ORGANIZATION FOR PRISONERS' RIGHTS

Annual Assessment Report on Human Rights Violations in Mogadishu Prisons and Detention Facilities

An account of prison conditions, community-based alternatives to imprisonment, and the treatment of sentenced and remand prisoners in the Benadir Region

By Organization for Prisoners' Rights

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Location Mogadishu, Benadir Region, Somalia

Reporting Period January to December 2022

Scope Mogadishu Central Prison and the Mogadishu Prison Court Complex, with comparative observations from Baidoa and Kismayo

Executive Summary

As of 2016, Somalia has been a federal state made up of five Federal Member States — Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Jubaland, Puntland, and South West State — alongside the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, which does not recognize federal authority. When this report discusses prisons in Somalia, it means the prison facilities in these federal states together with the prisons of the Benadir Region (Mogadishu).

The purpose of this annual report is to give an account of the state of human rights in Mogadishu's prisons: the condition of the facilities, the availability of community-based alternatives to imprisonment, and the treatment of both sentenced and remand prisoners.

Somalia is a state party to the Convention against Torture (CAT), and its Constitution and international commitments — including Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) — prohibit torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

In practice, several serious problems persist: unchecked prison violence, including deaths; disease as the leading cause of death in custody; inadequate supervision by guards; easy access to weapons inside facilities; a lack of separation between categories of prisoners; and fierce competition for basic necessities that encourages abuse between inmates. Corruption and physical abuse by guards remain chronic. Women prisoners are particularly vulnerable to custodial sexual abuse. Overcrowding is prevalent in almost every prison in the country, and many facilities are old, structurally unsound, and physically decaying. Conditions in many prisons are, in short, sufficiently deficient to constitute cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment in violation of ICCPR Article 7.

A 2015 UK Home Office assessment reached a similar conclusion: conditions in most prisons in Somalia, Somaliland, and Puntland — including facilities administered by Al-Shabaab — were harsh, marked by poor sanitation, overcrowding, disease, inadequate medical facilities, extensive use of lengthy pre-trial detention, and the use of torture and other ill-treatment.

Acronyms

CAT	Convention against Torture
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
MPCC	Mogadishu Prison and Court Complex
NISA	National Intelligence and Security Agency
OPR	Organization for Prisoners' Rights
SOYDEN	Somali Youth Development Network
TB	Tuberculosis
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
WOCSO	Women and Child Support Organization

Acknowledgements

This report is based on data collected by the Organization for Prisoners' Rights (OPR) in Mogadishu, with the support of the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs of the Federal Republic of Somalia, the Somali Custodial Corps, and the Somali Rights Organization.

The report was written by OPR, with input from Ismail Abukar (Head, Co-Founder and Researcher) and Ahmed Mohamud Hussein (Board Member and Researcher). Abdirashid Hassan Abdi served as editor and designer. Osman Mohiadin Moallim (“Shatah”), Dr. Teko Patrick Samson, and Fathiya Mohamed Abdullahi served as reviewers.

I. Introduction

This report outlines the impact of OPR's work and its findings for 2022, the year in which the Federal Government launched a renewed campaign against Al-Shabaab and prison populations rose accordingly. Responsibility for prison management rests with the Commander of the Somali Custodial Corps.

II. Prison Conditions

Detainee Demographics

The vast majority of prisoners in Somalia's prisons are adult men, with a smaller number of women. Somali prisons also hold detainees under 18 and people with disabilities.

Since President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud returned to office in May 2022, the government's anti-Al-Shabaab campaign — pursued jointly with local militia (Ma'awisleey), African Union forces, and Turkish and American drone support — has led to the arrest of many alleged extremists, some very young, from the Bay and Bakool regions. They are now held in prisons in Mogadishu, Baladwene, Bulo Burte, and Jowhar, often in harsh conditions, with those who are injured particularly poorly served by the available medical care.

A survey conducted by OPR with the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and the Somali Custodial Corps found approximately 1,482 male prisoners, 17 female prisoners, and 41 male juvenile prisoners in Mogadishu, with no female juveniles recorded. Remand prisoners totalled 1,134: 1,101 male, 12 female, and 21 male juveniles. These figures are summarised below. They reflect records provided by the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and the Somali Custodial Corps; OPR treats them as a floor, not a ceiling — the figures the government's own records show, not necessarily the full number of people held.

Category	Mogadishu Central Prison	Mogadishu Prison and Court Complex
Convicted male	1,482	270
Convicted female	17	—
Convicted male juveniles	41	—
Convicted female juveniles	—	—
Total	**1,540**	**270**

Table 1. Population distribution of convicted prisoners in Mogadishu, 2022.

Category	Mogadishu Central Prison	Mogadishu Prison and Court Complex
Male on remand	1,101	—
Female on remand	12	—
Juvenile male on remand	21	—
Juvenile female on remand	0	—
Total	**1,134**	**—**

Table 2. Population distribution of remand prisoners in Mogadishu, 2022.

A separate OPR survey found a number of prisoners and detainees at Mogadishu Central Prison held beyond their mandated term — that is, they had completed their sentences but remained incarcerated.

Administration and Record-keeping

Prisons do not have ombudsmen, and record-keeping remains inadequate. Alternatives to incarceration are limited, although authorities sometimes release nonviolent offenders due to resource constraints. Prisoners are permitted to practise their religion. Federal law does not specifically allow prisoners to submit complaints to judicial authorities without censorship.

Obtaining Justice

Many people spend long periods behind bars without charge. Beyond arbitrary arrests, detainees held by the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) are on occasion held for lengthy periods without access to a court. OPR was not able to document confessions gathered through torture or coercion being used as evidence in court, but received several credible reports of defendants being mistreated during the pre-trial period, notably in NISA facilities.

> *“He was beaten, he still has a scar on his face and was beaten on his breast.” — the uncle of a NISA officer detained in late 2012, describing his nephew's treatment at the site known as “the PS” in Villa Somalia, where detainees were taken to a room and beaten with sticks and wires.*

Infrastructural Challenges and Gender Sensitivity

Rule 11(a) of the Nelson Mandela Rules requires separate institutional facilities for men and women, with the premises allocated to women entirely separate in any institution that receives both. In the facilities OPR observed, most cells for women and men were separated. Facilities where they were not separated included several police stations in Baidoa (Wadajir, Baidoa Main, Dufur, Hanano 2, and Saldhig Yare), the Traffic Headquarters in Kismayo, and the Criminal Investigation Directorate in Mogadishu. All detainees held without separation in these facilities were adults.

Most of Somalia's prisons require renovation or rebuilding; several structures date to the colonial era. All of Kismayo's prison facilities except the Police Headquarters are in disrepair, and Mogadishu Central Prison itself needs maintenance due to significant damage. A lack of computers and printers hampers information-keeping. The main prison in Baidoa is old, with cramped, hot, and poorly ventilated cells and no separate facility for women.

Overpopulation sometimes forces women into temporary quarters such as staff rest rooms when designated space is unavailable, and men and women occasionally share restrooms where separate facilities do not exist.

Physical conditions across the system are concerning. It is not known how many people are held nationwide, including how many are children or women. Overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and a lack of healthcare are common, alongside persistent shortfalls in food, water, ventilation, and lighting. Prisoners depend

heavily on relatives and clans, who often cover the costs of incarceration, and on aid organizations. Mortality data for prisons and pre-trial facilities remains largely inaccessible.

Family and Information Availability

Access to family and to information about one's case is a major challenge affecting access to justice. Young men from Bay, Bakool, and Lower Shabelle, for instance, are often held far from where their families can visit. Most prisoners and detainees do have family contact and know why they are held, but others — particularly those arrested in southwest Somalia and imprisoned in Mogadishu — receive no visitors at all.

Separating prisoners by case type is also difficult in practice: terrorism suspects are frequently housed alongside juveniles convicted of very minor offences. Vulnerable inmates do receive some assistance from paralegals and medical staff, though funding constraints limit what can be done.

Overcrowding

Prison cells are packed well beyond capacity, compounding already substandard infrastructure. Mogadishu Central Prison was designed to hold 400 to 500 prisoners; the average population over the past three years was 1,993 — more than triple that figure — with direct health consequences. The large-scale return of internally displaced people to cities nationwide, combined with the government's anti-Al-Shabaab campaign, has made overcrowding worse.

Hygiene

Hygiene remains one of the most pressing concerns in detention. A 2022 study by Saferworld found hygiene unacceptable in 24 percent of observed cells, often due to a shortage or poor condition of toilets. Most institutions did not provide bedding, and over 60 percent of inspected facilities lacked sleeping amenities altogether — with what bedding did exist frequently judged inadequate.

Access to Water and Food

OPR supports places of detention in improving access to clean water and overall hygiene, on the principle that detainees must receive water and food sufficient in quantity and quality to sustain good health. Of the institutions inspected in Mogadishu, Kismayo, and Baidoa, 88 percent had drinkable water; the remaining 12 percent did not. No clean water was available to detainees in Kismayo specifically, though this shortage affected the wider population of the city, not detainees alone.

Food was provided at 91 percent of facilities observed. The government funds food only for prisoners and Criminal Investigation Directorate sites, not for detainees held in police stations, where police personnel are fed alongside detainees and families occasionally bring food. Sixty percent of those in custody received three meals a day. Qualitative data suggests diets are unbalanced and of poor nutritional quality; further research is needed to establish this with confidence.

Access to Health Care

Detainees were generally permitted to continue existing prescriptions, but overall care was subpar. Thirty-eight percent of observations found inmates lacking access to medicine or medical attention, with conditions particularly poor in Kismayo, where medication access was scarce and no detention facility had a functioning health post. Getting care took a long time even where it existed. At the main prison in Baidoa, few qualified medical staff were present during OPR's data collection, and the one licensed nurse on site had no medical supplies or equipment; individuals referred from police stations were not screened. Exposure to heat and insects was also a recurring concern.

Across Mogadishu's prisons more broadly, there is no isolation for tuberculosis patients and no medication provided for TB specifically, despite the high number of affected prisoners. Outbreaks of cholera and diarrhoea linked to seasonal heat have caused deaths and hospitalisations. Laboratory equipment, technicians, and functioning labs are all in short supply, as are first-aid supplies, emergency equipment, and trained emergency personnel. Prison medical units do not offer ultrasound, CT, MRI, or similar diagnostic procedures; prisoners whose condition deteriorates are transferred to an outside hospital. Medical staff in both prisons studied are not paid or trained on a reliable schedule. Across the facilities OPR visited for this report — Mogadishu Central Prison, the Mogadishu Prison and Court Complex, and the comparative sites in Baidoa and Kismayo — OPR's rough estimate is that a total of roughly 80 women are held, without gender-specific quarters; the formal population survey below, limited to Mogadishu Central Prison, recorded 29. No medical unit has an ambulance, making emergency transport difficult. Common conditions include scabies, tinea versicolor, ringworm, hepatitis A and B, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted infections, pneumonia, and anaemia.

Separation of Adults and Juveniles

Authorities frequently hold juveniles alongside adults, and often fail to separate pre-trial detainees from convicted prisoners, particularly in the southern and central regions. Families sometimes request a juvenile's incarceration as a disciplinary measure; separately, some families send children from Al-Shabaab-controlled areas to Mogadishu detention centres specifically to keep them from being forcibly recruited.

III. Achieved Outcomes against the Strategic Objectives of OPR

Working in Partnership with Prison Authorities and Stakeholders

OPR maintains a working relationship with the Somali Youth Development Network (SOYDEN), the Women and Child Support Organization (WOCSO), the Human Rights Director of the British Council, and other stakeholders engaged with the prison system, providing strategic policy advice in line with the UN Global Focal Point arrangement on rule of law and the Comprehensive Approach to Security. This has allowed coordination with UN entities — including UNDP, UNOPS, and UNODC — on joint justice and corrections programming, combining OPR's advice with UN programmatic delivery to strengthen rule-of-law institutions.

Human Rights Sensitisation, Teaching, Counselling and Discussion Groups

OPR builds capacity across several disciplines through sensitisation, teaching, counselling, and discussion on issues affecting Somalia's prisoners. Helping prisoners identify what pushed them toward violence, and then formulate and pursue better alternatives, is difficult work — approached through religious interventions, education and critical-thinking development, psychological support for reintegration, social work aimed at a clearer future, vocational training toward employment after release, sport and exercise to build teamwork without violence, and arts therapy such as theatre. OPR is developing an action plan to roll these interventions out, starting at Mogadishu Central Prison.

Meeting Prisoners' Needs within the Law

The harsh conditions already described — overcrowding, poor sanitation, inadequate healthcare — require a coordinated response. Beyond documenting prisoners' needs through its own data collection, OPR has partnered with the ICRC and others to support detainees, their families, and the authorities responsible for detention. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, OPR staff took part in distributing face masks and sanitiser in Mogadishu's prisons.

Support for Emotional, Legal, and Social Well-being

People with mental health conditions have been held in Somali prisons for extended periods without counselling, psychotherapy, or any discharge planning — no prescriptions and no outpatient follow-up when they leave. OPR's initial data collection has begun documenting the abuse of people with actual or perceived psychosocial disabilities in both public and private institutions.

Findings so far show that most affected residents experience arbitrary detention, chaining, verbal and physical abuse, involuntary medication, and the same overcrowding and poor conditions as the wider prison population, with no meaningful due process, judicial oversight, or channel for redress. Families — the main

support system available — are often themselves under-resourced and ill-informed about mental health, and face significant social stigma; some turn to traditional healers or unregulated pharmacies. The result, in many cases, is that people with psychosocial disabilities end up chained at home instead.

Religious Freedom in Prisons

OPR continues to monitor religious freedom in Somalia's prisons. Enforcement of religious-practice laws varies across the country's autonomous administrations as a legacy of the civil war, and OPR's information gathering finds that prisoners are frequently not permitted to pray, read the Qur'an, or take part in other religious practice that Islam allows.

An Objective, Fair, and Open Process

OPR's prison work is not limited to assessing conditions; it also works to ensure that detainees' rights are upheld regardless of background, that they are treated with dignity throughout detention, and that their families can reach them, visit them, and stay informed of their whereabouts. OPR publishes its findings on its website and social media accounts in support of an open, impartial process.

Partnership on Human Rights and Aftercare

In partnership with the ICRC and others, OPR has visited people in detention across Somalia since 2019 — in prisons, police stations, and state security facilities — to help ensure humane and dignified treatment, and to support the distinct needs of detainees, their families, and the authorities responsible for them.

IV. Recommendations

Overcrowding

→ Develop and implement sustainable, efficient measures to reduce the prison population, including non-custodial alternatives under the UN Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules) — among them mandatory rehabilitation for certain drug-related offences, fines for first-time offenders where the law permits a choice between fines and imprisonment, fines or community service for minor infractions, avoiding pre-trial detention for specific categories of offence, electronic monitoring as an alternative to remand, and early-release mechanisms such as parole.

→ Ensure pre-trial and remand detention are used as sparingly as possible, that bail is set at a reasonable and proportionate level, and that elderly inmates are prioritised for available alternatives to incarceration.

Accommodation Space

→ Ensure dormitories and cells are adequately ventilated, with cooling where needed, and that clean, climate-appropriate bedding is available to all prisoners.

Punishment and Degrading Treatment

→ Ensure all convicts are treated with equal respect and dignity, and that no disciplinary measure amounts to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

→ Limit solitary confinement to a genuine last resort, for the shortest possible time, following independent evaluation.

→ Investigate all allegations of torture and mistreatment thoroughly and independently, discipline offenders under applicable law, and ensure victims receive appropriate remedy and compensation.

Water and Sanitation

→ Guarantee a reliable supply of water for hygiene and for showers and toilets, including at peak demand, with unlimited and private restroom access.

→ Expand shower availability and time allowed per prisoner, and ensure cleaning supplies given to prisoners on cleaning duty are adequate.

Food and Drinking Water

→ Improve the nutritional quality of food provided, ensuring it meets prisoners' dietary, spiritual, and cultural requirements.

→ Provide hygienic eating utensils comparable to those used outside prison, and constant access to clean drinking water.

Healthcare Services

- → Conduct routine inspections — covering food, sanitation, temperature, lighting, ventilation, and sleeping arrangements — with qualified medical or public health input.
- → Ensure prisoners needing specialist care are transferred promptly to outside facilities, with particular attention to the needs of women, older prisoners, and people with disabilities.
- → Provide female inmates with the supplies their hygiene needs require, including sanitary pads free of charge, and ensure adequate psychological and mental health care for all prisoners.

Access to the Outside World and Recreation

- → Enable regular, unimpeded contact with family, friends, and legal counsel through visits, letters, and calls, with privacy protected for both family and legal visits.
- → Provide consistent access to newspapers, books, and other educational and cultural material, without arbitrary restriction, and adequate opportunity for recreation.

Prisoners' Complaints

- → Allow anonymous complaints, ensure every complaint is investigated and addressed, and guard against retaliation for complaints made.
- → Publish regular statistics on complaints received, investigations completed, and disciplinary action taken.

Recommendations to the International Community

- → Press the Somali government to develop and implement sustainable measures to reduce the prison population and address overcrowding.
- → Press the Somali government to bring prison conditions into line with the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners and the UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders — particularly on space per prisoner, sanitation, and healthcare access.
- → Call on the Somali government to honour existing agreements, including full Ombudsman access to all prisons, and provide the technical assistance needed to bring Somalia's prison conditions into line with its international human rights commitments.

V. Summary

Conditions in many of Somalia's prisons remain poor. Access to food, water, and bedding is restricted, and too little attention is given to prisoners' health and hygiene. Facilities need improvement, standardisation, and in many cases outright repair or reconstruction.

The provision of basic services is inadequate. Many police stations do not supply enough food, leaving prisoners dependent on officers or relatives to make up the shortfall.

Women remain a small share of the prison population, and gender is not consistently taken into account in facility design or operation — the distribution of bathrooms and cells between men and women shows a clear imbalance in men's favour.

> *The conditions described in this report are the measure of a system that has not yet been built to hold people lawfully, humanely, or accountably. Documenting them is the first step towards changing them.*