

Response

Somalia: Vulnerability – minority groups, weak clans and vulnerable individuals

Issue/question:

- What groups and individuals are vulnerable in the current situation?

General information about vulnerability, vulnerable groups and vulnerable individuals¹

The term ‘vulnerability’ is unclear. It covers everything from economic marginalisation to physical abuse, and varies with the economic, social, cultural and security-related conditions in a given geographical area. According to Somali traditions, weak groups – i.e. women, children, the sick, the elderly, the disabled, religious men, unarmed and neutral groups, prisoners of war, travellers etc. – shall not be attacked but protected during conflicts (ICRC 1998). Both during and after the civil war, however, protection of these groups has been weakened, and the tradition is far less respected today.

In the present situation, vulnerability in Somalia is closely linked to clan or group affiliation, the presence or absence of conflict and the power situation in the area in question. However, individuals can also find themselves in a vulnerable position because of their political or ideological views.

Minority groups

In 2008, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights described the situation for Somali minorities as follows:

Discrimination against minorities and persons with disabilities was also consistently reported, by recently asylum-seekers to Dadaab and in Somaliland. Social constraints put obstacles to inter-marriage, access to work is restricted to traditional jobs – normally those enjoying the lowest social status and pay. In a context of total breakdown of law and order, lack of protection from clans detracts them even from this shelter provided by customary law (OHCHR 2008).

¹ See also Landinfo 2009

This situation remains unchanged. In his report from February 2009, the UN's Independent Expert on the human rights situation in Somalia underlines that conditions for minorities are difficult (UN Human Rights Council 2009). A lack of understanding and, to some extent, racist attitudes characterise many people's views of these groups, who have traditionally had low status in Somali society. The Islamist groups, including al-Shabaab, therefore represent something positive to people who belong to a minority, since clan affiliation is not a criterion for social status and protection. Moreover, the strict law enforcement in areas controlled by the Islamists prevents the crime that for years has affected these groups in particular (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009). Consequently, in regions such as the Lower Shabelle, we note that the minorities support al-Shabaab.

While, in June 2008, several of Landinfo's interlocutors pointed out that everyone is affected by the ongoing conflict – grenades and bombs do not discriminate between people – one well-informed observer underlined that minorities such as Midgan, unlike other groups that find themselves in the crossfire between the rebels and the government forces, do not have alternative places to stay in Somalia. However, another international source reported that minorities who are forced to leave their homes due to difficult security conditions will endeavour to establish a client relationship to a host clan in their new place of residence (interview in Nairobi, June 2008). But this strategy only applies to Midgan and Bantu groups, who have traditionally had this type of affiliation to local Somali clans, not to Rer Hamar or other Benadir groups. In many cases, however, these groups have established protective relationships through marriages or by making payments.

The situation for the Bantus in the Hiraan region deteriorated during 2007-2008, according to one international organisation (interview, June 2008). The fears that the large clans would be attracted by the relatively good conditions for agriculture that the Bantus had enjoyed until 2007 (interview March 2007) proved to be well-founded. The local clans moved in with heavy agricultural machinery, and the Bantu population no longer had access to their irrigation equipment, for example. According to well-informed local and international sources, the current situation is more complex. There are armed Bantu groups in the Juba valley and elsewhere, and, in addition, the Bantu population is being armed and used by local clans in conflicts (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009).

Weak clans

In a conversation with Landinfo in Nairobi in March 2009, a representative of an international organisation stated that all groups or clans that are outnumbered and lack military strength in their area of residence can be characterised as minorities and at risk of abuse in a conflict situation. However, another well-informed international source gave the impression that no particular groups are especially vulnerable in the current situation, but that the difficult humanitarian situation affects large parts of the population. As an example, the source in question informed us that the population of the Badhaade district (and the neighbouring district) in Lower Juba share three watering holes that are meant to supply everyone with water, including livestock.²

² Approximately 32,000 people live in the rural districts in the Badhaade region (FSAU 2009).

Vulnerable individuals

As in 2008, journalists, human rights activists and others who express opinions still risk threats or being killed. The same situation applies to persons associated with the transitional government, including police officers, security personnel and others perceived to be supporters of the authorities. Both international and local aid workers have also been targeted in attacks. We have also seen examples of leading figures and other members of al-Shabaab being killed (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009). Unlike in 2008, however, it is no longer common to kill relatives who are seen as supporting the opposition.

Women

The situation for women has also deteriorated. In areas controlled by al-Shabaab, women who do not comply with the prescribed dress-code are harassed, and restrictions have been imposed on women's opportunity to appear in public. In minibuses, women have to sit at the back. Women also sell khat and, in Baidoa in the Bay region, al-Shabaab has assigned them to stalls outside town. Several Somali observers see this as part of a campaign to remove women from public life and to prevent the sale and use of khat (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009). As women are often the main breadwinners, al-Shabaab's orders cause problems for families that are dependent on women's income.

A response consists of answers to specific questions presented to Landinfo by case workers within the Norwegian immigration authorities. Responses are not intended to provide exhaustive reviews of a topic or theme, but should answer the specific questions posed and include relevant background information.

References

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