ORGANIZATION FOR PRISONERS' RIGHTS

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

An assessment of the legal framework, conditions of detention, gender-based violence, the treatment of children and minorities, and access to justice across Mogadishu's prisons, police stations, and undisclosed detention sites in 2024

By Organization for Prisoners' Rights

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Location Mogadishu, Benadir Region, Somalia

Reporting Period January to December 2024

Scope Mogadishu Central Prison, Mogadishu Prison and Court Complex, Godka Jilacow, the Criminal Investigation Directorate, and 18 district police stations

“All prisoners shall be treated with the respect due to their inherent dignity and value as human beings. No prisoner shall be subjected to, and all prisoners shall be protected from, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, for which no circumstances whatsoever may be invoked as a justification.”

Rule 1, United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (“the Nelson Mandela Rules”)

Executive Summary

Somalia remains a nation divided along clan lines, with entrenched human rights problems. Torture, gender-based violence, and the mistreatment of inmates and detainees continue largely unpunished. Somalia's security forces — NISA, the Somali National Army (SNA), the Somali Police Force (SPF), and the Somali Custodial Corps — routinely employ torture against suspects. Somalia ratified the Convention against Torture in 1990 but has not implemented its recommendations; the Constitution prohibits violence and torture, yet the Somali Penal Code still lacks any definition of torture or provision for its criminalization.

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

Despite considerable effort, persistent problems continue in Mogadishu's jails: rampant violence resulting in deaths, disease as the leading cause of mortality, inadequate oversight enabling access to weapons, a lack of separation between categories of prisoner, and competition for basic necessities that drives inmate-on-inmate violence. Corruption and physical abuse by guards remain entrenched, disproportionately affecting female inmates. Nearly every prison in Somalia is overcrowded, in buildings that are old and physically deteriorating.

Acronyms

AS	Al-Shabaab
ATMIS	African Union Transition Mission in Somalia
CAT	Convention against Torture
CID	Criminal Investigation Directorate
CPC	Criminal Procedure Code
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
GBV	Gender-based violence
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
MCP	Mogadishu Central Prison
MPCC	Mogadishu Prison and Court Complex
NISA	Somali National Intelligence and Security Agency
OPR	Organization for Prisoners' Rights
SC	Solitary Confinement
SNA	Somali National Army
SPF	Somali Police Force

SONSA	Somalia Non-State Actors
STIs	Sexually Transmitted Infections
TB	Tuberculosis
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations

Acknowledgements

This report is based on extensive data collection by OPR across multiple prisons and detention centres in Mogadishu, undertaken in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs of the FGS, the Somali Custodial Corps, and the Somali Rights Organization.

The report was authored by OPR, with significant contributions from Ismail Abukar (Head and Chairperson, Co-Founder), Abukar Hassan Ahmed (Co-Founder and Board Member, formerly Human Rights Adviser to the President of the FGS), and Ahmed Mohamud Hussein (Board Member and Researcher). Abdirashid Hassan Abdi served as Director of Graphic Design. Osman Mohiadin “Shatah”, Director of Somalia Non-State Actors; Dr. Teko Patrick Samson, Head of the Research Department at Makerere University; and Fathiya Mohamed Abdullahi, Community Engagement Specialist at the Benadir Regional Administration, served as reviewers.

I. Introduction

This report outlines OPR's work and findings for 2024. Since 2016, the FGS has recognized five Federal Member States alongside the Benadir Region. Responsibility for prison management rests with the Commander of the Custodial Corps. Prisoner numbers have risen sharply since the FGS intensified its anti-Al-Shabaab (AS) campaign, and Somalia's justice institutions continue to struggle with effective administration despite targeted international support — underscoring the continued need for reform of the court and prosecution system.

II. Legal Framework

Somalia's legal framework nominally protects personal liberty, prohibits torture, and guarantees a fair trial and legal representation, with habeas corpus available to challenge unlawful detention. In practice, enforcement is weak, particularly for female detainees and children held alongside their mothers: anti-torture provisions exist but lack clear definitions, and the 1971 Prison Law has not been updated to reflect modern correctional standards. Oversight nominally rests with the Attorney General and judiciary, but evidence of effective oversight is limited, and a shortage of legal aid leaves many detainees unable to challenge their treatment.

Article 126 of the Provisional Constitution identifies the Custodial Corps as one of four security services responsible for national security; Article 15(2) prohibits torture but, absent implementing legislation, without a workable definition. The Custodial Corps' legal framework also rests on the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC), the 1962 Penal Code, and the 1971 Prison Law, which together establish bail consideration, fair-trial rights, and legal representation. Key constitutional protections include Article 15 (personal liberty), Article 35(5) (court appearance within 48 hours), Article 35(7) (fair trial), and Article 34 (legal defence, including free representation for those unable to pay); the CPC's Article 13(2) establishes the presumption of innocence. Habeas corpus is provided for under Articles 60 and 66. The 1972 Presidential Decree on Prison Regulations further sets out detainee rights and expected conduct by Custodial Corps staff.

Internationally, Somalia is party to the ICCPR and the Convention against Torture, and follows the UN Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Detention, the Nelson Mandela Rules, the Bangkok Rules for women prisoners, the Tokyo Rules for non-custodial measures, and the Beijing Rules for juvenile justice, alongside its obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

III. Prisons and Detention Facilities Conditions

Prisoners and Detainees Demographics

Somalia's prison population remains overwhelmingly adult and male, with a much smaller number of women, minors, and people with disabilities. Since President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud returned to office in May 2022, the anti-AS campaign — pursued jointly with local militia (Ma'awisleey), ATMIS forces, and Turkish and US support — has led to the arrest of many alleged extremists, some under 18, from the Bay and Bakool regions, now held in Mogadishu, Baladwene, Bulo-Burte, and Jowhar, often in difficult conditions.

An OPR survey across MCP, Godka Jilacow, and MPCC found approximately 2,097 male and 37 female convicted prisoners, with 153 male juveniles and no female juveniles recorded. Remand prisoners totalled 1,105: 987 male, 29 female, and 89 male juveniles. A further 102 inmates at MCP were found to have completed their sentences but remained incarcerated — a claim OPR could not independently verify. At Godka Jilacow, OPR recorded 113 political prisoners and 198 individuals linked to Al-Shabaab, again unverified independently. A further 298 detainees were held across 18 district police stations, and 83 (21 of them female) at the CID headquarters.

Category	MCP	MPCC
Male	2,097	309
Female	37	0
Male juvenile	153	0
Total	**2,287**	**309**

Table 1. Convicted prisoners in Mogadishu, 2024.

Category	MCP	MPCC
Male	987	0
Female	29	0
Male juvenile	89	0
Total	**1,105**	**0**

Table 2. Remand prisoners in Mogadishu, 2024.

Site	Category	Count
Godka Jilacow	Political prisoners	113
Godka Jilacow	Linked to Al-Shabaab	198
CID headquarters	Male / Female / Male juvenile	60 / 21 / 2
District police stations (18)	Male / Female / Male juvenile	176 / 39 / 83

Table 3. Other detention sites in Mogadishu, 2024 (Godka Jilacow and district-station figures could not be independently verified by OPR).

These figures are compiled from records provided by the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and the Somali Custodial Corps. OPR treats them as a floor, not a ceiling — they reflect what the government's own records show, not necessarily the full number of people held.

Administration and Recordkeeping

Somalia's prisons have no ombudsmen, and recordkeeping is hampered by the absence of any policy framework for digital records. Registry staff are typically selected by clan affiliation rather than qualification and receive no formal training; OPR's research found none of the registry employees interviewed had received specialised training in records management, and the resulting misplacement, loss, and slow retrieval of records is a recurring complaint among prison administrators.

Prisons and Detention Facilities Infrastructure

Much of Somalia's prison infrastructure dates to the colonial era. Mogadishu Central Prison alone holds more than triple its designed capacity. Except for the Police Headquarters, all of Kismayo's detention facilities are in disrepair; Mogadishu's central jail needs urgent maintenance, and Baidoa's main jail is old, poorly ventilated, and excessively hot. None of these facilities has dedicated space for female detainees.

Family and Information Availability

Family visits, once permitted twice weekly, have been suspended for over a year; where visits occur, visitors may not bring food and are charged $20. A prison staff member confirmed to OPR that he runs a restaurant inside the prison and that families are barred from bringing food; visitors wait from 7am to 3pm and are separated from inmates by a barrier. Inmates themselves must pay $5 for ten minutes of fresh air.

Overcrowding

Mogadishu Central Prison, designed for 400 to 500 prisoners, has averaged 1,993 detainees over the past four years — more than triple capacity — driven by the return of IDPs to Somali cities and the ongoing anti-AS campaign. Overcrowding is especially severe in smaller pre-trial facilities and in prisons under AS control.

Health, Hygiene, and Nutrition

Healthcare in Kismayo, Baidoa, and Mogadishu prisons remains inadequate: limited qualified staff, no medical supplies for on-site nurses, no TB isolation despite high case numbers, and periodic cholera and diarrhoea outbreaks linked to seasonal heat. Laboratory equipment, trained technicians, first-aid supplies, and emergency equipment are all scarce; necessary diagnostics (ultrasound, CT, MRI) are unavailable on-site, and no facility has an ambulance. Common conditions include scabies, ringworm, hepatitis A and B, H. pylori, tuberculosis, STIs, pneumonia, and anaemia.

> *Mogadishu prisons lack medical ombudsmen and proper medical recordkeeping. High seasonal temperatures have driven an increase in diarrhoea and cholera, resulting in multiple deaths and 38 hospitalisations. Tuberculosis is resurging, and there have been instances of inmates dying from it. — a doctor at De Martino General Hospital*

Across prisons and detention facilities generally, 80 percent were judged to have unacceptable hygiene, mainly due to poorly maintained toilets, and over 60 percent lacked adequate bedding. Nutritionally, the combined pressures of climate extremes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and ongoing conflict have driven some of the highest rates of acute malnutrition OPR has observed in Somalia's prisons; interviews with nursing staff in Mogadishu, Baidoa, and Kismayo found inmates receiving insufficient food in both quantity and variety.

Access to Water and Food

The government funds food only for prisoners held at CID sites; detainees in police stations receive none, and what food the prison system does provide is frequently unpalatable, pushing inmates to buy food from prison-run restaurants owned by senior officers — a small portion of rice without soup costs around US$1. Prisoners who refuse to buy food are punished with solitary confinement: held undressed for up to five days without food or water, made to sleep in rooms fouled with drained vehicle oil, and beaten before being returned to their cells.

> *Initially, we were required to purchase our own food, but currently, we are also forced to buy drinking water due to a reported malfunction of the generator responsible for pumping water. — an inmate*
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> *My plea to the FGS is to address the situation at this facility, managed by Mohamed Qaliif, who is serving a 25-year sentence, alongside Dahir Abdulle Rage (Baasuuke), the Prison Commander. Despite receiving donations, prison officials confiscated these items shortly after delivery — including boxes of dates and powdered milk sent by the ICRC for every prisoner, which we were told we would have to pay for and never actually received. — an inmate*

Challenges Faced by Minorities

OPR research documents serious rights violations against minority prisoners, including sexual assault and extrajudicial killing, both inside prisons and in wider society. Somalia's justice system remains fragile and lacks the national policy framework needed to protect minorities in detention; judicial corruption and clan-based interference frequently result in minority-community members being held or convicted without proper access to legal process, representation, or information, compounded by the absence of the clan-based support networks that protect others.

> *He was responsible for constructing the Yakshid District Administration building. After completing the project he did not receive payment, and was arrested when he sought compensation. When he asked prison authorities to be taken to court to pursue justice, he was told he did not have the right to access the legal system. — OPR, relaying an account from a minority-group detainee at MCP*

Deaths in Prisons and Detention Facilities

Somalia's prisons remain among the most overcrowded and underfunded globally, and reliable nationwide mortality data is difficult to obtain. OPR interviews with former inmates point to tuberculosis, cholera,

insufficient food, and violent confrontations between inmates and correctional officers as leading causes of death; OPR has confirmed 137 deaths in Mogadishu's prisons and detention facilities since the start of 2019. Between 2020 and 2024, violent escape attempts by Al-Shabaab-affiliated inmates have contributed to at least 76 further deaths in confrontations with correctional officers.

Non-separation of Adult and Juvenile Prisoners

Juveniles continue to be held alongside adults, with pre-trial detainees rarely separated from convicted prisoners. Families sometimes request a juvenile's incarceration as discipline; others send children from AS-controlled areas to Mogadishu specifically to prevent forced recruitment. Terrorism suspects are frequently held alongside juveniles convicted of minor offences.

> *There has been a lack of separation between individuals associated with AS and those with less severe offences, particularly after the government's intensified security sweep. Individuals who have committed severe crimes, including parricide, are being housed together with juvenile prisoners — a high-risk environment for the younger inmates. — an inmate at MCP*

Gender-Based Violence in Prisons and Detention Centers

Female detainees and other vulnerable groups — women, adolescents, girls, and children — account for approximately 95 percent of survivors reporting gender-based violence (GBV) between 2020 and 2024; roughly 75 percent of these women and girls come from displaced communities. GBV affects prisons across Somalia, including those under Al-Shabaab control. OPR data for 2024 found 45 percent of reported incidents occurring in detention facilities specifically, with the remainder occurring in prisons and other undisclosed sites, including facilities used by NISA without transparency or oversight.

Documented forms of GBV in 2024 include rape, gang rape, and other sexual assault, often accompanied by severe physical violence causing lasting physical and psychological harm. Women held in Al-Shabaab-controlled facilities have reported forced marriage, denial of food, medical care, and sanitation, and psychological abuse including manipulation and threats. Al-Shabaab imposes punishments — including for offences as minor as listening to music, watching football, or not wearing a hijab — under its own interpretation of Islamic law. OPR's 2024 findings also show a rise in sexual violence against children captured during anti-AS operations, a trend requiring urgent attention.

Gender Sensitivity and Segregation

Rule 11(a) of the Nelson Mandela Rules requires separate facilities for men and women. Most facilities observed do separate cells by sex, but female prisoners — a small share of the population — often lack separate restrooms or private space; overcrowding sometimes forces women into staff rest rooms, and shared restroom facilities between men and women have been reported.

IV. Human Rights in Somalia's Prisons and Detention Facilities

OPR's 2024 findings point to continued unlawful and arbitrary killings by security forces, including extrajudicial executions, alongside serious cases of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Political prisoners, politically motivated disappearances, and significant restrictions on press and internet freedom persist — including criminal libel laws used to justify unjustified arrests and prosecutions of journalists. Investigation and accountability for violence against women, particularly sexual violence in detention, remain seriously inadequate.

Religious Freedom

Religious freedom in Somalia's prisons remains a significant concern, shaped by government policy, non-state actors, and inconsistent enforcement across the country's autonomous administrations — a legacy of the civil war. OPR's 2024 findings indicate that prisoners are rarely permitted to pray, read the Qur'an, or take part in communal prayer (jama'ah), with those who attempt to do so facing punishment.

> *We are not allowed to learn the Holy Qur'an; if someone insists on praying, they are punished. If two prisoners wish to pray together, they also receive punishment. — an inmate*

Political Prisoners and Detainees

The FGS and regional authorities do not disclose the number of political prisoners held, and human rights organizations are frequently denied access to sites such as Godka Jilacow and the CID headquarters. Abdi Ali Rage, a former adviser to President Farmaajo, was arrested in Kismayo on undisclosed charges after announcing his candidacy for a lower-house seat representing Jubaland — he has described facing threats of deportation over his political ties. Somaliland authorities, meanwhile, continue to detain Somaliland citizens working for the FGS in Mogadishu and treat any Somaliland official's representation of the region within the federal government as treason under Somaliland law.

Al-Shabaab-Controlled Prisons and Courts

AS operates a network of unauthorised courts nationwide, trying government officials, security personnel, and ordinary citizens alike, frequently without due process or legal representation and sometimes resulting in death sentences. Facilities under AS control are overcrowded and lack heating, adequate lighting, sleeping arrangements, sufficient food, recreation, and outside contact.

V. Justice and the Rule of Law

OPR was not able to document confessions obtained through torture or coercion being used as court evidence, but received credible accounts of mistreatment during pre-trial detention, particularly at NISA and CID facilities.

> *He was detained by NISA officers after being accused of assaulting an officer, and was beaten, leaving a scar on his face. After being taken to a separate room, officers struck him with sticks and wires while demanding a confession. — OPR, relaying an account from a detainee released from Godka Jilacow*

The Provisional Constitution prohibits illegal detention, yet government forces, allied militias, and regional authorities continue to arbitrarily arrest and detain people, frequently citing alleged AS affiliation — a justification also used against journalists and critics. Arrested persons are formally entitled to appear before a court within 48 hours, with prompt notice of charges and legal and family access, but adherence to these safeguards remains rare, and bail, while provided for in law, is rarely understood or respected in practice.

VI. Achieved Outcomes against the Strategic Objectives of OPR

Collaboration with Corrections Authorities and Stakeholders

OPR continues to work with the FGS and prison authorities, providing strategic policy advice aligned with the UN Global Focal Point Arrangement on Rule of Law and the Comprehensive Approach to Security, and coordinating with UN entities including UNDP, UNOPS, and UNODC on joint justice and corrections programming.

Human Rights Awareness, Education, and Counselling

OPR continues to develop rehabilitation-focused programming — religious, educational, psychological, social work, vocational, sport, and arts-based — for custodial corps staff and inmates, while continuing to advocate for legal reform: the 1962 Penal Code still lacks any definition of torture, and the Sexual Offences Bill remains before Parliament years after its 2018 introduction.

A Fair and Open Approach to Aftercare

OPR's work extends beyond assessing conditions to ensuring detainees' rights are upheld regardless of background, that they are treated with dignity, and that families can maintain contact throughout detention. Since 2021, OPR has visited people in detention — prisons, police stations, NISA facilities, and CID headquarters — in partnership with other stakeholders, in support of humane and dignified treatment for those held.

VII. Recommendations

Overcrowding

- → Develop and implement sustainable measures to reduce the prison population, including non-custodial alternatives under the UN Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (the Tokyo Rules) — mandatory rehabilitation for certain drug-related offences, fines rather than imprisonment for first-time offenders, fines or community service for minor infractions, avoiding pre-trial detention for specified offence categories, electronic monitoring as an alternative to remand, and early-release mechanisms such as parole.
- → Minimise pre-trial and remand detention, set bail at a level proportionate to the offence, and give elderly inmates priority for available alternatives to incarceration.

Accommodation and Space

- → Provide proper ventilation, heating, and cooling for cells, and ensure ample space and climate-appropriate bedding for all prisoners.

Punishment, Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment

- → Ensure all inmates are treated with dignity and without discrimination, 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, and investigate all allegations of torture and mistreatment thoroughly and independently.

Food, Water and Sanitation

- → Guarantee constant access to clean drinking water and a reliable water supply for hygiene, showers, and toilets around the clock, with unlimited, private restroom access.
- → Improve the nutritional quality of food, meeting prisoners' dietary, spiritual, and cultural requirements, bring facility sanitation up to international standards, and provide female inmates the supplies their hygiene needs require, including sanitary pads free of charge.

Healthcare and Other Health-related Services

- → Conduct routine inspections with qualified medical or public health input, and ensure prisoners needing specialist care are transferred promptly, with particular attention to women, older prisoners, juveniles, and people with disabilities.

Outside World, Recreation, and Complaints

- → Enable regular, unimpeded contact with family, friends, and legal counsel, with privacy protected for both family and legal visits, and consistent access to books and educational material.

→ Allow anonymous complaints, ensure every complaint is investigated and addressed, guard against retaliation, and publish regular statistics on complaints, investigations, and disciplinary action.

Recommendations to the International Community

→ Press the FGS to develop and implement sustainable measures to reduce the prison population and address overcrowding.

→ Press the FGS 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.

→ Call on the FGS 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.

Summary

Conditions in Somalia's prisons and detention facilities remained severe through 2024. Overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, unreliable food and water, weak legal safeguards, and a documented rise in gender-based violence continue to define daily life for those held — conditions compounded, for specific groups, by minority status, age, gender, or political association.

> *Somalia has ratified the Convention against Torture and written its prohibition into the Constitution; what it has not done is make torture a crime that can be charged. Until that changes, the abuses documented here will keep recurring with impunity.*