

SOMALIA: JOURNALISTS UNDER ATTACK

“ It is the journalists that are telling the world what is happening in Mogadishu. This is why everyone wants to silence us. I have thought, I will die in this job, but even when I am scared, I can't be silent, because if I do not tell these stories, no one will protect the civilians. We are their only advocates.”

Journalist from Mogadishu

Somalia is one of the most dangerous places on earth to be a journalist. In a country racked by conflict, journalists have been deliberately targeted. At least nine have been killed since February 2007, even more have been threatened, arrested and harassed. More than 50 have been forced to leave the country. Radio stations and other media outlets have been repeatedly closed.

The spate of attacks on journalists and the media is more than a by-product of the violence in Somalia. Instead, it indicates a systematic attempt to curtail independent journalism.

The situation for journalists in Somalia is the worst it has been since 1991, when the repressive Siad Barre government was overthrown and the state's collapse began. The continuing conflict between the Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and clan-based insurgents, many associated with the Council of Somali Islamic Courts, has resulted in widespread insecurity and severe restrictions on freedom of expression.



Somalis attend the burial ceremony of Bashir Nur Gedi, the acting head of an independent radio station, Shabelle, in Mogadishu. He shot dead in his house in Mogadishu on 19 October 2007 by unidentified gunmen.

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Somali journalists face a determined onslaught on their rights to life, security of person and freedom from arbitrary detention. The attacks on journalists and on the media, particularly in the last six months, appear to be part of a systematic attempt by all parties to the conflict to restrict freedom of expression in Somalia.

This marks a disturbing change of direction. In 2005 and 2006, new newspapers, radio and television stations and websites were opened, whose coverage and affiliation began to extend beyond clan and warlord loyalties. Freedom of expression was enhanced, for example, through radio phone-in programmes where Somalis could talk publicly about their views, fears and aspirations.

Recent interviews by Amnesty International with over 50 Somali journalists describe a marked increase in intimidation and persecution of journalists because of their work in the last quarter of 2007 and into 2008.

NEW MEDIA LAW

The Transitional Federal Parliament passed a new Media Law in December 2007. It contains some restrictive provisions but, by establishing mechanisms for complaints by officials, may reduce attacks on journalists. It obliges media providers to be registered and requires journalists to promote Islam, justice, democracy, Somali culture and state unity. It provides for the establishment of a regulatory Media Council with a majority of members elected from private media houses. It also contains a commitment to freedom of expression.

This report focuses on South Central Somalia and Puntland, a semi-autonomous regional state of Somalia. Journalists in Somaliland, which declared independence from Somalia in 1991 but has not been internationally recognized, have also experienced arrests and unfair trials.

This document outlines the attacks and threats that journalists in Somalia have faced. Amnesty International urgently calls for all parties to the conflict in Somalia to uphold and respect the rights of journalists and freedom of expression.

KILLINGS AND ASSAULTS

Thousands of Somali civilians have been killed since an upsurge in conflict in Mogadishu and other parts of South Central Somalia in March/April 2007. Many died in indiscriminate bombardments of civilian areas, and in insurgent attacks launched from densely populated areas. Among the dead are a significant number of people who were extrajudicially executed by parties to the conflict.

Nine Somali journalists were among those killed since the start of 2007. Their colleagues believe that at least five were targeted because of their published or broadcast work.

The journalists who were killed in targeted attacks in 2007 include:

- Bashir Nur Gedi, acting manager of Shabelle Radio, shot dead in his house in Mogadishu on 19 October 2007 by unidentified gunmen.
- Mahad Ahmed Elmi of Capital Voice radio, shot dead in Mogadishu on 11 August 2007 by two unidentified gunmen.
- Ali Iman Sharmarke, head of HornAfrik media company, killed by a car bomb in Mogadishu on 11 August 2007. The authorities announced that two youths had been arrested in connection with his death, but disclosed no further action.

- Mohammed Abdullahi Khalif of Voice of Peace radio, killed on 5 May 2007 in Galkayo in Puntland by soldiers from the Puntland regional government.

- Ali Mohammed Omar of Radio Warsan, killed by three unidentified gunmen on his way home from work on 16 February 2007 in Baidoa.

Other Somali journalists killed during the conflict include:

- Hassan Kafi Hared, 36, an official of the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ), and contributor to the official Somali National News Agency (SONNA) and Gedonet website, killed on 28 January 2008 in Kismayu by a roadside bomb. This bomb also killed three humanitarian staff of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) who were travelling in an MSF marked vehicle, and were apparently the target of the attack.

- Abdulkadir Mahad Moallin (known as "Kaskey") of Radio Banadir, killed on 24 August 2007 near El Ilan village when bandits attacked a bus in which he was travelling from Mogadishu to Gedo Region. One other passenger was wounded in the attack.

- Abshir Ali Gabre and Ahmed Hassan Mahad of Radio Jowhar, both killed on 16 May 2007, after being detained by unknown militia while travelling to Adele district in Puntland with the Governor of Middle Shabelle. Six of the Governor's bodyguards died in the attack.

With the exception of the car bomb attack on Ali Iman Sharmarke

(see above), no steps have been taken to investigate these killings or to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Some journalists escaped with their lives:

- Jafar Mohamed Kukay, the acting Director of Shabelle Media Network in Mogadishu, was attacked on 24 September 2007. Only the fact that the assailant's gun jammed saved his life.

- Abdikheyr Mohamed Jama, a presenter of Radio Galkayo, was shot in the mouth and critically wounded when he was attacked by four gunmen in Puntland on 10 January 2008.

Many journalists have told Amnesty International of incidents when they feared they would die. Some were shot at by TFG armed forces during the 18 October 2007 attack on the Shabelle Radio station (see page 7). Others feared they would be captured and killed by Ethiopian soldiers during a raid on the HornAfrik office on 2 November 2007 (see page 4). Both incidents followed a nearby attack against the TFG and Ethiopian forces by insurgent forces.

A number of journalists have also told Amnesty International of living in their office for weeks at a time, or going into hiding after being told that armed men without uniforms were waiting outside their homes, or had come to their homes and asked of their whereabouts.

DEATH THREATS

Journalists who fled Mogadishu told Amnesty International that they regularly received death threats, particularly when they reported on the conflict. Threats are typically delivered by calls to mobile phones with the number of the caller withheld.

Many of the threats came from people who identified themselves as officers of the National Security Agency (NSA) of the TFG, demanding to know why the journalist had reported particular incidents or military operations, and threatening them with enforced disappearance or arrest if stories remained on their websites. Two journalists claimed that they were threatened by Ethiopian diplomatic representatives in Mogadishu.

Amnesty International has also received testimony of repeated threats made by the armed groups fighting against the TFG and Ethiopians. One journalist said:

"I wrote a story that two insurgents were killed. I was called on my mobile, and the caller said, 'Why did you write that?' I said, 'It is the truth, I have to write it'. He said, 'You are going to be in the list which we are going to kill!'"

Many journalists could not determine the source of some of the threats they received. Others were unwilling to give

Abdulkadir Mahad Moallin (known as "Kaskey" of Radio Banadir, killed on 24 August 2007 near El Ilan village when bandits attacked a bus in which he was travelling from Mogadishu to Gedo Region.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Steps taken in January 2008 by the administration of the new TFG Prime Minister Nur Hassan Hussein may indicate a thawing of relations between journalists and the TFG and offer hope for the future. These include the appointment as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Information of Ahmed Abdisalam Adan, owner of HornAfrik, a key private media outlet which had been a target of TFG repression.

On 21 January 2008 the Prime Minister pledged the end of the crackdown on Somali journalists, stating that "violations against the free press are over".

It is too soon to tell whether this pledge and the new Media Law (see page 2) will affect the behaviour of the TFG security forces. They continued to arbitrarily arrest journalists in the weeks leading up to these remarks, and deadly attacks on journalists have not ceased.





Abshir Ali Gabre, a journalist with Radio Jowhar, killed on 16 May 2007, after being detained by unknown militia while travelling to Adele district in Puntland with the Governor of Middle Shabelle.

details because they still feared repercussions, even though they were outside the country. Given the targeted killings of journalists, threats have to be taken very seriously.

Amnesty International believes that the threats against journalists are part of an attempt to control and manipulate the reporting of the conflict. Any such attempt breaches the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression, and to which Somalia is a state party. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has ruled that provisions of the African Charter, including Article 9 which guarantees

ATTACK ON HORNAFRIK OFFICE BY ETHIOPIAN TROOPS

On 2 November 2007, Ethiopian troops were operating near the HornAfrik office in Mogadishu when a grenade was thrown at them. A three-hour gun battle followed between insurgents and Ethiopian forces. Three Ethiopian soldiers were killed and the others retreated. The bodies of the three Ethiopians soldiers were taken by local residents who dragged the bodies off the road and hid them. A Hornafrik journalist told Amnesty International:

"Then the Ethiopian soldiers came back, at least 200, and entered houses and made investigations, and took many people from their houses, including the watchman from HornAfrik.

"The Ethiopian soldiers entered the station, and all the journalists entered the studio or the other part of the office, where the Ethiopians feared to go. These were new Ethiopian troops and they were afraid, because many times when the Ethiopian troops are going into a house, there is an explosion.

"Later we found they took seven or eight people from nearby houses, and they returned three dead bodies. One of them, the guard of HornAfrik, had his throat cut. At that time, there was negotiation, and they got back the three bodies of their dead in exchange for three dead people they took, of which he was one.

"After that day, when I get back to my family, I and all the journalists were unable to return back to the office, so we started leaving Mogadishu. When we saw that one of us was slaughtered by the Ethiopian troops, we were afraid that they would do this to us."

Another journalist present told Amnesty International:

"It looked like he (the guard) had been killed in the house, killed like you would kill a goat, as there was a lot of blood. This is when we decided to leave Mogadishu."

freedom of expression, are applicable even in armed conflict.

ARREST AND DETENTION

A number of journalists told Amnesty International that they were detained by TFG forces and the Ethiopian military, generally after they had reported on the conflict or had interviewed government opponents. Journalists were also arrested after attacks on Ethiopian troops or TFG forces near media offices. The periods of detention varied from a couple of hours to 11 days, and none of the journalists were formally charged or brought before a court of law.

A Shabelle Media journalist said that after he was identified as a journalist, he was arrested by Ethiopian troops near Beletweyn and secretly transferred to Ethiopia, where he was detained incommunicado in military barracks near a village northeast of the town of Dessie for six days before being released without charge. He was able to find his way back to Somalia but later fled to Kenya after receiving further death threats.

Other journalists have been arrested several times by TFG forces. The National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) has recorded 53 arrests of journalists in 2007 in South Central

Somalia and Puntland. Many of the journalists detained by the TFG forces identified their captors as members of the NSA, headed by General Mohamed Aden, known as General “Darwish”. Amnesty International considers these detentions arbitrary and in breach of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, because they are in response to reports which are not prohibited by law and the journalists are not charged or brought before a court.

CLOSURES

TFG forces have repeatedly closed media outlets, particularly Mogadishu-based radio stations, often following news reports that reflected negatively on the TFG, or interviews with individuals opposed to the TFG forces or Ethiopian troops. These closures were usually for short periods of a few days. Towards the end of 2007, the duration of closures increased. Shabelle Radio and Simba Radio were closed from 12 November until 4 December 2007 on the order of the Governor of Banadir Region and Mayor of Mogadishu, Mohamed Omar Habib, known as “Mohamed Dheere”.

The TFG forces involved in the closure of media houses in Mogadishu have predominantly been NSA and the TFG local authority police of the Mayor of Mogadishu. Such closures amount to an assault on the independent news media and an unwarranted restriction on press freedom and freedom of expression.

Many journalists have told Amnesty International that the repeated closure of radio stations has left them without work and unable to report on what is happening in the city.

TFG ORDERS

TFG leaders have issued directives restricting the freedom of the media. On 28 March 2007, the Minister of Information in Puntland’s regional government, Abdurahman Mohamed Bankah, banned all media activities that did not have prior approval from the Ministry.

On 26 November 2007, the Governor of Banadir Region imposed new restrictions on privately owned media which led to virtually all of them being shut down. He was quoted in the Somali press as telling a meeting of journalists:

“The media cannot report the military operations of the TFG forces and the

Ethiopian troops unless they receive written documents that give them approval to disseminate that information. Interviewing the government opponents inside and abroad is forbidden and any journalists (who) dispense or any radio station (which) transmits their views, he/she will be considered as criminal. Disseminating the displacement of the civilians unless the journalists receive real [i.e. official] statistics to base as evidence for their information is also prohibited.”

These restrictions were lifted on 4 December 2007, after being widely condemned by journalists’ organizations, other NGOs and UN agencies working in Somalia.



The body of Somali journalist Ali Iman Sharmake, director of HornAfrik media group, killed by a car bomb in Mogadishu on 11 August 2007.

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Ahmed Hassan Mahad, journalist with Radio Jowhar, killed on 16 May 2007, after being detained by unknown militia while travelling to Adele district in Puntland with the Governor of Middle Shabelle.

NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY CRACKDOWN

The National Security Agency (NSA) of the TFG was repeatedly identified by Somali journalists as responsible for harassing and arresting journalists. NSA officers have raided journalists' homes and closed media outlets that published material seen as counter to TFG interests.

"Some TFG soldiers, under the command of 'Askar', the deputy commander of the NSA, came to my house. I was told TFG were searching for me. I changed my location. For about two months I was in hiding. I switched off my mobile. Then I fled from the country."

This account is typical of many: *"I was receiving phone calls from an unknown number, a man who said, 'I am in the national security service and I am called Abdi. You have written this editorial, and you have to remove it from the web, or you take responsibility for what happens.' I said, 'I have written it, and I have written it not on a matter of national security, but instead about a political issue'. He said, 'Okay, you should wait and see what happens'."*

NSA officers have also arrested a number of journalists. On 15 October 2007, 19 media personnel from Shabelle Radio Network were arrested by NSA forces and taken to the Presidential palace, where they were briefly detained and individually questioned by a high-ranking TFG police officer.

Other journalists have told Amnesty International that, while being detained or questioned, NSA officers openly discussed with their colleagues whether they should kill them.

One journalist, who was detained for 11 days in April 2007 after reporting on the TFG disarming a landmine, said:

"I said I am one of the HornAfrik journalists, I am doing my job, reporting the operation, and I showed my card. The deputy commander of the NSA, Askar, said to me, 'We hate HornAfrik the most'."

"When they first captured me, near the airport, they beat me with their fists and the butt of a gun to punish me. They didn't ask any questions. They took me, and discussed whether to kill, or arrest me. Some of them

said, 'It is a problem to take this person and arrest and guard him, it is easy for us to kill, it's better'. Some were saying it was better to arrest me. Some of them know a little about the media and humanity, and that there may be a side-effect of the killing, some act of revenge or it being said that they kill journalists.

This journalist told Amnesty International his family were initially asked to pay US\$ 8,000 for his release, but he was later released without payment after international news agencies reported his detention.

SILENCING REPORTS

Amnesty International believes that the intention of attacks on journalists and the media is to hide from scrutiny violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict. Other voices who could speak out against human rights abuses have also been silenced.

Since an upsurge in fighting in March/April 2007, independent local human rights organizations that were active in Mogadishu have been largely



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Ali Mohammed Omar, journalist from Radio Warsan, who was killed on 16 February 2007 in Baidoa.

suppressed. Many human rights defenders have been forced to flee or go into hiding after repeated threats and attacks apparently from all parties to the conflict. In October 2007, the Elman Human Rights group was reportedly ordered to close down by the Mayor of Mogadishu and its chairman was forced into hiding.

International humanitarian agencies have also faced increasing hostility from some of the leaders of the TFG, and continued restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian assistance from both the TFG and armed groups. According to information Amnesty International has received, humanitarian agencies are forced to refrain from exposing human rights violations they witness in order to be able to continue to provide emergency humanitarian assistance.

While international media and human rights organizations have been able to expose some violations of international humanitarian law and human rights, the majority of these abuses have not been documented or made public.

The closures and restrictions on independent journalists in Somalia reduce their ability to report the actions of TFG and Ethiopian forces, and of the various armed opposition groups. The restrictions also prevent journalists from reporting the growing criminal activities of armed bandits, and further entrench the already endemic impunity that exists in Mogadishu and across South Central Somalia.

Map of Somalia

ATTACK ON SHABELLE RADIO BY TFG FORCES

TFG troops attacked the Shabelle Radio office in Mogadishu on 18 October 2007. They fired automatic weapons into the second and third floor windows for more than five hours, trapping several journalists inside and injuring a security guard.

This assault followed a grenade attack by insurgents on TFG forces near the Shabelle Radio office, but Amnesty International has received numerous reports that indicate that the assault was not a direct response to the grenade attack. It was reportedly part of a pattern of arbitrary and disproportionate counter-attacks carried out by TFG forces some time after the grenade attack.

A number of journalists who were in the Shabelle Radio office told Amnesty International that they believed they were going to die, and had called their families to say goodbye.

"We got under the tables. They used a vehicle-mounted machine gun. The bullets came in, smashing all the windows. Luckily, I was not hurt. They were firing for hours. We called the National Union of Somali Journalists and international organisations, and we told them we are being fired upon, our office is being attacked. Eventually we escaped one by one from one of the doors at the back. After this, the troops based themselves there at our office, and we weren't able to work until 1 November."



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SOMALI JOURNALISTS IN NEED OF PROTECTION

Journalists in Somalia who report on the conflict are vital to the defence of human rights. By publishing information about human rights, they spread awareness of the human rights standards which government authorities are obliged to respect and protect. Journalists also inform the public about human rights violations which TFG and Ethiopian authorities have an obligation to stop and prevent.

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities in Somalia to respect and protect freedom of expression, and to end the systematic attacks on journalists.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE TRANSITIONAL FEDERAL GOVERNMENT:

- Implement the pledge made by TFG Prime Minister Nur Hasssan Hussein to end the crackdown on Somali journalists.
- Stop the arbitrary arrest of journalists.
- End all practices that threaten freedom of expression, including the closure of media outlets.
- Ensure that prompt, effective and impartial investigations are conducted into unlawful killings of journalists, and into threats of violence against journalists, and bring those responsible to justice by applying international standards of fair trial, without the application of the death penalty.
- Instruct TFG security personnel to respect freedom of expression and to refrain from statements or actions threatening journalists.

TO ETHIOPIAN FORCES IN SOMALIA:

- Stop the arbitrary arrest of journalists.
- Refrain from raids on media offices.
- Instruct Ethiopian military personnel to respect freedom of expression and to refrain from statements or actions threatening journalists.

TO ALL ARMED OPPOSITION GROUPS:

- Refrain from attacks on journalists.
- Refrain from intimidation and threats against journalists.
- Respect the right to freedom of expression.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY:

- Ensure that individuals and organizations that have perpetrated human rights violations, such as the National Security Agency, are excluded from internationally funded support and training.
- Use all available diplomatic means to call on all parties to the conflict to protect Somali journalists and to uphold freedom of expression in Somalia.
- Provide support for UN, international and local NGO efforts to protect journalists in Somalia, and provide training and development assistance to build greater independence and professionalism among Somali journalists.
- Provide safety and refuge to Somali journalists who are forced to flee from Somalia, and refrain from forcibly returning any Somali journalist to Somalia.

Amnesty International is a global movement of 2.2 million people in more than 150 countries and territories, who campaign on human rights.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments. We research, campaign, advocate and mobilize to end abuses of human rights. Amnesty International is independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion.

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