

Somalia: Pro-Government Militias Executing Civilians
Human Rights Watch
28 March 2012

(Nairobi) – Pro-government militias in Somalia have committed summary executions and torture in the towns of Beletweyne and Baidoa since occupying them with Ethiopian forces earlier in 2012, Human Rights Watch said today. The authorities should take immediate steps to stop the abuses and hold those responsible to account, Human Rights Watch said.

On December 31, 2011, the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and two Somali militia groups – Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a (ASWJ) and Shabelle Valley State (SVS) – ousted the militant Islamist group al-Shabaab from Beletweyne, the capital of the Hiraa region, which borders Ethiopia. Ethiopian troops and militias allied with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia took over Baidoa, the capital of the Bay region, on February 22, 2012.

Civilians told Human Rights Watch that since the transition, security has become worse in both towns due to abusive security operations by allied forces and, in the case of Beletweyne, rising tensions between militias vying for control. Although al-Shabaab no longer controls either town, its forces continue to attack the Ethiopian and other forces and target civilians perceived to support them.

“Civilians in Beletweyne and Baidoa hoped that threats, fear, and repression would diminish with al-Shabaab’s departure,” said Leslie Lefkowitz, deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “Instead, the arrival of the Ethiopian forces and their militia allies has meant that one set of abusive authorities has been replaced by another.”

Residents of Beletweyne described the more unpredictable and dangerous security situation since al-Shabaab’s retreat. Several residents told Human Rights Watch that at least under al-Shabaab they knew what to expect and how to avoid problems.

One man in Beletweyne, when asked why people were being executed, told Human Rights Watch: “You must know one thing, in Beletweyne nowadays killing someone doesn’t need whys, it needs the militiamen to decide to kill you, and that is it.”

Summary Executions and Indiscriminate Killings

Human Rights Watch interviewed relatives of the victims and witnesses of more than seven summary executions committed since mid-January in Beletweyne by militia allied with the Ethiopian forces. The total number of executions is believed to be significantly higher. Human Rights Watch’s research indicates that the SVS militia was responsible for most of the executions.

The Somali militias and Ethiopian forces controlling Beletweyne appear to have committed some of the abuses in response to continuing attacks in the town, including attacks by al-Shabaab. International humanitarian law, which applies to all parties to the conflict in Somalia, prohibits summary executions, as well as unlawful reprisal attacks against civilians.

Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for a suicide bus bombing on January 24 that damaged a government building taken over by the Ethiopian military. In the ensuing hours, Ethiopian troops and allied militias arrested a number of people, including a teacher in Beletweyne, Abdirahman Muhumed-Nur Abdulle, known as “Matan.” Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that Matan was seized from his home during house searches by the SVS militia, beaten, and then taken away. His body was found in a river several hours later after a member of the SVS administration told Matan’s relatives where to find it.

In the early hours of February 8, SVS militia members forcibly entered a building housing members of the Takfir Islamic sect. The militia members abducted five men, took them to a bridge 100 meters away from the house, and shot and killed four on the spot. A local resident described seeing the four bodies lying under the bridge the following morning with gunshot wounds to their heads, necks, faces, and chests. According to a credible source, the fifth man was wounded but managed to escape. SVS militias tracked

him down, abducted him the next morning from a nearby home where he was taking shelter, and shot him.

Credible sources also told Human Rights Watch that on March 2, SVS militias abducted a man with mental health problems from a mosque in Beletweyne, accused him of being an al-Shabaab spy, and summarily executed him.

Other armed forces in Beletweyne have also been implicated in summary executions, although the cases need further investigation. On March 12, unidentified assailants threw a grenade at a tea shop near a house belonging to the former governor of Hiraan, Yusuf Ahmed Hagar, known as "Dabageed." The next day, members of Dabageed's militia went to the home of a 17-year-old boy who had been at the scene and was wounded in the attack and took him away. His body was found the following day, riddled with bullet wounds, in the Koshin neighborhood of Beletweyne.

"Wartime attacks never justify summary executions," Lefkow said. "All armed groups need to stop such atrocities."

Since withdrawing from Baidoa in February, al-Shabaab has killed people it perceives to be supporting the TFG or Ethiopian forces. On the evening of February 25, an Ethiopian Oromo businessman in Baidoa was killed by gunmen, who shot him three times in the head. He had occasionally translated for Ethiopian troops and was the first to reopen his business, a laundry, after the arrival of the Ethiopian forces. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the killing, local residents reported.

At 7 p.m. on March 11, Nur Mohamed Nur, a brother of the former TFG parliament speaker, Sheikh Adan Mohamed Nur, was shot by a gunman outside of the Hormud Telephone Company office in Baidoa, where he worked. Al-Shabaab had accused him of having attended the funeral of his cousin, a TFG soldier killed during fighting with al-Shabaab at Yurkut village on March 10, a relative said. Nur Mohammed had been openly critical of al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab has continued to threaten Baidoa residents. Residents told Human Rights Watch that the al-Shabaab administration warned the population before it left town not to cooperate with new forces, and in particular threatened businesses likely to provide services and goods to the Ethiopian and allied Somali forces. In March, al-Shabaab reportedly distributed leaflets in Baidoa, threatening residents who cooperate with these forces. Elders in Baidoa received threatening phone calls from al-Shabaab following a meeting with TFG officials, a reliable source said.

Human Rights Watch documented one incident of indiscriminate attacks by TFG-allied militia in Baidoa. On March 21, alleged al-Shabaab sympathizers threw a hand grenade at TFG-allied militia in the marketplace. The militia responded by opening fire on civilians. According to two witnesses, at least six died – four immediately and at least two later in a hospital – and several more were wounded.

Arbitrary Detentions and Torture

Credible sources, including reports from United Nations monitors, describe frequent arbitrary detentions in Beletweyne and Baidoa by the Ethiopian forces and allied militias. Human Rights Watch interviewed five people who were arbitrarily detained in Beletweyne and Baidoa, three of whom were badly beaten by the Ethiopian troops.

A man arrested by the SVS militia in Beletweyne during a house-to-house search and handed over to Ethiopian forces was held for several days at the Hiraan University campus, which Ethiopian forces are using as a base. Credible sources told Human Rights Watch that he was tied to a tree, repeatedly beaten, and denied food throughout his detention.

Dozens of people have been arbitrarily detained following attacks in Baidoa, eyewitnesses reported. The UN has said that young men and boys are particularly likely to be picked up in such operations and accused of being al-Shabaab members or supporters. As a result, young men are fleeing the town for fear of being taken into custody.

One such sweep occurred on March 2, following an explosion outside a police station in Baidoa. Forty-two people, including three local leaders and at least eight teenagers, were arrested by Ethiopian forces and TFG allied forces.

Dr. Mohammed Ali Ahmed "Kalay," the president of the University of Southern Somalia and former education minister, was at the scene of the explosion, but was unable to flee due to a physical disability. Five Ethiopian soldiers beat him with the butts of their AK-47 assault rifles on his head, mouth, and ears until he bled, then detained him at the central police station. A witness said Kalay and the two other local leaders were held for a day and then released. A witness said that two teenagers were among those arrested and beaten by the TFG forces. All were subsequently released.

"Ethiopian and TFG forces need to treat everyone in their custody humanely," Lefkow said. "The current security vacuum should be resolved while respecting basic rights, not through abusive security operations."

The residents of Beletweyne also complain of the curfew imposed by the Ethiopian forces on January 24. It currently runs for five hours in the morning and has severely restricted everyday life and access to basic services. School attendance has dropped due to the curfew, but also because people fled the town and schools were closed during the fighting in December and early January. Hiraan University is being used as a military base by the Ethiopian troops, and the university has had to move to a makeshift campus inside town.

Following two months of deadlocked negotiations between competing factions, the TFG appointed Abdifatah Hassan Afrah as the new chairman of the Hiraan region. Abdifatah is the president of the Shabelle Valley Administration, whose militia is believed to be responsible for several cases of the summary executions documented by Human Rights Watch.

When asked by Human Rights Watch what steps he was taking to investigate reported abuses, including summary executions by the SVS, Abdifatah denied knowledge of such incidents and refuted the existence of militias inside Beletweyne.

"The newly appointed administration in Hiraan needs to show that it is committed to ending abuses and insecurity in Beletweyne," Lefkow said. "Chairman Abdifatah should start by condemning these incidents and taking measures to investigate abuses by all groups."