rights enshrined in the ICCPR, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and relevant Human Rights Council resolutions.

### **4.1 Freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information**

- Ensure the right to freedom of expression and media freedom by bringing national legislation into line with international standards; in particular, repeal provisions of the 1964 Penal Code that do not comply with international standards, including those providing for imprisonment for media-related offences.
- Review the Anti-Terrorism Law to bring it into line with best practices and international standards on right to freedom of expression.
- Withdraw the Official Information Bill from the legislative process and subject it to comprehensive consultations with all relevant stakeholders to bring it into line with best practices and international human rights standards.
- Reinstate all media outlets that have unwarrantedly been closed.
- Amend defamation legislation in conformity with ICCPR article 19.
- Create a safe environment where journalists and writers can work freely and without fear of reprisals for expressing critical opinions or reporting on issues considered sensitive by the government.
- Lift restrictions on the freedom of expression and adopt a framework for the protection of journalists from persecution, intimidation and harassment.
- Guarantee unfettered access for all people in Somalia to domestic and foreign media information, both offline and online.
- Develop an action plan to ensure that internet laws comply with the government's commitment to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information, including by ensuring free access to electronic media, ceasing censorship and surveillance, liberalising electronic media ownership rules and enabling journalists, bloggers, and other internet users
- Organise inclusive consultations with journalists and the media to resolve disputes that exist concerning current/proposed media/disinformation laws.

- Refrain from adopting any laws providing for censorship or undue control over social and conventional media content.
- Refrain from censoring social and conventional media and ensure that the right to freedom of expression is safeguarded in all arenas, including in the arts.

## **4.2 Protection of human rights defenders**

- Provide civil society members, HRDs and journalists with a safe and secure environment in which to carry out their work, conduct impartial, thorough and effective investigations into all cases of attacks, harassment and intimidation against them and bring the perpetrators of such offences to justice.
- Ensure that HRDs can carry out their legitimate activities without fear or undue hindrance, obstruction, or legal and administrative harassment.
- Undertake a consolidated process of repeal or amendment of legalisation and decrees that unwarrantedly restrict the legitimate work of HRDs, in line with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.
- Immediately and unconditionally release all HRDs, including journalists and bloggers detained for exercising their fundamental rights to the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, and review their cases to prevent further harassment.
- Publicly condemn at the highest levels of government instances of harassment and intimidation of CSOs and activists.
- Systematically apply legal provisions that promote and protect human rights and establish mechanisms that protect HRDs, including by adopting a specific law on the protection of HRDs.

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<sup>i</sup> RSF, “Somalia,” 2025, <https://rsf.org/en/country/somalia>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>ii</sup> CIVICUS Monitor: Somalia, <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/somalia/>

<sup>iii</sup> National Union of Somali Journalists , “New Report Exposes Escalating Legal Repression of Journalism and Free Expression in Somalia,” 21 May 2025, <https://nusoj.org/2025/05/21/new-report-exposes-escalating-legal-repression-of-journalism-and-free-expression-in-somalia/>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>iv</sup> National Union of Somali Journalists , “New Report Exposes Escalating Legal Repression of Journalism and Free Expression in Somalia,” 21 May 2025, <https://nusoj.org/2025/05/21/new-report-exposes-escalating-legal-repression-of-journalism-and-free-expression-in-somalia/>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>v</sup> Clause 14(2) affirms the Council’s independence from political interference, while Clause 14(4) requires broad consultations with media organisations.

<sup>vi</sup> International Federation of Journalists, “Somalia: Unlawful appointment of Media Council threatens press freedom,” 18 March 2024, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/africa/article/somalia-unlawful-appointment-of-media-council-threatens-press-freedom>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>vii</sup> NUSOJ, “Outrage Among Journalists: Somali Media Council’s Illegitimate Appointments Threaten Press Freedom,” 14 March 2024, <https://nusoj.org/2024/03/14/outrage-among-journalists-somali-media-councils-illegitimate-appointments-threaten-press-freedom/>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>viii</sup> IFJ, “Somalia: Official Information Bill endangers the right to access information,” 19 August 2024, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/somalia-official-information-bill-endangers-the-right-to-access-information>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>ix</sup> SJS, “Somali police shut down an independent radio station and arrested five journalists after reporting on the bombing attack on the president’s convoy in Mogadishu,” 18 March 2025, <https://sjsynidicate.org/2025/03/18/somali-police-shut-down-an-independent-radio-station-and-arrested-five-journalists-after-reporting-on-the-bombing-attack-on-the-presidents-convoy-in-mogadishu/>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>x</sup> SJS, “Somali journalist Mohamed Abukar Dabaashe killed in Al-Shabaab bomb attack in Mogadishu,” 18 March 2025, <https://sjsynidicate.org/2025/03/18/somali-journalist-mohamed-abukar-dabashe-killed-in-al-shabaab-bomb-attack-in-mogadishu/>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>xi</sup> SJS, “In a new crackdown on free press, Somali police arrest 19 journalists reporting on Al-Shabaab attack on president’s convoy,” 19 March 2025, <https://sjsynidicate.org/2025/03/19/in-a-new-crackdown-on-free-press-somali-police-arrest-19-journalists-reporting-on-al-shabaab-attack-on-presidents-convoy/>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>xii</sup> SJS, “World Press Freedom Day 2025: Alarming Escalation: Attacks on Journalists and Media in Somalia and Somaliland,” 3 May 2025, <https://sjsynidicate.org/2025/05/03/world-press-freedom-day-2025-alarming-escalation-attacks-on-journalists-and-media-in-somalia-and-somaliland/>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>xiii</sup> Horn Observer, “Somalia: End Impunity Day: SJS joins journalists in Galkayo to honor fallen colleagues and demand justice,” 3 November 2024, <https://hornobserver.com/articles/3033/Somalia-End-Impunity-Day-SJS-joins-journalists-in-Galkayo-to-honor-fallen-colleagues-and-demand-justice>, accessed 7 September 2025.

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<sup>xiv</sup> CPJ, “Somali authorities investigate media rights group, freeze its accounts,” 19 April 2024, <https://cpj.org/2024/04/somali-authorities-investigate-media-rights-group-freeze-its-accounts/>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>xv</sup> Coalition of Somalia Human Rights Defenders, “SOMALIA: ANNUAL HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT 2024,” 1 February 2025, <https://cshrds.org/somalia-annual-human-rights-report-2024/>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>xvi</sup> SJS, “Somaliland should free founder of MM Somali TV; Somalia parliament must give access to all media,” 31 January 2024, <https://sjsyndicate.org/2024/01/31/somaliland-should-free-founder-of-mm-somali-tv-somalia-parliament-must-give-access-to-all-media/>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>xvii</sup> CSHRDs, “Somalia: Quarterly Human Rights Report 2024,” 18 August 2024, <https://cshrds.org/somalia-quarterly-human-rights-report-2024/>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>xviii</sup> Horn Observer, “Somaliland Arrests Opposition MP Mohamed Abib After Return from UAE Trip,” 3 September 2024, <https://hornobserver.com/articles/2941/Somaliland-Arrests-Opposition-MP-Mohamed-Abib-After-Return-from-UAE-Trip>, accessed 7 September 2025.

<sup>xix</sup> HRW, “World Report 2025- Somalia, 2025,” <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/somalia>, accessed 7 September 2025.