



An Encouraging Start in Holding the Police to Account

19 February 2020

Horizon Institute welcomes the prompt decision of Somaliland's new Police Commissioner, Brigadier-General Mohamed Aden Saqadhi, to dismiss a policeman on 17 February 2020 filmed beating a woman on the streets of Hargeisa.

This may seem like a small and insignificant move to the outside world. But to the people of Somaliland, accustomed to police officers who routinely, and openly, act above the law, it has sent a welcome, and long overdue, message: they will be held to account for their actions.

This is certainly not the first time a police officer attacking a woman has been filmed and the image widely circulated in the media, including social media. But no meaningful disciplinary action was taken, encouraging others to mistreat civilians without fear of consequences. The fact that the policeman was hitting this woman in broad daylight on the street reflects the extent to which he felt entirely confident that such behaviour was acceptable, if not completely condoned.

From Horizon's work in the justice sector, it is painfully apparent that members of the public do not believe they have the right, much less the possibility, of bringing a complaint against a corrupt or abusive police officer. On the contrary, there is a well-founded fear that such action would merely invite more problems.

A disciplined and professional police force is essential if people are to feel secure and at peace. Neither individuals nor communities can feel safe if they do not trust their police as a force both willing and able to protect them. The police lie at the heart of the justice sector: the judiciary, the prosecution, the prison service and lawyers cannot deliver justice effectively without an efficient police force committed to public service. The investment Somaliland has made in its police force is in itself an indication of just how critically important the police is seen to be in building a stable society.

Inadequate education, the lack of training opportunities, insufficient resources and facilities, poor working conditions and very low salaries certainly all contribute to the challenges the police face in Somaliland, in common with much of the world.

However, in their relationship with the public, the single most important factor that facilitates misconduct and mistreatment is the absence of accountability, the absolute confidence that no matter what they do, there will be no repercussions. This is precisely why the new Police Commissioner's rapid response to this incident matters. It will, hopefully, serve as the start of a constructive and thoughtful discussion about police reform so the public can walk the streets, enter police stations and submit complaints about the police without fear of intimidation, violence or reprisals.

Horizon Institute works to promote human rights and the rule of law. We provide free legal advice and assistance to individuals in conflict with the law or families whose relatives are in detention or in need of legal support. To learn more about our services in Somaliland, please visit one of our three Hargeisa locations - Omer Hashi Building, Ayaha IDP near the police station, and Dami IDP near the police station - or our Burao office located in the Sagal Jet Building. We can also be contacted by phone in Hargeisa at 523603 or in Burao at 711208.

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