

Response

Somalia: Vulnerability, minority groups, weak clans and individuals at risk

Topics/questions:

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

General information about vulnerability, vulnerable groups and individuals at risk

The concept of vulnerability is unclear. It encompasses everything from economic marginalisation to physical abuse, and it varies depending on the economic, social, cultural and security conditions in a given geographical area. According to Somali tradition, disadvantaged groups – women, children, sick, elderly, disabled, clergy, unarmed and neutral groups, prisoners, travellers, etc. – must not be attacked, but protected in conflicts (ICRC 1998).

Both during and after the civil war in 1991-92, however, the protection of these groups has been weakened, and this tradition is followed to a much lesser extent today.

In the current situation vulnerability in Somalia is closely connected with the absence or presence of conflict, the distribution of power at the place of origin or residence, and, to a lesser extent, clan or group affiliation. However, individuals can also be in a vulnerable position, because of their political or ideological convictions, both within and outside the Shabaab-controlled areas.

Minority groups

Both the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN independent expert on the human rights situation in Somalia have described the situation of Somali minorities¹ as difficult in respectively 2008 and 2009 (OHCHR, 2008, UNHCR 2009). In his 2010 report, however, the independent UN expert says that "Al Shabaab appeared to be operating beyond the traditional clan system in Somalia by accommodating minorities that lacked the protection

¹ In this response, the concept of minority group is used for both the non-ethnic Somali groups such as the Jareer (Bantu) and the Benadir groups and also professional and low status groups such as the Midgan, Yibir and Tumul.

of the major clans" (UNHCR 2010). Many of today's Shabaab militants belong to marginalised minority groups and politically/militarily weak clans.

Shabaab apparently represents something positive for many with minority background (affiliation), because clan affiliation is not a criterion for social status and protection. The strict enforcement of Islamic law in the Shabaab-areas is also preventing crime, which for years has not least affected these groups (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009, March 2010 and March 2011).

We are therefore seeing members of minority groups supporting Shabaab, according to various international representatives and Somali experts (interviews in Nairobi, March 2011). This does not mean that the majority population's views on minorities have fundamentally changed. Lack of understanding, and sometimes racist attitudes, are still perceptible in many people's views on these groups, which have traditionally had a low status in Somali society. This could in Landinfo's assessment also colour the opinions of various sources on who actually supports Shabaab. The absence of systematic, objective monitoring of the situation in southern Somalia is also a challenge in many areas.

While several of Landinfo's interlocutors in the last few years have pointed out that everyone has been affected by the ongoing conflict - grenades and bombs do not differentiate - a well-informed observer has stressed that minorities such as the Midgan, in contrast to others who are in the crossfire between insurgents and Government forces, do not have alternative places to stay in Somalia. Another international source has stated that those minorities who are forced to leave their homes because of the difficult security conditions will try to establish a client relationship with a host clan at their new abode (interviews in Nairobi, June 2008).

This strategy is adopted, however, by the Midgan and Bantu groups, which have traditionally had such a connection with local Somali clans, not by the Rer Hamar or other Benadir groups. These groups, on the other hand, have in many cases established protective arrangements through marriage or through payment.

The situation of the Bantu in Hiraan region deteriorated during 2007/2008. The current situation, according to well-informed local and international sources, is more complex. Shabaab is in control despite the TFG offensive in major areas, including the Juba Valley. Clan or group affiliation means less for the Islamist groups, and there are armed Bantu groups in for instance the Juba Valley (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009, March 2010 and March 2011).

Weak clans

In conversation with Landinfo in Nairobi in March 2009 a representative of an international organisation indicated that all groups or clans who are outnumbered and lacking military strength in the area where they live can be categorised as minorities and may be subjected to abuse in a conflict situation. Another well-informed international source then stated that no specific groups were particularly vulnerable, but that the difficult humanitarian situation was affecting large parts of the population. The situation has not changed substantially since then. In Mogadishu and other conflict zones civilians are in the crossfire between the warring parties, regardless of clan or group affiliation. Shabaab sympathies and support for the Islamists have given minorities and other local clans the opportunity to seize power

(interviews in Nairobi, March 2009, March 2010 and March 2011). The position may prove to be fatal if the tables are turned .

Exposed individuals

Fewer politically motivated assassinations and fewer kidnappings have been reported in the last few years. The decline may be due to changes in tactics, but it could also be a result of the fact that people have become more vigilant. Government and parliament members, journalists, human rights activists and other prominent opponents of Shabaab still run a certain risk. Most government members and parliamentarians, however, keep outside Shabaab areas and are affected more rarely. Suspicion of espionage in Shabaab-areas may have fatal consequences. Shabaab has an effective monitoring and intelligence apparatus (interviews with a Somali expert in Nairobi, 26 March 2009; interviews with Somali and international experts in Nairobi, March 2010 and March 2011; Garowe Online 2010).

Shabaab monitors accessroads to the cities and towns and records all newcomers, and in areas where Shabaab are not deeply rooted and lacks support, they are extra alert and at worst kill strangers whom they suspect in any way.

International and local aid workers are targets of attack, but, because of the requirements Shabaab has imposed on international organisations, international aid workers have been banned from Shabaab-controlled areas for a long time (interviews in Nairobi in March 2009, March 2010 and March 2011). Because of the drought and the very serious humanitarian crisis that has developed in parts of southern Somalia, Shabaab has now changed its approach and is allowing emergency aid (RBC Radio 2011).

Ordinary citizens who comply with Shabaab's orders and do not challenge them in terms of ideology or way of life have no problems with Shabaab. If you have at some point broken an order, such as the ban on the sale or rental of videos, you could have problems with the local Shabaab administration. But in the current situation, according to several well-informed international representatives and Somalis, it is unlikely that the movement will devote resources to look for a person who moves elsewhere in the country. If that person is arrested by Shabaab in his or her new home, he or she could have problems. The question that could be asked is whether people who leave a Shabaab area are actually choosing to travel to another.

In areas where Shabaab is in control threats against people who breach their orders occur more often than in areas where the movement is under pressure (this is connected with the fact that few people dare to challenge the movement in areas where they are well established). Threats are made by phone, sms or indirectly through acquaintances. If the offender returns to compliance with the code of conduct, he or she is at no risk of a reaction, in contrast to those who do not conform (interviews in Nairobi, March 2011).

If the leaders of Shabaab have already decided to get an opponent out of the way, on the other hand, that person will receive no threats or warnings in advance.

Women

The freedom of movement of women is restricted in Shabaab-controlled areas. Those who do not comply with the organisation's strict dress code are at risk of harassment, and there are

restrictions on women's rights to show themselves in public without being accompanied by their husband or another male family member.

In mini-buses women must sit at the back. Some women sell khat, and in Baidoa in Bay region Shabaab has allocated sales to retail outlets outside the city. As many Somali observers see it, this has two purposes: to remove women from the public sphere and to prevent the sale and use of khat (interviews in Nairobi, March 2009). Because women are often the main breadwinners, this order of Shabaab is creating problems for those families that depend on women's income.

Shabaab must therefore to some extent tolerate that women are visible in the public sphere, although no doubt preferring women to be in the home. According to several of Landinfo's interlocutors in Nairobi in March 2011, Shabaab expects that women aged 13 to 35 will obey the rules, whereas they can be less restrictive with older women.

The majority of the female refugees Landinfo talked with in the Dadaab camps in Kenya in the spring of 2010 pointed out that the stricter dress code was one of the reasons why they left Somalia. The demand of al-Shabaab is that the cloth used for the hijab must be much rougher/heavier than what Somali women usually wear, in order to hide the shape of the female body. In some areas, women are not allowed to wear a bra, and in other areas women are, for example, required to use red socks when they are menstruating. Shabaab replaces the administration in areas they control every three months, and each new administration introduces new rules. These rules force women to buy new clothes or fabric and therefore help to provide the administration and the movement with much-needed income (interviews in Nairobi, March 2011).

Women react because of economic reasons but also because clothes made of heavier fabric feel strange and are uncomfortable to wear in the hot climate.

The Country of Origin Information Centre (Landinfo) is an independent body that collects and analyses information on current human rights situations and issues in foreign countries. It provides the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (Utlendingsdirektoratet – UDI), Norway's Immigration Appeals Board (Utlendingsnemnda – UNE) and the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and the Police with the information they need to perform their functions.

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.

Landinfo's responses are not intended to suggest what Norwegian immigration authorities should do in individual cases; nor do they express official Norwegian views on the issues and countries analysed in them.

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