The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) presents the following backgrounder on the humanitarian crisis in Somalia as of October 15, 2020. Information and maps are from various sources and not the original work of USCRI.

Quick Overview

The Civil War in Somalia has been going on for almost three decades. Although the intensity of the crisis has fluctuated over time, refugees continue to flee Somalia because of the combined forces of violence and natural disasters. While there is hope for future stability in the country, over 3 million Somalis are currently displaced, both within Somalia and in refugee communities around the world.

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WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit international organization that responds to the needs and advocates for the rights of refugees and immigrants worldwide.
Basic Information

Demographics

Population: 16 million
Population ages 0-14: 42% (USA: 19%)
Population ages 15-64: 55% (USA 65%)²
Life expectancy: 55 years (for men), 58 years (for women)
Birth rate: 6.12 births per woman³

Origins of the Crisis⁴

The land now known as Somalia has a rich cultural history and was known as a prolific trading post for Egypt and the Middle East as early as 3000 BCE.⁵ However, the intersecting forces of colonization, civil war, and extreme weather have destabilized the country over the last century. These crises have displaced over 3 million Somalis in the last three decades, both within the country as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and to neighboring countries as refugees.⁶

Colonization

Somalia was divided and colonized by the British (in the north), Italians (in the south), and French (in the area now known as Djibouti) during the Berlin Conference in 1885.⁷ The beginning of the 20th century was marked by intense fighting between Somali forces and British and Italian colonial forces.

As Britain and Italy continuously attempted to conquer ever more territory, Britain eventually gained control of both its own territory, British Somaliland, and Italy’s territory, Italian Somaliland, in the 1940s. Britain then gave Italy trusteeship over Italian Somaliland until Somalia's independence in 1960.
Independence

Despite the Somali people sharing a distinct cultural, ethnic, and linguistic identity, the colonial powers took no consideration of this fact when creating Somalia’s borders. Britain gave a part of the country to Kenya in the 1950s, and French colonists voted to keep a largely Somali-populated area as part of Djibouti instead of granting it to the newly-forming Somali state. By the time Somalia gained independence, the country had been parcelled up into various arbitrary areas by the British and Italians, leading to conflicting loyalties among its people.

Therefore, when Somalia gained independence in 1960, the country’s borders (which were drawn by Britain and Italy) excluded ethnic Somalis in other regions. These borders would later cause great conflict in and around the country.

With political turmoil in the early years of independence, General Mohamed Siad Barre rose to power after a coup in 1969. Barre’s regime initially made great strides by implementing several large infrastructure projects and improving education. However, as time passed, Barre’s rule became more and more authoritarian, stamping out opposition with brutal force. In 1977, Barre invaded the Ogaden region of Ethiopia— an area largely populated by Somalis— to try to annex it. In turn, Ethiopia, with the backing of the Soviet Union, pushed Barre’s troops out. After this, and in response to Barre’s increasing repression, various resistance movements began forming, newly encouraged by Ethiopia. One of these groups, the United Somali Congress (USC), began taking over territories in the capital, Mogadishu. These forces, combined with waning foreign interest in Somalia as the Cold War was winding down, led to such instability that Barre’s government collapsed in 1991.

In the power vacuum left by the collapse, intensifying violence between various militia groups plunged the country into civil war. UN intervention between 1992 and 1995, although unsuccessful at establishing a new government, did help to quell violence in some areas of the country. Peace talks eventually led to the creation of a transitional government in 2000, and then the Transitional Federal Government in 2004.

In 2006, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), an Islamist militant group, took over a large part of southern Somalia. By 2007, the government reclaimed the territory and the ICU splintered as it lost power. Out of these splinters grew several extremist groups, including Al-Shabaab. In the coming years, Al-Shabaab began seizing control of more and more territory. During this time, the government was unable to drive back the many different factions fighting for territory and power. The Transitional Federal Government was dissolved in 2012, replaced by the Federal Government of Somalia, the first permanent central government since 1991. The country’s current president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (nicknamed Farmajo) was elected in 2017.

Current Situation

Within Somalia, President Farmajo has been working with international partners to try to bring stability to the country by creating and strengthening inclusive democratic institutions under the watchful eye of the UN. However, although the Somali government continues to make slow progress towards peace, it remains unstable. Concerns have been raised about President Farmajo’s leadership as his government has responded to even peaceful protests with lethal force, and has committed human rights abuses against journalists in the country.
Given that the Somali Civil War has been going on for almost three decades, many Somalis left their homes years ago and there are now over one million Somalis living outside the country. Although there are sizable Somali communities in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States, most Somali refugees live in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Yemen. In fact, at least 250,000 Somalis live in one Kenyan refugee settlement, Dadaab Refugee Complex. Many younger refugees have been living in the camp their entire lives, as some residents have lived in Dadaab for over twenty years. It is thought that over 300,000 Somali refugees live in Kenya, 255,000 in Ethiopia, and 255,000 in Yemen. There are about 150,000 Somalis in the United States, with the largest Somali community living in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Impacts

Refugees and Displaced Persons

Kenya has long held a policy of keeping refugees living in camps, prohibiting them from integrating into broader Kenyan society. The Kenyan government has justified this policy by stating that integrating them could cause tensions, and that Somali refugees attract Al-Shabaab, exposing native Kenyans to dangerous attacks. As a result, many Somalis have been in limbo for decades, living in overcrowded camps with little access to healthcare, basic necessities, or economic opportunity.

Although the Civil War began almost three decades ago, many Somalis continue to be displaced as the conflict continues and as natural disasters such as drought cause widespread famine. While many leave Somalia, it is estimated that about 2.6 million are internally displaced within the country. About half a million of these IDPs live in the capital, Mogadishu. IDP sites are often on privately-owned land, and living conditions there are unsanitary and overcrowded. IDPs are often coerced into handing over their already meager humanitarian aid as “rent” to these landowners.

Government

Somalia’s government is rated the most corrupt in the world by Transparency International’s Corruption Index. Government actors often take bribes from Al-Shabaab, especially soldiers who otherwise often go unpaid by the official Somali government. Although the government has made great strides in pushing Al-Shabaab out of urban areas, this progress is not linear due to the widespread corruption that helps the group regain pockets of power.

Despite widespread corruption and instability, the fact that there is a government is progress in and of itself, in a country that had no legitimate centralized governing body for well over a decade. In recent years, the government has managed to retake significant territory from other militia groups, and has also established five states to create more localized government administration. Somalia’s current president Farmajo was elected by a vote of Somali citizens in 2017. The election was a peaceful process and Farmajo’s opponent willingly accepted defeat.

Health and Safety

According to Human Rights Watch, over 1,000 civilians were killed in 2019, mainly by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) used by Al-Shabaab. Other deaths were caused by inter-clan violence and attacks by various militia groups. The government continues to respond
to acts of protest and defiance with lethal force, regardless of whether the protests are violent or peaceful. Civilians are often caught in the fighting between Al-Shabaab forces, the government, and other militia forces.

The Somali people are heavily dependent on outside aid organizations for their healthcare needs. Healthcare services are inconsistent and difficult to access, as international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are often the only entities responding to issues of maternal health, gender-based violence, sanitation-related health issues, and even basic nutrition needs.

**Food Security**

Food security is one of the gravest issues facing Somalia in recent years, and the problem has been greatly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Somalia is a land of intense climate extremes, and the past several months have brought both intense flooding and a locust infestation that have devastated the country’s crops. A recent study estimates that over 2 million Somalis will face food shortages in the coming year. Of those, approximately 850,000 children will be acutely malnourished if humanitarian aid does not increase in the region.

The situation in the refugee camps is also perilous. Food rations in Dadaab have been cut by 40% since the pandemic hit. Many NGOs have reduced their presence or pulled out altogether from refugee camps amid the pandemic, leading to widespread food and resource shortages.

**Sexual Violence**

As is true in most conflict situations, Somali women and children are especially vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation. In recent years, Al-Shabaab militants have not only used sexual violence as a form of control in communities, but they have also recruited young women and girls for forced marriage to combatants. These women and girls are sometimes used as “incentives” to attract new recruits, or as rewards for combatants in the field.

Women’s human rights activists celebrated in 2018 when the Somali government introduced the Sexual Offences Bill, which would have been revolutionary in protecting women and girls from sexual violence and acknowledging their rights to bodily autonomy. However, this bill has not yet been passed and has instead been replaced by a bill that allows child marriage and violence against women. The new bill constitutes a major setback for the human rights of women and girls, raising doubts as to whether they will ever receive adequate protection against sexual violence.

**Children**

In 2018, Somalia had the highest rate of child soldier recruitment in the world. Although Al-Shabaab accounted for well over half of these recruits, the Somali government itself was found to be using over 250 child soldiers. These children are sometimes kidnapped directly from their schools, and any resistance to recruitment is met with violence.

Children are at great risk of sexual violence perpetrated by security forces on all sides of the conflict. Child recruitment and victimization is not only a grave concern for children still living in Somalia; Al-Shabaab recruits and attacks heavily in Kenya, and has been known several times to infiltrate the Dadaab refugee complex.
Covid-19

In Dadaab refugee complex, home to over 250,000 Somali refugees, UNHCR acted quickly to respond to the Covid-19 outbreak through ambitious prevention measures that have so far largely spared the camps from infection. The first two cases of Covid-19 in the complex were recorded in May of 2020, and Doctors without Borders created a 40-bed isolation facility to ensure that those infected are able to isolate and get the care they need. UNHCR is working to distribute larger quantities of food rations at a time to reduce the need for people to gather at distribution sites. In addition to food, UNHCR has been providing masks, hygiene products, and jerrycans to promote WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) education and compliance in the camps.

Refugee camps around the world remain at constant risk of spread due to close living quarters, lack of infrastructure and sanitation, and sparse medical resources to deal with infections. While Dadaab only had 44 recorded cases by the end of August, aid agencies are constantly scrambling to prevent outbreaks. This struggle is heightened by the reality that donors generally do not want to give funding to areas that do not already have outbreaks, leaving prevention efforts in the camps deeply underfunded.

Looking to the Future

Somalia has many obstacles to achieving stability and peace. Al-Shabaab remains an ever-present threat, corruption is still widespread within the government, and conflict between regional powers continues to undermine progress towards democracy. In a worrying move, President Farmaajo recently brokered an agreement with regional leaders to abandon the one-person, one-vote system for the upcoming presidential election. The adoption of this system had been praised as a win for democracy by so many leaders in the international community.

However, there is reason to believe that the situation in Somalia could improve. President Farmaajo outwardly claims to remain committed to establishing democracy and accountability in his government. In response to the Covid-19 crisis, the government implemented tax exemptions on food staples, and is now working to safely reopen the economy. Somalia is also working towards major debt relief goals that require economic reforms to build the economy. While the future of the country remains uncertain, modest progress has been made towards peace and stability.


5 South African History Online. 2016. “Somalia.” Retrieved October 7, 2020 (https://www.sahistory.org.za/place/somalia) (stating that archeological discoveries have determined that Somalia could have been inhabited since the Paleolithic Era, and the early trading civilization was known as the Land of Punt).


12 Id.


14 Id.


16 Id.


18 Id.


22 Id. (noting how even the World Food Programme left southern Somalia in January of 2010 due to Al-Shabaab’s overwhelming takeover of the area).

23 Id. (The United States recognized the new government in 2013, the first time it had recognized Somalia’s government since 1991).

24 Id.
28 Id.
29 Id.
30 Id.
31 Id.
34 Id.
39 Id.
40 Id.
42 Id (noting that the poor pay of government soldiers give Al-Shabaab a window to recruit them).
43 Id.
44 Id (acknowledging the “tremendous strides” the Somali government has made since 2010, when it did not even control all of Mogadishu).
45 Id.
47 Id.
49 Id.
50 Id.
52 Id.
54 Id.
55 Id.
57 Id.
59 Id.
61 Id.
62 Id.
70 Id.

