

World Report 2011: Somalia

Events of 2010

The Transitional Federal Government (TFG), supported by the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), lost control of further territory to opposition groups in Somalia in 2010, with bitter fighting imposing a significant toll on civilians, especially during an upsurge of attacks in August and September. Al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam, the militant Islamist groups that spearhead the opposition, consolidated control over much of south-central Somalia, where the population experienced relative stability but also increasingly harsh and intolerant repression, in the name of Sharia law. A humanitarian crisis exists across the country. Humanitarian agencies have limited access due to ongoing insecurity, and armed opposition groups threatened humanitarian workers, journalists, and civil society activists with attack.

The northern region of Somaliland, a self-declared independent republic, provided a rare positive note in the region when its long-delayed presidential election took place in a largely free and fair atmosphere in June 2010.

Indiscriminate Warfare in Mogadishu

Continual fighting between militant Islamist groups and the TFG raged in Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, throughout 2010, with all parties conducting indiscriminate attacks causing high civilian casualties. Opposition fighters have deployed unlawfully in densely populated civilian neighborhoods and at times used civilians as "shields" to fire mortars at TFG and AMISOM positions. These attacks are conducted so indiscriminately that they frequently destroy civilian homes but rarely strike military targets. Often AMISOM or TFG forces respond in kind, launching indiscriminate mortar strikes on the neighborhoods from which opposition fighters had fired and then fled, leaving only civilians to face the resulting devastation.

The TFG lost further ground to al-Shabaab during the year and at this writing controls just a few square blocks around the presidential palace at Villa Somalia in Mogadishu, with the AU forces defending the capital's port, the airport, and a few other strategic sites.

Clashes and attacks intensified in August and September—during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan—after al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the July 11 bomb blasts in Kampala, Uganda's capital. At least 76 civilians died in those attacks, which struck crowded public gatherings the day of the football World Cup final. Uganda provides the largest contingent of the 7,100-member African Union Mission in Somalia. AMISOM forces were accused of indiscriminate shelling in retaliation for the Kampala blasts, particularly in Bakara Market. Bakara and other residential areas were repeatedly hit on July 12 and 13, again in late August, and on September 9; dozens of civilians were killed and injured in these attacks.

On August 23 al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam called for an escalation in the fighting, and al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for an August 24 suicide attack at the Muna Hotel, which killed 32 people, including civilians and several members of parliament. Another suicide attack on Mogadishu's international airport on September 9 killed at least nine people, including civilians.

Much of the remaining population of Mogadishu fled this new round of fighting and is now displaced in makeshift camps on the outskirts of the capital, primarily in the Afgoi corridor, with little access to humanitarian aid and at risk of harassment by local militia groups.

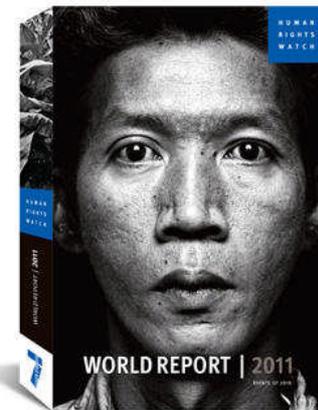
Both the armed opposition groups and the TFG have used children in their ranks.

Abuses in Opposition-Controlled Areas

South-central Somalia was under the control of local administrations linked to armed opposition groups throughout 2010. In many areas al-Shabaab rule brought relative stability and order, which contrasts dramatically with the chaos in Mogadishu. Residents from some of these areas credit al-Shabaab with ending a constant menace of extortion, robbery, and murder from bandits and freelance militias. But even where this holds true, security has come at a steep price, especially for women.

Grinding repression characterizes daily life in communities controlled by al-Shabaab, and many local administrations have sought to implement harsh and intolerant measures in the name of Sharia law. These measures control minute details of personal lives, including the way people dress and work. The punishments for even minor offenses are often summary, arbitrary, and cruel. A climate of fear prevents most people from speaking out against abuses of power. As one resident of the southern town of El Wak said, "We just stay quiet. If they tell us to follow a certain path, we follow it."

Freedoms women took for granted in traditional Somali culture have been dramatically rolled back. In many areas women have been barred from engaging in any activity that leads them to mix with men, even small-scale commercial enterprises on which many of them depend for a living. Al-Shabaab authorities have arrested, threatened, or whipped countless women for trying to support their families by selling cups of tea.



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A Somali woman tells Human Rights Watch how she was beaten and jailed by al-Shabaab for wearing the wrong clothes; a young boy describes how he fled Mogadishu after his family was killed. With reporting by HRW's Letta Tayler and Jessie Graham.

Al-Shabaab and other opposition forces often threaten to kill people they suspect of harboring sympathies for their opponents or who resist recruitment. These are not empty threats; opposition groups have murdered civilians regularly and with complete impunity.

Elections in Somaliland and Instability in the North

After almost two years of delay, Somaliland finally held its presidential election on June 26, 2010. International observers deemed the polls reasonably free and fair despite an isolated incident in the Sool region, where one person was killed. The incumbent President Dahir Riyale accepted defeat and peacefully ceded power to an opposition candidate, further advancing hopes for stability in the northern region.

The situation remains unstable in the contested regions of Sool, Sanag, and Cayn, which lie between Somaliland, in Somalia's northwest, and the autonomous state of Puntland in the northeast. Thousands of civilians were displaced by clan-based clashes and conflicts over resources in the disputed area in June.

Attacks on Journalists, Human Rights Defenders, and Humanitarian Workers

Somalia remains one of the world's most dangerous places to be a journalist. At least three journalists were killed in 2010, bringing the total killed since 2007 to 22. Two were targeted killings: Sheikh Nur Mohamed Abkey of state-run Radio Mogadishu was killed by three gunmen in May, and Abdullahi Omar Gedi was stabbed by unknown assailants in Galkayo. Barkhat Awale was killed by a stray bullet in Mogadishu on August 24. Both TFG and opposition forces have harassed the dwindling number of journalists still struggling to operate in Somalia. In April al-Shabaab banned all BBC broadcasts in Somalia and confiscated equipment.

Journalists also suffered detentions and harassment in the northern Somali regions of Somaliland and Puntland. In January Puntland authorities released Mohamed Yasin Isak, a local correspondent for Voice of America, after 17 days of detention without charge.

The majority of human rights defenders fled the country in the past years amid increasing threats to civil society and media; the few individuals remaining in south-central Somalia censor themselves.

The delivery of humanitarian assistance to south-central Somalia has been partially blocked by insecurity as well as measures imposed by armed opposition groups specifically targeting humanitarian agencies. At least eight agencies have been expelled from Somalia by al-Shabaab since January. In addition, United States sanctions on support to terrorist groups have restricted the delivery of food aid toward southern and central Somalia. As a result, some agencies had to cancel their operations, and access is reportedly at its lowest point since 2006.

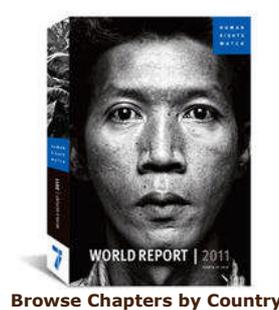
Key International Actors

Western governments, the UN, the AU, and neighboring countries, with the exception of Eritrea, are united in supporting the TFG as the government of Somalia. The July 2010 bombings in Kampala, Uganda, increased regional concern over the threat posed by al-Shabaab and its connections to al-Qaeda. At this writing the principal response has been to increase the number of AMISOM troops to approximately 7,100 and pledge further funds.

Of the US\$213 million pledged by a joint UN, European Union, and AU conference held in Brussels in April 2009, little has reached Somalia. The EU, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya trained TFG soldiers and police in neighboring countries throughout 2010. But efforts to bolster the TFG's weak military and police capacity have been plagued by allegations of corruption and the defection of newly trained troops, some with their weapons; many of the trainees complain that they never received their salaries.

Since withdrawing from Mogadishu in early 2009, Ethiopian troops have repeatedly entered into Somalia for security operations near the border. Ethiopia, along with Eritrea, remains a key player in Somalia, with both countries providing various types of support to proxy forces, although Eritrea's support for armed opposition groups has reportedly declined, according to UN experts.

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