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## Somalis

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### Profile

Somali populate the Ogaden area, renamed the Somali region under the 1994 Constitution. Somali and Muslim organizations have limited influence and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) is pushing for rights of self-determination and possible secession.

### Historical context

The Somali irredentist movement in Ogaden peaked during the 1970s and declined after the defeat of Somali incursions. Disintegration of the state in Somalia in the late 1980s and early 1990s led many Somali organizations in Ogaden to reject irredentism and re-orient themselves towards Ethiopian political life. These groups merged to form the Ethnic Somali Democratic League (ESDL), which won regional elections in 1995. A fraction of the original ONLF has carried on with a low-level secessionist war.

Somalis complain of a lack of development in their region. The government acknowledges the many problems, including poor infrastructure and lack of educational opportunities, but blames the rebellion for the underdevelopment. The Somali region has closer economic ties to Somalia than it does with the rest of Ethiopia.

### Current issues

The ONLF rebellion in the Somali region spiked sharply in 2006, amid reports of new support from Eritrea and the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), the Islamist rebels who were in control of Mogadishu. In response, the Ethiopian government deployed thousands of troops to the region, employing increasingly repressive tactics.

In April 2007, the ONLF attacked an oil installation, killing 74 including some Chinese workers. Security forces responded by blockading areas suspected to be rebel strong-holds, denying international aid agencies access to supply humanitarian relief. In September 2007, a public plea by the international aid agencies, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Medicins Sans Frontiers, galvanised the world's attention to the security crack-down in the Ogaden.

Food prices had soared, livestock prices halved. Many people were forced to flee their homes - amid witness testimony that the government was burning villages. As a result, hundreds of thousands were left dependent on food aid. There were also reports of abuses by ONLF as well - including punishments for civilians who failed to provide food or shelter.

The Horn of Africa Group based at the UK think-tank, Chatham House, said the government's response was disproportionate and counter-productive. Its report, 'Conflict in the Ogaden and its regional

dimensions' concluded 'Ethiopian action is leading to a revival of Somali national sentiment and a sense of common destiny that cuts across the clan divide'.

A report by Human Rights Watch in June 2008 accused the Ethiopian government of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity against the civilians of Ogaden. Through over 100 interviews with victims and eyewitnesses, HRW recounted abuses including killings, torture, and the burning of villages – the latter confirmed through satellite images. The group warned that the actions of Ethiopian forces were endangering the survival of Somali nomads in the region. Further, HRW heavily criticized the United States, United Kingdom and European Union for their failure to condemn atrocities in Ogaden.