

Report

Somalia: Practical issues and security challenges associated with travels in Southern Somalia



Translation provided by the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons, Belgium.

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SUMMARY

This report deals with practical and safety aspects related to travels from Mogadishu to various places in southern Somalia. The report focuses on public travel by minibus, as this is a common and preferred means of transportation.

It is possible to travel to most places in southern Somalia. The risks involved in travelling are primarily related to potential reactions at various checkpoints. Drivers will as far as possible seek to minimize risk by adapting the itinerary or postpone the trip. The likelihood of encountering a checkpoint manned by government forces or al-Shabaab can still be high. For most Somalis the primary risk at such checkpoints is to be suspected of belonging to the enemy, a suspicion which may cause serious reactions. Travellers thus try to avoid arousing suspicion by keeping a low profile and blending in with fellow travellers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report provides a brief description of opportunities for Somalis to travel from Mogadishu to various places in Southern Somalia. The report focuses on public transport by minibus (hereafter referred to as bus), which in Landinfo's understanding is a common and preferred method of travel. Of course it is also possible to travel on the ground in other ways, such as by renting a car with a driver or by paying to ride with a truck (source A, meeting Mogadishu, January 2016).

The report is mainly based on information obtained from drivers and travellers through a local resource person in Mogadishu (source A). Landinfo has met with and cooperated with source A on several occasions, and assess the source to be highly reliable. The information from the source is assessed in light of other available information. Source A and some other sources are anonymous for the sake of their safety and/or employment.

2. PRACTICAL CONDITIONS

There are no statistics on how many people travel where, but source A explained that fully loaded buses run daily from Mogadishu to various destinations in Southern Somalia. Thus it is Landinfo's impression that many people travel despite the security challenges involved in such travels (see point 3).

2.1 DESTINATIONS

As shown in table 1 below it is possible to travel by bus from Mogadishu to all regions in Southern Somalia, including to al-Shabaab areas (such as Jilib). According to source A (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) it is possible to travel from Mogadishu to most places in Southern Somalia, including small villages, as long as you can pay. The routes are flexible. However the source explained that Somalis who want to travel from Mogadishu to such small villages usually travel to the nearest district city and then arrange further transport from there.

Travel opportunities to various destinations can be temporarily limited by natural and safety conditions (see chapter 3). Natural conditions primarily relate to areas that may be inaccessible due to flooding.¹

The table shows only a selection of destinations, and the stated travel times in the table are estimates only. The information is obtained from two sources (source A, e-mails of 20 February 2016 and 2 March 2016; source C, attachment in e-mail from Norway's Embassy in Nairobi of 23 November 2015).

¹ Flooding occurs during or in the wake of rainy seasons with too much rainfall, affecting vulnerable local areas. The most vulnerable areas are located along the rivers, but areas that are not near rivers can also be affected. Rainy seasons normally last from April to June (*Gu*, the long rainy season) and from October to November (*Dayr*, the short rainy season). Even during the rainy season it can go several weeks without rain, and periodically it can rain in the dry season. Normally over half the rains fall during *Gu* (FAO-SWALIM 2010, p. 11).

2.1.1 Table 1: Price of bus travel from Mogadishu to destinations in Southern Somalia

Destination		Price (USD)	Travel time
Region	City		
Lower Shabelle	Afgoye	1	½-1 hour
Lower Shabelle	Merka	10	3-4 hours
Lower Shabelle	Qoryoley	10	
Lower Shabelle	Barave	15	
Central Shabelle	Jowhar	10	2-4 hours
Hiran	Belet Weyne	50	26 hours
Hiran	Buli Burti	20	
Galgadud	El Bur	20	24 hours
Galgadud	El Der	30	24 hours
Bay	Baidoa	20	6-9 hours
Bay	Dinsor	30	14 hours
Bakool	Hudur	60	
Gedo	Bardere	40	
Gedo	Luuq	40	36-50 hours
Gedo	Garbaharey	50	
Gedo	Belet Hawo	50	
Gedo	El Wak	50	
Lower Juba	Kismayo	70	48-50 hours
Lower Juba	Afmadow	80	
Central Juba	Jilib	40	40 hours
Central Juba	Buale	60	

2.2 PRICES AND DEPARTURE

Table 1 shows how much it can cost to travel to select destinations in Southern Somalia.² Prices may of course vary, and normally they go up during the rainy season (see footnote 1).³

According to source A (e-mail 24 November 2015) it is easy to get in touch with drivers and others who arrange bus trips. Buses run from various locations in Mogadishu, including from the Bakara market and KM5.⁴ Here it is possible to inquire about destinations and prices. People who want to travel give their name and mobile number to the driver or the person arranging the trip, and will be called when the trip can begin. Buses only run when enough travellers have expressed interest, possibly when fewer travellers are willing to pay an adequate sum. The buses are usually of the type Toyota Noah or equivalent. Toyota Noah has room to accommodate up to eight passengers (Be Forward 2014). It is not uncommon for interested parties to wait for several days before departure can take place.

Buses normally leave Mogadishu early in the morning (source A, meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016). They are not marked with a destination, and as mentioned in chapter 4, the driver will customise the itinerary depending on the security situation at the time.

There are four main roads going out of Mogadishu. Two of these roads run inland via the cities of Afgoye in Lower Shabelle and Balad in Central Shabelle. In addition there are two roads that follow the coastline north and south. Maps from e.g. FSNAU (2005) provide a relatively accurate picture of the road network and distances in Southern Somalia. The road conditions are generally poor.

2.3 TRAVEL TIMES

The travel times specified in table 1 are estimates and must therefore be read with reservation. As noted the travel times are usually longer during the rainy season (see footnote 1).

Accidents and other unforeseen events may extend travel times considerably (source A, e-mail 3 January 2016). According to source A (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) it is possible to buy food and drinks in most villages that are passed during the trip. Sometimes travellers must also sleep over along the way. Source A explained that drivers often enter into agreements with owners of eateries and/or accommodations in various villages that the driver eats/stays for free in return for bringing travellers with them.

² American dollars (USD) are widespread currency in Mogadishu. According to source A (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) only sums under USD 1 are paid in Somali shillings. Payment is usually done by mobile phone.

³ It is also possible to ride with trucks or rent your own car with driver (source A, meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016). Riding with a truck costs maybe half of travelling by bus, while the price for renting your own car with driver is probably three times more expensive than travelling by bus (source C, attachment in e-mail from Norway's Embassy in Nairobi of 23 November 2015).

⁴ The Bakara market is not a market in the traditional sense, but a larger geographical area with extensive trading in the districts Hawl Wadag and Hodan. KM5 is an area right by Benadir hospital along Afgoye road between the districts Wadajir and Hodan.

3. SECURITY CHALLENGES

Travelling by bus in Southern Somalia entails a potential risk beyond traffic accidents. The risk primarily relates to reactions from armed men at various types of checkpoints. A checkpoint consists of various types of roadblocks, such as a trunk or coil of barbed wire that forces the vehicle to stop. The term checkpoint can be misleading in this context, as such roadblocks largely have to do with economic motives rather than checks/controls.

Checkpoints are often divided into regular and irregular checkpoints, depending on whether the post is sanctioned by the authorities. Such a dichotomy makes little sense for the description of security challenges relating to checkpoints in Southern Somalia, because the Somali government has limited authority over the country's territory and includes actors with varying degrees of loyalty to the government in Mogadishu.

In this report Landinfo refers to four categories of checkpoints, depending on the actors who man them and the context in which these actors operate: 1) bandits, 2) clan militias, 3) government forces and 4) al-Shabaab. The distinction between the categories can be fluid. For example both government forces and al-Shabaab may consist of clan militias, and bandits may be dressed in government uniforms (see for example Goobjoog News 2015).⁵ Category 1 refers to the roadblocks that are created for the purpose of robbing travellers regardless of clan conflict and power struggles. Category 2 refers to checkpoints that are established in connection with armed clan conflicts. Category 3 and 4 relate to the ongoing conflict between al-Shabaab and government forces. In Landinfo's understanding, travellers are generally not targets, but they may be affected by crossfire and roadside bombs by being «in the wrong place at the wrong time». Source A shared this perception (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016). However both al-Shabaab and the government are aware of people they suspect of belonging to the enemy.

Sexual violence is prevalent in Southern Somalia in general, although this is not discussed further in this report. Such violence is for example perpetrated by armed men at checkpoints (UN Secretary-General 2015, p. 13).

3.1 BANDITS

Bandits are primarily looking to rob travellers. Travellers may also be exposed to violence in this context. According to source A clan affiliation provides little protection against bandits (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016). According to source A there is a widespread perception amongst drivers and travellers that the incidence of banditry is less prevalent in al-Shabaab-controlled areas. This is in line with previous information from the Somalia expert Stig Jarle Hansen (2013, p. 85) that al-Shabaab managed to limit the incidence of banditry in areas under their control.

⁵ A well-informed local resource person noted that the government uniforms are easily available (source D, meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016). It may therefore be difficult to determine which actors are behind such banditry. However it is a known problem that government forces are paid irregularly. According to source A such forces get paid by robbing travellers (e-mail 23 February 2016).

3.2 CLAN MILITIAS

Clan conflicts flare up at irregular intervals in Southern Somalia. Such conflicts typically concern control over grazing land, water sources and other resources. When the conflicts become so acrimonious that clan members take up arms, according to source A (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) it is legitimate to kill members of the opposing clan. This primarily affects combat-age men. Women, children and older people should traditionally be spared, but this is not necessarily done in practice. Armed clan conflicts can be very violent, but the violence is usually limited to a small geographic area and for a short time (see for example IRIN News 2014; Horseed Media 2015). According to source A there is a widespread perception amongst drivers and travellers that such violent conflicts primarily occur in areas where al-Shabaab is no longer in power. This is in line with information from the UN monitoring group for Somalia and Eritrea that clan conflicts flourish in areas that the government overtakes (UN Security Council 2014, p. 309).

Somalis have no physical characteristics that show which clan they belong to. According to source A the local population in rural areas usually knows who in the local community, including neighbouring cities, belongs to which clan (e-mail 24 November 2015; meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016). The local population in Mogadishu and other major cities do not necessarily know who belongs to which clan. In Landinfo's assessment it is primarily travellers who belong to an involved clan and who are living in the conflict zone who risk reactions in such contexts.

3.3 GOVERNMENT FORCES

Vehicles must usually pass a regular checkpoint manned by government forces to drive in and/or out of government areas (source A, meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016). According to source A the actual checks/controls at such posts are often inadequate (e-mail 23 February 2016). The source pointed out that government forces are paid irregularly and therefore largely use checkpoints to get paid from travellers. The travellers may still be asked to explain where they are going and why. In this context travellers may also be asked to call a reference who can confirm what they have reported.

As Landinfo understands it people who are suspected of being al-Shabaab members risk being arrested. If the suspicion is maintained, the suspect may be brought before a court and ultimately sentenced to death or imprisonment of varying durations, up to life (Landinfo 2015b, p. 4). However the government's capacity is very limited. This particularly applies outside Mogadishu. Any legal proceedings and punishment are further discussed in Landinfo's query reponse of 5 June 2015 on mass arrests and sanctions against persons suspected of being al-Shabaab members (*Massearrestasjoner og reaksjoner mot personer som mistenkes for å være al-Shabaab-medlemmer*). As mentioned the government actors have varying degrees of loyalty to the government in Mogadishu. Their reactions to travellers suspected of being al-Shabaab members may thus vary. Corruption is very widespread.⁶

⁶ Transparency International (2015) ranked Somalia as the most corrupt country in the world in 2015. Transparency International's corruption index is based on perceptions of corruption in the public, which are obtained from a wide variety of people in the countries in question.

3.4 AL-SHABAAB

The sources Landinfo met during a fact-finding mission to Mogadishu in January 2016 agreed that al-Shabaab generally has a lot of influence along highways, including in areas between cities that the government has taken. This is supported by al-Shabaab conducting ambushes against government forces along the roads (see for example Goobjoog News 2016) and disrupting supplies and trade to areas that the government has taken (see for example Radio Ergo 2016a and 2016b; Shabelle News 2016).

However Landinfo is not aware that al-Shabaab prevents travel. Information from source A, including that it is possible to travel more or less anywhere in Southern Somalia, including al-Shabaab areas (see table 1), underscores this. Source A also explained that drivers must pay fees to al-Shabaab to drive to or through al-Shabaab areas. The fees are normally only paid once per trip from Mogadishu to a given destination. The fees are probably payable before departure from Mogadishu, but this is unclear.⁷ The driver usually receives some kind of receipt which shows that the fee is paid. This serves as a pass at al-Shabaab checkpoints.

Al-Shabaab has limited manpower and so cannot be present everywhere. The degree to which they have a presence in various areas may thus vary and Landinfo does not have an exhaustive overview of this. The general picture is that al-Shabaab may have a presence in and around areas that the government has taken.⁸ Source B, a very well-informed representative of an international organisation, substantiated this by explaining that al-Shabaab can largely stop and check vehicles along the highways between government-controlled cities (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016). This also applies to major roads that are frequented relatively often by AMISOM. The source explained that al-Shabaab themselves operate some checkpoints along such roads that are more or less static. Al-Shabaab disappears from the road when an AMISOM column approaches, but reestablishes the checkpoint once the column has passed. Therefore it seems to Landinfo that there is a real possibility of travellers meeting al-Shabaab between cities that have been taken by the government.

Source A explained that many Somalis are afraid of al-Shabaab, but that this does not mean that they have real reason to fear reactions from them. As mentioned earlier the source pointed out that there is a widespread perception amongst drivers and travellers that the chance of being exposed to crime and clan-related violence is less in al-Shabaab areas. Having been in a Western country is in itself unproblematic in meeting with al-Shabaab, according to source A. In this context the source pointed to the fact that many al-Shabaab members themselves have a background from and/or family in the West. However Western behaviour and dresscode, such as having your shirt tucked inside your trousers, is sanctioned by al-Shabaab. According to source A the punishment for this is usually lashes. This is in line with information that al-Shabaab implements strict rules of dress and lifestyle, including that women must wear niqab (see for example BBC 2014).⁹

⁷ According to source A (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) the fee is included in the price travellers must pay for bus fare. The travellers also never themselves make payment to al-Shabaab.

⁸ The presence in government areas is hidden.

⁹ Al-Shabaab's rules and views on Western behaviour are not necessarily foreign to the people of Southern Somalia (source A, meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016; Somalia expert 2015, p. 7). Islam generally attaches

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3.4.1 Risk for people associated with the government

According to source A (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) people who have reason to fear al-Shabaab are primarily people with ties to the government and their supporters. Such people risk being killed by al-Shabaab if they encounter and are recognised by al-Shabaab. This is consistent with Landinfo's understanding of who are targets of attacks by al-Shabaab.

Al-Shabaab has an extensive network of informants (see for example Landinfo 2015a, p. 5). Through this network they can be made aware of a government official travelling on a given bus along a given road. Al-Shabaab can then intercept the bus to get hold of the person.

According to source A (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) government officials therefore avoid travelling in this way. However the source explained that the risk depends on the extent to which they have a high-profile position in the government. Government officials with a low profile have less chance of being recognised and/or prioritised by al-Shabaab. The latter is in line with Landinfo's understanding that al-Shabaab has limited resources and for this reason must prioritise who to actively pursue (see for example Landinfo's topical note on reactions against al-Shabaab defectors of 5 August 2015).

3.4.2 Risk for people suspected of having connections to the government

People suspected of being associated with the government, including people suspected of being spies, risk serious reactions from al-Shabaab. Travelling from government areas does not in itself arouse suspicion (source A, e-mail 24 and 26 November 2015). According to source A (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) such suspicion mostly occur if the travellers have objects with them that are associated with the government, such as documents issued by the government, or symbols that are associated with the government, smartphones (which are banned in al-Shabaab areas), Western names on mobile phones etc. It is not a given that they check all travellers, but travellers may be asked to explain who they are, where they are going and why. Al-Shabaab can also search the traveller's belongings.

According to source A the reaction against the suspect depends on the degree of power al-Shabaab has in the area. This is consistent with information from other sources (for example source D, meeting in Nairobi, February 2015). In areas where al-Shabaab does not have full control, including along roads between government areas, suspects risk being killed on the spot, particularly if they do not have a reference who can vouch for them. According to source A such a reference must be an al-Shabaab member or a person who knows an al-Shabaab member. Source A emphasised that it is not a given that suspects have the opportunity to call a reference, and that it is therefore an advantage to travel with someone who can serve as a reference if problems arise. This is in line with information from the Somalia expert Stig Jarle Hansen (2013, p. 87) that al-Shabaab's security service (Amniyat)

great importance to people most, and many Somalis live in line with al-Shabaab's rules on their own religious convictions. For example niqab are also widespread in Mogadishu and other government areas (fact-finding mission to Mogadishu and Belet Weyne, February 2015).

and al-Shabaab members with authority to give orders during military operations,¹⁰ have broad powers to punish suspected spies without putting them in front of a court.

According to source A, in areas where al-Shabaab has exclusive dominion, the suspects are usually arrested and tried before a court. If the accused is found guilty, they may ultimately be sentenced to death. A well-informed local resource person (source E, meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) suggested that such courts might be more keen to make examples to deter the population from cooperating with the government against al-Shabaab, rather than judge fairly.

According to source D, a representative of an organisation that has long experience with having to deal with al-Shabaab, the suspect's clan affiliation may provide some protection against reactions, particularly if the person belongs to a local clan that can challenge al-Shabaab's power in an area (meeting in Nairobi, February 2015).

4. RISK REDUCING MEASURES

Source A (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) explained that drivers try to reduce risk as much as possible, either by postponing a trip until a military offensive or clan conflict has subsided or by taking detours to avoid such areas. Updated information on the security situation along travel routes is essential in this context, and drivers will therefore obtain such information before a trip. The source explained that news about military offensives, clan conflicts and bandits spread quickly, including through clan networks, local media and through drivers exchanging information. In Landinfo's assessment it is reasonable to assume that travellers themselves will obtain such information and adhere to it. This is supported by information from source A that people belonging to a clan involved in a clan conflict will be careful not to go into the area where the conflict is raging.

Regardless Landinfo considers that there is a high probability that travellers will meet a checkpoint manned by government forces when travelling to or through government areas. Likewise Landinfo considers that there is a high probability that passengers will meet a checkpoint manned by al-Shabaab when travelling to or through al-Shabaab areas. As mentioned under point 3.4 Landinfo also considers it a real possibility of meeting an al-Shabaab checkpoint when travelling between cities that have been taken by the government.

As mentioned under point 3.3 and 3.4 the risk associated with such checkpoints is primarily of being suspected of belonging to the enemy. Source A (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) explained that travellers try to avoid arousing such suspicion by keeping a low profile and not standing out from other travellers. When meeting al-Shabaab this means adapting to al-Shabaab's rules and travelling without objects that may arouse suspicion (see point 3.4). As mentioned in point 3.3 and 3.4 it may also be an advantage to travel with or have a reference to call if problems arise.

¹⁰ Hansen refers to «battle commanders».

4.1 FLYING

According to the source A (meeting in Mogadishu, January 2016) people who can afford it reduce the risk by flying as close to the travel destination as possible, then possibly travelling on the ground from there. There are a number of airstrips in Southern Somalia (see for example the map from FSNAU 2005), but few of them are open to commercial traffic. From Mogadishu it is possible to fly to the cities of Baidoa (USD 110, 40 minutes), Beled Weyne (USD 115, 1 hour) and Kismayo (USD 120, 40 minutes).¹¹ The routes are operated by Blue Sky Air (n.d.) and other local airlines (source A, e-mail 22 February 2016).¹² Flight destinations/schedules may be extended.

¹¹ Travel times and ticket prices were obtained from source C (attachment in e-mail from Norway's Embassy in Nairobi of 23 November 2015). The specified prices may of course vary.

¹² Source A referred to a number of local airlines. However the majority of these have no website.

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