



PUNTLAND SITUATION REPORT

Somali Law & Policy Program

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the reporting period, Puntland State of Somalia remained relatively stable and the state government continued the struggle against insurgents and the COVID-19 pandemic. Flash floods in Qardo caused loss of life and extensive damage to infrastructure, including homes, roads, local businesses and farms. The Puntland government's committee managing recovery efforts of the Qardo flash floods reported that at least 7 persons were killed and some 8,000 families lost their homes.

Insurgent groups undertook operations in major cities in Puntland. In Bossaso, a roadside bomb targeting a police vehicle wounded at least 10 persons, mostly civilians. A police officer was killed in a separate incident in Bossaso during the month as well. In Galkayo, two officials claimed that they survived assassination attempts, including the governor of Mudug.

Sub-national tensions remained high between Puntland and Somaliland during the month. In Shidan area of eastern Sanaag, renewed clan fighting erupted again between rival clan militias vying for control over the area alleged to contain mineral deposits. This month's *Puntland Situation Report* covers a major story on Sanaag region and the linkage between the recent spate of clan violence and competition for control over a mining-rich area. In South Galkayo, Galmudug security forces seized an explosives vest as part of ongoing security operations. In Somaliland-administered western Sanaag region, at least 2 persons were killed in renewed violent rivalry between two local clan militias.

Political disputes between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and Puntland continued, with Puntland rejecting "any reason" to delay the 2020/2021 national elections in Somalia. At the same time, however, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Qardo floods emergency pushed the FGS and Puntland closer towards better relations. Puntland government's COVID-19 prevention measures were tested throughout the month, but the government has been largely unable to enforce its policy on land closures, khat import bans, shutting down mosques and implementing night time curfews. This limitation has ensured that more COVID-19 cases were reported in Puntland during April. Meanwhile, the Transitional Puntland Electoral Commission (TPEC) continued with public awareness campaigns and appointed a commission secretary.

The report also covers the opening of Tuurdibi Customs transit hub in Mudug region; in 2012, a deal between Puntland state government and Somali Regional State of Ethiopia agreed to formal economic ties and establishment of a customs transit hub along the common border. The report assesses the importance of the customs hub for the local economy, for integrating the economic cooperation between Puntland and Ethiopia's Somali Regional State, and overviews the important regional linkage this customs point has once the Gara'ad port on the eastern coast is finalised.

Meanwhile, in Sanaag region, a number of developments have occurred since early 2019 and eventually lead to clan clashes fighting for control over the land. This report goes deeper into the recent security and political developments in Sanaag region, and its wider impact on peace and stability. Furthermore, the report highlights and assesses the roles of Puntland, Somaliland, local communities, and mining interests, as well as the presence of Al Shabaab group in Sanaag region. The report gives a broader perspective on recent developments, and makes projections for the coming months unless major changes are instituted.

2. PEACE AND SECURITY

- 2.1 **Key Developments:** Over the course of April 2020, a total of 7 violent deaths were reported in Puntland State and regional fault-lines. About 28.5% of all killings were attributed to VEO attacks in Puntland cities, another 28.5% attributed to clan fighting in regional fault-line areas, another 28.5% attributed to two separate incidents of ‘friendly fire’ between Puntland security forces, and the remaining 14.5% was attributed to local/clan conflicts. A roadside bombing in Bossaso targeting a police vehicle wounded at least 10 persons, including 9 civilians. In Galkayo, the governor of Mudug region claimed that he ‘survived’ an assassination attempt and called on members of the public ‘to kill or wound attackers’. In Sanaag region, clan fighting contributed to deteriorating security in the region’s western and eastern parts, with eastern Sanaag becoming the epicentre of a new territorial battle for control over areas with mineral deposits.
- 2.1.1 **Violence Against Women:** No incidents of violence against women were recorded during the reporting month of April.
- 2.1.2 **Sub-National Conflict:** On Apr. 3, a group of local elders, politicians, commanders and Diaspora activists from Sool, Sanaag and Cayn (SSC) regions met with Puntland president Said Deni to discuss “liberation of SSC regions” and requested that “militias are organized into Puntland security forces.”¹ Claimed by both Somaliland and Puntland, SSC regions remain at the heart of the territorial dispute between the two rival sub-national states in northern Somalia.
- 2.1.3 **Regional Fault-Lines:** On Apr. 2, Galmudug security forces in South Galkayo seized an explosives vest in a security operation aided by federal special forces ‘Gaashaan’ and two Al Shabaab suspects (a man and a woman) were arrested during the operation.² The forces also reportedly coordinated with Puntland Security Forces (PSF) during the operations. On Apr. 19, clan fighting erupted in El Afweyn district of western Sanaag region, between two rival clan militias who have previously fought in the area.³ At least 2 fighters were killed and 3 others wounded. Somaliland president Muse Bihi called for an immediate ceasefire and restoration of peace between the warring clans.⁴
- 2.1.4 **Violent Extremist Organisations (VEO):** On Apr. 5, Puntland Finance Ministry official Abdi Gube official survived an assassination attempt in Galkayo after his vehicle exploded. Mr. Gube suffered injuries and was taken to hospital for medical treatment.⁵ On evening of Apr. 8, a roadside bomb explosion targeted a Puntland police vehicle driving on main road, near Al Nakhil Hotel in Bossaso. At least 9 civilians and 1 police officer were injured and there were no reports of deaths.⁶ On Apr. 11, unknown gunmen shot and killed Galkayo airport immigration director Osman Hussein Haji Ismail ‘Farey’.⁷ He was killed inside a mosque, according to witnesses. Al Shabaab group claimed responsibility for the attack.⁸ On Apr. 26, unidentified assailants killed a Puntland police officer in Bossaso. Local media reported that the six attackers fled the scene, but the victim identified some of the attackers before succumbing to his fatal wounds.⁹ No group claimed responsibility for the attack.
- 2.1.5 **Counter-Terrorism:** On Apr. 4, Puntland state’s Mudug governor Ahmed Muse Nuryare claimed that state forces had “foiled” an assassination attempt on his life after security forces seized a “suicide bomb jacket” in security operations in South Galkayo, under Galmudug administration (*see also: Section 2.1.3*).¹⁰ On Apr. 7, Puntland sent more security forces to Galkayo to take part of efforts to boost local security; some media outlets reported that the security reinforcements were dispatched to Galkayo ahead of

President Deni's proposed trip to the city.¹¹ On Apr. 11, Mudug governor Ahmed Muse Nuryare told media after a meeting of the Regional Security Committee chaired by Puntland interior minister Mohamed Dhabanad in Galkayo, that the "Galkayo community should kill or wound attackers targeting government commanders...the government cannot protect everyone or be everywhere".¹² The governor's words come on the heels of several assassinations of security commanders and government officers, although the governor said suspects were detained for the latest assassination of Galkayo airport immigration director (*see also: Section 2.1.4*).

2.1.6 Local/Clan Conflicts: On Apr. 8, local elders and Puntland government ministers including Puntland interior minister Dhabanad attended an event in Galkayo to resolve a violent incident on Mar. 12 at the new Galkayo airport site, whereby 1 person was killed and 2 others wounded after local militia claiming land rights clashed with security forces guarding the new proposed airport site.¹³ Addressing local media at the site, Minister Dhabanad declared that the issue was "resolved" and that construction of the airport security fence "shall continue".¹⁴

On Apr. 11, clan fighting erupted in parts of eastern Sanaag region in an area southwest of Las Qorey coastal town.¹⁵ Local sources reported that the clan militias were fighting for control over mining-rich Shidan area of eastern Sanaag region.¹⁶ On Apr. 26, unknown gunmen shot and killed local civilian named Abdiwahab Awil along a road in a remote area between Midigale and Awsane villages in eastern Sanaag region.¹⁷ The killers escaped the area and local authorities reported that Puntland security forces arrested two men in connection with the killing the next day. The two suspects were arrested in Buraan town and transported to Bossaso for further investigation.¹⁸

2.1.7 Security Sector Governance: On Apr. 4, President Said Deni appointed Awil Ahmed 'Djibouti' as new governor of Nugal region; the governor is also chairperson of the Regional Security Committee. Mr. Awil replaces former Nugal governor Abdisalam Hassan Hersi 'Gujir' who was killed by Al Shabaab suicide bomber in Garowe on Mar. 29, 2020.¹⁹ On Apr. 4, President Deni issued a presidential decree making changes to regional police commanders: Nugal regional police commander was transferred over to Mudug regional police command; Karkaar police commander was nominated as head of Nugal police command; and a new commander was appointed for Karkaar region.²⁰ On Apr. 5, Puntland state police in Bossaso continued burning "khat" imported by land from Ethiopia. Puntland government previously banned import of khat drug trade due to COVID-19 health concerns.²¹ On Apr. 5, Galkayo central police station commander Abdigani Jama Habun 'resigned' from his post in protest over Puntland government's 'lack of action' on needs of the central police station.²² On Apr. 13, President Deni told a press conference in Garowe that he is "concerned" that the Somali National Army (SNA) is being rebuilt through "politisation, clannisation, divisions, and special interests" and warned that commanders "should be chosen based on merit and contribution to Somali society".²³ The remarks were made on the 60th anniversary of the formation of SNA, which was not celebrated this year with commemorative events due to COVID-19 pandemic.²⁴

On Apr. 17, a Puntland Darawish soldier was killed near Dangorayo in Nugal region, in what authorities termed as friendly fire when other Darawish troops opened fire. The deceased soldier left Garowe to Dangorayo to convince a mutinying army truck to return to Af-urur army base in Bari region.²⁵ On Apr. 20, at least 1 soldier was killed when local police opened fire near a Garowe police checkpoint.²⁶ The dead soldier, who was part of Vice President's security detail, was carrying an AK-47 weapon and wearing a civilian

uniform, local media reported. Police commanders rushed to the scene and the matter remained under investigation.²⁷

On Apr. 27, President Deni fired two Puntland police deputy commissioners, First Deputy Commissioner Col. Bile Farah Ali and Third Deputy Commissioner Col. Ahmed Mohamud Ali ‘Jenitaag’, and new commissioners were not appointed.²⁸ Later that day, President Deni appointed Gen. Abdi ‘Yare’ Hassan Hussein as the new Puntland police commissioner, replacing veteran police commander commissioner Gen. Muhyadin Ahmed Muse.²⁹ The new police commissioner has previously served as director of Puntland Intelligence Agency (2011-2015).

2.2 Security Forecast

2.2.1 **Sub-national Conflict:** There were no armed clashes reported during the month of April between Somaliland and Puntland, as both authorities are dealing with COVID-19. The meeting President Deni held with the group from the SSC regions is a new development in the sub-national context. The request to integrate SSC militia into Puntland forces is not an entirely new proposal. However, the publicity surrounding this request is a relatively new development in the 18-year saga between Somaliland and Puntland forces. It is likely that Puntland will take a couple months to weigh its options before executing this request from the SSC delegation. Nevertheless, what is unknown at this point is the level of grassroots support the SSC delegation holds in the regions they represent. It is likely that the sub-national dispute will continue to develop in the coming months.

2.2.2 **Regional Fault-lines:** Over the past months, the security situation in Galkayo has been deteriorating with security forces on both sides not being able to thwart attacks. The capture of a suicide vest and two suspects was a crucial security breakthrough. The Gashaan forces and Galmudug police who first caught wind of the suicide vest prevented a potential attack in Galkayo. More importantly, security cooperation between Galmudug police, Gashaan forces and Puntland’s PSF signifies security cooperation between the three sides when it is needed most. This will likely bring the two administrations in Galkayo closer together and can signal the need for closer cooperation. More joint coordination is expected as initial cooperation has yielded positive results.

The El Afweyn conflict in western Sanaag continues to present a potential fault-line in the region that has had a tumultuous 2019. The reigniting conflict indicates the inability to ensure lasting peace in the region, despite successive peace campaigns by elders and the Somaliland government. The recent agreement between Col. Arre who led a rebel militia campaign against the Somaliland government, in part due to Somaliland’s handling of the El Afweyn clan conflict, may be impacted as the government has been unable to subdue the conflict. Meanwhile, the region is also home to a clan conflict over a new ‘gold rush’ that contributed to a recent escalation of conflict.

2.2.3 **VEO/Counter-Terrorism:** VEOs continued to undertake attacks in Galkayo and Bossaso in the month of April. The attacks on government officials and security officers continues, despite Puntland sending more security forces in Galkayo. On the other hand, counter terrorism operations by Puntland forces have not yielded many results. The success of the counter-terrorism operation by Galmudug forces lies entirely with the Galmudug residents who found the explosives-laden vest. The comments made by Mudug Governor Nur for residents to ‘kill or wound attackers’ of government officials indicate his crude views on citizens’ safety and his disconnect with the role of the administration. The statement likely came from the pressure the governor is facing with ensuring security in the region; however, putting unnecessary pressure on citizens to do

more will not yield the desired results. It is likely that Puntland will continue its counter-terrorism operations while VEOs continue to target Bossaso and Galkayo.

- 2.2.4 **Local/Clan Conflicts:** Mining in the Shidan area has added another volatility in the developing situation in Sanaag region. The clan conflicts are unlikely to subdue due to the valuable natural resources that are at stake. The implications of this conflict are detailed in *Section 4.2* of this report. The skirmishes that led to deaths in Midigale village and Galkayo have been quickly investigated with the Galkayo killing being resolved through traditional and formal justice processes. It is unlikely that these ‘resolved’ killings will result in more killings.
- 2.2.5 **Security Sector Governance:** As Puntland security apparatuses tackle COVID-19 and with it the khat trade, major reshuffles have resulted in more rudimentary changes to vital security institutions within Puntland. The interchanging of Police Commanders of Mudug, Karkaar and Nugal may pose more difficulties than solutions, mainly the commanders who hail from the regions they were initially appointed to, will have to adapt and operate in a different region than they are accustomed to. This will result in a period of adjustment that may negatively impact security in the region they govern. Furthermore, the resignation of Galkayo central police station commander is troubling development as the reasons cited by the commander were lack of action with regards to the needs of the Galkayo police station. Meanwhile, the city is facing an uptick in violent crimes with several assassinations. Puntland’s security reform will need more than changes at senior positions to ensure improved results.

3. POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

3.1 Puntland Struggles with COVID-19, its Response Stirs Controversy

- 3.1.1 **Key Developments:** Throughout April, Puntland officials continued to COVID-19 prevention efforts through direct government action and public awareness campaigns. Apr. 5, Puntland state police in Bossaso continued the practice of burning “khat” smuggled by road via Ethiopia.³⁰ On Mar. 28, the Puntland government banned the import of khat due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³¹ On Apr. 10, Puntland officials admitted that the government’s order to “close land boundaries” with Somaliland and Ethiopia have not been implemented, according to press remarks by Puntland information minister Ali Sabarey.³²

On Apr. 12, Puntland state’s COVID-19 Prevention Committee met with security commanders to exert more pressure on “closing land boundaries” and “banning khat” from entering Puntland cities, for fear of the spread of COVID-19.³³ On Apr. 15, Somali Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire announced that the Federal Government had allocated \$1million each to five Federal Member States (Puntland, Jubaland, Southwest, Galmudug and Hirshabelle states) and Banadir Regional Administration to combat the global pandemic.³⁴ On Apr. 15, Puntland education minister Abdullahi Mohamed Hassan issued a decree postponing, until the end of May 2020, all school exams for Puntland students to halt the spread of COVID-19.³⁵

On Apr. 17, Puntland Islamic clerics rejected the state government’s ban on Friday prayers over COVID-19 concerns, with clerics demanding that the government “ban khat” before suspending Friday prayers.³⁶ The next day, the Puntland State Security Council, issued an order to security forces to “shut down mosques”.³⁷ On Apr. 19, Puntland declared its first COVID-19 positive case in Garowe, after a 33-year-old male

tested positive.³⁸ On Apr. 23, Puntland declared that 7 persons were quarantined in suspected COVID-19 cases. The cases were waiting results from a lab in Nairobi.³⁹

On Apr. 22, Somali federal education minister Abdullahi Godah Barre expressed concern over Puntland state's "decision" to impose food supply restrictions on Hiran region.⁴⁰ On Apr. 21, the governor of Hiran region Ali Jeyte Osman had threatened that Hiran region "would transfer its business to a new port" if Puntland's decision to stop food supply was implemented.⁴¹ However, Puntland officials said they "did not restrict food supply" to Hiran region, but rather banned local businesses from raising the food prices.⁴² On Apr. 25, Puntland health minister Jama Farah Hassan announced that Puntland recorded 5 new COVID-19 positive cases after 11 persons were tested.⁴³ On Apr. 26, Puntland health ministry announced 4 new COVID-19 positive cases after 10 persons were tested.⁴⁴ On Apr. 26, Puntland announced that it had set up a COVID-19 test lab in Garowe, with assistance from the international community.⁴⁵

3.1.2 Analysis: Overall, Puntland has done an exceptional job with regard to COVID-19 prevention efforts; all the early steps, such as suspension of civil aviation, closing 'land boundaries', bans on khat drug imports, suspension of public gatherings including at mosques, and introducing night time curfews, were preventative steps that have helped to curb the rapid spread of the pandemic. Puntland lacks the health infrastructure to manage a public health crisis. As such, it is imperative that the state government takes necessary precautions to prevent the spread of the disease. However, as witnessed with the khat import ban or mosque closures, the Somali public has largely adopted an ambivalent attitude towards the COVID-19 pandemic, with speculation triumphant over scientific facts in public spaces and social media platforms. In this scenario, the government should put more focus on public awareness campaigns – on TV, radio and online – that provide public health information about the dangers of COVID-19 and the serious threat the pandemic poses to public health. The fact that the government has been unable to shut down 'land boundaries' or mosques, or enforce the khat import ban or night time curfew, is linked to wider societal and cultural norms and practices that overpower governmental policies. This requires a nuanced approach to prevention efforts, ensuring a more committed focus to raise public awareness about the threat to public health combined with an effective and disciplined community policing effort.

With regard to the food supply controversy in Hiran region, this matter could have been simply resolved if the governor of Hiran region contacted Puntland Interior Ministry officials to expand on the government's circular on food prices. Once the Hiran governor held a press conference, the federal education minister – who hails from Hiran region – immediately held a follow-up press conference critical of Puntland state's "decision" – when, in fact, there was no such decision in the first place. The case has come to highlight the lack of inter-governmental coordination (between Puntland and Hirshabelle states, in this case) and underscores the necessity for such cooperation to ensure that the Somali public is not misled and that, during this time of public health emergency, all parties can rightfully focus on COVID-19 prevention efforts.

3.1.3 Forecast: Puntland government is expected to strengthen COVID-19 prevention efforts through police action; it is unlikely, however, at least in the short-term, that the government will introduce a major public awareness campaign to dismantle popular myths about the global pandemic. In the short term, the rate of COVID-19 infections is anticipated to grow through the next month.

3.2 Major Crises Seemingly Pushing FGS-Puntland Relations Closer

3.2.1 **Key Developments:** Since 2019, political fallout between the FGS and Puntland has been the main characteristic underpinning relations between the two sides. However, throughout April, FGS-Puntland relations have been pushed towards cooperation due to major crises, including the COVID-19 prevention efforts and the Qardo flash floods emergency. On Apr. 3, Somali media reported that the Federal Government's decision to "shut down" schools operated by Egyptian institutions throughout Somalia had affected many schools, including one school in Mogadishu and two schools in Puntland. Correspondingly, some media houses commented that the matter had become "part of disputes" between the FGS and Puntland.⁴⁶ On Apr. 5, Somali media reported that "30 trucks" that were delivered to Port of Bossaso and intended for Galmudug were "stuck" at the port for unidentified reasons.⁴⁷ The report alleged that the Federal Government ordered the trucks for Galmudug police force, but that the Puntland leadership had requested more assurances. It was unclear what assurances Puntland expected, but local officials confirmed that there were "10 trucks" and hoped the matter would be "resolved soon".⁴⁸

On Apr. 6, speaking during his monthly public address, President Deni said he was "awaiting" the Federal Government to accept his proposed trip to Mogadishu, so he may invite the federal leaders to Garowe for political talks alongside federal and state leaders.⁴⁹ On Apr. 11, speaking at a press conference in Galkayo, Puntland interior minister Mohamed Dhabanad reiterated that Puntland "opposes any reason" to delay the 2020/2021 Somali federal elections.⁵⁰ The FGS and Puntland have disagreed over the electoral model for the 2020/2021 national elections. On Apr. 15, new Galmudug President Ahmed Abdi Kariye 'Qoorqoor' announced that Galmudug state government is "most qualified" to host federal-state political negotiations in its capital Dhusamareb, noting that Galmudug "enjoys good relations" with Federal Government and state governments, including "our neighbours".⁵¹ The declaration by President Qoorqoor came only one month after the Puntland Consultative Conference called on the state leadership to "host" a national conference among federal-state leaders in Garowe.

On Apr. 27, flash floods overtook main parts of Qardo, 220km north of Garowe.⁵² At least seven persons were killed and the floods caused much property destruction.⁵³ On Apr. 28, President Deni leading a government delegation arrived at Qardo to assess widespread damage to homes, businesses, roads, and farms.⁵⁴ On Apr. 29, President Deni nominated a 24-member committee to oversee the government's response to the Qardo floods emergency. Chaired by the Puntland interior minister, the committee included ministers, state MPs, regional and district officials, businesspeople, Islamic clerics, and representatives from the state's chamber of commerce.⁵⁵ On Apr. 29, Puntland finance minister Hassan Shire 'Abgal' announced that the ministry received \$1million USD from the FGS to assist with the aftermath of the Qardo floods.⁵⁶

3.2.2 **Analysis:** The political dispute between the FGS and Puntland sits at the heart of the centre-periphery relationship in Somalia. From education, to sharing of foreign aid to rebuilding the national army, Puntland has complained of marginalisation and criticised the Federal Government's 'unilateral' policies. However, it was clear that the COVID-19 pandemic and the Qardo floods emergency was pushing the two sides closer together. The Federal Government's allocation of \$1million USD in emergency aid to Qardo floods was a timely goodwill gesture. It could open new doors of cooperation to discuss contentious issues, such as 2020/2021 federal elections, aid distribution and rebuilding the national army.

3.2.3 **Forecast:** If goodwill gesture is any indication, it seems the month of April marked the moment of thawing relations between the FGS and Puntland, and could be the beginning of political negotiations as Somalia charts its path towards 2020/2021 federal elections. It is highly likely that the two sides will enter into political negotiations and attend a joint conference, possibly in Mogadishu, in the coming two months.

3.3 Puntland Democratisation Process Inches Forward

Key Developments: The Puntland government has put the state on the path towards multiparty elections, ever since the Transitional Puntland Electoral Commission (TPEC) was nominated within the new administration's first year in office. Since assuming office, TPEC has taken steps to formulate an action plan towards hosting the Local Council elections, has registered 17 political associations, has engaged in public consultations with civil society and political associations, and has engaged international donors to solicit funding support for the state's democratisation process, which has stalled for several years. On Apr. 14, TPEC announced that Ubah Abshir was appointed as the commission's new secretary.⁵⁷

3.3.1 **Analysis:** There are some concerns that the state is not ready to hold multiparty elections. Registration of 17 political associations is a sign of growing public support; by comparison, TPEC registered six political associations in the 2013 effort, which was later suspended. On Apr. 2, former Puntland education minister Ali Haji Warsame warned that "three issues" will be key to implementation of multiparty elections in Puntland: 1) government commitment; 2) an electoral commission that maintains its neutrality; and 3) a political class that invests in the multiparty system by establishing functioning political associations.⁵⁸

Other major concerns include: district boundaries which are not demarcated; a lack of disarmament of the public and clan militias; limited public awareness of electoral rules and procedures; lack of separation between democratic election and clan-based seats; budgetary limitations; and weak public finance management. With regards to weak accountability of public finance, on Apr. 11, Somali media reported that the fund-raising committee for cyclone victims in Puntland's north-eastern Gardafui region has been levied with "corruption allegations" after the managing committee quarreled among themselves and news was leaked to local media.⁵⁹ Puntland should further improve its public finance reforms and enact legal and electoral procedures to prevent corruption and electoral mismanagement, which could trigger post-election uncertainty.

3.3.2 **Forecast:** TPEC is expected to gradually push the democratisation agenda in Puntland. However, with concerns over COVID-19 and limited funding for multiparty elections, it is entirely plausible that TPEC shall extend its action plan to reflect evolving realities. This is most likely expected to push the proposed Local Council elections towards early 2021, instead of late 2020.

4. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

4.1 Puntland and Ethiopia's Somali Regional State Open Customs Point

- 4.1.1 Key Developments:** On Apr. 25, a Puntland state government delegation and a delegation from Somali Regional State of Ethiopia jointly attended an event at Turdibi town, in Galdogob district of Mudug region. The ceremony was held to mark the opening of Turdibi Customs transit hub, which would facilitate movement of goods and trade between Puntland and Ethiopia's Somali Regional State. The two neighbouring sub-national states signed an economic cooperation agreement in 2012.⁶⁰
- 4.1.2 Analysis:** The opening of Turdibi customs has been a long-awaited development after the signing of an economic cooperation agreement eight years ago. Since then, the opening of Turdibi customs has been delayed by a number of factors, mostly attributed to bureaucratic delays. However, limited trade interaction continued informally, although it was not at the levels Puntland desired. Now that Turdibi has been formally opened, after Puntland and Somali Regional State officials renewed their pledges of trade and economic cooperation, with both sides realising that the potential trade volume will likely require major improvements in infrastructure, particularly finalisation of construction of Gara'ad sea port and rehabilitation of Galkayo-Garowe road, which has deteriorated significantly. Even if infrastructure is improved, ensuring that inter-state trade goes through the formal transit hub at Turdibi and not through other unmanned areas, will be an entirely different task that Puntland and the Somali Regional State will need to cooperate on.
- 4.1.3 Forecast:** In the short-term, Turdibi transit hub is not likely to drastically transform local trade networks; however, real long-term growth will require the proper investment in infrastructure, enabling the trade volume to grow and contribute significantly to local revenue and jobs, on both sides of the border.

4.2 Sanaag's Gold Rush contributes to clan conflict

- 4.2.1 Key Developments:** As previously reported, clan fighting in parts of eastern Sanaag region has been partly linked to speculation over the area's potential mineral reserves. On Apr. 17, Puntland President Said Deni issued a presidential decree "suspending export" of metal and mineral resources in Puntland State of Somalia.⁶¹ The letter, dated April 15, was sent to six Ministries and Puntland State Police Command.⁶² Speculation over alleged mineral deposits in eastern Sanaag region have contributed to clan conflicts for control of land and impacted social cohesion in the region for a number of years. On Nov. 26, 2019, local media reported that at least 3 persons were killed in the mountain area of Sanaag region after two rival militias clashed over "gold" found in the area.⁶³ Somaliland MP Abdiqadir Jama Hamud, speaking to the media a day after the clashes, said that the cause of the conflict was "mountains of gold".⁶⁴ Weeks later, on Jan. 15, 2020, a Puntland delegation was attacked at Ulheed village in eastern Sanaag region by unidentified gunmen and one of the delegation's vehicles was burned.⁶⁵ The clan conflict erupted in November 2019; however, tensions over areas rumoured to contain mineral resources in Sanaag region have been boiling over since at least 2017. To make matters worse a sub-national dispute between Somaliland and Puntland has added a new contextual layer to a local conflict over land and resources.

In 2017, Somaliland media reported about a ‘gold rush’ in a village northeast of Erigavo, capital of Sanaag region; the area is called Irshida in Sanaag region.⁶⁶ The report goes on to say that the surrounding villages also became hubs for artisanal miners looking for gold. On Apr. 6, 2018, clan elder Boqor Mohamed Nuh Adan said in a press statement that the Somaliland government’s newfound interest in the area is due to the ‘gold deposits’ and stated that elders were in control of the mining trade in Irshida area, but claimed that it was ‘part of Somaliland’. On Jan. 19, 2019, a company called Tacab Wadaag began to dig for gold in an area near Erigavo.⁶⁷ In a press conference, the Somaliland government’s Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources fully supported the mining in the Maydh areas of Sanaag region. One day after mining began, elders from the area held a press conference stating that the company had begun mining for gold without consent of local communities and accused the company of attempting to evict people from their ancestral grazing lands.⁶⁸ As the mining dispute within Somaliland continued to develop, Sanaag region was also the epicentre for a new sub-national battleground between Puntland and Somaliland, with several troops allied to Somaliland defecting to Puntland in early 2019. Throughout that year, armed clashes between Somaliland and Puntland forces were frequent and have continued into 2020. As recently as Feb. 27 2020, local media reported that at least 8 soldiers were killed and 6 were wounded on both sides when Puntland and Somaliland forces clashed at Hadaaftimo town, in eastern Sanaag region.⁶⁹ The fighting reportedly erupted after Somaliland forces attacked a Puntland army garrison. On Feb. 29, Puntland security minister Abdisamad Gallan accused Somaliland troops in Sanaag region of being “allied to Al Shabaab”, days after Puntland and Somaliland forces clashed in the region.⁷⁰

4.2.2 **Analysis:** Sanaag region and the Golis Mountains that run through it have been reported to be mineral rich. Although the area has no history of major commercial gold exploration, the geology of the area consists of high-grade metamorphic rocks within a greenstone belt that are good indicators that the area contains gold.⁷¹ Furthermore, Sanaag region is also home to a long culture of artisanal mining that can be traced back for decades, with coal and gemstones being some of the mineral commodities mined in the area. Given the widely believed potential of the region, it was not unusual that reports of gold exploration by artisanal miners spurred a ‘gold rush’ in the area that garnered the attention of foreign companies.

Precious metals and minerals have been known to be a significant conflict driver in many African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone. Therefore, any approach to mining has to be cautious, inclusive and transparent. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recommends that companies sourcing minerals from conflict-affected areas “avoid contributing to conflict”.⁷² Responsible mining is the term used by OECD, but more often than not, that recommendation falls on deaf ears. Much like the case in Sanaag region. The elders in Maydh, who spoke out against a company backed by the Somaliland authority on natural resources signifies the delicateness of attempting to extract mineral resources in the region. It may also indicate more troubling factors, such as the lack of inclusivity and/ or transparency.

Puntland state has had a history with mining in the Golis Mountain area, specifically the Majjiyahan area where the Puntland administration inked an agreement with Australian mining firm Range Resources for mineral extraction in 2005.⁷³ But the contract with the foreign company was not accompanied with a sustainable contract or agreement with local communities, and ultimately triggering local resistance in the form of clan militias. Years later, the remnants of that armed resistance gave rise to Mohamed Said Atom, who later became Al Shabaab faction leader in Galgala mountains of Puntland.⁷⁴ Insurgent

groups exploited local grievances and established operating bases in mountain hideouts over the areas. Given the history of mining in Puntland, the Somaliland administration's push for the commercialisation of gold deposits can have serious implications for wider peace and stability.

The dynamic is entirely different this time around. There are several different clans living within the area of the 'gold rush', and the local clans are allied to Somaliland and Puntland. The fighting in November of last year and April signals that the internal dispute within Somaliland over mining has been eclipsed by the clan conflict over mining-rich areas between rival clans in the area. Arthur A. Stein found that external threats/conflicts indeed contribute to internal cohesion but that a number of factors needed to be present for this effect to be actualized.⁷⁵ While rival clans battle for land believed to be mineral rich, the conflict situation in El Afweyn continues to flare up. The clan conflict is a destabilising factor impacting social cohesion in Sanaag region. Clan conflict inside Somaliland, combined with conflict between Somaliland and Puntland-allied clans over mineral resources indicates a worsening situation. Another more troubling layer of conflict is the sub-national conflict between Puntland and Somaliland, which continues to intensify. After an attack on a Puntland delegation in Badhan, 2019 saw unprecedented defection of troops once allied to Somaliland, defecting over to Puntland. The newly integrated Puntland troops hailing from the region of Sanaag have vowed to remove Somaliland forces from the region. However, the attack on the Puntland delegation alone likely did not trigger the major defection of Somaliland troops. During that period, Somaliland was facing a lot of internal strife with Col. Arre rebel militia still active and operating within eastern Sanaag areas. Furthermore, the 'gold rush' and local reservations with the Somaliland government's management of the gold mining were ongoing, thus creating a multitude of reasons for soldiers to defect from Somaliland and ensure the protection of the local resources. However, since then, Col. Arre has agreed to disband his militia group and has handed over 600 equipped troops to Somaliland. How those troops will be integrated into the Somaliland army has not been expounded on. But as clan conflicts in the region intensify, over land and resource control, and if Col. Arre's rebel militia are not fully integrated into the Somaliland army, some of these forces may find themselves persuaded to join the clan conflict in Sanaag region.

Another layer to the conflict in Sanaag region is the proximity of mineral resources to Al Shabaab strongholds and the group's possible intervention in the area. A week before clan fighting first erupted in Sanaag region, on Nov. 17, 2019, Al Shabaab announced that the group captured a small village at Gacan-Maroodi, about 50km southeast of Erigavo, a stronghold of Somaliland forces in Sanaag region.⁷⁶ According to residents, the Al Shabaab militants later left the village and there were no major security incidents. This was a very unusual development, as Al Shabaab have not been known to briefly occupy villages in such close proximity towards Somaliland forces. Whatever the group's intentions, it signifies that Sanaag region is experiencing serious social fragmentation and an increase of insecurity stemming from a multitude of conflict drivers, and this renewed risk of major violence in the region requires committed peacebuilding efforts by all stakeholders.

- 4.2.3 **Forecast:** The conflict over gold and mineral resources in Sanaag region will likely not dissipate in the months to come. Furthermore, the risk of the 'resource conflicts' involving Puntland and Somaliland is likely, although the conflict would be shrouded in sub-national and clan-centric cover.

*New Access International (NAI Somalia), founded in 2012, is a Research and Development Agency based in Somalia. NAI Somalia specializes in policy research, organizational development, advocacy, and project consulting work. NAI launched its **Somali Law and Policy Program** in January 2019, publishing the monthly **Puntland Situation Report** and the **Somali Federalisation Monitor** that focus on collecting, observing, recording, and analysing all major events and developments linked to matters of law and policy, and its impact on peace, politics and development in the Federal Republic of Somalia.*

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