

1969



**ORGANIZATION FOR
PRISONERS' RIGHTS**

1990s

The Disappeared

**Enforced Disappearance in Somalia
Across Three Generations, 1969–2026**

2026



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Organization for Prisoners' Rights (OPR) | Mogadishu, Somalia · 2026 |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article documents the practice of enforced disappearance in Somalia from the establishment of the National Security Service under Siad Barre in 1970 to the present day. It argues that enforced disappearance has functioned, across three distinct political eras, as a deliberate instrument of state and non-state repression — one that destroys not only the individual who disappears but the family and community left waiting for answers that never come.

The article identifies three generations of enforced disappearance in Somalia: the NSS-era disappearances into Godka Jilow and Labaatan Jirow (1969–1991); the warlord-era disappearances driven by clan violence and targeted killings (1991–2006); and the current era of NISA-conducted disappearances and politically motivated incommunicado detention (2006–present).

The article closes with seven specific recommendations to the Federal Government of Somalia, to NISA, to the Somali Parliament, and to international partners. It is published by OPR as part of its ongoing documentation of prisoners' rights conditions in Somalia.

KEY FINDING: Enforced disappearance in Somalia has never been criminalized as a specific offence under Somali law. No individual has ever been prosecuted in Somalia for conducting, ordering, or concealing an enforced disappearance. Somalia has not ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Impunity is total and structural.

I. Opening: The Woman Who Was Not There

On the evening of 26 June 2021, Ikran Tahlil Farah left her home in Mogadishu after receiving a call from a number she did not recognize. Her family watched her get into a car. They did not see her again.

Ikran Tahlil Farah was not a dissident. She was not a journalist or an opposition politician or a civil society activist. She was a senior officer of the National Intelligence and Security Agency — NISA — serving as the head of its cyber security division. If the Somali state had a list of people it was supposed to protect, she was on it.

That she disappeared from that list, apparently at the hands of the institution she served, tells us something essential about the nature of enforced disappearance in Somalia: it is not a tool directed only at enemies. It is a tool directed at inconvenience. At people who know too much. At people whose continued existence creates problems for those with the power to make existence stop.

A former NISA official stated that Ikran may have been in possession of a list of Somali youth sent to Eritrea for military training under a clandestine government program that had attracted significant public scrutiny and outcry. If true, she was disappeared not by an external enemy but by the agency she served — silenced from within, for knowing too much.

Her fate has never been officially accounted for. Her family continues to search for answers. The Somali government has never provided an explanation. As of the publication of this article, Ikran Tahlil Farah is a disappeared person.

She is not the first. She is not the last. She is, however, among the most recent. And her case, taken alongside the fifty-seven years of enforced disappearance documented in this article, tells a story about Somalia that demands to be told in full.

II. What Enforced Disappearance Is

Under international human rights law, an enforced disappearance occurs when a person is arrested, detained, or abducted by agents of the state or by persons acting with the authorization, support, or acquiescence of the state; followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or the concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person; which places such a person outside the protection of the law.

The definition has three elements, all of which must be present. First, a state actor or someone acting with state complicity must be responsible. Second, the detention must be denied or concealed. Third, the person must be placed outside any legal protection. All three elements have been consistently present in the Somali cases documented in this article.

Enforced disappearance is not merely a form of arbitrary detention. It is a distinct crime under international law — recognized as a crime against humanity when practiced systematically, criminalized by the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006), and prohibited under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Somalia has ratified none of these instruments. It has no domestic law criminalizing enforced disappearance as a specific offence.

III. The First Generation: The NSS Era, 1969–1991

The systematic practice of enforced disappearance in Somalia began within months of Siad Barre's coup in October 1969. The Preventive Detention Law of 10 January 1970 provided the legal architecture: any person could be held by the National Security Service for any duration without charge, without trial, and without any obligation to inform the family of the detained person's whereabouts. Habeas corpus was abolished. The legal concept of a disappeared person was, in effect, written into Somali law.

The primary facility for enforced disappearance was Godka Jilocow — the NSS headquarters in Mogadishu's Bondhere district, known as "the Hole." Prisoners were held in underground cells in permanent solitary confinement, without natural light, without communication with family or lawyers, and without any information about the duration of their detention. Families were routinely not informed that their relatives had been taken there.

For the most politically sensitive prisoners — former government officials, military officers, religious leaders, intellectuals — the facility of choice was Labaatan Jirow, near Baidoa: a maximum-security concentration camp where prisoners were held in total isolation, permitted twenty minutes of corridor walking per day, and denied any contact with the outside world. Former Prime Minister Mohamed Ibrahim Egal was held there. General Mohamed Abshir Muse, former Commander of the Somali Police Force, spent twelve years there without trial.

DOCUMENTED CASE: MOHAMED ABSHIR MUSE

Role: Former Commander, Somali Police Force

Arrested: 1969, following Barre's coup

Held: Labaatan Jirow prison, near Baidoa

Duration: Twelve years without charge or trial

Condition: Permanent solitary confinement, no family contact, no medical care, no legal representation

Release: Eventual release following international pressure

Accountability: None. No one was ever prosecuted.

Source: Mahamud M. Yahya, *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, Macalester College; US State Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices, Somalia, 1988.

Amnesty International's 1988 investigation documented a consistent pattern: families of prisoners at Godka Jilcow were not informed of their relatives' detention. When families inquired at NSS offices, they were either told nothing or given false information. Prisoners were held incommunicado for months and years. The deliberate concealment of the prisoner's whereabouts — the definitional element of enforced disappearance — was standard NSS practice.

The scale of NSS-era disappearances cannot be precisely quantified because the NSS kept no public records and independent monitoring was prohibited. What is documented, through survivor testimony and Amnesty International's research, is that the practice was systematic, sustained across the full twenty-one years of Barre's rule, and conducted with the explicit authorization of the government's senior legal and security architecture.

IV. The Second Generation: Warlordism and the Disappeared, 1991–2006

When Siad Barre fled Mogadishu in January 1991, the institutional apparatus of enforced disappearance dissolved. What replaced it was something in some respects more dangerous: the capacity to disappear people distributed across dozens of armed factions, clan militias, and freelance operators, without any central registry, any institutional record, or any single authority to hold accountable.

During the factional fighting of 1991 and 1992, thousands of people were taken by armed factions and never seen again. Some were killed and their bodies disposed of. Some were held as hostages in locations known only to their captors. Some were absorbed into militia structures and lost to their families through a combination of violence, displacement, and the severing of communication networks.

The specific targeting of peace activists and civil society leaders in this period produced a pattern of disappearance that preceded killing: the peace activist Elman Ali Ahmed, before his assassination in 1996, had received threats and was under surveillance. The peace researcher Abdulkadir Yahya Ali, before his murder in 2005, had been warned and had made plans to leave. In both cases, the disappearance of security — the withdrawal of any protection from the state or any armed actor — preceded the disappearance of the person.

“We do not know where he is. We do not know if he is alive. We have asked everyone we can ask. No one tells us anything.”

— Family member of a person who disappeared in Mogadishu, 1992. Account collected by a Somali human rights researcher.

V. The Third Generation: NISA and the New Disappearance, 2006–Present

The establishment of the Transitional Federal Government and the subsequent development of the Federal Government of Somalia brought a new institutional actor into Somalia’s disappearance landscape: the National Intelligence and Security Agency. NISA, which inherited both the physical infrastructure and the institutional culture of Barre’s NSS, has been documented conducting enforced disappearances — arrests without acknowledgement, incommunicado detention in undisclosed locations, and denial of access to family and lawyers — throughout the period of its operation.

The cases documented below represent a fraction of total NISA-conducted disappearances. They are the cases that became visible — where a family member spoke to a journalist, where an organization filed a report, where the disappearance was brief enough to be documented before the person either reappeared or died in custody. The cases that remained fully invisible are, by definition, not in this record.

**D O C U M E N T E D C A S E : M O H A M E D
A B D I W A H A B N U R (A B U J A)**

Role: Journalist, Radio Higs

Detained: February 2020, by NISA officers

Location: Undisclosed NISA facility, Mogadishu

Duration: Nearly five months incommunicado

Circumstances: Detained in retaliation for investigative journalism.

Forced to sign confession under duress. Released,
then re-detained. Family and lawyer denied access.

Outcome: Transferred to military tribunal. Charged with murder
and Al-Shabaab membership. Acquitted of all charges.

Accountability: None. No NISA officer was disciplined or prosecuted.

Source: *Committee to Protect Journalists; Somali Journalists Syndicate;*
US State Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices, 2020.

**D O C U M E N T E D C A S E : I K R A N T A H L I L
F A R A H**

Role: Head of Cyber Security, NISA

Last seen: 26 June 2021, Mogadishu

Circumstances: Left home following call from unknown number.

Entered a vehicle. Never returned.

Government response: No official explanation provided.

No investigation publicly disclosed.

Alleged context: Former NISA official alleged she may have possessed
information about a clandestine government program.

Current status: DISAPPEARED. Fate and whereabouts unknown.

Accountability: None.

Source: *US State Department Country Report on Human Rights*
Practices, Somalia, 2021; Somali media reporting.

**D O C U M E N T E D C A S E : A B D A L L E A H M E D
M U M I N**

Role: Secretary-General, Somali Journalists Syndicate (SJS)

Detained: Three times in thirteen months (Oct 2022, Oct 2022, Feb 2023)

ARREST ONE: Oct 2022, without warrant, Aden Adde Airport.

Held in undisclosed location. Abhorrent conditions.

ARREST TWO: Oct 2022, re-arrested attempting to seek medical care in Kenya.

ARREST THREE: Feb 2023. Held 33 days. Tortured. Officers threatened to kill him if he resisted.

Reason stated: Refusal to retract press statement on media freedom.

Outcome: Released. SJS bank accounts subsequently frozen by court order.

Accountability: None. NISA officers not identified or disciplined.

Source: *Somali Journalists Syndicate; RFK Human Rights; CPJ;*
US State Department Country Report on Human Rights Practices, 2023.

The 2023 NISA Act, passed by the Somali Senate, expanded the agency's powers of arrest, detention, and surveillance with what Human Rights Watch described as minimal independent oversight. The Act does not contain a specific prohibition on enforced disappearance. It does not require that families be notified of a detention. It does not mandate access for lawyers within a defined timeframe. It does not provide for independent inspection of NISA detention facilities. It creates, in legislative form, the same architecture that enabled enforced disappearance under the NSS in 1970.

VI. The Scale of the Problem

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE IN SOMALIA: KEY STATISTICS	
Years Somalia has practiced systematic enforced disappearance	55+ years
Domestic law criminalizing enforced disappearance	NONE
International Convention on Enforced Disappearance: ratified?	NO
Prosecutions for enforced disappearance in Somalia	0
NSS political prisoners held without charge or trial (Barre era)	Thousands
Ikran Tahlil Farah: days since disappearance (as of May 2026)	1,800+

NISA journalist detentions documented in a single year (2019)	38
NISA Act provisions specifically prohibiting enforced disappearance	0

VII. The Human Cost: What Disappearance Does to Families

The crime of enforced disappearance is unusual in human rights law because it is a crime that is committed continuously — it begins with the arrest and continues for as long as the state withholds information about the disappeared person's fate and whereabouts. It is a crime that victimizes not only the person who has disappeared but the family waiting for answers.

In Somalia, where the clan system historically provided the primary framework for social protection and where a family's social position depends on its ability to account for and protect its members, the disappearance of a family member carries consequences beyond grief. It creates legal limbo: a family cannot claim inheritance from a person who has disappeared. It creates social stigma: in communities where disappearance is associated with criminality or political trouble, the family of a disappeared person is tainted by association. It creates economic devastation: when the disappeared person was the primary breadwinner, their absence without confirmation of death means the family cannot remarry, cannot access any survivor benefits, cannot close the chapter and move forward.

The families of those disappeared into Godka Jilow in the 1970s and 1980s are still living with these consequences. The families of those disappeared during the civil war have never received death certificates, never received remains, never received acknowledgement. The family of Ikran Tahlil Farah is living this reality today.

“An enforced disappearance is a living death — for the person taken, and for every person who loves them.”

— UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

VIII. Recommendations

OPR calls on the following duty-bearers to take immediate and specific action:

RECOMMENDATION 1: *To the Federal Government of Somalia*

Enact specific legislation criminalizing enforced disappearance as a distinct offence under Somali law, consistent with the definition in the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. The legislation must include criminal penalties for individuals who conduct, order, or conceal an enforced disappearance, regardless of their rank or institutional affiliation.

RECOMMENDATION 2: *To the Somali Parliament*

Ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance without reservation, and incorporate its provisions into domestic law within twelve months of ratification.

RECOMMENDATION 3: *To NISA*

Immediately disclose the fate and whereabouts of Ikran Tahlil Farah, who disappeared on 26 June 2021, and of all other persons currently held in NISA facilities without formal charge. Establish a publicly accessible register of all persons currently in NISA detention, updated within 24 hours of any new detention.

RECOMMENDATION 4: *To NISA*

Amend internal detention protocols to require: immediate notification of a detainee's family within six hours of any arrest; access to a lawyer of the detainee's choice within twenty-four hours; prohibition on incommunicado detention beyond forty-eight hours without judicial authorization.

RECOMMENDATION 5: *To the Somali Parliament*

Amend the NISA Act (2023) to include specific provisions prohibiting enforced disappearance; to require judicial oversight of all detentions exceeding 48 hours; and to establish an independent oversight mechanism with the power to inspect NISA detention facilities and report publicly.

RECOMMENDATION 6: *To International Partners*

Condition security sector assistance to Somalia — including financial support to NISA — on measurable progress toward ending the practice of incommunicado detention and enforced disappearance. Donors who fund NISA without requiring accountability bear a share of responsibility for abuses conducted with those funds.

RECOMMENDATION 7: *To the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights*

Open a formal inquiry into the practice of enforced disappearance in Somalia, including the specific case of Ikran Tahlil Farah, under the Commission's mandate to promote and protect human rights across the African continent.

IX. Conclusion

Enforced disappearance in Somalia is not a new problem. It is not a problem caused by a single government or a single era. It is a structural feature of how power has been exercised in Somalia for fifty-five years — a tool used by the NSS under Barre, by warlord factions in the civil war, by Al-Shabaab in the areas it controls, and by NISA under successive elected governments.

What makes it a problem that can, in principle, be solved is that it requires an active choice by the state to sustain it. Enforced disappearance does not happen accidentally. It requires officers to conduct arrests. It requires superiors to authorize them. It requires laws or the absence of laws to enable them. It requires an institutional culture that treats the disappearance of inconvenient people as an acceptable management tool.

All of those things can be changed. The law can be changed. The institutional protocols can be changed. The culture, over time and with consistent pressure, can be changed. What produces change is accountability — the reliable consequence for those who choose to conduct, order, or conceal an enforced disappearance. Somalia has never had that accountability. The recommendations in this article are a roadmap toward it.

Ikran Tahlil Farah disappeared on 26 June 2021. Her family is still waiting. Somalia's disappeared have been waiting, in some cases, for more than half a century.

The waiting must end.

This article was researched and written by the Organization for Prisoners' Rights (OPR), an independent civil society organization based in Mogadishu, Somalia. OPR documents human rights conditions in Somali prisons and detention facilities and advocates for the rights of prisoners, detainees, and their families.



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