



# SOMALIA'S CHILDREN UNDER ATTACK

**AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL**



***“It was in 2009. A bomb fell on my house and the bricks fell on my son’s arm. Because of this bomb my other son lost part of his sight. Three of my children died in this bombing. They were 12, 10 and eight years old. My father and my mother were also killed in the same bombing.”***

A woman who left Mogadishu in April 2010

Children and young people in southern and central Somalia are under relentless attack. Their lives are in constant danger and their hopes for the future have been shattered by armed conflict and grave human rights abuses.

In a country which has not had a functioning central government for 20 years, public services, the rule of law and respect for human rights have been greatly undermined. But in the past four years the rights of children and young people – to life, food, water, basic medical care and education – have been flouted on an unprecedented scale.

Children are dying in the conflict that has engulfed southern and central Somalia, killed or injured in attacks where no distinction is made between civilians and combatants. Their families and friends lose their lives when mortars and bullets are fired in heavily populated urban areas. Their homes and schools are destroyed and their teachers threatened. Many are separated from their families during chaotic flights from war zones.

*“I was living in Baidoa with my mother and my four brothers and sisters. My father died in an explosion a few months before. When the fighting started many people fled Baidoa to a village outside the town. Al-Shabab then attacked the village. I escaped and hid in the bush. This is when I lost my mother. I did not know where to go and I got lost. I wanted to go back to Baidoa. I was fleeing from town to town. People on the way were helping me by giving me water and milk... Finally I ended up in Dadaab.”*

A 14-year-old boy who arrived in the Dadaab refugee camps, Kenya, in March 2010.

According to the World Health Organization, children in Mogadishu accounted for almost one fifth of all weapons-related casualties in 2010.

Children and young people are also deliberately targeted. Children are increasingly recruited and used by armed groups, in particular the Islamist group al-Shabab. They risk being killed if they refuse to join.

Children are not spared the floggings, amputations and executions that have become a regular occurrence in the al-Shabab controlled areas of Somalia.

A 14-year-old girl, who fled Baidoa in March 2010 described one incident:

*“We had to leave because of so many problems and hardship as a result of the war in Somalia. I was beaten up by al-Shabab because of how I dressed. They wanted me to wear heavy clothing and so they beat me with a cane. Two men beat me as I was coming from the market. They beat me four times and then I was able to run away.”*

Children and young people who manage to flee to neighbouring countries are traumatized by their losses and their experiences, and hampered by lack of education.

*“My son who sits in front of you had a disabled hand before the bombing, but since then one side of his body has become paralysed. He developed epilepsy and stopped talking after the bombing.”*

A woman who left Mogadishu in April 2010

Southern and central Somalia is gripped by a humanitarian emergency, in which children’s very survival is threatened because armed groups deny them access to humanitarian aid. This, coupled with drought since late 2010, means that 2 million Somalis are in urgent need of aid, according to the UN.





*Above:* Militia members cast shadows against a wall in central Somalia, 2009. Most of the country is under the control of militias such as al-Shabab.

*Left:* Displaced children eating meals in a camp outside Mogadishu, Somalia, September 2009. According to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, 1.5 million Somalis were internally displaced in the country at the end of 2010.



Amnesty International delegates interviewed children and families fleeing the conflict in Somalia in March 2009, March 2010 and June 2010. Most, but not all, interviews took place in the Dadaab refugee camps in north-eastern Kenya and in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital.

***“My husband and my five children were killed by a missile. It was one year ago [2008]. There was fighting between al-Shabab and the interim government and the Ethiopian troops. A mortar fell on the house. My children were three, four, five, six and nine years old. My grandmother, the housemaid and a visitor were also killed. I have one child left with me, he is 13.”***

A woman from Mogadishu speaking to Amnesty International in March 2009

## **A LONG HISTORY OF CONFLICT**

Since the collapse of the Siad Barre government in 1991, southern and central Somalia has been blighted by armed conflict based on clan rivalries, competition over scarce resources, ideology and criminal activity. After years of conflict between competing warlords, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) took effective control of the capital Mogadishu and other cities in June 2006. Ethiopia intervened militarily in December 2006 to oust the ICU and to restore to power the internationally recognized Transitional Federal Government (TFG), formed in 2004 at a national reconciliation conference.

Ethiopian and TFG troops fought against armed opposition groups, including al-Shabab. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed and injured while hundreds of thousands were displaced. In January 2009, following the UN-sponsored Djibouti peace process, the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops and the appointment of a new President, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, gave rise to hopes that civilians' lives would improve.

These hopes were dashed by renewed armed conflict. In May 2009 armed opposition groups in Mogadishu launched an offensive against the TFG and the African Union Mission in Somalia, AMISOM, a UN-authorized peace support mission. Cities across southern and central Somalia also witnessed sporadic fighting. The TFG now controls only part of the capital Mogadishu, while vast areas of southern Somalia are under the control of al-Shabab.

## **DEATH FROM THE SKIES**

Civilians have borne the brunt of the fighting in the past four years and children have not been spared. Residents of Mogadishu have suffered most, as the capital continues to be the main battleground, but civilians in other towns have also been caught up in sporadic clashes. In January 2010, fighting between armed Islamist groups and the Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa (ASWJ) in the towns of Dhusamareb in central Somalia and Beletweyne in the Hiran region caused the displacement of tens of thousands. In October 2010, fighting between pro-TFG forces and al-Shabab in Belet Hawo, on the border with Kenya, forced some 60,000 people to flee from their homes.

Between 2007 and early 2009, civilians in Mogadishu were bombarded by shells, heavy artillery and mortars fired in densely populated areas by the Ethiopian armed forces, TFG forces and armed opposition groups. The attacks were often indiscriminate – no efforts were made to protect the civilian population – and disproportionate – although aimed at military targets their effects on civilians outweighed any military advantage.

Such attacks have continued since the departure of the Ethiopian troops. Armed groups typically launch attacks from residential areas towards TFG and AMISOM bases, endangering civilians. AMISOM and TFG forces are reported to have fired mortars and heavy weapons indiscriminately in response.



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## COMPLEX ARRAY OF WARRING PARTIES

The TFG military and police are made up of members of previous TFG forces and members of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed's armed group, which was formerly in opposition to the government. Pro-government forces also include the ASWJ, a Sufi group which took up arms against al-Shabab in late 2008 following al-Shabab's desecration of Sufi graves in central Somalia. The ASWJ signed an agreement with the TFG in 2010, formalizing a military alliance and recognizing the armed group's de facto authority in parts of central Somalia. However, the ASWJ has since accused the TFG of not respecting the agreement.

The two main armed Islamist groups opposing the TFG are al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam, which have allied against the TFG but have also engaged in fighting against each other. Hizbul Islam merged with al-Shabab in December 2010.

Groups on both sides of the conflict often overlap, forge or shift alliances, or split.

AMISOM, the African Union peace support operation, has at least 8,000 troops from Uganda and Burundi and is present in Mogadishu. It is tasked with providing protection to the Transitional Federal Institutions and security for key infrastructure. Since Ethiopian troops left in January 2009, AMISOM has been increasingly drawn into the armed conflict.



*Above:* Children run past the body of a man in Mogadishu, May 2009. Witnessing violence can have long-lasting and damaging effects on children's mental health and wellbeing.

*Left:* A Somali woman and children walk past a makeshift home in Mogadishu, June 2009, after fleeing fighting in the city.

## GENERALIZED VIOLENCE

Children describe their fears of being hit at any time: at night in their homes, when they walk in the streets, when they are buying food at the market, on their way to or from school. Many parents have stopped their children from going to school because of the dangers.

A 15-year-old child from Mogadishu explained:

*"Two of my brothers died. Abdullahi was 18 and Ahmed 14. It was in February 2010. They were going to Bakara market, fighting broke out, they were caught up in the middle, and they died in the crossfire. After the fighting stopped, we ran to the market to collect their bodies."*

## EDUCATION SHUT DOWN

A 12-year-old boy from Mogadishu described his schools being bombed:

*"My primary school was far away in Bakara, I had to take the bus. The school closed after fighting started, it was bombed, teachers died inside the school, it was in February 2006. I had many friends who died and were injured that day but I wasn't at school... After that I went to a private school in Bakara. Also a bomb exploded there, six people died and three were injured, all were pupils from the ages of seven to 14. This happened in June or July 2009."*

Al-Shabab has restricted the right to education in southern and central Somalia. In most areas there are no schools, although many children attend duksi (Koranic schools). According to UNICEF's *State of the World's Children*, only 23 per cent of children in southern and central Somalia receive primary education.

In 2010, al-Shabab reportedly banned some text books and English teaching in schools in the town of Afmadow. In some areas, they discourage girls from attending school.

A 14-year-old girl from Baidoa said:  
*"Sometimes al-Shabab would come to our school and cane the students and beat the teachers. They even killed one of our teachers. We were told to get out of school and that we should not be studying here. That time I had to run all the way back home. It was a male teacher who was killed. They shot him dead."*

## FAMILIES TORN APART

The unpredictable fighting has caused the displacement of countless civilians in chaotic circumstances. Many children are separated from their parents and relatives as a result, which deprives them of protection and support.

Several thousand Somali refugees make their way to the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya every month. Aid workers there say that the number of unaccompanied children arriving at the camps is rising. Children are often absorbed by other Somali families of the same clan, or temporarily adopted by neighbours. Unaccompanied children in the Dadaab refugee camps are placed in foster care, but they are more likely to have to perform domestic labour, more vulnerable to abuse and less likely to be sent to school.

A 16-year-old unaccompanied child in Dadaab described the precariousness of his position:  
*"If you're not living with your parents, you can be told to leave the house at any time."*





*Above:* Somali children's right to education has been increasingly eroded over the past 20 years. Now there are no schools operating in large areas of Somalia. Here children study the Koran in a site for internally displaced people some 20km from Mogadishu, April 2008.

*Left:* Women and children flee fighting between Somali government forces and Islamic fighters, Mogadishu, July 2009.



### WHO IS A CHILD?

Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines children as everyone under the age of 18, unless in national law a person becomes an adult at an earlier age.

Although Somalia is one of only two countries in the world that have not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 2004 Transitional Federal Charter prohibits forced labour or military service for children under 18. It also bans the imprisonment of children under 18 in the same prison as adults.

## CHILD SOLDIERS

Conscripting or enlisting children under the age of 15 into armed forces or groups, or using them to participate actively in hostilities, is a war crime.

Somali refugees report that recruitment of children is widespread, mainly by armed groups opposed to the TFG. In certain areas, local al-Shabab leaders reportedly target young men, but in others, particularly in Mogadishu, Kismayo, Brava and Baidoa, children are specifically targeted for forced recruitment.

One woman told Amnesty International in 2010:

*“My son was taken from our village by al-Shabab to one of their training camps. He was held in a training camp for two weeks with other boys of his age. He is just 10 years old. They used other children to lure my son into joining them.”*

## RECRUITMENT METHODS

Several children have reported that armed groups come into schools and homes to recruit children. Children and parents are threatened with reprisals if they do not agree to join up – many families have fled Somalia to save their children from being recruited by armed groups.

A 13-year-old boy who fled Mogadishu in April 2010 said:

*“Al-Shabab were fighting and they even came to my school and tried to make us join them... If a mother insists that her son won't go and fight, they will kill her or beat her.”*

*“They came during assembly to school and told teachers that they wanted to inform children that they should go with them and fight. Even though children refused to go, they still took some away. My mother refused to let me go and fight...”*

*“There was a time when they beat us at school. There were 20 of us who were beaten with a leather cane. Sometimes in assembly they would ask that people not supporting them raise their hands. If you didn't support them then they would beat you...”*

*“They tried to make my brother go and fight with them while he was in school. He refused and so they went to my house to try and force him but he still refused. My mother stayed silent. They ended up taking my brother when he was 14 years old in 2009. We have had no news about him but my sister saw him once in a vehicle with many other children.”*

## USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

Children are used by armed groups to fight, to collect intelligence and to place bombs in the streets. Some have been used to enforce al-Shabab's strict interpretation of Islamic law. One refugee described a boy flogging women and girls who were not wearing the hijab (Islamic headscarf).

Three brothers who left Mogadishu in 2007 told Amnesty International that some children were used as suicide bombers: *“People would tie a bomb to their bodies and they would be told to go to the TFG centres and then the bomb would explode. This happened to our friend Hussein who was 16 years old. Al-Shabab made him do this.”*

TFG forces and the ASWJ have also been accused of recruiting and using children in the conflict. In June 2010, after media coverage of child soldiers at a TFG checkpoint, TFG President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed ordered an investigation into the use of child soldiers by its armed forces. The investigation's findings are still not available. A Somali journalist who worked on the story had to flee temporarily for fear of arrest.

Although boys and young men are the main recruitment targets of the armed groups, girls are sometimes recruited. A girl, who was 19 when Amnesty International interviewed her in March 2010, said: *“Al-Shabab have a volunteers' office where you get called to. Sometimes they give you money. The girls are forced to cook and carry water for them. Each village controlled by them has a volunteers' office.”*

A mother told Amnesty International: *“One of the major issues that affect girls is early marriage. This happens mostly with al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam. Parents generally won't force you but al-Shabab or Hizbul Islam will kill you if you refuse.”*

Girls are sometimes forcibly married to combatants. The extent of sexual violence is difficult to assess, because it is under-reported. A 13-year-old girl from Baidoa told Amnesty International: *“Girls were also being raped by al-Shabab. I know people to whom this happened – someone in my family was raped but I can't tell you about it. It is quite common.”*





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*Above:* Somali children playing war games, Mogadishu, August 2008. An entire generation has known nothing but conflict.

*Left:* Internally displaced Somali children wait with containers in hand to receive food aid at a food distribution centre in Mogadishu, January 2010. More than 2 million Somalis are in urgent need of humanitarian aid, according to the UN.



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### WHO IS A CHILD SOLDIER?

A child soldier is any person under 18 years of age who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking, or has taken, a direct part in hostilities.

## TARGETED ABUSES

Anyone thought to be linked to the TFG is at high risk of being killed, abducted, tortured or threatened by armed Islamist groups. Many children have lost their parents in this way.

A 17-year-old boy from Baidoa, who fled Somalia in March 2010, recounted:

*"The Islamist militia killed my father in 2009. This was just after the Ethiopian troops left. My father was a TFG soldier. He was 60. One night, at around 8pm, when he was at home sleeping, they came in, took him outside and killed him. They targeted my dad because he was from the TFG.*

*They were four people, carrying pistols; they were our neighbours. Nobody knew before that they were part of al-Shabab. First they told my dad that they wanted to have a discussion with him but outside. My dad agreed and then they shot him. They had threatened him before but at that time my dad had already withdrawn from the TFG. A lot of neighbours working for the TFG were killed like this."*

Throughout 2009 and 2010, there were increased reports of public killings, amputations and floggings by armed opposition groups of people accused of theft or sexual offences. Some of these punishments were ordered by quasi-judicial bodies operated by local leaders linked to armed groups.

Many people have been punished because they were suspected of opposing al-Shabab or refused to comply with their orders. Often punishments are imposed in public, to intimidate the civilian population and assert control over territory.

A child who fled the area of Sako in the middle Juba region in April 2010 said:  
*"Al-Shabab has controlled the village for two years. Life was very difficult. They punish*

*people without reason. They use whips made out of tyres. We have to pay taxes to al-Shabab when we get our harvest. They cut my [relative]'s hand because he refused to give some of his harvest to them. They tied his hands and took him away. The next day they brought him to the centre of the village. They cut his right hand with a knife."*

The armed Islamist groups also punish children.

A 17-year-old girl from Mogadishu described one incident:

*"It was in January 2010. I was with some girls on the way to school and we were asked by al-Shabab which group we supported. We kept silent. They beat us with canes and then we were able to continue walking."*

On 27 October 2010, two teenage girls were publicly shot dead by al-Shabab in Beletweyne. They were accused of spying.

## DENIAL OF AID

Al-Shabab has severely restricted humanitarian access in most of southern and central Somalia, putting civilians and particularly children at risk. According to UNICEF, one in six children there is acutely malnourished. Restrictions include banning UN and international agencies from working in areas under al-Shabab's control and arbitrarily closing down Somali organizations, sometimes accusing them of spying for the international community.

The World Food Programme was banned in early 2010. Despite an impending drought in 2011, al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam officials publicly declared that aid agencies would not be allowed in the areas under their control.



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Al-Shabab has also imposed "taxes" on aid organizations and on civilians, farmers and businesses.

A 25-year-old woman with three children to support said:

*"I left Somalia and my farm because the farm could not support us. We had to give so many of our products to al-Shabab. We were living in Jamame... They came to the house and they took everything. They didn't harm me but they just looted us. My children had no food and then we had to walk for three days to Kismayo... We were helped by some people and then we managed to board a vehicle and come to the refugee camps."*



## ENDURING TRAUMA

All the Somalis who spoke to Amnesty International delegates had experienced the fear of living under constant fighting, the loss of a relative or a friend, or had seen someone being killed or tortured. According to humanitarian workers in Dadaab, Somali refugees often suffer from nightmares, post-traumatic stress disorder, anger, epilepsy and mental illnesses.

The lack of psycho-social care in the refugee camps is compounded by cultural norms that stigmatize those with mental illnesses. A woman who lost five children and her husband when a mortar fell on her house in Mogadishu said:

*"I am absent minded because of the fear I had in Somalia. There is no support for traumatized people here. It would be good to get advice as to how people can forget about the pain."*

## A LOST GENERATION

Twenty years of war and recent restrictions on schools have resulted in a whole generation of children who lack education.

Humanitarian workers in refugee camps say that it is very difficult to integrate these children into the host country's schools. Many teenagers have to attend primary schools because of their low level of education.

**Above: A member of al-Shabab flogs a youth in front of a crowd of around 100 onlookers immediately after an Islamic court convicted him of a serious crime, Mogadishu, March 2009.**

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All the children who spoke to Amnesty International's delegates said they wanted to be educated, to have a chance to find employment, improve their lives and live in dignity.



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## A LEGACY OF IMPUNITY

Despite the nature and scale of the human rights abuses committed in Somalia, including war crimes, near total impunity continues to reign. Addressing accountability for war crimes and other human rights abuses is essential to improve the protection of children and their human rights in Somalia.

As one child told Amnesty International: *“There is so much recruitment of children by Al-Shabab. They do this because they think that no one will investigate them.”*

**Above: Children race against each other outside Ifo camp in Dadaab, Kenya, December 2008.**

**The camps at Dadaab are home to some 300,000 refugees, mostly Somalis.**

**Front cover: Wounded children are carried to a clinic – a mortar shell landed on their house in Mogadishu, Somalia, 29 July 2009.**

## TAKE ACTION TO HELP SOMALI CHILDREN

**You can take action to help Somali children. Please call on your Minister of Foreign Affairs to help improve children’s lives and stop human rights violations.**

**Please ask the Minister to:**

- End the supply of arms to Somalia’s warring parties that are likely to be used in committing war crimes and serious human rights abuses;
- Provide adequate funding for Somali children’s education and for medical and psychological care in refugee camps, settlements for the internally displaced and other areas.
- Request the United Nations to establish an independent Commission of Inquiry to investigate crimes under international law committed in Somalia, including grave abuses against children, and to make recommendations to address impunity;

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Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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