SOMALIA

Violence Against Health Care in Conflict

2023

SAFEGUARDING HEALTH IN CONFLICT

Insecurity Insight
Data on People in Danger

Letter from the Chair

The year 2023 was a grim one for violence inflicted on health care. In 2022, the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition identified the highest number of incidents since we began reporting. Yet in 2023 the number was 25% greater, exceeding 2,500.

The intensity of conflicts characterized by pervasive attacks on health care in recent years declined somewhat in 2023, including in Syria, Yemen, and the Tigray region of Ethiopia. As a result, it might also have been expected that the global trend of violence against health care would turn downward. Instead, from the first days of two new and catastrophic wars, one in Sudan and the other between Israel and Hamas, health care came under ferocious assault. In both conflicts warring parties killed health workers, attacked facilities, and destroyed health care systems. Meanwhile, attacks on health care in Myanmar and Ukraine continued at a relentless pace, in each case exceeding 1,000 since the start of the conflicts in 2021 and 2022, respectively. In many chronic conflicts, fighting forces continued to kidnap and kill health workers and loot health facilities.

At the same time, new and disturbing trends emerged. In Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Gaza, Lebanon, Myanmar, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen combatants employed drones to attack health clinics, hospitals, and ambulances. In many conflicts, combatants violently entered hospitals or occupied them as sites from which to conduct military operations, leading to injuries to and the deaths of patients and staff. In many conflicts, the conduct of combatants revealed open contempt for their duty to protect civilians and health care under international humanitarian law (IHL). Israel, while purporting to abide by IHL, promoted a view of its obligations that, if accepted, would undermine the fundamental protections that IHL puts in place for civilians and health care in war.

The one consistent feature of the attacks was continued impunity for these crimes. For more than a decade, despite their repeated commitments, governments have failed to follow through on these commitments and reform their military practices, cease arms transfers to perpetrators, and bring those responsible for crimes to justice.

We need a new approach, starting with stronger leadership from UN agencies and governments willing to join with civil society and the health care community to take far more assertive action to end the scourge of violence against health care. Among other steps, they can press prosecutors domestically and internationally to bring cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed against health care, to develop political support for special tribunals to circumvent UN Security Council members' vetoes of referrals to the International Criminal Court, and restrict the sale of arms to forces that commit crimes.

There are some sources of hope. After years of lassitude, the World Health Organization has spoken forcefully against vicious assaults on health facilities and health workers. Civil society groups are exerting pressure to stop arms transfers to perpetrators of violence, while some militaries have launched initiatives to reduce civilian casualties in war. Leaders must build on these initiatives. Ending the suffering of millions of people depends on their doing so.

Len Rubenstein
Chair, Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition

Executive Summary | *Full Report* | *Recommendations* | *Methodology* | *Data*

Somalia 2021-2023 (including Puntland and Somaliland)

REPORTED INCIDENTS AND MOST COMMONLY REPORTED CONCERNS

REPORTED INCIDENTS	HEALTH WORKERS KILLED	INCIDENTS WHERE HEALTH FACILITIES WERE DAMAGED/DESTROYED
2023		
21	12	8
2022		
12	2	5
2021		
9	2	3

Source: 2021-2023 SOM SHCC Health Care Data

OVERVIEW

The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) identified 21 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in Somalia, including Puntland and Somaliland in 2023, 12 in 2022 and nine in 2021, compared to ten in 2020, when the last SHCC report chapter on Somalia was published.[1] In 2023, 12 health workers were killed and health facilities were damaged on eight occasions. This factsheet is based on the dataset 2021-2023 SOM SHCC Health Care Data, which is available for download on the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX).

THE CONTEXT

Multiple security challenges continued to undermine access to health care in Somalia in 2023. An offensive launched by Somalia's armed forces against the Al-Shabaab terrorist group in central and southern Somalia in August 2022 continued into 2023, with fighting being particularly intense in the southern Lower Shabelle and Banadir regions. Although weakened, Al-Shabaab remained a powerful political force, committing indiscriminate attacks that killed hundreds of civilians.

In February 2023, violence broke out in the disputed city of Las Anod between militia of the Dhulbahante clan and the armed forces of Somaliland. Almost 200,000 people were displaced and several hundred people were killed as a result of the violence. An INGO health care provider was also forced to suspend operations following multiple attacks on hospitals and health workers.

Somalia 2021-2023 (including Puntland and Somaliland)

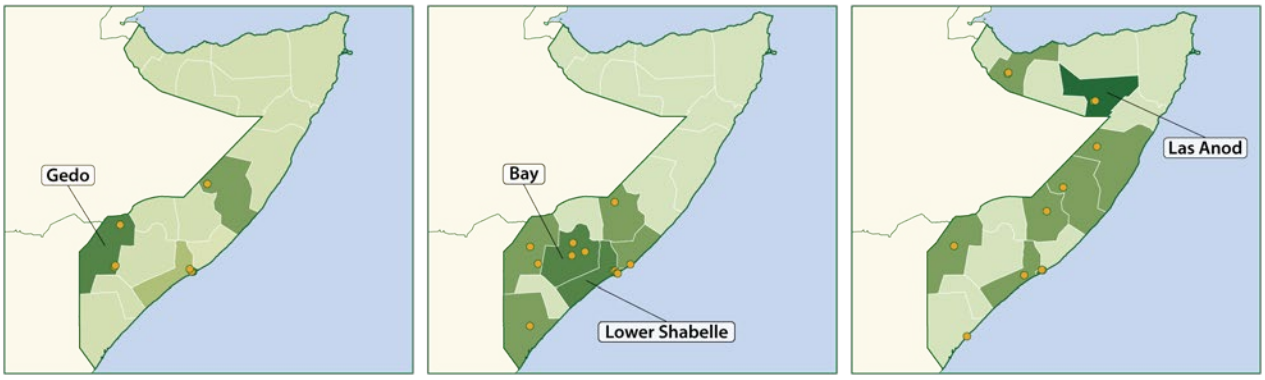
Humanitarian needs were further challenged by Somalia's worst drought since 1981 and flooding that displaced 1.2 million people and destroyed latrines, contributing to a cholera outbreak. The first suspected cholera case was reported in early December 2023; by early February 2024 over 400 cases and nine fatalities had been recorded.

VIOLENCE AGAINST OR OBSTRUCTION OF HEALTH CARE IN 2023

Incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care increased from 12 incidents in 2022 to 21 in 2023. Ten incidents occurred in the context of the armed conflict in the disputed Las Anod area between Somaliland armed forces and local Dhulbahante militias, compared to zero during previous years. Incidents continued to take place in the Somali capital, Mogadishu, in 2023, where three health workers were shot and killed in three incidents, including a national female UN polio vaccinator who was shot dead while going house to house on a vaccination campaign in April.[2] From 2020 to 2023 a total of seven health care-related incidents were reported in Mogadishu, while new cases were reported in Galgaduud and Mudug regions in 2023. Incidents were also reported in Sool, Gedo, Hiiraan, and Lower Shabelle.

Known locations of reported incidents affecting health care in Somalia, including Puntland and Somaliland, 2021-2023

In 2023 there was a rise in incidents in the contested Las Anod region between Somaliland armed forces and local Dhulbahante militias.



Damage to health facilities was commonly reported in Las Anod. Health worker killings were more widely dispersed and increased from two in 2022 to 12 in 2023. Recorded incidents affected health care providers working in public health structures, NGOs, and UN agencies.

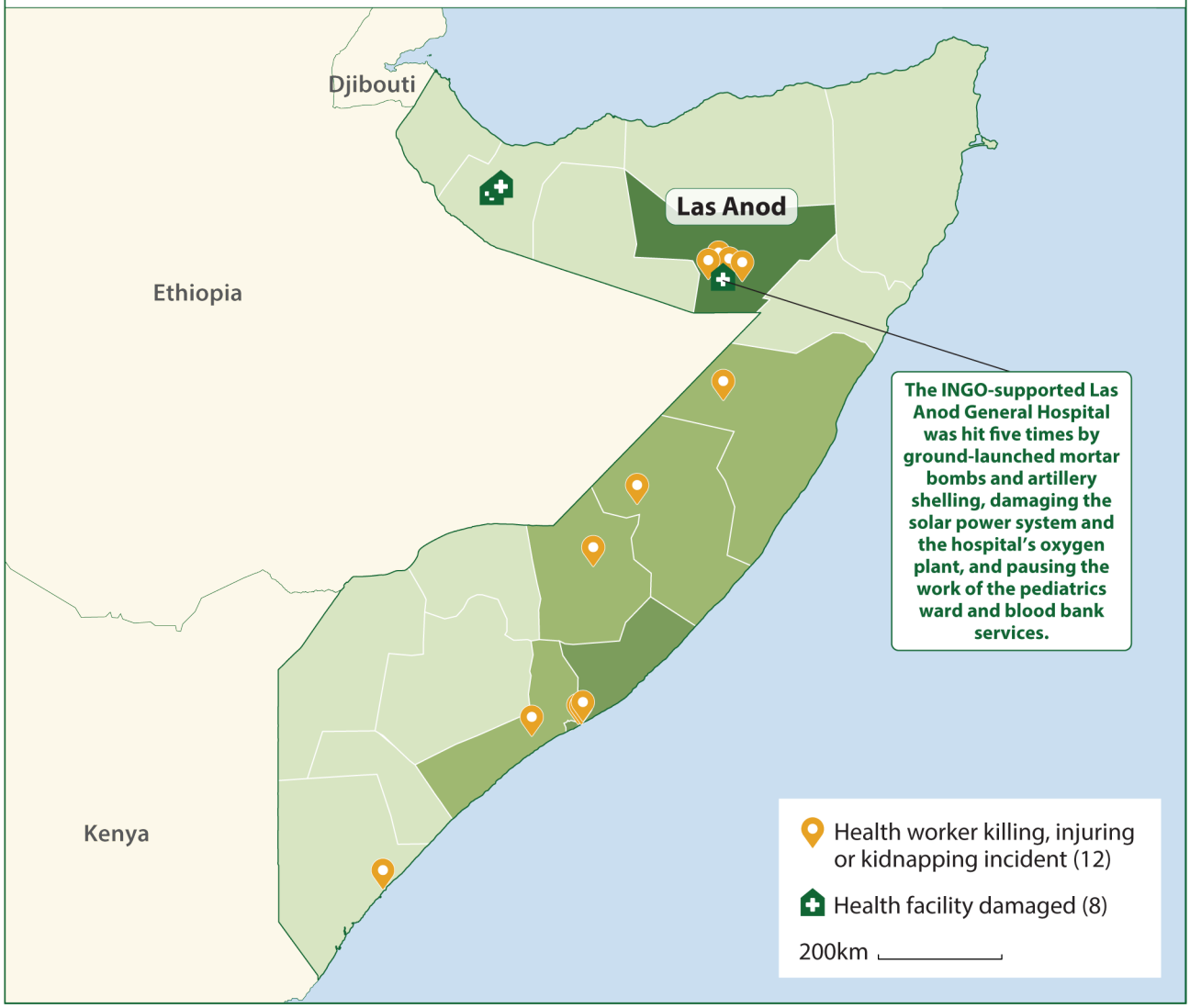
Four cases of violence against or obstruction of health care were attributed to Al-Shabaab fighters in 2023, compared to six in 2022 and two in 2021. All four in 2023 were recorded between June and September and involved staff who were affiliated with an NGO or the WHO. A WHO national female staff member was killed in an attack on the Pearl Beach Hotel and Restaurant in Mogadishu; the head of an NGO hospital was shot and injured while he was on his way home in the Lower Shabelle region; five NGO health workers and a male civilian were kidnapped and released after their families and relatives paid a ransom in Hiiraan; and a truck carrying medical supplies that had been rented by an NGO was hijacked in Gedo.[3]

Somalia 2021-2023 (including Puntland and Somaliland)

Four Habar Gedir-Yabadhaalo Ayr militiamen shot and killed a doctor and his brother in a reported clan revenge attack in Galgaduud region in December.[4] All four were apprehended and remained in custody as of April 9, 2024. In another incident in September 2023, a gunman dressed in a security uniform accompanied by two other unarmed individuals shot and killed a doctor inside his health center in Mudug.[5] In other attacks, the attackers remained unidentified.

Known locations of reported incidents affecting health care in Somalia, including Puntland and Somaliland, 2023

Damage to health facilities were commonly reported in Las Anod district while health worker killings were more widely dispersed across Somalia.



Las Anod area

Ten incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care were recorded in the area of the disputed city of Las Anod between February and July 2023. Four incidents were attributed to the Somaliland armed forces. In other attacks, the attackers remained unidentified. Eight incidents were recorded of explosive

weapons use damaging hospitals and harming health workers. The INGO-supported Las Anod General Hospital was hit five times by ground-launched mortar bombs and artillery shelling, damaging the solar power system and the hospital's oxygen plant, and pausing the work of the pediatrics ward and blood bank services.[6] The last attack occurred on July 8, wounded seven hospital staff and three caretakers, and caused significant damage to the facility.[7] In response, the INGO withdrew its staff and support.[8]

The WHO reported an attack on another health facility on July 11 that killed and injured health workers and patients and destroyed two ambulances.[9] While there was no mention of explosives being used, the pattern of past explosive weapons use in Las Anod suggests that explosives may have been used in this incident. On July 15, the Government of the Republic of Somaliland issued a press release stating that it was "deeply disturbed by the recent statement from the World Health Organization (WHO) about the conflict in Las Anod." No further incidents were identified in Las Anod since that date. When explosive weapons are used in populated areas, they often have wide-area effects and cause death and destruction beyond the intended target, resulting in reverberating adverse effects on the health sector.

Three health workers were killed in Las Anod in 2023, including a female nurse killed amid fighting, a male nurse volunteer killed by a stray bullet while working inside Las Anod General Hospital, which was also hit by shells, and a paramedic who died in hospital from injuries sustained when the ambulance he was traveling in was hit by unidentified munitions.[10]

THE IMPACT OF ATTACKS ON HEALTH CARE

Decades of violence have stifled the development of Somalia's health care system. This is evident in shortages of essential health workers. The latest available data suggests nurse, midwife and doctor levels are only four per 10,000 people in Somalia with a shortage of approximately 24,000 health workers to meet minimum requirements. In remote rural areas, especially those affected by violence, the access of Somalia's civilian population to health care workers is likely to be especially difficult. The availability of freely accessible public health facilities is also severely limited, even in large urban areas such as Mogadishu, while few people can afford the alternative of private treatment. This has created further barriers to health care and contributed to high child and maternal mortality rates.

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The pre-existing weaknesses of Somalia's health care system make the impact of attacks on health care particularly acute. As already noted, following the serious damage sustained to the Los Anod General Hospital, the INGO supporting the hospital announced that it could no longer continue its operations due to security concerns. This was the only public hospital in Los Anod, meaning that there were limited options for people to seek care elsewhere at a time when treatment for injuries was in high demand due to the intensity of the violence in the city. The impact of violence on national health workers is especially great in such instances. Following the INGO's announcement that it would be withdrawing, hopes were expressed that local health workers would continue working "on a volunteer basis," potentially adding to their financial burdens and psychological trauma, given their harrowing operating environment.

Somalia 2021-2023 (including Puntland and Somaliland)

Attacks on health care coupled with broader insecurity have further undermined health care access and quality by causing many INGOs to conduct remote management of their operations from Nairobi in Kenya, which is a substantial distance away from the populations being served. While helping safeguard staff security, this has had the unintended consequences of increasing operational costs and reducing the ability to effectively assess and respond to context-specific health needs in Somalia, especially in remote areas.

1 The SHCC report contains a country chapter when at least 15 incidents of violence against health care were reported in one calendar year or at least 30 incidents over multiple years. The reported incidents from Somalia, including Puntland and Somaliland, were included in the total figures for the past years, but because the SHCC report did not list these incidents individually in 2022, the recorded incidents are listed here.

2 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SOM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 38692, 38675; 39500.

3 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SOM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 39620; 41442; 39500; 41025.

4 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SOM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 43181.

5 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SOM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 40648.

6 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SOM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 37817; 44597; 37930.

7 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SOM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 40157.

8 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SOM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 40157.

9 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SOM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 40158.

10 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SOM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 37925; 37744; 44596.

SAFEGUARDING
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The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition is a group of more than 40 organizations working to protect health workers and services threatened by war or civil unrest. We have raised awareness of global attacks on health and pressed United Nations agencies for greater global action to protect the security of health care. We monitor attacks, strengthen universal norms of respect for the right to health, and demand accountability for perpetrators.
www.safeguardinghealth.org

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