

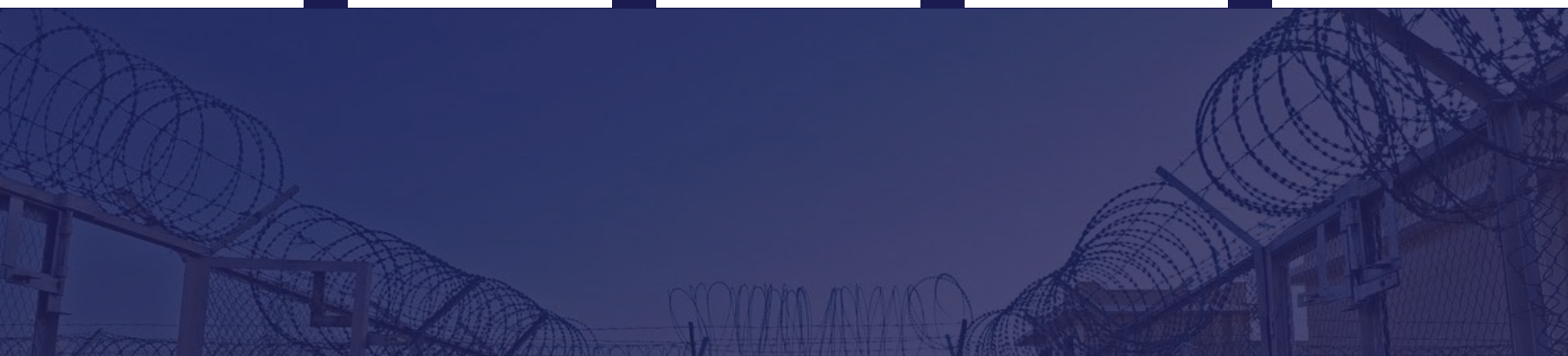


**ORGANIZATION FOR
PRISONERS' RIGHTS**

SOMALIA'S PRISONS IN CRISIS

EVIDENCE FROM NINE PRISONS AND DETENTION FACILITIES

An Advocacy-Oriented Policy and Documentation Report



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DISCLAIMER

This report was prepared by the Organization for Prisoners' Rights (OPR), an independent and nonpartisan human rights organization dedicated to advancing justice, accountability, and the protection of prisoners' rights in Somalia. The findings presented in this report are based on field research, interviews, observations, policy dialogues, and analysis conducted across multiple prisons and detention facilities in Somalia.

The purpose of this report is to document prison conditions, highlight systemic challenges within Somalia's penal system, and advocate for reforms aligned with Somalia's constitutional obligations and international human rights standards. The report does not seek to interfere with lawful criminal proceedings, but rather to promote humane detention conditions, due process, rehabilitation, and accountability.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Somalia's prison system remains one of the least examined yet most critical components of the country's justice and security sector. Across the country, prisons and detention facilities suffer from overcrowding, poor sanitation, inadequate healthcare, arbitrary detention, weak oversight, corruption, and a near-total absence of rehabilitation services. Vulnerable groups, including minors, women, individuals from minority clans, and people with mental health conditions, are particularly exposed to abuse and neglect.

This report examines conditions in nine prisons and detention facilities across Somalia, including Mogadishu Central Prison (MCP), Mogadishu Prison and Courts Complex (MPCC), Baidoa Central Prison, Samareb Prison, Adado Prison, South Galkacyo Prison, Beletweyne Prison, Jowhar Central Prison, and Warshiekh Detention Facility. The research draws on interviews with approximately 200 inmates and 25 prison staff members, in addition to focus group discussions, policy dialogue sessions, community interviews, and direct observations.

The findings reveal that Somalia's prisons are functioning not only as detention centers for criminal offenders, but also as substitutes for missing social welfare, rehabilitation, and mental health institutions. A significant proportion of inmates are imprisoned for family-related disputes, disobedience, substance use, or issues handled through customary and clan-based systems rather than formal criminal justice mechanisms.

The report documents widespread violations of international human rights standards, including prolonged pretrial detention, lack of legal representation, arbitrary imprisonment, detention of children alongside adults, denial of healthcare, and indefinite detention linked to unpaid compensation or clan negotiations.

Although Somalia has initiated penal reform efforts aimed at modernizing the justice system and improving prison infrastructure, progress remains slow and uneven. Without meaningful institutional reforms, improved oversight, rehabilitation programs, and stronger legal protections, prisons risk becoming spaces that deepen criminality, radicalization, social exclusion, and human suffering.



This report calls on Somali authorities, international partners, civil society organizations, and justice sector institutions to prioritize comprehensive prison reform grounded in human rights, accountability, rehabilitation, and dignity.



ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This report was researched and prepared with the contribution of prisoners, prison staff, community members, legal professionals, human rights defenders, and civil society actors who shared their experiences and insights despite difficult circumstances.

Special acknowledgment is extended to Ismail Abukar, Co-founder and Chairperson of the Organization for Prisoners' Rights (OPR), whose leadership, field research, advocacy, and commitment to justice and prisoners' rights played a central role in the development of this report.

The Organization for Prisoners' Rights (OPR) also acknowledges the courage of detainees and vulnerable individuals whose testimonies continue to shed light on conditions often hidden from public scrutiny.

INTRODUCTION

Prisons are central institutions within the rule of law and the broader justice system. In conflict-affected countries such as Somalia, prisons are expected to provide secure detention while also supporting rehabilitation, accountability, and public safety. However, prison systems operating in fragile contexts are often shaped by political instability, weak institutions, limited resources, customary justice practices, and ongoing insecurity.

This report contributes to the growing discussion on prison reform in Somalia by examining the realities facing inmates and prison staff across multiple detention facilities. It explores how communities experience imprisonment, justice, punishment, and rehabilitation within Somalia's complex legal and social environment.

The report argues that meaningful prison reform in Somalia requires more than infrastructure projects or security-focused interventions. Sustainable reform must address underlying structural problems, including arbitrary detention, lack of due process, weak healthcare systems, inadequate rehabilitation services, overcrowding, corruption, and the detention of vulnerable groups.

The findings further demonstrate that Somalia's prisons are increasingly being used as substitutes for missing social institutions, including mental health facilities, youth rehabilitation centers, and community-based dispute resolution mechanisms.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on qualitative field research conducted across ten prisons and detention facilities in Somalia. The research included:

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|---|---|
| I. Interviews with approximately 200 inmates | IV. Focus group discussions |
| II. Interviews with 25 prison staff members | V. Policy dialogue sessions |
| III. Community interviews | VI. Direct observations within prison facilities |

The facilities covered in this report include:

<i>I. Mogadishu Central Prison (MCP)</i>	<i>V. Adado Prison</i>
<i>II. Mogadishu Prison and Courts Complex (MPCC)</i>	<i>VI. South Galkacyo Prison</i>
<i>III. Baidoa Central Prison</i>	<i>VII. Beletweyne Prison</i>
<i>IV. Samareb Prison</i>	<i>VIII. Jowhar Central Prison</i>
<i>IX. Warshiekh Detention Facility</i>	



The research focused on prison conditions, access to justice, healthcare, inmate classification, rehabilitation efforts, vulnerable populations, and perceptions of prison reform.

Due to security challenges, institutional restrictions, and the absence of comprehensive prison records, some data relied heavily on interviews and observational findings. Nevertheless, recurring patterns across facilities provided strong evidence of systemic challenges affecting Somalia's prison system.

All interviews were conducted with consideration for confidentiality and the safety of participants.

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Somalia is bound by both domestic and international legal obligations concerning the treatment of prisoners and detainees.

This report draws upon the following standards:

- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
- The Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
- The Convention on The Rights of The Child (CRC)
- The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
- The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for The Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules)
- The Bangkok Rules on The Treatment of Women Prisoners

These instruments establish protections against arbitrary detention, torture, prolonged pretrial detention, inhumane prison conditions, denial of medical care, and the detention of children alongside adults.

The findings of this report indicate that many detention practices in Somalia fall short of these obligations.

PRISON CONDITIONS

Despite ongoing prison reform efforts aimed at improving detention conditions, the majority of inmates interviewed raised serious concerns regarding living standards inside Somali prisons.

Healthcare and Medical Services

Access to healthcare emerged as one of the most urgent concerns across nearly all facilities. Prisoners consistently reported inadequate or nonexistent medical services, poor nutrition, and lack of access to clean water.

One inmate stated:

“There is no healthcare at all in here. The food and water are poor quality. Life is very difficult in here.”

Prison staff acknowledged that health complaints were among the most common grievances raised by inmates. Although some international organizations had previously supported healthcare initiatives inside prisons, such support was described as inconsistent and unsustainable.

Hygiene and Overcrowding

Poor sanitation and overcrowding were widespread across the facilities examined. Many inmates lacked access to soap, detergent, and basic hygiene supplies.

Several prisoners described being held in overcrowded cells shared with more than 50 inmates, creating serious health risks and facilitating the spread of disease.

One inmate explained:

“As long as I am in prison, I will never feel good.”

Dependence on Family Support

Family members play a critical role in sustaining prisoners inside Somali detention facilities. Most inmates relied on relatives to provide food, medicine, hygiene products, and financial assistance during prison visits.

Prisoners without family support, particularly those from minority clans or remote regions, faced heightened vulnerability and neglect.

One inmate from Mogadishu stated:

"If you don't have any family, or if you are from a minority clan, you are in trouble."

Institutional Weaknesses

The research found that many prisons lacked proper inmate records, medical documentation, or standard health screening procedures. In some facilities, prison staff had limited literacy skills, undermining effective administration and record-keeping.

Limited interaction between prison staff and inmates further reduced the ability to identify urgent welfare or protection concerns.

CLASSIFICATION AND SEPARATION OF PRISONERS

One of the most alarming findings of this report is the failure to properly classify and separate prisoners.

In many facilities, children, low-risk offenders, individuals accused of minor offenses, and people detained for family-related "rehabilitation" purposes were housed alongside convicted murderers, violent offenders, and alleged Al-Shabaab members.

Rehabilitation Inmates

A significant proportion of prisoners interviewed were so-called "rehabilitation inmates." These individuals were often imprisoned following family complaints involving:

◦ <i>Disobedience</i> ◦ <i>Smoking cigarettes</i> ◦ <i>Chewing khat</i>	◦ <i>Drinking alcohol</i> ◦ Family disputes ◦ Attempts to migrate abroad
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Many of these inmates had not committed offenses recognized under formal criminal law.

At the time of the research, OPR estimated that approximately one-third of inmates were imprisoned for family-related rehabilitation purposes.



One inmate imprisoned for chewing khat stated:

"The inmates are all in one place and it is scary to be with the murderers."

Risks of Radicalization and Abuse

The mixing of vulnerable detainees with hardened criminals creates significant risks of abuse, criminal contamination, and radicalization.

Prison staff themselves expressed concern that prisons were exposing minors and low-risk offenders to violent criminal networks and extremist influences.

VULNERABLE GROUPS

Children and Young Offenders

Children and young detainees are particularly vulnerable within Somalia's prison system. The report found cases where minors accused of minor offenses were detained alongside adults convicted of violent crimes or terrorism-related offenses.

The absence of juvenile rehabilitation centers has resulted in prisons becoming the default destination for many children.

Women Prisoners

Women detained for "disobedience" or family-related disputes face heightened stigma and vulnerability. Several cases involved women imprisoned after attempting to leave home or migrate abroad.

The lack of gender-sensitive facilities and psychosocial support increases the risks faced by women prisoners.

Minority Clan Inmates

Prisoners from minority clans frequently lacked family support, financial assistance, and protection inside detention facilities.

Many remained in prison longer because they lacked the clan influence or resources needed to negotiate compensation agreements.

Prisoners With Mental Health Conditions

Mental illness remains severely neglected within Somalia's prison system. Most facilities lacked trained mental health professionals, treatment programs, or specialized institutions.

Prison staff reported concerns that inmates suffering from mental illness often deteriorated further while incarcerated.

ACCESS TO JUSTICE

The findings of this report reveal widespread concerns regarding arbitrary detention, corruption, prolonged pretrial detention, and lack of due process.

Prolonged Detention Without Trial

Several inmates reported remaining in prison for years without receiving a formal trial.

Some detainees on remand stated that they had spent as long as seven years in prison without judicial resolution.

Family-Controlled Detention

Many rehabilitation inmates described imprisonment as effectively controlled by family or clan negotiations.

One inmate explained:

"I have no idea when I will be released. It depends on when my family and clan want to release me."

Corruption and Inequality

Respondents frequently described corruption, bribery, and unequal treatment within the justice system.

One community representative stated:

"The justice system is very much like a prepaid phone. If you want justice, you have to pay beforehand."



Compensation and Indefinite Detention

Many inmates remained imprisoned because they could not pay financial compensation, fines, or customary “blood money” agreements.

As a result, economically disadvantaged prisoners often remained incarcerated even after completing their formal sentences.

REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION

Rehabilitation efforts within Somali prisons remain extremely limited.

Although prison staff and community members generally supported rehabilitation programs, most facilities lacked educational opportunities, vocational training, recreational activities, and psychosocial support.

Lack of Rehabilitation Programs

The report found that prolonged detention, overcrowding, poor living conditions, and lack of activities contributed to anger, hopelessness, and deteriorating mental health among inmates.

Several prison staff members expressed concern that prisons were reinforcing criminal behavior rather than reducing it.

Need for Education and Skills Training

Many inmates strongly supported vocational training and educational programs.

However, rehabilitation initiatives remained heavily dependent on international support and were often inconsistent due to funding shortages and weak infrastructure.

PENAL REFORM EFFORTS IN SOMALIA

Somalia's ongoing penal reform efforts seek to replace the outdated 1962 Penal Code with legislation aligned with international human rights standards, Sharia principles, and Somalia's constitutional framework.

Key reform priorities include:

- I. Criminalizing modern crimes such as cybercrime and human trafficking

II. Improving prison infrastructure and detention conditions

III. Reducing overcrowding through alternatives to imprisonment

IV. Strengthening rehabilitation and reintegration programs

V. Expanding healthcare and psychosocial services

VI. Training judges, prosecutors, police, and prison staff

VII. Enhancing accountability and oversight mechanisms

International organizations, including the United Nations, European Union, and IDLO, continue to support justice and prison reform initiatives in Somalia.

Civil society organizations, including the Organization for Prisoners' Rights (OPR), also play an important role in documenting abuses and advocating for detainees' rights.

KEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings of this report demonstrate that Somalia's prison system suffers from deep structural weaknesses.

Key findings include:

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|--|---|
| I. Severe overcrowding and poor sanitation | II. Heavy reliance on family and clan structures within detention practices |
| III. Inadequate healthcare and nutrition | IV. Corruption and unequal access to justice |
| V. Arbitrary detention and prolonged pretrial imprisonment | VI. Weak rehabilitation systems |
| VII. Lack of inmate classification and separation | VIII. Lack of mental health services |
| IX. Detention of children alongside adults | X. Dependence on international support for basic prison operations |

The report further finds that Somali prisons are increasingly functioning as substitutes for missing social institutions, including rehabilitation centers, youth support systems, and mental healthcare facilities.

Without meaningful reform, prisons risk contributing to cycles of criminalization, radicalization, social exclusion, and instability.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the challenges identified in this report, Somali authorities and international partners should prioritize the following reforms:

Immediate Reforms

1. Improve prison healthcare services, sanitation, nutrition, and access to clean water.
2. End the detention of children alongside adults.
3. Introduce proper inmate classification and separation systems.
4. Reduce overcrowding through alternatives to imprisonment.
5. Ensure timely trials and reduce prolonged pretrial detention.
6. Expand access to legal aid and legal representation.

Institutional Reforms

7. Establish independent prison oversight and monitoring mechanisms.
8. Improve prison staff training, literacy, and professionalism.
9. Develop standardized prison record systems.
10. Strengthen accountability measures to combat corruption.

Rehabilitation and Social Support

11. Expand vocational training, education, and rehabilitation programs.
12. Establish specialized mental health and rehabilitation facilities.
13. Develop juvenile rehabilitation centers separate from adult prisons.
14. Increase psychosocial support services for inmates.

Legal and Policy Reforms

15. Align prison practices with the Nelson Mandela Rules, ICCPR, CAT, CRC, and the African Charter.
 16. Reform laws and practices enabling arbitrary “rehabilitation detention.”
 17. Strengthen protections against indefinite detention linked to unpaid compensation.
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CALL TO ACTION

The conditions documented in this report demand urgent attention from Somali authorities, Parliament, the judiciary, civil society organizations, religious leaders, and international partners.

Prison reform cannot remain limited to infrastructure projects or security-focused interventions alone. Somalia must build a justice system grounded in human dignity, accountability, rehabilitation, and equal protection under the law.

The continued detention of vulnerable individuals in overcrowded and abusive conditions undermines public trust, weakens the rule of law, and contributes to cycles of violence and instability.

The Government of Somalia, Federal Member States, donors, and international organizations must work together to ensure that prisons are no longer spaces of neglect and suffering, but institutions that uphold justice, rehabilitation, and human rights.

CONCLUSION

Somalia's prison system reflects broader structural weaknesses within the country's justice sector, including limited institutional capacity, corruption, weak oversight, and the continued influence of customary justice mechanisms.

The findings of this report demonstrate that arbitrary detention, overcrowding, poor healthcare, lack of rehabilitation, and denial of due process continue to undermine justice and human dignity across detention facilities.

Meaningful prison reform in Somalia requires more than physical infrastructure improvements. Sustainable progress depends on strengthening the rule of law, protecting fundamental human rights, investing in rehabilitation and mental health services, and ensuring accountability throughout the justice system.

Prisons should not function as warehouses for vulnerable populations or substitutes for failed social institutions. They must become institutions that support rehabilitation, reintegration, justice, and respect for human dignity.

Only through comprehensive reform can Somalia begin to transform its prison system into one that reflects both constitutional principles and international human rights standards.



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