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Uproar after Somali lawmaker presents bill to legalise child marriage

By Abdi Sheikh

Reuters (20.08.2020) - <https://reut.rs/34sZ9ko> - Hafsa was married off at 13 by her father to a man who paid \$100. She and her mother say she was beaten and raped for two years before they convinced him to divorce her.

"The man just slept with me, beating me always," she said, sitting by her mother, who clutches her daughter tightly. "I regretted I was born."

There is no law mandating a minimum age for marriage in Somalia. A bill introduced in parliament this month by a presidential ally caused a storm of criticism from lawmakers when they realised it would legalise marriage at puberty - as early as 10 for some girls.

Data from a government survey this year shows that nearly a third of girls are married before their 18th birthday - just under half of those before the age of 15.

"Some families marry off their daughters to reduce their economic burden or earn income. Others may do so because they believe it will secure their daughters' futures or protect them," said Dheepa Pandian, a spokeswoman from UNICEF, the United Nations' Children's Fund.

Political turmoil in Somalia - the prime minister was sacked last month and elections due this year will likely be delayed - means it is unclear when parliament might vote on the bill. The Horn of Africa nation is also battling an Islamist insurgency.

Many lawmakers, like legislator and human rights activist Sahra Omar Malin, reject the bill.

"Our constitution is based on Islam. It says the age of maturity is 18, this is the right age for voting or for a girl to marry," she said.

Deputy speaker Abdiweli Mudeey, who presented the bill, did not return calls seeking comment but told lawmakers that it had been reviewed by clerics and "this bill ... is the correct one based on Islam."

Nadifa Hussein, who runs three camps in the capital for families fleeing violence, shelters many abused and abandoned child brides.

"Most women here were married at 13 and are divorced by the time they are 20," Hussein said. "They have no one to feed them."

Among them is Sirad, a shy 16-year-old with two children. Her husband has left, but if he comes back she must welcome him, she said sadly.

"Who else wants me?" she asked, covering her face. "If you are thrown into a well and can't come out, the only option is to try to swim."

Somalia sees "massive" rise in FGM during lockdown and Ramadan

By Emma Batha

Thomson Reuters Foundation (18.05.2020) - <https://reut.rs/2lVFgrI> - Somalia's coronavirus lockdown has led to a huge increase in female genital mutilation (FGM), with circumcisers going door to door offering to cut girls stuck at home during the pandemic, a charity said on Monday.

Plan International said the crisis was undermining efforts to eradicate the practice in Somalia, which has the world's highest FGM rate, with about 98% of women having been cut.

"We've seen a massive increase in recent weeks," said Sadia Allin, Plan International's head of mission in Somalia. "We want the government to ensure FGM is included in all COVID responses."

She told the Thomson Reuters Foundation nurses across the country had also reported a surge in requests from parents wanting them to carry out FGM on their daughters while they were off school because of the lockdown.

FGM, which affects 200 million girls and women globally, involves the partial or total removal of the external genitalia. In Somalia the vaginal opening is also often sewn up - a practice called infibulation.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has warned that the pandemic could lead to an extra two million girls worldwide being cut in the next decade as the crisis stymies global efforts to end the practice.

Allin said families in Somalia were taking advantage of school closures to carry out FGM so that the girls had time to recover from the ritual, which can take weeks.

The economic downturn caused by coronavirus has also spurred cutters to tout for more business, she said.

"The cutters have been knocking on doors, including mine, asking if there are young girls they can cut. I was so shocked," said Allin, who has two daughters aged five and nine.

She said restrictions on movement during the lockdown were making it harder to raise awareness of the dangers of FGM in communities.

"FGM is one of the most extreme manifestations of violence against girls and women," said Allin, who has been cut herself.

"It's a lifetime torture for girls. The pain continues ... until the girl goes to the grave. It impacts her education, ambition ... everything."

The UNFPA, which estimates 290,000 girls will be cut in Somalia in 2020, said the spike was also linked to Ramadan, which is a traditional time for girls to be cut.

UNFPA Somalia representative Anders Thomsen said the pandemic was shifting world attention and funding away from combatting FGM.

But he said there were also grounds for optimism, pointing to the recent criminalisation of FGM in neighbouring Sudan.

"There are glimmers of hope and we do hope and believe that may rub off on Somalia, which I would call ground zero for FGM," he said.

New data also shows families are beginning to switch to less severe forms of FGM with 46% of 15 to 19-year-olds having been infibulated compared to more than 80% of their mothers.

Queensland mum convicted over female genital mutilation procedure

By Warren Barnsley

The Sydney Morning Herald (13.02.2019) - <https://goo.gl/VB78Yu> - A Queensland woman has been found guilty of arranging for her two daughters to have their genitals mutilated in Somalia.

The woman, who cannot be named for legal reasons, denied she had taken the girls, then aged 12 and nine, to her birth nation in April 2015 to undergo the procedure.

She was convicted by a Brisbane District Court jury on Wednesday of two counts of removing a child from the state for female genital mutilation (FGM).

The jury deliberated for about 90 minutes before reaching their verdict.

The trial heard the woman, who had undergone a similar procedure as a girl, had her daughters endure FGM a few days after arriving in Somalia.

One of the girls was called inside from playing outside her grandmother's house and had no idea what was about to happen when she had the painful procedure.

She was conscious throughout and it caused pain for days. Her sister was also subjected to the procedure, also with their mother by her side.

"(Their mother) had them in her care for the entire time. She was there when they were mutilated not long after they arrived in Somalia," crown prosecutor Dejana Kovac said.

"She extended the trip to give them time to heal before returning to Australia."

The family returned to their home seven months later. Then the girls' stepsister tipped off child safety services.

The girls told Queensland police about their experiences, leading to the charges against their mother.

Pediatrician Ryan Mills, who examined the girls, told the court the flattening of their clitoral hoods and discolouration of associated skin was "abnormal" and unlikely to be a "natural variation".

"(The abnormalities) could be explained or are consistent with, in medical terms, genital mutilation," he testified.

He said there was no therapeutic reason for the procedure.

Defence barrister Patrick Wilson said key medical evidence could have been interpreted differently by doctors not familiar with the case.

In a police interview, the woman said their trip had been to visit her mother and she'd done "nothing" in relation to a genital mutilation procedure.

Whatever had happened to the girls was "from God", she said.

Asked by Justice Leanne Clare if there was any reason why sentencing should not be passed down, the woman, through an interpreter, said she had cancer and back problems.

She was granted bail and will be sentenced at a later date.

Somalia under renewed scrutiny over FGM after two more young girls die

Death of sisters aged 10 and 11 undermines hopes of change inspired by announcement of landmark prosecution

By Kate Hodal

The Guardian (17.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2xqSBRC> - Two more girls in Somalia have died after undergoing female genital mutilation, just weeks after a high-profile case prompted the attorney general to announce the first prosecution against the practice in the country's history.

Two sisters, aged 10 and 11, bled to death last week after they were cut in the remote pastoral village of Arawda North in Galdogob district, Puntland, said activist Hawa Aden Mohamed of the Galkayo Centre.

The deaths of Aasiyo and Khadijo Farah Abdi Warsame have come at a time of transition in Somalia, where 98% of all women and girls undergo FGM, the highest rate in the world. Most cases go unreported.

The case of Deeqa Dahir Nuur, 10, who haemorrhaged to death in July after she was operated on by a traditional cutter, prompted Somalia's attorney general Ahmed Ali Dahir to send a team of investigators to her remote village with the aim of prosecuting those involved in her death.

The move was heralded at the time as a "defining moment for Somalia" by Mahdi Mohammed Gulaid, the deputy prime minister, who said: "It is not acceptable that in

the 21st century FGM is continuing in Somalia. It should not be part of our culture. It is definitely not part of the Islamic religion.”

However, activists in the country say the death of the two sisters proves that the government is not moving quickly enough to prevent further incidents.

“It is shocking that, with the massive publicity of the Deeqa case and subsequent commitment by the Somali government to do more, on the ground change does not yet seem to be happening,” said Brendan Wynne of Donor Direct Action, an international women’s group that runs a fund to end FGM. “Girls continue to die from this devastating abuse while we wait for politicians to move.”

FGM is technically illegal in Puntland, a semi-autonomous state in north-eastern Somalia, where lawmakers recently approved legislation outlawing the practice.

“Yet there seems to be reluctance in discussing and passing the anti-FGM law in Puntland, which was recently approved by the cabinet,” said Mohamed.

“We hope that this will serve as a wake-up call for those responsible to see the need to have the law in place to protect girls from this heinous practice.”

Most girls in Somalia undergo the most severe form of circumcision – during which external genitalia are removed or repositioned and the vaginal opening is sewn up, leaving only a small hole through which to pass menstrual blood – between the ages of five and nine. The operation is often performed by untrained midwives or healers using knives, razors or broken glass.

The two girls underwent the surgery on 10 September but bled continuously for 24 hours, said Mohamed. Their mother tried to take them to nearby Bursallah town to seek medical help but the girls died during the journey, according to Mohamed.

Somali-born FGM survivor and campaigner Ifrah Ahmed said the sisters’ deaths were “very upsetting” given Puntland’s professed interest in outlawing the practice.

“I’m still in shock after Deeqa’s death and hearing this [news] is very upsetting, very sad, losing two little girls again to female genital mutilation,” said Ahmed.

“Puntland has approved the anti-FGM bill and still young girls are losing their lives. Immediate action needs to be taken by international donors who support Somalia, and by the federal government of Somalia [itself].”

First prosecution for female genital mutilation

By Emma Batha

Thomson Reuters Foundation (26.07.2018) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/2v4tfY4> - Somalia's Attorney General Ahmed Ali Dahir announced on Wednesday the country's first ever prosecution against female genital mutilation (FGM) following the death of a 10-year-old girl, an adviser to the government said.

Ifrah Ahmed, who advises Somalia on gender issues, said the attorney general was sending a team of investigators to find out more about the death of the girl, Deeqa, who suffered severe bleeding after her mother took her to a traditional cutter.

The announcement was made at a conference on FGM attended by officials, religious leaders and journalists, which was co-hosted in Mogadishu by the Global Media Campaign to End FGM and the Ifrah Foundation.

"We are ready to take it to court," the attorney general was quoted as saying on Twitter by the organisers.

Deeqa's death has prompted campaigners to renew calls for Somalia to pass a law on FGM, which affects 98 percent of women in the east African country - the highest rate in the world, according to U.N. data.

"This is really a defining moment for Somalia," Deputy Prime Minister Mahdi Mohamed Gulaid told the conference organisers in a video posted on Twitter on Thursday.

Somalia's constitution prohibits FGM, but efforts to pass legislation to punish offenders have been stalled by parliamentarians afraid of losing votes.

Ahmed confirmed news of the attorney general's announcement to the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Mogadishu.

"He said they had opened the case in Mogadishu and that they would investigate and deal with the parents," said Ahmed, whose charity, the Ifrah Foundation, campaigns to end FGM in Somalia.

"He told the conference he would bring the family to justice."

Global campaigners against FGM, which affects around 200 million girls and women worldwide, welcomed the news.

"This is massive," said Nimco Ali, a prominent Somali-born British activist.

Somalia does not have a law against FGM, but campaign group 28 Too Many said offenders could still be prosecuted under the country's Penal Code, which makes it a criminal offence to cause hurt to another.

Many girls in Somalia undergo the most extreme form of the ancient ritual in which the external genitalia are removed and the vaginal opening is sewn up.

Deeqa was taken by her mother to a traditional circumciser on July 14 in central Somalia's Galmudug state and died in hospital two days later.

Her father was quoted by international media this week as defending the practice, saying he believed his daughter was "taken by Allah".

Many people believe the ritual is an important part of their tradition and a religious obligation, although it is not mentioned in the Koran.

Organisers said the attorney general had also urged Somalia's religious leaders to use radio and TV to speak out against FGM.

Meet the tank girls taking on al-Shabab

Somalia's fight against jihad will be decisive for women's rights — and may be decided by female soldiers.

By Christina Goldbaum

Foreign Policy (28.10.2016) - <http://atfp.co/2f1b9NR> - It was 9:30 a.m., in a desolate corner of Somalia, and Lt. Cpl. Juliet Uwimana was taking her tank for a test drive. She and the rest of Uganda's Battle Group 18 had been in the war-torn Lower Shabelle region for only a week, but already the battle group was on high alert.

Al-Shabab militants had overrun three similar forward-operating bases in the last year, killing more than 100 soldiers. They had also attacked dozens of other bases, including one just six miles from their post in Arabiska. But this morning was a quiet one — hence Uwimana's test drive in the T-55 tank. She stood on a metal seat as the machine jerked forward, spewing smoke from its massive treads and rolling through sand so deep it threatened to swallow the vehicle whole.

Uwimana is one of roughly 500 women in the Ugandan contingent of AMISOM, the 17,000-strong African Union force tasked with battling al-Shabab and securing the troubled Horn of Africa nation so that a political process can take root. They serve as drivers, gunners, and technicians in the motorized infantry division — roles that women were barred from in the U.S. military until as recently as last year. But in Somalia, female peacekeepers have been serving in these positions for years.

This is remarkable not only because al-Shabab is among the region's most dangerous terror groups, but because Somalia is generally one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman, according to various rankings and polls. Somalia has the highest prevalence of female genital mutilation in the world at 95 percent, among the highest maternal mortality rates at 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births, and, though official statistics are unreliable, anecdotal evidence suggests that sexual assault remains an inescapable threat for most women across the country.

But the fact that AMISOM features so many women in combat roles is neither a matter of oversight, nor desperation. It's a strategic gambit. The female peacekeepers have an unspoken but very clear mandate: to prevent their male colleagues from perpetrating sexual violence against civilians and to help nurture faint stirrings of gender equality in Somalia.

After a bumpy swing around the base's green Hesco barriers, Uwimana's tank gunner, Lt. Cpl. Lehi Chebet, calls down for the tank's driver to cut the engine, her voice nearly drowned out by its roar. The vehicle lurches to a halt and the fresh-faced tank gunner nimbly maneuvers her way out of its small opening, giving a short nod. The machine is ready.

or nearly three decades, Somalia has been the world's default example of a failed state. After the collapse of dictator Siad Barre's regime in 1991, the country fell under the sway of a patchwork of local warlords whose bloody inter-clan fighting destroyed infrastructure and crops and produced one of the worst famines the world has ever seen. Out of this chaos came the terrorist group al-Shabab, which pledged allegiance to al Qaeda and seized control of large swaths of the country, including parts of the capital, Mogadishu.

AMISOM first deployed to Somalia in 2007 under an African Union Peace and Security Council mandate to protect Somali infrastructure and government officials as well as to deliver humanitarian aid. Since then, the mission's size, mandate, and geographical

presence have dramatically increased. AMISOM's mission is now more counterinsurgency than peacekeeping. Its troops have pushed al-Shabab militants out of most urban areas and into sparsely populated regions like Lower Shabelle, where the two forces are engaged in a deadly game of cat and mouse.

But as AMISOM's presence has grown, so too has the controversy surrounding it. A 2014 Human Rights Watch report documented widespread sexual exploitation and assault of women and girls by Ugandan and Burundian troops within AMISOM. Since the report was released, AMISOM has created mechanisms for survivors of sexual violence to report accusations against soldiers. But it has also worked to keep new allegations of sexual assault from becoming public. According to U.N. and nongovernmental organization sources working on gender-based violence in Somalia, a 2013 internal U.N. report that alleged sexual assault by AMISOM soldiers was buried after researchers involved in writing it received death threats.

Deploying female peacekeepers has been a part of the U.N.'s official strategy to fight sexual violence since 2000, when the Security Council passed Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security. The logic behind that resolution, which called for greater female participation in peacekeeping missions as well as new safeguards to prevent gender-based violence, was simple: Women are generally more comfortable speaking with female authorities, so deploying female blue helmets should make it easier for women to report cases of sexual violence and enhance the ability of missions like AMISOM to investigate such cases. The presence of female soldiers within peacekeeping battalions is also thought to make sexual violence against civilians less likely.

But beyond the U.N.'s impressive claim, made in a study of Resolution 1325's implementation last year, that "not a single female peacekeeper has ever been accused of sexual exploitation and abuse on mission," there is little more than anecdotal evidence to support the idea that female peacekeepers are an effective antidote to sexual violence.

"There is this idea that women are a civilizing influence, that maybe some men would be ashamed in front of their female colleagues to be engaged in that kind of behavior," said Mary Schwoebel, a professor of conflict resolution studies at Nova Southeastern University in Florida who has trained Ugandan peacekeepers in Somalia. "But unless women are commanders and have the power to do something about it, I'm not sure that makes any difference."

Sixteen years after the resolution was approved, women still account for only 3 to 4 percent of all U.N. peacekeepers. According to Pablo Castillo-Diaz, a peace and security analyst at U.N. Women, a United Nations agency dedicated to gender equality, "many of them are in support roles, such as clerical support jobs, even if they have been trained to be much more in contact with the population or in protection tasks."

The proportion of women in AMISOM's Ugandan contingent is only slightly higher than the U.N. average of 6.6 percent. And Uganda consistently ranks near the bottom of the U.N. Development Program's Gender Inequality Index. But with more than 30 percent of those women serving in combat positions, the likelihood that they will eventually attain leadership positions is much higher. Many of these women not only aspire to be commanders, they view themselves as pioneers in a new generation of female fighters on the front line.

Ugandan Pvt. Scovia Nagun Mafabo, who drives a tank-like infantry combat vehicle known as a BMP, said there were no female BMP drivers when she arrived at the Kampala Armoured Warfare Training School in 2012. "But when I arrived, they said let us see if these girls can also manage and they selected four of us to train with the men," she said. "After we successfully finished the course and qualified to be drivers, the school

said, 'From today we are going to be training more girls.' Now we have trained six more girls in BMP."

Still, the number of Ugandan women training and serving in combat roles has begun to grow only recently, meaning that it will be a decade or more until they ascend the ranks to positions of power. And even when there are more female officers, many fear it won't do much to change the hyper-masculine culture that prevails in most militaries that contribute peacekeeping troops.

"[Military] culture is not being changed by women; it's changing women," Schwoebel said. "The culture is a really macho, sexist culture, and it's not going to change easily. So to succeed as a woman and get promoted to higher echelons, you have to adopt a character or traits that are also macho."

This might be true in places like Arabiska, the remote forward operating base where Uwimana and Chebet work beside only a few female colleagues. But in Uganda's main AMISOM base in the Somali capital of Mogadishu, where the largest group of female soldiers is stationed, women have carved out a space where femininity becomes its own form of camaraderie.

"You see this is our place; here we can just relax," Cpl. Maimuna Kahindo, who drives a non-armored vehicle transporting equipment and personnel, said recently as she and seven other female soldiers kicked back in a women-only dormitory on AMISOM's massive razor-wired complex at the airport in Mogadishu. Kahindo, who is stocky with a wide, infectious smile, plopped down on a bed made up with green-and-pink plaid sheets in their shipping-container-turned-barracks. She and the other soldiers were debating the merits of a jar of hair cream with a picture of a woman suggestively tilting her head on the label. The consensus was that nothing — not even the contents of the jar — could help their hair in Somalia's oppressive heat.

Eventually tiring of the conversation, Kahindo turned on the large stereo next to her bed and a popular Nigerian pop song filled the room. She stood and started swaying to the beat, elbows hugging her hips, as the women on the bed cheered her on. One chorus in, Oliver Basalirwa, another driver, joined Kahindo and began crooning along to the song.

Kahindo laughed. "You see," she said, still rocking her hips to the music. "Here we are just at peace. Mogadishu, it is not too bad, yeah?"

Driving through the Somali capital, it's easy to forget that just a few years ago these streets were the front lines of the war against al-Shabab. These days, humid air from the Indian Ocean wafts over the shiny blue windows of brand-new office buildings and young girls jump around poorly painted but brightly colored playgrounds. The restaurant at the Beach View Hotel, a faded yellow building sandwiched between a wall of Hesco barriers and a white sand waterfront, is packed once again, only four months after an al-Shabab attack there killed at least 20 people.

Mogadishu's peace is tenuous. In July, two suicide bombers tried to breach the AMISOM base where Kahindo and Basalirwa are stationed, killing 14 people. But for a country that has been at war for a quarter century, the change in the city feels dramatic. It just hosted its second annual international book fair, drawing hundreds of visitors and showcasing more than a dozen local and international authors. Residents can now stroll down the street and grab a slice of brick-oven pizza or watch a 3-D movie at the Pizza House Cinema.

Although most of the country outside the capital remains dangerous, the relative calm in Mogadishu has allowed a national discussion about gender roles and women's rights that

was impossible during the height of the war. The Parliament has drafted and debated — though not passed — a bill that would criminalize sexual violence for the first time, and the National Leadership Forum, which is overseeing preparations for the country's upcoming general election, has endorsed a 30 percent quota for women in Parliament.

Peacetime has many obvious benefits for Somali women; among the hardships of wartime, they were disproportionately affected by sexual violence and inadequate access to health care. But there are some who worry that the end of war could mean a step backward for women. Women routinely became heads of households out of necessity during the war, and many started businesses in order to survive.

"You can always say conflict is an opportunity for gender roles to change," said Tanya Chopra, a contractor with U.N. Women in Somalia. "In some areas women of Somalia have been more economically engaged because their husbands are fighting or have died, and women are wondering now if ... they will have to go back to being in the house and have to give up their economic engagement."

Some, including Chopra, are looking to the female soldiers in AMISOM to inspire Somali women to fight to retain their wartime freedoms. They also hope that the presence of female AMISOM officers in the street, in U.N. conference rooms, and in meetings with top Somali officials will change men's perceptions about gender roles.

"When we say we have a leader who's coming to meet you, [local leaders] expect to see a male and they are surprised when they see a female. Maybe because of the culture they thought as a female you can't be a leader," said Ugandan Capt. Mercy Ruhinda. "But I think that is starting to change, at least they see that women can be in leadership positions, and we are trying to help address the problems here."

But where many see the presence of female AMISOM soldiers having the greatest impact is in changing the mindset of young Somali girls. According to Schwoebel, "It could have a great impact on young women in Somalia because seeing women, especially from African countries, in these positions, they become like role models to these young girls."

Evidence from previous missions suggests that the example set by female peacekeepers can make a difference. In Liberia, for example, an all-female Formed Police Unit from India was credited by the U.N. with inspiring Liberian women to join the country's police force, increasing the percentage of female officers from 13 to 21 in the five years after the Indian unit deployed in 2007. In Somalia, a similar trend is emerging, perhaps inspired by the women of AMISOM and perhaps by a 24-year-old member of the diaspora, Iman Elman, who as a captain is the highest-ranking woman of the Somali National Army (SNA). Elman was raised in Canada following the slaying of her father, the prominent human rights activist Elman Ali Ahmed, but returned to Mogadishu in 2009 to work at her mother's center for victims of sexual assault, the Elman Peace and Human Rights Center.

"A lot of girls I talked to believed that they were physically incapable of doing what men could do," Elman said. "I remember Googling woman bodybuilders and showing them the pictures because I wanted them to see that that wasn't true."

Elman soon realized the only way to convince young women of their potential would be to demonstrate it herself — by joining the military. When she enlisted in the SNA at the age of 19, she was one of only two women in her battalion of 350 soldiers. After a year of struggling through intense verbal abuse from her male colleagues, Elman went on to serve on the front lines of the war against al-Shabab, earning national recognition for her accomplishments. Though the number of women in uniform is still very low, she says, more young women are expressing interest in joining Somalia's nascent military force.

"There's been an influx of girls, young girls, joining the army, and the boys are a bit more accepting of it than when I joined," she said.

But the SNA is still a long way from being considered a professional fighting force. It's estimated that 16,000 troops are poorly trained and equipped, and they often go months without pay. That poses a host of challenges for female troops like Elman that the women of AMISOM don't have to contend with. The Somali army doesn't have proper barracks, let alone reporting mechanisms or disciplinary procedures for gender-based discrimination and abuse.

"We still don't have a gender department, we don't have a human rights department," Elman said. "When I joined there wasn't a single channel where I could lodge any complaints about how the guys were treating me."

Somali female soldiers haven't yet earned the same respect as their AMISOM counterparts, and young SNA recruits still complain about sexual harassment and mistreatment by their male colleagues, Elman said. But as AMISOM prepares to withdraw from Somalia and hand combat operations over to the SNA, perhaps as early as 2018, the role of female soldiers in both forces has never been more important. Gender norms are changing as Somalia inches toward peace, and women in uniform will play an important role in safeguarding what little progress was made toward gender equality during wartime — and leading the charge for full equality during peacetime.

For now, peace and equality seem a long way off. Though some stability has returned to Mogadishu, bombings and targeted assassinations are still commonplace. Outside the capital, al-Shabab still terrorizes huge swaths of the country and clan militias do as they please in the absence of government control. The outlook for women in these areas is grim; one out of every 12 women dies of pregnancy related-causes and nearly half of all Somali girls are married by the age of 18. Whether or not the government can wrest control over these regions will not just be decisive for women. It may be decided by women, since more of them are serving in uniform.

"Women raised this country; they have been mediating peace throughout the war," said Leila Mohamoud Abdulle, a women's rights activist in Mogadishu. Now women have a chance to fight for peace on the frontlines and help build a culture of respect and gender equality in the armed forces.

"If we want peace to last," she said, "we are going to need the leadership from women."

Sexual violence must be subject to criminal justice, says UN expert

UN News Centre (25.4.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1QYccrH> - A United Nations human rights expert today called on the Government of Somalia to enhance the capacity of the judiciary and police force in handling cases of sexual and gender-based violence, and to prohibit the handling of such cases by traditional clan elders.

"I call on the Government to prioritize the creation and implementation of a twin strategy: to enhance the capacity of the judiciary and the Somali Police force, and to prohibit clan and traditional elders from resolving or adjudicating such cases," said the UN Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Somalia, Bahame Tom Nyanduga, in a press release.

"There is also a crucial need to create human rights awareness among clan elders and religious leaders about women's rights, as one way of facilitating change within communities," he added.

Mr. Nyanduga began his visit to Somalia on 16 April. During his mission, he visited Mogadishu, Kismayo and Baidoa, and met the Speaker of the Federal Parliament, Federal Government authorities in Mogadishu, representatives of Jubbaland state, and the South West state.

On Saturday, at the end of his third mission to the country, Mr. Nyanduga noted that the Xeer Somali traditional dispute resolution system continues to play a key role in the country, given that rule of law institutions are still being established. He was concerned to learn that traditional elders adjudicate sexual and gender-based violence cases, such as rape, due to the absence of a fully functioning criminal justice system in many parts of Somalia.

He called for the adoption of the Sexual Offences Bill during the forthcoming session of Parliament to further guarantee the protection of women's rights and also urged the Government to implement the recommendations arising from Somalia's 2016 Universal Periodic Review before the Human Rights Council, including the adoption of a moratorium on the death penalty.

Mr. Nyanduga commended the Federal and regional authorities and Parliament for committing themselves to holding elections later this year, widening the electoral base and ensuring that a 30 per cent women representation is met. However, he expressed concern that representation of youth, minorities and persons with disabilities, is not similarly guaranteed.

The Independent Expert also reiterated the need to address the human rights challenges that journalists and media in Somalia face. He warned that the Media Law must not be used as a tool to harass journalists, but rather to ensure respect for the rights to freedom of opinion and expression.

He noted with satisfaction the Government's commitment to adopt the National Human Rights Commission Bill, establishing an independent National Human Rights Institution before the end of its tenure, and urged that this commitment be met.

"However, another bill, the Counter Terrorism Bill, could potentially negatively affect the enjoyment of human rights," Mr. Nyanduga said. "I urge the authorities to ensure that this bill conforms to international human rights guarantees in accordance with Somalia's international human rights obligations and the revised Federal Constitution. To be effective in fighting terrorism, the law must be firmly entrenched in human rights."

AMISOM's role in Somalia

The Independent Expert commended the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) for the role it continues to play in the country. He noted its commitment to comply with human rights and international humanitarian law, including ensuring accountability for violations committed by its forces. Regarding the incident on the killing of the four civilians by AMISOM forces in Bullo Mareer, Lower Shabelle, the expert urged the Mission to conduct thorough, independent investigations and make the findings of its inquiries public.

In this regard, he welcomed the plan by the UN and AMISOM to hold the first UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy implementation review workshop on 26 and 27 April, urging

that stronger collaboration on the ground will foster compliance with human rights and international humanitarian law, which is a shared objective for both the United Nations and the African Union.

Independent experts or special rapporteurs are appointed by the Geneva-based Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.