

SOMALIA



Capital: Mogadishu
Population: 9 million
Borders with: Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti
Major religion: Islam
Major language: Somali, Arabic, Italian, English
Colonised, occupied or administered by: Italy, Britain
Why people flee: Widespread conflict, attacks on civilians, detention without trial, threat of torture, suppression of human rights groups, food shortages

FIFTEEN FAST FACTS ABOUT SOMALIA

- Since the overthrow of President Siad Barre in 1991, Somalia has lacked an effective, coherent central government. The opposing clans responsible for the overthrow of President Barre were unable to agree on a replacement, which led to escalating conflict and lawlessness. The resulting struggle for power combined with famine and disease have led to the death of up to one million people since 1991.
- After the collapse of the Siad Barre regime, the north-west part of Somalia unilaterally declared itself the independent Republic of Somaliland. The territory has been relatively stable, although its independence is not recognised by international bodies.



- In 2000, representatives of the leading clans set up a transitional government with the aim of reconciling the warring militias. This administration had only limited success and in 2004, after talks between leading politicians and warlords, was replaced by an UN-backed interim government known as the Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

- Before the new administration could impose its authority, it was faced with the rise of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in the capital Mogadishu and the south of the country. The ICU emerged from a judicial system funded by a powerful business community and compromised the authority of the TFG as its supporting militias gained control over areas previously under the authority of warlords.

- The ICU's links to Eritrea and opposition groups in Ethiopia prompted the Ethiopian government to provide military backing for forces seeking to wrest control back from the ICU in late 2006. Opposition clan-based groups and militias that had emerged out of the ICU fought back against TFG and Ethiopian armed forces. The most prominent of these militias was Al-Shabab ('youth') militias, which later declared allegiance to Al-Qaeda. The ensuing conflict forced an estimated 60% of Mogadishu residents to flee their homes and the Islamist insurgents regained control of most of southern Somalia by late 2008. In January 2009, Ethiopia pulled its military forces out of Somalia.

- In late January 2009, Somalia's parliament met in Djibouti and swore in 149 new members from the main opposition movement, the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia. The parliament extended the mandate of the transitional federal government for another two years, and appointed moderate Islamist Sheikh Sharif Ahmad as the new president.

- However, the government's military position weakened further. From May 2009 Islamist insurgents launched attacks on Mogadishu displacing over a quarter of a million people.

- Throughout this period, civilians have been at risk of being indiscriminately attacked by all the warring parties. In Mogadishu all factions have been implicated in war crimes or serious human rights abuses, such as torture, rape and disproportionate attacks on civilian areas.

- In 2008, Human Rights Watch concluded that the human rights and humanitarian situation had 'deteriorated to levels perhaps unseen since 1991'. In January 2010, fighting and general insecurity displaced an estimated 63,000



people. In Mogadishu alone, clashes between government forces and Al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam militias displaced 14,000 people in just two weeks.

- Much of the country is under the control of local administrations linked to armed opposition groups. In many areas, the population has suffered abusive application of sharia law; use of civilians as human shields; and forced conscription of civilians, including children, as militia fighters. In 2007 and 2008, more than 16,000 civilians were killed. In 2007, hundreds of civilians were arrested and detained without charge.
- Many independent media outlets were closed in 2007 amid claims that their broadcasts were inciting violence and journalists were detained for long periods without charge. All warring factions have been implicated in threats directed at journalists who produce reporting they do not like.
- Throughout 2007 and 2008, there were an increasing number of attacks on human rights defenders and members of civil society organisations. In October 2007 the TFG ordered the closing of one of Somalia's oldest human rights organisations, Elman Human Rights, for 'security reasons' and in a nine-month period in 2008, more than 40 Somali human rights defenders were killed. Attacks targeting human rights defenders decreased in 2009, in part reflecting the fact that many prominent activists have now fled the country.
- The humanitarian crisis brought about by successive years of drought in the region has been exacerbated by the conflict. Roughly half of Somalia's remaining population are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. However due to the general insecurity and targeted threats, most humanitarian agencies have had to dramatically reduce their operations or been driven out of south-central Somalia altogether. In opposition-controlled areas, humanitarian agencies have come under regular threat by Al-Shabab and other groups who accuse them of colluding with international efforts to back the TFG in its war effort.
- Somalia is one of the countries generating the highest number of displaced people in the world. 1.4 million people are internally displaced within Somalia and over 560,000 people are living as refugees in neighbouring countries, mainly in camps in Kenya (309,000), Yemen (163,000) and Ethiopia (59,000).
- From 2000 to 2009, 33,170 Somali nationals (not including dependents) applied for sanctuary in the UK, the third largest national group in that period. In 2009, 39% of initial decisions on Somali claims resulted in grants of refugee status. In the same



year, 47% of appeals determined on Somali cases were allowed. These are very high success levels compared to other countries of origin (the equivalent rates for Afghans were 5% of initial decisions resulting in grants of refugee status, 21% of appeals allowed). There is also secondary migration of Somalis within the EU, as people who have received refugee status and later citizenship in other EU countries, migrate to the UK as EU citizens to join relatives.

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CHECK OUT OUR SOURCES

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