OPR POLICY BRIEF | DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND PLACES OF DETENTION

Counting the Detained

A plan to include people in custody in Somalia's El Niño flood preparations, October 2026 to early 2027

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

Who this is for: SoDMA, Somalia's national disaster agency, and the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change; the Ministry of Justice and the Custodial Corps; the federal member states, Puntland and Somaliland; the Red Cross (ICRC), the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the UN humanitarian office (OCHA), with the UN aid clusters for protection, health, water and sanitation, and food security; donors; and aid groups working on Somalia's disasters.

The Short Version

El Niño is firmly under way. Forecasters expect much more rain than normal in the Deyr season, from October to December 2026. Flood plans cover farms, riverbanks, water points, clinics and camps for displaced people. In everything I reviewed, including the full UN El Niño report for Somalia and WFP's flood analysis, I found no mention of prisons, police cells or other places of detention.

That matters because people in custody cannot move themselves. Their food, medicine and contact with the outside world depend on the prison authorities and on families who may be forced from their homes. A July 2024 report by the UN mission in Somalia (UNSOM) says the Beledweyne prison, beside a river, floods easily. It says the Beledweyne and Kismayo prisons have no clinic, and that floods disrupt the food supplies prisons depend on. It says no prison inspections were carried out in 2023, the year of the last big El Niño flood. The public record has almost nothing on what happened to detainees in that flood, and nothing on places held by Al-Shabaab. Every head count is also the least we can prove. OPR believes people are held with no record in police, CID and NISA sites, and that some are held where their families cannot find them.

OPR recommends five actions, most urgent first:

1. Add places of detention to every Deyr flood plan, and to the shared national flood plan (officially, the anticipatory action framework).
2. Require and fund a written flood plan for each prison, police cell and security-agency site in a district on SoDMA's flood alert list, before the rains peak.

3. Buy and store food, water, medicine and space to isolate sick people now. The ICRC's 2023 experience shows that supplies bought late arrive late.
4. Start a case-by-case review, by judges, of people held before trial and people held for minor offences, to reduce crowding before the floods.
5. Let independent monitors in before, during and after the floods, put a regular national inspection programme in place, and fund the collection of the missing data.

What Is Coming

The forecasts agree. In June, the UN food agency (FAO) said El Niño was more than 90 percent likely during the Deyr rains (FAO Somalia). FEWS NET, a US-funded hunger warning network, expects a strong El Niño, above-average rain and a high chance of river floods and sudden floods after heavy rain. It warns of famine in parts of the south if flooding is extreme, and it names 1997 and 2023 as the years to compare (FEWS NET). East Africa's climate centre, ICPAC, gives a 90 percent chance of more rain than normal over central and southern Somalia (ICPAC). On 3 September, the UN weather agency (WMO) said El Niño was firmly established and very likely to last through February 2027 (WMO).

The UN disaster risk office (UNDRR) names the Jubba and Shabelle river valleys, home to about 8.8 million people, as the main area of concern. It also flags sudden city floods in Mogadishu, Baidoa, Garowe, Kismayo and Jowhar (UNDRR). 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). Mogadishu has already flooded (Hiiraan Online).

In August, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) estimated how many people live in areas that could flood (WFP VAM Somalia, Somalia El Niño 2026: Flood Exposure & Preparedness Analysis, August 2026). In its middle scenario the number is about 1.7 million. In a severe year it is 2.4 to 2.7 million. WFP tells planners to prepare to help 800,000 to 1.2 million of them, the people likely to need aid. It calls these planning estimates, not a count of people who will need help. Other estimates differ. SoDMA has said 2.5 to 3.5 million people could be exposed to floods (WFP news release), and a UN statement says more than 600,000 are at risk (Xinhua).

Most of the risk is in the south. At WFP's middle estimate, about 553,000 people live in flood areas in Bay, where Baidoa is. The other numbers are 199,000 in Hiraan, where Beledweyne is, 183,000 in Middle Shabelle, where Jowhar is, and 180,000 in Lower Jubba, where Kismayo is. In Beledweyne district alone it is 160,000 to 180,000 people, with 85 settlements in the highest risk class. WFP

counts far fewer people around Mogadishu (about 21,000), Garowe (about 1,000), Bosaso and Qardho (about 260) and Hargeisa (about 1,000). But WFP warns that low numbers do not prove safety, because sudden local floods are easy for its data to miss.

Detention does not appear. I read the full UNDRR report. Its list of who is responsible names SoDMA, the environment and water ministries, the food-security monitors, the state disaster agencies, WFP, IOM, UNHCR, NGOs and the UN Resident Coordinator's office. It does not name the Ministry of Justice, the Custodial Corps or the police. Its measures cover evacuation transport, shelter sites, drainage, fuel, mobile money, counselling, schools, livestock, disease watch and protection along displacement routes. None mentions detention. WFP's August analysis does not either. The UNDRR report also says the shared flood plan and its warning levels were not finished when it was written (UNDRR).

Money is short. The UN's emergency fund has set aside US$7 million for flood preparation. The UN's 2026 aid plan for Somalia, US$852 million, was only 29.7 percent funded on 12 August (Save the Children and partners).

Why People in Custody Need Their Own Plan

They cannot move themselves. Evacuation, transfer and release are decisions for the prison authorities. If there is no plan, the first sign of failure may be a flooded cell.

One prison is known to flood. The UNSOM report 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 UNODC, says several prisons run by the federal member states flooded often and prisoners were moved to temporary sites, usually police stations (2020 report). It names no prison, date or number.

Food and water are unreliable. UNSOM says food and water supply in most prisons is inconsistent, and that floods and drought disrupt local food supplies. At Baidoa, the food budget is a fixed amount however many prisoners there are. At Garowe in July 2023, inspectors found shortages of food, electricity and water, after money was reportedly not released for months (UNSOM). In Mogadishu, 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 and sometimes water 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).

Health care is thin. The Beledweyne and Kismayo prisons have no clinic and no emergency medical supplies. The Custodial Corps depends on the police to take sick detainees to hospital (UNSOM).

Disease is already here, and rain and heat make 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). OPR's 2025 report says TB and cholera outbreaks continue at the Mogadishu Prison and Court Complex, especially in the rainy season, and that there is no place to isolate TB patients (OPR 2025 Annual Assessment). Floods spread disease through dirty water and mosquitoes (WMO; IRC). The UNDRR report also expects above-average heat from September, peaking between December and February in Puntland, Somaliland, Galmudug, the central regions and inland southern Somalia (UNDRR). OPR's 2025 report describes poor air and too much heat in the cells of Baidoa's main jail.

The national inspection programme did not run in the last flood year. UNSOM says no inspections were done in 2023 and no lasting oversight system was planned. 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.

Nobody can say how many people are held. OPR's 2025 report counted 5,122 people at 23 sites in Mogadishu, including 3,695 at Mogadishu Central Prison. These are average numbers from Ministry of Justice records and OPR surveys, and they cover only recorded custody. OPR believes more people are held with no record in CID cells, police cells and secret NISA sites that OPR could not inspect, and that 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). The point for planning is simple. A plan built on registers will not provide enough, and people whose location is unknown cannot be moved, fed or told.

Security can fail. Armed inmates tried to break out of Mogadishu Central Prison in July 2024 (Al Jazeera). Al-Shabaab prisoners escaped from a north Galkayo prison in August 2024 (Kaab TV). Al-Shabaab stormed Godka Jilacow prison on 4 October 2025 (Al Jazeera). In Nigeria in September 2024, flooding after a dam collapse brought down prison walls, and 281 inmates went missing after being evacuated (CNN).

The state has a duty of care. 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 on treating prisoners and its Tokyo Rules on alternatives to prison. Rule 1 of the Mandela Rules says the safety and security of prisoners, staff and visitors must be ensured

at all times. Those duties do not stop in an emergency. An emergency is when they are tested.

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, the Mogadishu region (UNDRR). All of Middle Jubba is theirs, including Jilib, Bu'aale and Saakow (EUAA). The UN humanitarian office has mapped very heavy restrictions on aid in parts of Middle Shabelle (EUAA), and the State Department says the group blocked humanitarian aid.

In my assessment, the group's detention places are mostly in villages and rural land. 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. Contact is possible. In 2023, the ICRC worked in areas the group influences or controls, but only after the floods had made access impossible. Access has to be asked for before the water rises.

What the Evidence Shows

Claim	Strength	Basis
Flood risk is high in the south and centre, where Baidoa, Beledweyne, Kismayo and Jowhar are. It is smaller around Mogadishu, Garowe, Bosaso and Hargeisa, though WFP warns low numbers do not prove safety.	Strong for the south, moderate elsewhere	FAO, FEWS NET, ICPAC, WMO, UNDRR, WFP, SoDMA
The Beledweyne prison floods easily.	Strong	UNSOM, July 2024
Other state-run prisons have flooded and prisoners were moved to police stations.	Moderate	One UNODC-sourced line in the 2020 State Department report, with no names or dates
Floods disrupt the food supplies prisons rely on.	Strong	UNSOM; ACT Alliance and ReliefWeb on the 2023 markets and roads
Detainees depend on families or on paid purchases for food and health care, and disease outbreaks occur in crowded prisons.	Strong	UNSOM, State Department 2022 and 2023, Sahan, OPR 2025
The national inspection programme did not run in 2023, though ICRC visits continued.	Moderate	UNSOM; State Department 2023; ICRC
Floods will cut the family lifeline and raise disease risk in prisons.	Plausible, not measured	Follows from documented effects. No study of detention

Claim	Strength	Basis
Floods will raise the risk of escapes.	Plausible, not measured	Nigeria 2024; escape attempts and a stretched guard force in Somalia
More people are held than any register shows.	OPR's assessment, partly supported	OPR 2025 (NISA sites not accessible); State Department 2024
Some detainees' families do not know where they are held.	OPR's documentation, not independently verified	OPR's reports on enforced disappearance
Al-Shabaab detainees face harm in floods.	Unknown	Detention is documented. No independent access. No reporting on floods
Minority prisoners are hit harder.	Unknown	A hypothesis. No study measures it

Decision-makers should treat the "plausible" rows as planning assumptions and the "unknown" rows as reasons to collect data.

Lessons From 2023

The ICRC's account of its 2023 flood response is a useful guide (ICRC factsheet). By 26 December 2023, about 2.5 million people were affected and 1.2 million were forced from their homes. Roads were cut and two major bridges washed away.

- **Six to eight weeks is not enough to buy supplies.** The ICRC found that many items could not be bought and delivered in time. Medical supplies already stored in Somalia moved much faster. Supplies for detainees should be bought and placed now, not when a warning level is hit.
- **Agree warning levels in advance.** The ICRC said agreed warning levels would have made its response faster. Detention should be written into the levels of the shared national flood plan.
- **Ask for access before the water rises.** Al-Shabaab agreed to ICRC help only after floods had made access impossible.
- **Routine work gets paused.** The ICRC put existing work in the south on hold to turn to the flood. Its factsheet does not say whether detention visits were paused. The risk is that routine detention work stops just when it is needed most.

Where to Start, by Region

Area	Prisons named in public records	Priority actions
South and centre (Mogadishu, Baidoa, Kismayo, Beledweyne, Jowhar, Dhusamareb)	Mogadishu Central Prison; Mogadishu Prison and Court Complex; Baidoa; Beledweyne; Kismayo	Beledweyne first (160,000 to 180,000 people in the district live in areas that could flood): a named evacuation site and a health kit. Emergency health kits and transport for Beledweyne and Kismayo. TB and cholera readiness at Mogadishu Central. A surge food budget at Baidoa. A way to tell families where people are.
Puntland (Garowe, Bosaso, Qardho, Galkayo)	Garowe; Bosaso; north Galkayo	Protect emergency money so food, power and water are not held up by late payments. Fix the drinking-water problem at Garowe. A plan for sudden floods.
Somaliland (Hargeisa)	Hargeisa	Publish or share the prison's plan. Plan for water, food and heat as well as sudden floods. Allow independent monitors, which the State Department says were not allowed in 2023.
Al-Shabaab areas (Jubba and Shabelle valleys)	Not known publicly	Ask the ICRC to seek access early. Collect testimony from released detainees and families after the floods.

What Each Group Should Do

SoDMA and the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change

- Add places of detention to the list of vulnerable institutions in the shared national flood plan and its warning levels, alongside hospitals and schools.
- Include detainee numbers and locations in evacuation planning and situation reports.

The Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, the Attorney General's Office and the Custodial Corps

- Issue one joint instruction requiring a written flood plan for every facility in a district on the alert list. UNSOM notes that the Custodial Corps answers to its Commissioner General, while the ministry's Corrections Services Directorate sets policy but has little direct control. So the instruction should carry both signatures (UNSOM).
- Keep women, children and adults apart, and people held before trial apart from convicted prisoners, in any emergency transfer.
- Set staffing rules so guard posts are not emptied during a flood or a security emergency.
- Use the Attorney General's legal power to supervise and inspect prisons, and carry out an inspection round before and after the Deyr season.

- Publish complete registers of everyone held, by facility, including CID, police and NISA sites, and tell families where their relatives are.

The federal member states, Puntland and Somaliland

- Apply the same planning rule to state-run prisons and police cells, and share the plans with monitors.
- List the police cells and security-agency sites that hold detainees. They are the most likely to be missed.

Courts and prosecutors

- Start a lawful, case-by-case review by judges of people held before trial and people held for minor offences, in line with the Tokyo Rules. This is a review with public-safety safeguards, not a blanket release. UNSOM notes that a large share of the people waiting for trial are minors.
- Plan for backlogs so floods do not lengthen time spent held before trial. That is already a documented problem (EUAA).

The ICRC, UNODC, the UN mission and the aid clusters

- Add detention sites to cluster emergency plans. The ICRC already brings hygiene items and Ramadan food to detainees, and the same channels could carry flood stocks (ICRC).
- Agree who is responsible for detainee water and health if prison systems fail. Right now, that is unclear.
- Put a regular joint inspection programme in place. UNSOM found none planned as of July 2024. Keep detention visits going during the flood response.
- Seek access to every place of detention, including security-agency sites. Extend the family message service to flood transfers and to people whose location their families do not know. The ICRC's Somalia detention visits already cover prisons, police stations and state security agencies (ICRC).

Donors and the UN humanitarian office (OCHA)

- Write detention into the shared national flood plan and the UN emergency fund allocation for it.
- Fund flood readiness for detention within existing justice budgets. UNODC has built or renovated prisons in Mogadishu, Bosaso, Garowe and Hargeisa, so flood-proofing them is a natural next step (UNODC).
- Fund independent documentation of what floods do to detainees in 2026 and 2027, so the next forecast comes with evidence.

Aid groups and civil society, including OPR

- Track conditions where you have access, and publish findings in time to change practice.
- Collect testimony from released detainees and families, including from Al-Shabaab-held areas. OPR's Testimonies page accepts it, with choices about being named.

A Flood Checklist for a 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 who was moved, when and where?
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 a way to get sick detainees 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?

What Is Still Missing

- **Which prisons flooded in 2019, 2020 and 2023, and what happened to the people held?** The Ministry of Justice, state authorities, UNODC and the ICRC can say. UNSOM documents the Beledweyne prison as flood-prone, but I found no account of what happened there in 2023.
- **Were detention visits paused during the ICRC's 2023 flood turn?** The ICRC.
- **How many people are held, and where?** The Ministry of Justice told UNSOM the national total was 2,799 in June 2023, not counting Somaliland, and that the Custodial Corps had 6,800 registered staff. Inspectors found

few staff on site, and management avoided giving them registered staff numbers (UNSOM). OPR's 2025 report counted 5,122 people in Mogadishu alone. The figures are from different dates and may be counted differently, but the gap is a reason to publish one reconciled register, prison by prison. All these counts are the least we can prove, because they leave out people held with no record.

- **Who is held in secret or unrecorded sites, and where?** OPR could not inspect NISA's detention houses in Mogadishu. Only the authorities, and the ICRC if it is given access, can answer.
- **Do written emergency plans exist?** Ask the ministries and state authorities directly, and publish the answers.
- **What happened in Al-Shabaab-held areas?** Testimony from released detainees, families and defectors after the floods, collected with care for their safety and consent.
- **Did floods hit minority prisoners harder?** OPR's minority prisoners' department, with community groups, can test this.

What to Watch This Season

Tie warning levels to the shared national flood plan that SoDMA and WFP are finalising. At the least, watch for: a district flood alert from SoDMA; river levels at Beledweyne, Bulo Burto, Jowhar, Luuq and Bardheere; road closures on routes to prisons and police cells; cholera cases in a district with a prison; and any move of detainees because of floods.

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 UNDRR report 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 seen any internal emergency plan from a government or agency, and I cannot rule out that some exist. 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, and I have no first-hand testimony on detention in past floods. Where a point is my own analysis and not a documented fact, I have said so. Corrections and additions are welcome at ismail@ismailabukar.com.

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