



Lemkin Institute Statement on the Isaaq Genocide Committed between 1987 and 1989 by the Somali Government

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On the occasion of the 35th Anniversary of the beginning of the Somali Revolution, the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention wishes to remember the genocide committed towards the Isaaq clan during the Somali Civil War.

During the 1980s, the Isaac people, members of a thriving and independent clan in Somalia, fell prey to a broad array of abuses, including genocide by the Somali government, in the northern part of the country. This was caused, in part, by the clan's support to the Somali National Movement (SNM), an anti-regime group formed by the Isaaq clan in 1981 as a response to the harsh measures inflicted on the community by the abusive military regime in place.

Suspecting every Isaaq of supporting the SNM, Somalia's then-president Said Barre launched a reign of terror against them. Barre's regime used the SNM's flourishing influence to justify the crimes against individuals who made comments pertaining to the government's unjust and arbitrary policies and despotic rulers, or simply because of their affiliation to the Isaaq clan. The increasingly violent counterinsurgency measures that ensued included arbitrary arrests, detainment in appalling facilities and conditions, crippling restrictions on the right to freedom of movement and expression, aerial bombardment of civilian targets, indiscriminate use of landmines, purposeful destruction of water reservoirs, rape and other forms of gender-based violence, resulting in the mass murder of Isaaq civilians.

Many witnesses and Isaaq survivors made it clear that the slaughter of defenseless Isaaq civilians was not exceptional. Rather, it was the result of a premeditated plan, demonstrating that the intent of Barre's government was the complete erasure of the Isaaq ethnic group.

A United Nations investigation concluded in 2001 that the killing of Isaaq individuals was a crime "conceived, planned and perpetrated by the Somali government" and therefore a breach of the Genocide Convention. The persecution resulted in the deaths of 50,000 to 250,000 members of the Isaac clan between 1987 and 1989. This genocide also caused almost the complete destruction of the second and third largest cities of Somalia, where the Isaacs made up the majority: Hargeisa (90 percent destroyed) and Burao (70 percent destroyed). These events led 500,000 Somali individuals (primarily members of the Isaaq group) to flee their country and cross the border to Hartasheikh (Ethiopia) to seek shelter.

The Isaaq genocide was committed mainly in the region now called Somaliland, which declared independence from Somalia in 1991 in part to protect Isaaq clan members from further atrocities. The territory of Somaliland has been governed by a succession of democratically-elected governments that continuously and tirelessly seek international recognition as the independent Republic of Somaliland. The international community has stated multiple times that the fate of the international recognition of Somaliland remains in the hands of the African Union. However, the latter is concerned that any renegotiation of Africa's state borders, despite being colonial relics, would lead to continent-wide insecurity, potentially launching the continent down a slippery slope of conflict over land and borders.

While the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention recognizes the danger of renegotiating established legal borders, especially on the African continent, where there are currently many sub-national groups seeking independence from central governments, in the context of ongoing threats to the life and identity of groups like the Isaaq, we also understand the calls for independence. What is needed is peace and security. We therefore advocate for a well-funded and focused independent effort to bring justice to the region, one that recognizes past genocide and ongoing genocidal threats, brings perpetrators to justice, and protects the right of all human groups to live in dignity.

Owing to the absence of widespread international attention granted to this "forgotten genocide", the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention urges the international community to take measures to prosecute perpetrators of the Isaac genocide who still enjoy impunity in Somalia and beyond. Such prosecution is one of the only ways to 1) bring justice to the survivors and descendants of victims 2) pay tribute to the victims, and 3) build the infrastructure necessary to prevent repeats of this genocide in the future.

The Lemkin Institute emphasizes that judicial accountability is at the heart of transitional justice and lasting peace. We thus encourage international organizations and States to allocate significant funds to investigate the crimes and hold criminals accountable.