



Lemkin Institute Statement on Political Violence in Somaliland

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The Lemkin Institute expresses its alarm regarding the political violence that has afflicted the Republic of Somaliland since last December. This violence, which has mushroomed into a virtual referendum on Somaliland’s territorial integrity and bid for independence, threatens to embolden Somalian political factions linked historically and ideologically to the Siad Barre regime that committed genocide against the Isaaq people in Somaliland in the 1980s. Thus, the recent violence threatens a renewed genocide against the Isaaq clan and the possibility of a broader assault in the Somaliland identity in general.

Violence in Somaliland’s eastern region of Sool erupted in December when Somalilander local politician Abdifatah Abdullahi Abdi alias Hadrawi, chairman of the Wadani opposition party, was killed by unverified assailants in the regional capital city of Laascaanood. Although he was not the first government official to be killed in Laascaanood and the Sool region as a whole, since his assassination violence has increased and has involved lethal confrontations between the armed forces of Somaliland, local protesters, and militias in Sool, which began to demand an end to Somaliland suzerainty and the transfer of political control of the territory to Somalia instead. Certain leaders of the Dhulbahante clan in Sool also support the annexation of the eastern territory of Somaliland to Somalia’s “Puntland” province.

Protests by residents of Laascaanood and local militias against the assassination started to take place in December and went on throughout the month of January, resulting in the deaths of 82 civilians and the wounding of over 400 more as a consequence of clashes involving Somaliland government forces, militia groups, and civilians, according to the Turkish *Anadolu Agency*. The last few months have been some of the deadliest months in Somaliland since the 1980s, when Somalia’s Siad Barre government committed genocide against the Isaaq clan.

Somaliland is a semi-independent state that has enjoyed remarkable peace for the three decades since its Declaration of Independence from Somalia in 1991. Somaliland is known for its internal safety and stability, and the peaceful coexistence of different clans, unlike its neighbour Somalia, which has gone through many years of civil war and instability characterized by a strong presence of different terrorist and insurgent groups like Al-Shabaab, mainly in the region of Puntland, as well as the marginalization of non-Somali ethnic groups.

Although the recent conflict in Laascaanood has been portrayed as an ethnic confrontation between the different clans living in the region, it is very much a political, economic, and,

possibly, an ideological struggle, one that is centred on the issue of Somaliland's self-determination, which is primarily supported by the Isaaq people, but also by the Gudurbirsi clan in the Awdal region, the Cisse, and the Dhulbahante and Warsengeli people of the Darood clan, amongst others. Opponents of Somaliland's independence would profit from greater control over very lucrative entrepôts in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade networks. They may also be threatened by the peace and stability in Somaliland, as such security works against many of the vested interests in Somalia who control the levers of political violence. Al-Shabab and other Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates in the region deliberately create chaos in order to prepare the groundwork for an eventual power grab. Laascaanood was identified as the new stronghold for terrorism, including for the influential radical islamic group Al-Ictisaam, a faction of Al-Itixaad Al-Islam, a former extremist group.

Since February Somaliland has pulled its troops out of Laascaanood in order to avoid greater loss of life. Laascaanood is now controlled by a local committee of 33 elders of the Dhulbahante clan, many of whom were allowed to return to Sool from Somalia by the Somaliland authorities in the name of negotiating a lasting peace. Some Dhulbahante elders in Sool are now calling for their own federal state in Somalia named SSC-Khaatumo.

The Lemkin Institute is concerned by the language present in the Sool protests against Somaliland, which stigmatizes Somalilanders, including members of the Dhulbahante clan who support Somaliland's claims, calling Somalilanders "separatists" and "traitors." This language has the objective of undermining Somalilanders' right to self-determination and poses the risk of yet another genocide against the Isaaq people and anyone who would support the independence of Somaliland. Videos circulating in different social media show individuals calling for the killing of "separatists," chilling language that is reminiscent of the Barre regime.

The Lemkin Institute reminds the world that Somalilanders are exercising their right to self-determination in claiming independence for the former British territory. We further remind the international community that the right to self-determination is one of the fundamental rights of the international global order. It is recognized as a *jus cogens* or peremptory norm. This collective right was first included in the 1945 United Nations Charter, which gave birth to a new global order based on the protection of the fundamental rights of peoples, the equal sovereignty of states, the protection of their territorial integrity, and the prohibition of the use of force.

The right to self-determination is deeply linked with the rights of people to survival both physically and culturally. Thus, the protection of the exercise of this right is imperative in genocide prevention. Let us remember that not only is Somaliland's self-determination from Somalia linked to the history of colonialism in the region, but also it is a direct consequence of the genocide against the Isaaq people that took place between 1987 and 1989 under the dictatorship of Siad Barre. This genocide remains forgotten, uninvestigated and unpunished, circumstances that, once again, put the Isaaq community at risk in the midst of the current crisis.

The Lemkin Institute calls on Somalia to respect the rights of Somalilanders to self-determination and to concentrate its efforts on fighting internal instability, violence, famine, and the spread of terrorist groups in its own country and the region. The Lemkin Institute also calls on the international community to broadly recognize Somaliland's independence as an

autonomous and peace-loving country characterized by decades of political and social stability and a culture of protection of the various clans, which is embedded in its ancient traditions. The broad recognition of Somaliland independence must be accompanied by a recognition of the Isaaq genocide as well as financial and logistical support to strengthen national institutions and to carry out a transitional justice process to determine the responsibility of perpetrators and give proper redress to victims and survivors.

Furthermore, we call on Somaliland to strengthen the rule of law according to international principles and confront any internal clashes or uprisings within the framework of its constitution and the criminal justice system. We welcome Somaliland's repeated offers to negotiate with the leaders of the Sool protests as well as its recent efforts to reduce tensions by pulling out of Laascaanood.

The Lemkin Institute shares the concern of many in the region that the current protests are being manipulated by forces who stand to gain from sowing the seeds of disunity, ethnic and clan division, and chaos. We share the concern of many that the perpetrators of the Isaaq genocide are still influential in Somalia's politics and are operating with complete impunity. We therefore call on the international community to invest immediate attention and ample resources in bringing peace to Sool by clarifying the genuine issues and working with all parties to determine a just and peaceful solution to the current crisis.