OPR POLICY BRIEF FOR GOVERNMENTS | DETENTION AND DISASTER READINESS

Before the Rains

What the Federal Government, the federal member states and Somaliland should do now to protect people in custody from the Deyr 2026 floods

By Ismail Abukar | Organization for Prisoners' Rights (OPR) | September 2026

Addressed to: the Federal Government of Somalia (the Office of the Prime Minister, SoDMA, the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Security, the Ministry of Health, the Attorney General's Office and the Custodial Corps); the governments of the federal member states, including Puntland; and the authorities in Hargeisa. SoDMA is Somalia's national disaster agency. Everything here applies to whoever holds people in custody, whatever the political dispute over status. A person in a cell is owed the same protection in Baidoa, Garowe or Hargeisa.

What We Ask

El Niño is firmly under way. Forecasters expect much more rain than normal from October to December 2026, with a high chance of river floods and sudden floods after heavy rain (FEWS NET; FAO Somalia; ICPAC; WMO). SoDMA has 29 districts in 14 regions on high alert. They include Mogadishu, Baidoa, Kismayo, Beledweyne, Jowhar, Galkayo, Dhusamareb, Garowe, Bosaso, Qardho and Hargeisa (Dawan, reporting a SoDMA statement). The UN World Food Programme (WFP) estimates that about 1.7 million people live in areas that could flood in its middle scenario, and up to 2.7 million in a severe year, mostly in the south (WFP VAM Somalia, Somalia El Niño 2026: Flood Exposure & Preparedness Analysis, August 2026).

In the public flood plans I reviewed, including the full UN El Niño report for Somalia, I found no mention of prisons, police cells or other places of detention. OPR asks each government to make five commitments, in public, by **15 October 2026**:

1. **Name detention as a flood risk.** Put prisons, police cells and security-agency detention sites into every Deyr flood plan, alongside hospitals and schools.

2. **Give every site a written flood plan.** Each site in a district on the alert list needs a risk check, a named alternative site, a register of everyone held, a transfer procedure, and a way to tell families where their relatives are.
3. **Secure supplies for detainees.** Store food, safe water, medicine and space to isolate sick people in advance, so survival does not depend on families who may be forced from their homes.
4. **Reduce the numbers before the water rises.** Start a lawful, case-by-case review by judges of people held before trial and people held for minor offences.
5. **Keep the door open.** Let independent monitors in, including the Red Cross (ICRC), during and after the floods, and put a regular national inspection programme in place.

None of this needs a new law. All of it can start within weeks.

Why Governments, and Why Now

A person in custody cannot leave. Whether they are moved, fed, treated and kept in touch with their family is decided by the authority that holds them. That makes this a government duty, and it is why this brief is written for governments and not only for aid agencies.

The record shows why a plan is needed:

- **One prison is known to flood.** A July 2024 report by the UN mission in Somalia (UNSOM) says the Beledweyne prison, beside a river, floods easily (UNSOM). Up to 85 percent of Beledweyne went under water in May 2023 (Islamic Relief via ReliefWeb). The US State Department's 2020 report, citing the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), says several state-run prisons flooded often and prisoners were moved to temporary sites, usually police stations (2020 report).
- **Supplies and health care are thin.** UNSOM says food and water in most prisons are inconsistent, that floods and drought disrupt local food supplies, and that the Beledweyne and Kismayo prisons have no clinic, no emergency medical supplies and no Custodial Corps vehicle to take sick detainees to hospital (UNSOM).
- **Detainees depend on families and on paid purchases.** OPR's 2025 report says visits to Mogadishu Central Prison had been suspended for over a year, visitors may not bring food, and prisoners buy food inside. In police stations, the government gives no meals and families bring food (OPR 2025 Annual Assessment). The State Department says prisoners with no family or clan support get very little health care (2023 report). Floods cut roads, destroy markets and force families from their homes (ReliefWeb; ACT Alliance).

- **Disease is already here, and the rainy season makes it worse.** The State Department's 2022 report warned that TB and cholera outbreaks in crowded prisons could be life-threatening in the rainy season (2022 report).
- **The national inspection programme did not run in the last flood year.** UNSOM says no inspections were done in 2023. The ICRC did visit 15 places of detention that year, and the State Department says the ICRC, UNICEF and UNODC were allowed to carry out joint inspections. So international monitoring was not absent.
- **Order can break down.** Armed inmates tried to break out of Mogadishu Central Prison in July 2024 (Al Jazeera). Prisoners escaped from a north Galkayo prison in August 2024 (Kaab TV). Al-Shabaab stormed Godka Jilacow prison in October 2025 (Al Jazeera). In Nigeria in 2024, flooding after a dam collapse brought down prison walls, and 281 inmates went missing after being evacuated (CNN).

The UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights said in May 2025 that conditions in Somalia's prisons and detention places do not meet international standards. He backed the UN's 2024 prison report, which calls for less crowding through alternatives to prison, reform of the 1971 Prison Law, one system across federal and state levels, and stronger oversight (OHCHR). Flood readiness is a first step on the same road.

The People Nobody Counts

Every number in this brief is the least we can prove. OPR's 2025 report counted 5,122 people at 23 sites in Mogadishu, from Ministry of Justice records and OPR surveys (OPR 2025 Annual Assessment). OPR believes more people are held with no record, in cells of the Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID), in police cells and in secret sites used by NISA, the national intelligence agency. OPR could not inspect those sites. In some cases, families do not know where a person taken by NISA or the police is held. The State Department reports that federal police held people without a judge's order, and that the government sometimes kept high-profile Al-Shabaab suspects in safe houses before charging them (2024 report).

For flood planning, this matters most to a government. A person who is on no register cannot be moved, fed or treated by any plan. A family that does not know where a relative is held cannot bring food or medicine. We are not asking for secret sites to be made public. We are asking that the authorities know, and write down, who they hold and where.

Al-Shabaab-Held Areas

Most of Al-Shabaab's territory is rural. The EU asylum agency says the group held most rural areas and many smaller towns in south-central Somalia as of March

2026 (EUAA). It holds land in every region the UN names as a flood danger zone except Banadir (UNDRR), including all of Middle Jubba (EUAA). The UN humanitarian office has mapped very heavy restrictions on aid in parts of Middle Shabelle (EUAA). In my assessment, the group's detention places are mostly in villages and rural land, and I believe they are small, far from roads and clinics, and not prepared for floods. I found no public information on them and no flood plan. That is my assessment, not a documented finding. The government cannot plan for these places, but it can ask the ICRC to seek access before the water rises.

What I Could Not Find

I found no public account of how the 2023 floods affected detainees, and I have no first-hand testimony on it. I could not check the flood risk of most prisons beyond Beledweyne. Very little is publicly known about detention in areas under Al-Shabaab control. I have marked these limits so that officials can answer with facts. If your ministry has information that corrects anything here, OPR will publish the correction.

For the Federal Government

Who holds the levers. SoDMA was set up in 2011 and got its legal basis from Law No. 17 of 27 June 2016. It took over the work of the former humanitarian ministry in 2022 (SoDMA). Prisons are more complicated. UNSOM explains that the Custodial Corps is a military body in the national security system. Its Commissioner General is appointed by the President and reports to him. The Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, through its Corrections Services Directorate, is responsible for prison policy but has little direct control over how prisons are run. A March 2023 proposal would put the Corps under the ministry, with each state keeping its own prison system, but it had not been adopted (UNSOM). That split is a practical problem for a flood plan, because it is unclear who would issue and enforce one.

Recommended commitments

1. **One joint instruction.** The Minister of Justice and the Custodial Corps Commissioner General should jointly order every federal prison to submit a flood plan by 15 October, covering the ten points in the checklist below, with SoDMA copied.
2. **SoDMA** should add places of detention to its high-alert guidance and situation reports, and ask the ministry and the Corps for detainee numbers and locations.
3. **The Ministry of Health** should name a focal point for health in detention and confirm stocks of chlorine, oral rehydration salts, TB medicine and isolation space for Mogadishu Central and other prisons. For Beledweyne

and Kismayo, where the UN found no clinic or emergency supplies, it should agree a health kit and a transport arrangement now.

4. **The Ministry of Internal Security, the police and NISA** should list every police cell and security-agency site that holds detainees in a district on the alert list, enter everyone held there in a register, and tell families where their relatives are. These are the sites most likely to be missed by a plan that covers only prisons. NISA should give the list of its sites, and the number held at each, in confidence, to the Attorney General's Office and the ICRC. The ICRC's Somalia detention visits already cover state security agencies (ICRC). That way, evacuation and family notification can be planned.
5. **The Attorney General's Office and the courts** should start a case-by-case review of people held before trial and people held for minor offences, with public-safety safeguards. This is a review of cases, not a blanket release. The Attorney General also has a legal duty under the 1971 Prison Law to supervise and inspect prisons. UNSOM found the national inspection programme did not run in 2023, so an inspection round before and after the Deyr season would help rebuild it (UNSOM).
6. **The Custodial Corps** should protect guard numbers at detention sites. In March 2025, the Corps was sent to the front lines in Middle Shabelle (EUAA). UNSOM also reported that inspectors found very few staff in prisons compared with the number of detainees, and that management avoided giving them registered staff numbers. A staffing check for each site should be part of any flood plan.
7. **The federal government** should share the finished plans with the ICRC and the UN mission, so that help can be planned and not improvised.

For the Federal Member States

Who holds the levers. Prisons and police cells in member-state towns such as Baidoa, Kismayo, Beledweyne, Garowe and Bosaso are run by state authorities. They get support from UNODC, the ICRC and the UN's joint corrections programme, which aims for at least one equipped prison in each state (UN Somalia Joint Fund). In Puntland, the Ministry of Justice, Constitution, Rehabilitation and Religious Affairs covers prison reform and prisoners' rights, and a separate Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management handles emergency preparation (MoJCRAR; MoHADM).

Recommended commitments

1. Each state's justice authority and disaster body should jointly order a flood plan for every detention site in a district on the alert list.

2. **Start with Beledweyne.** It is the one prison the UN has documented as flood-prone, and WFP puts 160,000 to 180,000 people in Beledweyne district in areas that could flood this season. The Hirshabelle authorities should name an evacuation site, check its space and water, and agree who will move the detainees.
3. **Name alternative sites before the emergency.** Past floods sent prisoners to police stations. States should decide now where people will go, how many each site can hold, and how women, children and adults will be kept apart.
4. **Keep a log of every transfer**, recording who was moved, when and where, and tell families.
5. **Fix known shortages first, and protect emergency money.** In July 2023, Puntland's Human Rights Defender found Garowe Central Prison short of food, electricity and water. The Custodial Corps had reportedly received no money for months because the Ministry of Finance had not released it. The UN also reports that the prison's borehole water is not fit to drink (UNSOM). A flood on top of an existing shortage is a far bigger emergency. States should set aside emergency money for food, water and power at detention sites, so a late payment cannot become a crisis.
6. **Give Baidoa a surge budget.** UNSOM reports that Baidoa prison's food budget is a fixed daily amount, however many prisoners there are. Baidoa held about 650,000 displaced people in 2023 (ABC News), so a jump in arrests or transfers during a flood would stretch that budget.
7. **Coordinate with Mogadishu and with each other.** If a flood forces a transfer across a state or jurisdiction line, the authorities should agree in advance how it is recorded and how families and monitors can find the people.

For the Authorities in Hargeisa

Who holds the levers. The Ministry of Justice in Hargeisa runs the courts, and the Somaliland Custodial Corps, which traces its roots to the Somaliland Prisons Service set up in 1949, guards the prisons (Wikipedia). Somaliland has its own prison law (UNSOM). Hargeisa is on SoDMA's priority list. The UN warns that drought may get worse in parts of Somaliland (Xinhua), and the UN report flags above-average heat in Puntland and Somaliland, peaking between December and February (UNDRR). WFP counts few people in flood areas around Hargeisa (about 1,000 in Woqooyi Galbeed), but it flags October to December as wetter with flood risk, and it warns that low numbers do not prove safety. Planning should cover sudden floods, water and food shortages, and heat.

Recommended commitments

1. The Ministry of Justice, the Custodial Corps and the body in charge of disaster preparedness should jointly order a flood, drought and heat plan for Hargeisa Central Prison and every other detention site.
2. **Share the plan.** Earlier State Department reports say Hargeisa Prison met international standards (2018 report). That is a strength worth documenting, and publishing the plan would let others learn from it.
3. **Allow independent monitoring again.** The State Department reported in 2023 that the authorities did not allow independent NGO observers to monitor prisons that year, though some monitoring was allowed in 2022. Access during and after a flood or drought is the best way to show detainees are safe.
4. **Review the cases of people held before trial**, as recommended above.

A Flood Checklist for Every Place of Detention

1. Has the site's flood risk been assessed, including drainage, access roads and the water table?
2. Is there a named alternative site, checked for space, water and security?
3. Is every person held at the site on a register, and is there a transfer procedure with a written log of everyone moved?
4. Is there a way to tell families where a person is held, and to tell them about a transfer, illness or death?
5. Are food, drinking water and water-treatment supplies stored for the forecast flood period, for the real number of people and not a fixed budget line?
6. Are there medicines, emergency supplies and a place to isolate people with TB, cholera or other infections, and can sick detainees be taken to hospital?
7. Are there separate arrangements for women, children, and people with medical needs or disabilities?
8. Is there a guard staffing plan that does not depend on staff being pulled away?
9. Has a review of low-risk people held before trial been done?
10. Can independent monitors reach the site during and after floods?

The legal basis. UNSOM records that Somalia is bound by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention against Torture, and has committed to the UN's Nelson Mandela Rules, its Tokyo Rules and other UN standards on detention. Article 15(2) of the Provisional Federal Constitution bans torture. Rule 1 of the Mandela Rules says the safety and security of prisoners, staff

and visitors must be ensured at all times. These duties do not stop in an emergency.

Answers to Likely Objections

"Detainees are not the priority in a flood." Nobody is asking for detainees to go ahead of anyone else. We are asking that they be counted. A written plan costs little, and it prevents a situation where the people in state custody are the only group nobody has planned for.

"Some detainees are dangerous." That is why the review in commitment four is by judges, case by case, with public-safety safeguards. It cuts crowding among people held on minor charges or before trial, which makes prisons safer for everyone else, including guards.

"Security agencies cannot say where they hold people." We ask for confidential disclosure, not public disclosure. Registers and site lists would go to the Attorney General's Office and the ICRC, which already visits state security agencies and works under a confidentiality rule. Without them, no one can plan to protect the people held, and no family can find its relatives.

"We lack the money." Most items on the checklist are decisions and records, not building work. The ICRC's 2023 experience shows that stock bought early arrives on time, while goods ordered during a flood arrive late (ICRC factsheet). Donors and UN partners, including the ICRC and UNODC, already support prisons. OPR encourages them to back a credible government plan before the rains, not after.

What OPR Will Do

OPR will monitor conditions where it has access, invite testimony from released detainees and families, and publish what it finds. Anyone who was held during a flood in 2019, 2020, 2023 or another year can tell their story through the Testimonies page. They can choose to be named, anonymous, or recorded for OPR's records only.

Basis and Limits

This brief uses the public sources linked above. I read in full the UNSOM prison report, the ICRC's 2023 to 2024 El Niño factsheet, the full UN El Niño report for Somalia and WFP's August analysis. The last two do not mention detention. All population numbers are the least we can prove. They leave out people held with no record or in secret sites. I have not read internal government plans, and I cannot rule out that some exist. Some descriptions of institutions come from secondary sources, and officials should correct any errors. The State Department's report on 2024 no longer has a prison-conditions section, so I cite its 2022 and 2023 reports. The Al-Shabaab territory information comes from the EU asylum agency's control maps as of 31 March 2026. I have not verified conditions in any prison or police cell. Corrections are welcome at ismail@ismailabukar.com.

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