

HARD NEWS

JOURNALISTS' LIVES
IN DANGER IN SOMALIA

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL





The burial of Mukhtar Mohamed Hirabe, director of Radio Shabelle, who was killed in Mogadishu on 8 June 2009.

Somalia is one of the most dangerous places on earth to be a journalist. In 2009 alone, nine journalists were killed. Three of them were deliberately targeted and shot dead. In the first five months of 2010, one journalist has been killed and others abducted, harassed and threatened by armed groups.

More journalists were killed in 2009 than in any one year since 1991, when armed conflict broke out after the collapse of Siad Barre's government. The conflict, based on clan rivalries, competition over scarce resources, ideology and criminal activity, has ravaged the country ever since.

SHIFTING ALLEGIANCES, CONTINUING CONFLICT

The internationally backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG), controls only a small part of the capital Mogadishu, while the rest of southern and central Somalia is under the control of armed groups. The TFG was backed militarily by Ethiopian troops who remained in Somalia until early 2009. TFG officials and institutions are now protected by the African Union Mission in Somalia, AMISOM. The TFG is opposed by a number of armed Islamist groups. The two largest are al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam, groups which are allied against the TFG but have also engaged in fighting against each other. Groups on both sides of the conflict often overlap, forge or shift alliances, or suffer divisions.

Since February 2007, at least 20 journalists have been killed in Somalia. (Amnesty International documented some of these killings in a briefing issued in March 2008: Somalia: Journalists under attack, Index: AFR 52/001/2008.) Faced with the threat of human rights abuses including violations of their rights to life, security of person and freedom from arbitrary detention, many have been forced into exile.

Journalists have been systematically prevented from carrying out their work and providing information to the public by parties to the conflict. Attacks on journalists and media outlets violate the right of all Somalis to seek, receive and impart information. Given the constant insecurity and unpredictable fighting blighting Somalia, access to information is of vital importance.

Attacks on journalists prevent independent reporting of the daily violence affecting the population, in a conflict too dangerous for consistent international presence and monitoring. Foreign journalists have been targeted for kidnapping and as a result have drastically reduced their presence in



NUR MOHAMED ABKEY
Radio Mogadishu

4 May 2010, Mogadishu

On 4 May 2010, journalist Nur Mohamed Abkey was reportedly abducted by gunmen near his home in southern Mogadishu and then shot repeatedly in the head. He was on his way to visit his family from Radio Mogadishu, a TFG-owned radio station where he worked with Somalia's information ministry training journalists. Nur Mohamed Abkey was a veteran journalist, who had remained in Mogadishu even when the civil war started in 1991. He had previously worked for the independent HornAfrik radio station and the Somali Television Network as a news anchor and comedian.

His body was dumped in an alleyway in Mogadishu, and reportedly bore traces of torture. His Radio Mogadishu colleagues received a phone call from people saying they were al-Shabab members and claiming responsibility for the killing. It is believed he was killed because he was working for a TFG-owned radio station.



MUKHTAR MOHAMED HIRABE
Radio Shabelle

8 June 2009, Mogadishu

According to local sources, gunmen opened fire on Radio Shabelle director Mukhtar Mohamed Hirabe and news editor Ahmed Omar Hashi in June 2009 as they walked to work one Sunday morning in the Bakara Market area of Mogadishu, a stronghold of al-Shabab.

Mukhtar Hirabe, aged 48, was shot repeatedly in the head and killed while his colleague Ahmed Omar Hashi, aged 41, was shot in the stomach and hand but managed to escape.

A veteran Radio Shabelle reporter, Mukhtar Hirabe took on the role of station director after the former director, Bashir Nur Gedi, was shot dead by unidentified gunmen in his house in Mogadishu on 19 October 2007. A popular journalist, Mukhtar Hirabe had led a charity drive to help displaced Somali children in 2006. He is survived by two wives and five children.

Somalia. Two foreign journalists, Amanda Lindhout and Nigel Brennan, were released on 25 November 2009 after 15 months in captivity following their kidnap by an unknown group on 21 August 2008. Only a few still visit the TFG and AMISOM controlled areas of Mogadishu.

Armed groups opposed to the Somali government now control many towns, restricting what local media can report on, shutting down radio stations and threatening journalists into supporting them or leaving. This makes it almost impossible for independent observers to report on the situation in Somalia from within the country. Up until early 2009, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) also repeatedly harassed and attacked journalists. There have been fewer reports of harassment of journalists by the TFG in the past year, although some incidents were recorded.

DELIBERATE KILLINGS

Since the beginning of 2009, at least four journalists have been deliberately shot dead by gunmen. Such killings are part of a well-established pattern: in 2007, at least five journalists were killed in deliberate attacks and in 2008 another journalist was shot dead. In most cases the killers wore masks or were not identified, but they are believed to be linked to the parties to the conflict. The apparent motivation behind most targeted killings was to suppress independent reporting or punish those seen as critical of one of the warring sides.



SAID TAHLIL AHMED
HornAfrik

2 February 2009, Mogadishu

Masked gunmen repeatedly shot Said Tahlil Ahmed, director of the independent broadcaster HornAfrik, as he and several other senior journalists were walking through the Bakara Market area of the capital in February 2009. The journalists had been summoned to a meeting with members of al-Shabab. Al-Shabab was apparently angered by local media coverage of the 31 January 2009 appointment of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed as President of the TFG. Al-Shabab considers his appointment illegitimate.

The other journalists escaped without serious injury, but Said Tahlil Ahmed died at the scene. Al-Shabab denied responsibility for the murder.

Said Tahlil Ahmed became director of HornAfrik after the company's founder, Ali Sharmarke, was killed in August 2007 in a roadside bomb attack in Mogadishu. Said Tahlil was best known for his Friday news programme in which he discussed the week's top issues. He is survived by a wife and eight children.



HASSAN MAYOW HASSAN
Radio Shabelle

1 January 2009, Afgoye

Local sources reported that Hassan Mayow Hassan, aged 36, a Radio Shabelle correspondent since 2006 in the town of Afgoye, 30 kilometres south of Mogadishu, was shot dead by a man wearing a government uniform when he entered the town at around 10am in January 2009. He and other journalists were reportedly stopped by men wearing government uniforms who accused them of collaborating with armed opposition groups. Hassan Mayow Hassan was then reportedly shot twice in the head.

Hassan was apparently en route to a news conference when he was killed. He had produced many reports on the humanitarian situation in the region, including critical stories about the army's harassment of civilians in the area.

Despite promises by the TFG to investigate allegations against security forces, Amnesty International is not aware of any such investigation or any charges being brought against the alleged perpetrator. Hassan is survived by a wife and five children.

CAUGHT IN CROSSFIRE

Journalists have also lost their lives in crossfire during fighting, as a result of attacks which may be indiscriminate or disproportionate, and sometimes in direct attacks against civilians. Since early 2007, shelling and other heavy bombardment have caused massive damage to residential areas across Mogadishu, killing and injuring thousands of civilians, destroying infrastructure and causing many residents to flee. Other cities in contested territory have also been shelled, although the fighting has been most intense in the capital.

There are near weekly reports of civilian deaths and injuries in fighting in Mogadishu between armed opposition groups and TFG forces and AMISOM troops. Armed opposition groups continue to launch attacks from areas inhabited or frequented by civilians in Mogadishu, endangering the lives of civilians. They fire mortars and heavy artillery in the direction of TFG and AMISOM bases, near which civilians live. TFG and AMISOM forces are repeatedly accused of responding by firing mortars and other artillery in the direction of the attackers. All sides to the conflict use mortars and other heavy artillery weapons which are inherently indiscriminate when used in densely populated urban areas. Although Amnesty International does not have sufficient information to determine whether each of these attacks is indiscriminate, the use of weapons that are inappropriate for fighting in densely populated civilian areas demonstrates a persistent failure by all parties to the conflict to comply with their legal obligation to take necessary precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects.

At least eight journalists were wounded in a bomb attack on 29 June 2010 in the Abdiaziz district of northern Mogadishu, according to the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ). They were reportedly attending a press conference held by al-Shabab.

YASIR MAIRO

Freelance photographer

HASSAN ZUBEYR

Cameraman for Al-Arabiya

MOHAMED AMIN

Shabelle Radio

3 December 2009, Mogadishu

Yasir Mairo, Hassan Zubeyr and Mohamed Amin were among more than 22 people who were killed in an explosion at a graduation ceremony at the Shamo hotel in Mogadishu in December 2009. The explosion, reportedly detonated by a suicide bomber, was deliberately targeted at civilians, killing a number of recent medical graduates, these three journalists and three TFG ministers, among others. Many suspect al-Shabab was behind the attack, although the group's spokesman denied responsibility.

Amnesty International condemned the attack as a war crime – the targeting of civilians is always prohibited under international law.

Yasir Mairo, in his early 20s, was an active soccer player and had started working part-time as a freelance photographer not long before he was killed. He was the only photographer to cover a suicide car bomb attack against African Union peacekeepers in September 2009 that killed 21 people. Whereas Yasir Mairo's two colleagues were killed instantly in the explosion, Yasir Mairo



died shortly afterwards in hospital as a result of his injuries.

Hassan Zubeyr, 31 years old, was a cameraman for the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya television network when he was killed. Previously a head technician at Radio Shabelle, he left behind his pregnant wife and four children.

Mohamed Amin, 24, was supporting his younger siblings as the sole breadwinner in the family when he died, having lost both his parents.

A mortar shell landed on the building of Hamar Radio (also known as Voice of Democracy) on 21 December 2009 in Suq Ba'ad market in Mogadishu. Three civilians were killed, including the wife of the station director. Three station employees were also injured in the attack including the station director and programme director. The shells were reportedly launched in retaliation for an insurgent attack on a Parliament session being held in Mogadishu. Mortar shells destroyed the studios and damaged the station's transmitters.

Hassan Zubeyr receiving a bullet proof jacket. Hassan Zubeyr was a cameraman for Al-Arabiya television network. He was among more than 22 people killed by a suicide bomb at the Shamo Hotel on 3 December 2009, during a graduation ceremony for graduates of Banadir University.



MOHAMUD MOHAMED YUSUF
Radio Holy Quran (Radio IQK)

4 July 2009, Mogadishu

Mohamud Mohamed Yusuf died on 4 July 2009. Local journalists reported that he was hit twice in the stomach by stray bullets during heavy gunfire in the city.

Mohamud Mohamed Yusuf, aged 22, was killed in July 2009 at 8am after presenting the morning news on Radio Holy Quran near Afarta Jardin in northern Mogadishu. According to local journalists, he was hit twice in the stomach by stray bullets during heavy gunfire in the city and lay by the side of the road for roughly three hours. The National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) reported that no one could reach him because of the gunfire. He was eventually taken to Medina Hospital but died from blood loss before he could be saved.

Mohamud Mohamed Yusuf worked for three years at Radio Holy Quran, a private radio station. He had been a reporter, presenter, and occasionally a producer. He is survived by his wife and three children.



NUR MUSE HUSSEIN
Radio Holy Quran

26 May 2009, Beledweyn

Nur Muse Hussein died as a result of gunshot wounds suffered while covering fighting in April 2009 in Beledweyn. A veteran correspondent for Radio Holy Quran, Hussein was shot twice in his right leg while reporting on clashes between militia groups in the town of Beledweyn, in the Hiran region, on 20 April, according to NUSOJ.

He is reported to have died in his home. One of the most senior journalists working in the region, Nur Muse Hussein started his career in 1970 as a journalist for the Somali National News Agency. He is survived by a wife and five children.



ABDIRISAK MOHAMED WARSAME
Radio Shabelle

22 May 2009, Mogadishu

Abdirisak Mohamed Warsame, aged 24, was reportedly killed at 7.30am during fighting in Mogadishu in May 2009. The Radio Shabelle station producer was shot in crossfire during gunfire between TFG forces and insurgents in southern Mogadishu.

According to local journalists, the shelling was so intense that no one could pick up his body for over half an hour. He was survived by his wife of six months.

CLOSURE OF RADIO STATIONS

On 21 October 2009, two radio stations, Radio Warsan and Jubba Radio, were closed when al-Shabab ordered the stations to cease transmission until further notice. The stations were warned that, “failing to comply with this order will result in severe punishment according to the law”.

On 24 November 2009, al-Shabab closed Maandeeq Radio in Belet Hawo, the second time the station had been closed in 2009.

THREATS AND RESTRICTIONS ON REPORTING

In September 2009, al-Shabab leaders in Bardhere and Belet-Hawo, Gedo region, banned the playing of music on local radio stations, banned journalists from interviewing TFG members and announced that their information officer could order journalists to report stories. Al-Shabab threatened to kill those airing information against them.

During fighting between al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam for control of the town of Kismayo in September and October 2009, al-Shabab announced that only those journalists who supported al-Shabab would be allowed to stay and work in the town. At least six journalists fled following the announcement.

In Mogadishu on 24 October 2009, Hizbul Islam’s information secretary threatened journalists at a press conference, saying “we will know what you are in the coming days”. He accused the journalists of reporting news against the “jihad” and urged them to “defend your country by using your voice”.

On 4 October 2009, the Deputy Speaker of the Transitional Federal Parliament accused Al Jazeera of inciting violence in Somalia “by broadcasting the propaganda of armed insurgent groups”.

On 19 November 2009 the armed group Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamma, which fights against al-Shabab and allied itself with the TFG, accused Voice of Peace Radio of broadcasting reports opposing the group. The group banned residents in areas of Galgudud region under their control from listening to the radio station. The group announced that any radio station found to be engaged in inappropriate activities would be banned from broadcasting.

On 3 April 2010, the armed group Hizbul Islam ordered radio stations to stop broadcasting music within 10 days, claiming it was un-Islamic. On 9 April 2010, al-Shabab banned the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Voice of America (VOA) from broadcasting in areas under its control, claiming that the broadcasters were opposed to an “Islamic administration”. They also seized the BBC’s satellite dishes and FM transmitters. Most radio stations had to stop relaying BBC programmes and airing music, for fear of reprisals. Some radio stations resorted to play the sound of gunfire or croaking frogs to replace music they previously aired between programmes.

On 21 May 2010, al-Shabab raided Radio Somaliweyn’s premises in Mogadishu’s Boondheere district. Al-Shabab reportedly confiscated the radio station’s equipment, including computers and the FM transmitter, after blindfolding and handcuffing a technician who was in the station’s premises.

JOURNALISTS IN CAPTIVITY

■ Ali Yusuf Adan, a correspondent for the media outlet Somaliweyn, was captured by al-Shabab on 21 February 2010 in the city of Wanleweyn, apparently after a report was broadcast alleging the group had killed a man in the Wanleweyn district. He was freed on 2 March. He was not ill-treated while he was held, according to local sources.

■ In March 2010, al-Shabab members abducted Radio Markabley manager Ahmed Omar Salihi in the city of Bardhere and Radio Markabley reporters Mohamed Salad Abdulle and Mohamed Abdikarim, in the cities of Belet Hawo and Kismayo respectively.

■ According to NUSOJ, Hizbul Islam captured three journalists in Afgoye town on 25 May 2010. Sheekh Adow Amiin, a correspondent for Simba Radio, Ahmed Yusuf Idaajaa, a correspondent for Radio Holy Quran and Mohamed Hussein Osman, a correspondent for Radio Xurma were taken to a detention centre controlled by Hizbul Islam.



Left: The burial of Said Tahlil Ahmed, the director of Radio HornAfrik, killed by gunmen in February 2009.

Cover: Protesters denounce an explosion at a graduation ceremony in early December 2009 which killed medical students, doctors, government ministers and three journalists.
© AP Photo/Mohamed Sheikh Nor

TIME FOR ACTION

All parties to the conflict must immediately stop attacks against journalists and respect the right of all in Somalia to freedom of expression.

Amnesty International calls on al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam to:

- immediately stop intimidating journalists, including through death threats, abductions and restrictions on the media;
- immediately stop attacks on civilians, including journalists, and indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks;

- suspend from their forces any member suspected of having ordered, committed or participated in human rights abuses against journalists.

ADD YOUR VOICE

Call on the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia to:

- Respect and protect freedom of expression and end all practices that threaten the right to freedom of expression, including threats against journalists and media outlets by the Transitional Federal Government authorities and armed groups associated with the government.
- Ensure that prompt, effective and impartial investigations into the killings of all Somali journalists are carried out, and investigate all threats of violence against journalists.

- Establish, with the support of the international community, an independent commission of inquiry, or similar mechanism, to address impunity for crimes under international law committed in Somalia.

Please send letters or postcards to the Transitional Federal Government via the Embassy of Somalia in Nairobi, Kenya.

Embassy of the Somali Republic
Jabavu Rd
PO Box 623 - 00606
Nairobi
Kenya
Fax: +254-20-2736619
admin@somaliembassy.co.ke

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Amnesty International
International Secretariat
Peter Benenson House
1 Easton Street
London WC1X 0DW
United Kingdom

www.amnesty.org