ORGANIZATION FOR PRISONERS' RIGHTS

No Prisoner Should Be Without Rights

Situational Report (SITREP) on the State of Human Rights Violations in Mogadishu Prisons

By Organization for Prisoners' Rights

Date August 2022

Location Mogadishu, Benadir Region, Somalia

Acknowledgements

This report is based on data collected by 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.

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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
TB	Tuberculosis
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
VOA	Voice of America

Methodology & Research Limitations

Research Methodology

This SITREP was conducted by OPR in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and the Somali Custodial Corps, using direct site inspections, structured interviews with prison administrators and Custodial Corps officials, review of government records and prisoner population data, and analysis of international monitoring reports and secondary research from UN agencies, international NGOs, and government sources.

Research Limitations

- → Geographic Scope: for reasons of security and inaccessibility, OPR was able to conduct in-person visits only to Mogadishu Central Prison; data on prisons in Puntland, Somaliland, and Al-Shabaab-controlled areas is drawn from secondary sources and international reports rather than primary field research.
- → Incomplete National Data: the total number of prisoners and detainees nationwide, including in Al-Shabaab-controlled regions, remains unknown; estimates suggest approximately 120,000 detainees in areas outside federal control, but this cannot be verified.
- → Limited Access to Vulnerable Populations: OPR was unable to conduct private interviews with prisoners due to security and institutional constraints; prisoner accounts presented here are from secondary sources and documented testimonies.
- → Data Inconsistencies: government agencies provided varying figures on prisoner populations; the data presented reflects the most recent official counts from the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and the Somali Custodial Corps as of August 2022.
- → Ongoing Conflict: Somalia's continued state of relative insecurity means conditions documented here are subject to rapid change. A number of the secondary sources cited date to 2012–2014; they are included because independent verification of current conditions in non-federally-controlled areas remains impossible, but updated independent monitoring is urgently needed.

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 situational assessment is to review the state of human rights violations in Mogadishu's prisons, the availability of community-based alternatives to imprisonment, and the conditions of imprisonment for both sentenced and remand prisoners.

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

Somalia is a state party to the Convention against Torture (CAT), and its Constitution and international commitments — including Article 5 of the UDHR and Article 7 of the ICCPR — prohibit torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

In practice, serious problems persist: unchecked prison violence, including deaths; disease as the leading cause of death in custody; inadequate supervision enabling easy access to weapons; a lack of separation between categories of prisoners; and fierce competition for basic necessities that encourages inmate-on-inmate abuse. Corruption and physical abuse by guards remain chronic, with women prisoners particularly vulnerable to custodial sexual abuse. Overcrowding is prevalent in almost every prison in the country, and facilities are old, physically decaying, and in a state of disrepair sufficient to constitute cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment under ICCPR Article 7.

Key Findings at a Glance

Metric	Finding
Total Prisoners in Mogadishu	1,540 convicted + 1,134 on remand = 2,674 total
Design vs. Actual Capacity	Central Prison designed for 400–500; holds roughly 3–4 times that number
Female Prisoners	17 convicted + 12 on remand = 29 total (housed with males)
Juvenile Prisoners	41 convicted + 21 on remand = 62 total
Guard-to-Prisoner Ratio	Approximately 1 guard per 150 prisoners (critically inadequate)
National Prison Population	Estimated 3,700+ (plus unknown thousands in Al-Shabaab areas)
Prison Facility Age	Central Prison built during the colonial era (100+ years old)

I. The Situation to Date

Introduction

As of 2016, Somalia has five Federal Member States — Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Jubaland, Puntland, and South West State — alongside the self-declared Republic of Somaliland. This report's discussion of prisons in Somalia focuses on facilities in these federal states, together with the prisons of the Benadir Region (Mogadishu). The head of the prison administration is the Chief of the Custodial Corps.

No current comprehensive research exists on Somalia's overall prison situation, but the most recent surveys estimate the national prison population, including pre-trial detainees, at approximately 3,700 or more: around 1,503 at Mogadishu Central Prison (Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs), roughly 2,000 in Somaliland and 500 in Puntland as of 2011, and an unknown but reportedly substantial number — “thousands,” per the U.S. State Department — held by Al-Shabaab in areas under its control.

Known prison and detention facilities are located in Hargeisa (Somaliland), Bosaso, Galkayo, Garowe, Kismayo, Dhuusamareeb, Baidoa, Jowhar, Beledweyne, and Mogadishu.

Purpose

This assessment reviews the state of human rights in Somalia's prisons, the availability of community-based alternatives to imprisonment, and the conditions of imprisonment for sentenced and remand prisoners alike. For reasons of security and inaccessibility, OPR members were able to visit only Mogadishu Central Prison in person at the time this report was completed.

II. Summary of Overall Situation to Date

The 2015 Home Office assessment found conditions in most prisons in Somalia, Somaliland, and Puntland — including Al-Shabaab-administered facilities — harsh, with poor sanitation, overcrowding, disease, inadequate medical care, lengthy pre-trial detention, and torture. The same assessment noted that, with UNODC support, new prison facilities meeting international standards had opened in Somaliland and Puntland, primarily for piracy-related cases, with appropriate staff training provided.

An OPR survey at the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and the Somali Custodial Corps found a similar picture in Mogadishu specifically: prisons lack basic office equipment such as computers and printers; medicine is frequently insufficient or unavailable; there is no isolation room or medication for tuberculosis (TB) patients given the large prisoner population; laboratory equipment, technicians, and qualified staff for laboratory work are absent; there is no emergency equipment or trained staff for emergencies, so deteriorating cases are sent to outside hospitals, since prisons offer no ultrasound, CT, or MRI capability; medical staff are not paid or trained on schedule; OPR's rough estimate across the Mogadishu facilities visited is that roughly 80 women are held and lack gender-segregated space, while the formal population survey below, limited to Mogadishu Central Prison, recorded 29; common conditions include scabies, tinea versicolor, ringworm, hepatitis A and B, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted infections, and anaemia; and no medical unit has an ambulance for emergency transport.

The U.S. Department of State's assessment of 2013 events similarly found prison and detention conditions harsh and life-threatening nationwide, with medical care and sanitation wholly inadequate in many facilities. OPR's own survey found approximately 1,482 male and 17 female convicted prisoners at Mogadishu Central Prison, plus 41 male juveniles and no female juveniles; and 1,134 remand prisoners — 1,101 male, 12 female, and 21 male juveniles — summarised in the table below.

Category	Mogadishu Central Prison	MPCC
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, Mogadishu Central Prison and MPCC.

Category	Mogadishu Central Prison	MPCC
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, Mogadishu Central Prison and MPCC.

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.

Physical conditions across the system remain a serious concern. The total number of prisoners and detainees nationwide, including juveniles and women, remains unknown. Overcrowding, poor sanitation, and inadequate healthcare are widespread, alongside persistent shortfalls in food, water, ventilation, and lighting; tuberculosis and pneumonia are reportedly widespread, and mortality data for prisons and pre-trial facilities remains largely unavailable. Prisoners depend heavily on family, clan, and relief agencies for food and for covering the costs of detention.

Authorities frequently hold juveniles alongside adults, though women and men are held separately; pre-trial detainees are often not separated from convicted prisoners, particularly in the southern and central regions. Families sometimes request a juvenile's incarceration as discipline, and some send children from Al-Shabaab-controlled areas to prison specifically to prevent forced recruitment. Following a March 2013 visit to Mogadishu Central Prison, then-Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon publicly called conditions “deplorable” and appealed for international support for long-term improvements.

> *I am very disappointed to see prisoners in these deplorable conditions. At present the situation is under control and we are providing immediate assistance in terms of providing sufficient quantities of clean water and medical supplies for all those who require treatment. For the longer term, we will be asking our international partners to support us as we embark on urgently needed renovation and expansion of our prison facilities. — Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon, March 2013*

A 2012 UN prison assessment found Mogadishu Central Prison holding 950 people, including 14 women and 39 juveniles; while men and women were kept separate, adults and juveniles were not consistently separated, and conditions overall fell short of minimum international and national standards — including 120 inmates held in cells designed for no more than 50.

Administratively, prisons lacked ombudsmen and recordkeeping remained inadequate; alternatives to incarceration were limited, though nonviolent offenders were sometimes released due to resource constraints; prisoners generally had visitor access and could practise their religion; and federal law did not specifically allow prisoners to submit complaints to judicial authorities without censorship.

The Elman Peace and Human Rights Centre reported to a May 2013 Danish/Landinfo fact-finding mission that many people were incarcerated without charge for long periods, children and adults were not separated, disease outbreaks occurred, and humanitarian actors — including, most recently, the ICRC — had been denied access amid concerns about cholera. The UN Secretary-General's May 2013 report similarly found detention conditions nationwide, including in Hargeysa, Garowe, Bosaso, and Mogadishu, below minimum international standards, with a suspected cholera outbreak reported at Mogadishu Central Prison. The UN Independent Expert's August 2013 report found most facilities dilapidated, corrections staff inadequately

trained, no clear separation between military- and civilian-court convicts or between national-security and common-crime cases, and no separation of adults and juveniles despite the legal requirement.

> *In addition to arbitrary arrests, detainees held by the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) in particular are on occasion held for lengthy periods without access to a court. Human Rights Watch was not able to document the use of confessions gathered through torture or coercion as evidence in court. However, we received several credible reports of defendants being mistreated during the pre-trial period, notably during detention in NISA facilities. — Human Rights Watch, May 2014*
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> *He was beaten, he still has a scar on his face and beaten on his chest. This was at the PS, a common name for NISA, in Villa Somalia. They were taken to a room and beaten with sticks and wires. — the uncle of a NISA official detained in late 2012, describing his nephew's treatment*

III. Actions to Date

Somalia has reaffirmed its commitment to preventing and combating torture through its ratification of the Convention against Torture (CAT), alongside Article 5 of the UDHR and Article 7 of the ICCPR. The 1962 Somali Penal Code (Legislative Decree No. 5) has been reviewed but still lacks a definition of torture; a comprehensive revision, expected in 2020, would have added such a definition consistent with the UN Convention. The Sexual Offences Bill (SOB), intended to fill gaps in the Penal Code's treatment of sexual violence, was submitted to Parliament by the Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development in June 2018 and remains awaiting its first reading.

With UNODC support, new prison facilities meeting international standards have opened in Somaliland and Puntland, primarily for piracy-related cases, with staff training provided. The Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs has described plans to renovate two additional prisons, in Afgoye and Lafoole, and to open two vocational workshops at Mogadishu Central Prison to support prisoners' reintegration on release.

Government, Puntland, and Somaliland authorities have permitted independent prison monitoring: in Somaliland, a UNDP-organised prison conditions committee of medical doctors, officials, and civil society representatives continues to visit prisons, and UNPOS and UNSOM's human rights unit have also been granted access — though Puntland has denied similar access. UNODC has provided training for prison security and management staff in both Somaliland and Puntland.

UNODC's Global Maritime Crime Programme (GMCP) opened a 500-bed prison in Garowe in April 2014, built to international standards with medical, educational, and vocational facilities, intended in part to allow Somali piracy convicts held abroad to serve sentences closer to home. UNODC has also completed a new block for 40 women at Bosaso prison in Puntland (with a 200-bed men's block still under construction), and supports the fully operational Hargeysa Central Prison, including staff and vocational training. Bosaso prison, substantially rebuilt by UNODC, suffered a deadly Al-Shabaab attack on 8 November 2013 in which a Deputy Commander and a guard were killed; prison staff and Puntland security forces prevented a mass escape.

In April 2020, UNODC's GMCP — with EU and Swedish government support — provided COVID-19 infection-prevention supplies (hygiene items, bedding, cleaning products, and protective equipment for staff) to Mogadishu Central Prison, MPCC, and prisons in Garowe, Kismayo, Baidoa, and Beledweyne, alongside recreational and religious materials to offset pandemic-related visit restrictions. UNODC leads the Somalia Joint Corrections Services Support Programme (JCP), contributing to Somalia's National Development Plan 2017–2019 in partnership with UNSOM, UNOPS, and UNIDO, on the principle that prisoners are entitled to the same standard of healthcare access as the general population.

On legal safeguards, Article 34(2) of the Constitution guarantees a fair public hearing before an independent tribunal within a reasonable time, and Article 34(3–4) guarantees the right to self-representation and to free

legal aid for those unable to afford it. Legal aid caseloads rose sharply, from 2,199 clients in 2016 to 22,391 in 2017, per Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs data — though capacity constraints among judges, lawyers, and paralegals remain a challenge the Ministry is addressing through training. A Case Management System has also begun improving case handling and record-keeping in Somali courts, with early results in Puntland: two courts in Gardo and Garowe registered 86 new cases between January and March 2017.

IV. Issues Arising

As in many countries, unchecked prison violence in Somalia frequently violates prisoners' right to life, and authorities have repeatedly promised reform and investigation without evident follow-through. Disease remains the most common cause of death, typically the predictable result of overcrowding, malnutrition, unhygienic conditions, and inadequate medical care; OPR's own preliminary research has documented “appalling” sanitary conditions and a chronic shortage of medical staff, and tuberculosis continues to claim lives in Somali prisons.

In Mogadishu, disease — including drug-resistant strains — has reached epidemic proportions, and HIV/AIDS affects many prison populations. Inadequate supervision, easy access to weapons, a lack of separation between categories of prisoner, and competition for scarce necessities all encourage inmate-on-inmate abuse; with roughly one guard for every 150 prisoners, rape, extortion, and involuntary servitude are common at the bottom of the prison hierarchy. Beyond guard-on-inmate abuse, Somalia continues to permit corporal punishment and the routine use of shackles and chains, and women prisoners remain particularly vulnerable to custodial sexual abuse — a risk that increases further in the aftermath of riots or escape attempts.

Overcrowding, prevalent in almost every Somali prison, underlies many of the worst conditions documented here, and is most acute in smaller pre-trial facilities and in areas under Al-Shabaab control, where a large share of the country's roughly 120,000 detainees are held. Mogadishu Central Prison, built during the colonial era and designed for 400 to 500 prisoners, now holds more than three times that number — one of many old, poorly maintained facilities that also lack functional plumbing, a problem OPR notes is not unique to Somalia.

These conditions are sufficiently deficient, in short, to constitute cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment under ICCPR Article 7 and to fall well short of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners — rules that, while incorporated into many countries' prison laws, are rarely observed in full anywhere.

The U.S. State Department's 2013 country and religious-freedom reports both noted that Al-Shabaab operated dilapidated detention centres in areas under its control, holding an unknown number of “religious prisoners and detainees.” Amnesty International reported in October 2014 that Al-Shabaab imprisons people for offences as minor as smoking or listening to music under its interpretation of Sharia law, with torture and punishments including stoning, public whipping, and amputation, and an increase in beheadings and abductions since 2013.

> *Al-Shabaab regularly captures and imprisons people suspected of activities against their interpretation of Shar'ia law. It is said that thousands are imprisoned for minor offences such as smoking, listening to music and engaging in other leisure activities. Torture and other ill-treatment such as stoning, public whipping and amputation are used as punishment. — Amnesty International, October 2014*

In 2020, Voice of America reported that Somali security forces shot dead four Al-Shabaab-affiliated inmates during a gun battle at Mogadishu Central Prison after inmates obtained smuggled pistols and hand grenades; three prison guards were also killed, two further inmates were wounded and recaptured, and one inmate reportedly escaped.

Recommendations & Path Forward

Based on this report's findings, the following recommendations address the documented violations and systemic challenges in Mogadishu's prisons and Somalia's correctional system more broadly, aligned with Somalia's obligations under the ICCPR, CAT, the Nelson Mandela Rules, and the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

Immediate Priorities (0–6 Months)

- → Medical Emergency Response: establish a dedicated TB isolation ward with proper ventilation, procure sufficient TB medication, deploy additional medical staff, establish 24-hour clinic operations, and procure emergency first-aid equipment with trained staff.
- → Gender Segregation & Women's Safety: immediately separate the roughly 80 women prisoners from the male population; establish protocols to prevent custodial sexual abuse and provide trauma-informed care for survivors; accelerate release of low-risk female pretrial detainees where space is unavailable.
- → Guard Staffing: recruit and deploy at least 50 additional guards to move toward a minimum 1:30 ratio (from the current approximately 1:150); ban corporal punishment and shackling outright and remove existing chains and leg shackles.
- → Sanitation & Water: repair or replace broken plumbing, ensure 24-hour access to clean drinking water, and establish a daily sanitation and disinfection schedule for communal areas.
- → Food & Nutrition: increase food rations to meet minimum caloric requirements, procure vitamin supplements, and establish sanitary kitchen operations with trained food-preparation staff.

Medium-Term Actions (6–12 Months)

- → Overcrowding & Capacity Analysis: audit the prisoner population and security classifications, and develop an evidence-based capacity-reduction strategy including accelerated release of low-risk pretrial detainees and community-based alternatives.
- → Independent Monitoring: establish an independent prison monitoring mechanism with authority for unannounced visits, grant access to international observers (ICRC, UN) and civil society, and establish a formal, protected complaint system.
- → Staff Training: develop mandatory training on use-of-force restrictions, emergency protocols, prisoner rights, and trauma-informed care; establish regular salary payment and performance incentives; implement psychological screening for guards.
- → Medical Infrastructure: install functional laboratory equipment with qualified technicians, establish ultrasound and radiographic imaging protocols, procure reliable ambulance transport with trained paramedics, and develop formal hospital-referral protocols.

- → Legal Framework Implementation: finalise and enforce a revised Penal Code with torture prohibitions, ensure passage of the Sexual Offences Bill, and establish protocols for recording and investigating abuse allegations.

Long-Term Strategic Actions (1–3 Years)

- → Prison Infrastructure Reconstruction: develop a master plan to rebuild Mogadishu Central Prison to modern standards (target capacity 500–750), with gender-segregated housing, medical facilities, educational space, and outdoor areas, seeking international funding and technical assistance.
- → Community-Based Alternatives: establish formal bail/bond systems, day-reporting centres, electronic monitoring, and community service options, targeting a reduction in the pretrial population from 1,134 to fewer than 300 within three years.
- → Prisoner Rehabilitation & Reintegration: expand vocational training to reach 60 percent of the prisoner population, establish restorative-justice programmes, mental health counselling, and substance-abuse treatment, and develop job-placement and housing support for released prisoners.
- → Ombudsman & Accountability: establish an independent Prison Ombudsman Office with statutory investigative authority, a tracking system for abuse allegations with real consequences for substantiated violations, and prisoner grievance committees.
- → Sustainable Funding & Partnership: secure multi-year funding commitments from international donors, establish technical partnerships with regional prison systems and international experts, and create a dedicated prison-reform budget within the justice ministry.

Conclusion

This Situational Report documents systematic and widespread violations of prisoners' human rights in Mogadishu's detention facilities. The evidence presented — drawn from government data, international monitoring reports, and field assessment — establishes that conditions in Somali prisons violate international human rights law, including ICCPR Article 7's prohibition on torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

Overcrowding, disease, systematic abuse, and neglect are not inevitable features of imprisonment in a developing country — they are policy failures demanding urgent remediation. Mogadishu Central Prison, holding 1,540 convicted prisoners in a colonial-era facility designed for 400 to 500, represents an acute crisis in need of immediate intervention.

The Federal Republic of Somalia has shown commitment to prison reform through legislative initiatives — the ongoing Penal Code review and the Sexual Offences Bill — and through UNODC-supported infrastructure investment in Somaliland and Puntland (Garowe, Bosaso, and Hargeisa). These efforts are genuine and should be recognised. They remain, however, insufficient to address the scale of the crisis in Mogadishu and nationally.

The international community, particularly UNODC and bilateral partners, has shown real willingness to support reform, with tangible results: modern facilities, trained staff, and improved conditions where investment has occurred. This support needs to be expanded, sustained, and scaled to close the gap in Mogadishu and other federal facilities.

Most critically, the Government of Somalia must prioritise prison reform within its own National Development Plan, allocate adequate budget resources, and empower independent oversight. External support alone cannot substitute for domestic political will.

No prisoner should be without rights. This is not a slogan but an international legal obligation Somalia has voluntarily assumed through its ratification of the ICCPR, CAT, and other instruments. The dignity, health, and safety of prisoners — regardless of their crimes — is a measure of a society's justice system and its commitment to human rights.

OPR remains committed to monitoring conditions, documenting violations, and advocating for reform, and calls on government, civil society, international partners, and the prisoners and families whose lives depend on change to act on the findings and recommendations in this report.

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Mogadishu, Somalia · August 2022 · www.opr.org.so