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, and access to justice across Mogadishu's prisons, police stations, and undisclosed detention sites

By Organization for Prisoners' Rights

Date December 2025

Location Mogadishu, Benadir Region, Somalia

Reporting Period January to December 2025

Scope Mogadishu Central Prison, Mogadishu Prison and Court Complex, Godka Jilacow, the Criminal Investigation Directorate, 19 district police stations, and undisclosed detention sites

“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 is a nation divided along clan lines, grappling with significant human rights challenges. Violations such as torture, gender-based violence, and the mistreatment of detainees and inmates are pervasive and largely unpunished. Somalia's security apparatus — NISA, the Somali National Army (SNA), the Somali Police Force (SPF), and the Somali Custodial Corps — routinely engages in torture against suspects. Somalia ratified the Convention against Torture in 1990 but has shown reluctance to implement its recommendations; the Constitution prohibits violence, torture, and cruel treatment, yet the Somali Penal Code still lacks a definition of torture and contains no 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. This report concentrates on conditions within prisons and detention centres across these federal states, as well as in the Benadir Region, particularly Mogadishu.

The FGS has endorsed the principal international human rights instruments prohibiting torture, with the Convention against Torture (CAT) as the primary treaty, alongside Article 5 of the UDHR and Article 7 of the ICCPR. In practice, the government has not fully operationalised these commitments, and torture and ill-treatment persist among security forces and prison personnel.

Ongoing violence continues to cause fatalities in Mogadishu's jails, driven by illness, inter-inmate violence, and abuse by guards. Inadequate oversight enables the proliferation of weapons and a lack of separation between prisoner classifications, while competition for scarce resources fuels further violence. Corruption and physical mistreatment by guards remain persistent, disproportionately endangering female inmates. Overcrowding is near-universal, and prison infrastructure is notably dilapidated.

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
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Acknowledgements

This report is the culmination of extensive data collection by OPR across prisons and detention centres in Mogadishu, in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs of the FGS, the Somali Custodial Corps, the Somali Rights Organization, and numerous civil society organizations.

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, with figures prepared by Timothy B. Frankland, a data scientist supporting analytic research at Kaiser Permanente. 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 provides an in-depth overview of OPR's accomplishments and the impact of its work throughout 2025. Since its establishment in 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 following the FGS's intensified 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 remains weak, particularly regarding female detainees and children held alongside their mothers: anti-torture provisions 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 its effectiveness 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, Article 15(5) the right to legal representation, and Article 40(1) the conditions for arrest warrants and bail. 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

Mogadishu Central Prison (MCP)

MCP is the oldest correctional facility in Somalia and the largest by far, holding an estimated 80 percent of the country's incarcerated population. Built during the colonial era and now housing more than triple its designed capacity, the prison is notorious for systemic abuse, including sexual violence and extrajudicial killings. Conditions are especially dire for female detainees, who lack private restrooms and adequate hygiene facilities.

Mogadishu Prison and Court Complex (MPCC)

At the MPCC's inauguration, Ghada Waly, UNODC's Executive Director, described the complex as a “fortress for the administration of justice.” The facility includes two courtrooms and three prison blocks accommodating up to 700 inmates, alongside housing for judges, and was built with support from the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Conditions are an improvement on MCP's, but OPR interviews with families of the incarcerated found that authorities typically require families to cover food and healthcare costs, leaving those without family or clan support with little recourse; outbreaks of tuberculosis and cholera persist, particularly during the rainy season.

Godka Jilacow Prison (“The Hole”)

Godka Jilacow holds suspected AS fighters and political opponents, and functions as a NISA interrogation centre notorious for harsh conditions, including underground cells. A former inmate described the experience as unimaginable — daily torture, humiliation, starvation, and sleeplessness amid the screams of others being tortured. Estimates from former detainees and other testimony put the number held there in the thousands over time, many never formally charged or convicted, without reliable access to medical care, family visits, legal counsel, or, at times, food; OPR's own tally at the time of this survey, in Table 3 below, recorded 315 men, 91 women and 108 male juveniles linked to AS plus 113 political prisoners or detainees, for a total of 627 — a figure OPR could not independently verify. Former inmates described being stripped, beaten, and forced into humiliating acts in front of the wider prison population, intended to coerce false confessions of AS or opposition membership.

Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID)

The CID operates nationwide, overseeing investigations, fingerprinting, and criminal records as part of the Somali Police Force, headquartered in Mogadishu. Though not formally a detention facility, it holds many people awaiting investigation, some for extended periods without sufficient justification. Overcrowding is significant, medical resources are scarce, and communicable diseases including tuberculosis, cholera, and diarrhoeal illness are present among the detained population.

Benadir (Mogadishu) District Police Stations

The Benadir Region has 19 district police stations functioning as detention facilities; detainees typically remain there pending transfer to the CID, though officers report many are not transferred due to overcrowding at CID. Families bear the burden of food and medical costs. Reports describe frequent interrogation, torture, and harsh conditions, with particular criticism directed at treatment of Somalia's minority population.

Undisclosed Detention Sites

NISA operates several undisclosed facilities across Mogadishu, used to hold political opposition figures and senior AS-affiliated individuals — including, reportedly, former AS co-founder Hassan Dahir Aweys and Sheikh Mukhtar Robow, AS's former co-founder and spokesman, now serving as Minister for Religious Affairs. These sites are associated with allegations of torture, sexual violence, and killings, and some detainees have resorted to hunger strikes to protest their treatment.

IV. Prisoners and Detainees Demographics

Somalia's prison population remains overwhelmingly adult and male, though a notable number of adult women, minors, and people with disabilities are also held. 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, Bakool, and Hiran Middle Shabelle regions, now held in Mogadishu, Baidoa, Baladwene, Bulo-Burte, and Jowhar.

An OPR survey across MCP, Godka Jilacow, and MPCC found approximately 2,301 male and 66 female convicted prisoners, with 189 male and 34 female juveniles. Remand prisoners totalled 1,105: 987 male, 29 female, and 89 male juveniles. A further 179 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, alongside 315 males, 91 females, and 108 male juveniles linked to AS — again unverified independently. A further 408 detainees were held across 19 district police stations, and 83 (21 female, 2 male juvenile) at the CID headquarters.

Category	MCP	MPCC
Male	2,301	309
Female	66	0
Male juvenile	189	0
Female juvenile	34	0
Total	**2,590**	**309**

Table 1. Convicted prisoners in Mogadishu, 2025.

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

Table 2. Remand prisoners in Mogadishu, 2025.

Site	Category	Count
Godka Jilacow	Political prisoners or detainees	113
Godka Jilacow	Linked to AS (male / female / male juvenile)	315 / 91 / 108
CID headquarters	Male / Female / Male juvenile	60 / 21 / 2
District police stations (19)	Male / Female / Male juvenile / Female juvenile	192 / 39 / 130 / 47

Table 3. Other detention sites in Mogadishu, 2025 (Godka Jilacow and district-station figures could not be independently verified by OPR; undisclosed NISA sites are not reflected here, as OPR was unable to investigate them due to lack of cooperation).

These figures represent average populations for the reporting period and fluctuate with admissions, releases, and transfers; they are compiled from records provided by the Department of Prisons and the Prison Administration at the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs. OPR treats these figures as a floor, not a ceiling — they reflect what the government's own records show, not necessarily the full number of people held.

V. Prison Conditions

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.

> *The officer highlighted that many difficulties arise from outdated methods, such as the reliance on traditional recordkeeping books. Issues are compounded by inadequately trained staff and ineffective policy formulation and implementation — including outdated systems, data loss, threats to the reliability and authenticity of records, and compromised security and privacy. — a registrar officer at MCP*

Prisons and Detention Facilities Infrastructure

Much of Somalia's prison infrastructure dates to the colonial era. 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. 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.

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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

Gender-Based Violence

Female detainees and other vulnerable groups — women, adolescents, girls, and children — continue to account for the large majority of survivors reporting gender-based violence (GBV) in Somalia's prisons and detention facilities, a pattern OPR has now tracked since 2020. GBV affects prisons across the country, including those under Al-Shabaab control, and includes rape, gang rape, forced marriage, and denial of food, medical care, and sanitation, alongside psychological abuse. Al-Shabaab imposes punishments — including for offences as minor as listening to music or not wearing a hijab — under its own interpretation of Islamic law.

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.

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

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. OPR's 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.

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.

VII. 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. 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. Arrested persons are formally entitled to appear before a court within 48 hours, but adherence to this safeguard remains rare, and bail, while provided for in law, is rarely understood or respected in practice.

VIII. The Somali Police Force and Other Somali Authorities

Beyond Somalia's prisons, people arrested by police and NISA are also held in police stations, Godka Jilacow, CID facilities, and undisclosed houses. NISA conducts security sweeps across all 19 Mogadishu districts, as well as parts of Lower Shabelle, detaining individuals linked to AS — often without being brought before a court despite constitutional protections.

IX. Achieved Outcomes against the Strategic Objectives of OPR

OPR continues to work with the FGS and prison authorities, providing strategic policy advice and coordinating with UN entities on joint justice and corrections programming, while advocating 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. 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.

X. 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) — 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.

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, 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 2025. Overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, unreliable food and water, weak legal safeguards, and continuing gender-based violence define daily life for those held — conditions compounded, for specific groups, by minority status, age, gender, or political association.

> *Rule 1 of the Nelson Mandela Rules admits of no exception: no circumstance whatsoever may be invoked to justify torture or degrading treatment. Every finding in this report is a measure of the distance between that rule and the conditions in which people are actually held.*