



# PUNTLAND SITUATION REPORT

## Somali Law & Policy Program

March 2020

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the course of March 2020, a relatively significant number of events unfolded in Puntland State of Somalia. Overall, a sense of insecurity was heightened throughout the state due to fear of terrorism attacks and concerns over the spread of COVID-19 global pandemic. Puntland state institutions continued to struggle containing the impact of both threats. From a security standpoint, a number of security incidents occurred during the month, including the assassination of Nugal Governor Abdisalam Hassan Hersi ‘Gujir’ – a retired colonel and former Garowe mayor, who was appointed as governor on Sep. 24, 2018. Militant groups carried out VEO attacks in Bossaso and Galkayo, including assassinations of government officials, launched a mortar attack targeting a security facility in Bossaso, and conducted overnight shelling on Puntland army base at Af-Urur, approximately 80km southwest of Bossaso in Bari region. Puntland security forces launched major house searches in Bossaso and detained a number of suspects connected to Al Shabaab and ISIS militants. In Somaliland-controlled Las Anod, provincial capital of Sool region, suspected militants carried out two assassinations of Somaliland court and intelligence officials, the first such assassinations in recent years.

With regard to sub-national tensions between Puntland and Somaliland, the situation remained relatively calm; however, Puntland Vice President Ahmed ‘Karash’ Elmi Osman visited Puntland troops near Tukaraq town at the frontline with Somaliland forces in Sool region. In a separate incident, a Puntland delegation attending a traditional ceremony in western Sool region abruptly left the event before Somaliland troops led by a government minister arrived in the town to attend the same ceremony. Meanwhile, visitations to Garowe by leaders of Islamist Sufi armed group Ahlu Sunna angered officials in Galmudug state, who warned Puntland against “interference” in Galmudug state politics, thereby raising inter-state political tensions.

Also, in March, Puntland government hosted the Puntland Consultative Conference that was attended by over 1,500 persons, including federal and state officials, traditional elders, civil society, Diaspora members, and regional delegates. The conference was held on time in Garowe, between Mar. 15-17, and concluded with an official communique; however, Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) delegation of ministers rejected parts of the communique, immediately sparking a political mini-crisis that required the interjection of Puntland President Said Deni. After tit-for-tat media appearances, between FGS and Puntland ministers, President Deni met privately with the FGS delegation and agreed to “travel to Mogadishu”. Within days, international diplomats including UN and EU special envoys to Somalia welcomed President Deni’s proposed Mogadishu trip. However, domestic pressure was growing on the president, who reframed his visit to Mogadishu as “recommended” by the Puntland Conference communique and that he would travel to Mogadishu to “invite” FGS leaders to a national consultative conference to be held in Garowe.

Meanwhile, Puntland state, like the rest of the world, was preparing the fight against the spread of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The government nominated a Prevention Committee, launched public awareness campaigns, initiated a lockdown of major towns, and sought international assistance. However, on the whole, Puntland state’s health infrastructure is poorly equipped and wholly unprepared to handle a public health emergency. This *Report* analyses the current situation and forwards suggestions for improvement. Finally, Puntland ministers also traveled with a Djiboutian government delegation to Gara’ad port construction site, where Puntland state is building a regional port along the state’s Indian Ocean coast. In this month’s *Puntland Situation Report*, the state’s infrastructure development is overviewed and assessed, identifying key opportunities and challenges in this sector. President Deni, in a TV interview, also announced plans that the Garowe-Galkayo road rehabilitation project, funded by the EU, would be relaunched “soon” and expressed “regret” that DP World’s construction of Bossaso port has not yet commenced.

## 2. PEACE AND SECURITY

2.1 **Key Developments:** During March, a total of 8 violent deaths were reported in Puntland State and regional fault-lines. About 50% of all killings were attributed to VEO attacks in Puntland cities, while another 37.5% were reported in Somaliland-controlled regional fault-line areas, and the remaining 13.5% was attributed to local/clan conflicts. Significantly, Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for the assassination of Nugal Governor Abdisalam Hassan Hersi ‘Gujir’ who was killed in Garowe by a suicide bomber. There were also two assassinations in Bossaso and Galkayo, a bomb attack near Bossaso port gate, a mortar attack near security forces facility in Bossaso, and Al Shabaab overnight shelling of Puntland troops at Af-Urur army post in Bari region. In Las Anod, two high-profile assassinations targeted a Somaliland judge and regional intelligence chief, raising concerns about terrorism attacks in new locations.

2.1.1 **Violence Against Women:** On Mar. 10, local media reported that a group of young men “injected with an unknown needle and attempted to kidnap” a 17-year-old girl who was herding family livestock near South Galkayo.<sup>1</sup> The attackers failed to kidnap the girl after she fainted and bystanders began screaming and asking for help, and the attackers reportedly fled away. The girl was recovering at a South Galkayo hospital. On Mar. 8, Puntland President Said Deni, speaking at a March 8 Women’s Day Event in Garowe, told attendees that Puntland government will “implement justice” in rape cases “similar to Aisha Ilyas case” and denied “speculation” that attackers in the case of rape-murder victim Hodan Shanlayste will not face justice.<sup>2</sup>

**Sub-National Conflict:** On Mar. 12, Galmudug administration’s spokesman Osman Isse ‘Taardhuleed’ told local media that Galmudug and Puntland are “brothers and neighbours”, but warned Puntland against “arming Ahlu Sunna group to destabilise Galmudug”.<sup>3</sup> He said: “The state formation of Galmudug in 2015, [former] President Abdiweli Gaas took it upon himself to make sure that Galmudug’s formation did not stand. By the Grace of Allah, it did not happen. Galmudug defended itself and now [Puntland President Said] Deni is trying to destabilise Galmudug. The people of Galmudug see this and will defend themselves.”<sup>4</sup> In February, Galmudug forces and Ahlu Sunna group clashed in the state capital Dhusamareb, whereby Ahlu Sunna leaders surrendered and later travelled to Puntland.<sup>5</sup>

On Mar. 12, a Puntland government delegation including ministers and parliamentarians were attending a local traditional elder crowning ceremony at Dharkengeyo village, in western Sool region. The delegation reportedly “left in a hurry” after Somaliland information minister Saleban Koore’s delegation and accompanying security forces at the village to attend the same event.<sup>6</sup> During the ceremony speeches, Mr. Koore said “this is Somaliland territory”, while a Puntland deputy minister said “this is Puntland territory”; however, and the Sool regional clan chief Garad Jama Garad Ali said “this territory belongs to neither Puntland nor Somaliland”, underscoring local tensions.<sup>7</sup>

On Mar. 24, Puntland Vice President Ahmed Karash toured Puntland troops near Tukaraq in Sool region, where Puntland troops face off against Somaliland forces since the military clashes of 2018.<sup>8</sup>

2.1.2 **Regional Fault-Lines:** On Mar. 6, local forces loyal to Galmudug’s ousted leader Ahmed Duale Gelle Haaf conducted security operations to South Galkayo. The forces were deployed after reports that Federal Government officials had “arrived in South Galkayo”.<sup>9</sup> On Mar. 2, Somaliland-appointed Sool regional judge Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was killed in Las Anod after an improvised explosive device (IED) planted on his vehicle exploded.<sup>10</sup> No group claimed responsibility for the attack.<sup>11</sup> On the same day, one Somaliland police officer was killed and 2 other police officers wounded in El Afweyn district in western Sanaag region.<sup>12</sup> The attacker, himself a police officer, was arrested. On Mar. 16, Somaliland head of intelligence in Sool region Abdigani Guhad was killed in Las Anod, the Somaliland-controlled provincial capital.<sup>13</sup> Somaliland officials did not blame anyone for the attack; however, a number of persons were arrested for investigations the next day.<sup>14</sup>

On Mar. 25, unconfirmed reports said Somaliland forces in Las Anod “arrested” Yasin Kilwe, a senior Al Shabaab leader.<sup>15</sup> In the recent past, Kilwe was responsible for operations in Galgala mountains in Puntland and is on the US wanted list. However, the report could not be verified independently.

**2.1.3 Violent Extremist Organizations:** On Mar. 9, a bomb exploded near the main gate of Bossaso port. Local media reported that one person, an Ethiopian national, was killed and 1 police officer was wounded, and nearby buildings were damaged.<sup>16</sup> No group claimed responsibility for the bombing attack. On Mar. 12, suspected Al Shabaab militants shelled Puntland security forces positions at Af Urur army base in Bari region.<sup>17</sup> There were no confirmed reports of casualties. On Mar. 17, Puntland tax officer Saleban Ahmed Shire was killed in Bossaso and Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for the targeted killing.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, a car belonging to Sabir local company in Bossaso attached with an explosive device exploded and no was killed or injured in the attack.<sup>19</sup> Local media reported a mortar attack near Puntland forces facilities overnight on Mar. 17 in Bossaso.<sup>20</sup> On night of Mar. 22, Mukhtar Ahmed Omar Tindle, a member of Galkayo Local Council, was killed in Galkayo after unknown gunmen opened fire.<sup>21</sup> He was rushed to the hospital where he later died from gunshot wounds. Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for the killing.<sup>22</sup> On Mar. 29, a suicide bomber exploded his vest in front of Puntland State Police headquarters in Garowe, initially wounding Nugal Governor Abdisalam Gujir and a fellow passenger, who was a former police commander. Governor Gujir died later that night from his wounds. Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for the fatal blast.<sup>23</sup>

**2.1.4 Counter-Terrorism:** On Mar. 4, Puntland state police in Bossaso arrested a group of 8 men accused of being members of Al Shabaab militant group, and seized guns, assault rifles, and other weapons during a house raid.<sup>24</sup> Militants have stepped-up their attacks on government and security personnel in Bossaso in recent months. On Mar. 17, PSF counter-terrorism forces in Bossaso reported that a number of militant suspects were ‘detained in security operations’ conducted inside Bossaso.<sup>25</sup> The exact number of detained suspects was unknown.<sup>26</sup> On Mar. 23, Puntland state police and PSF forces jointly conducted search and arrest operations in Bossaso, and an unknown number of suspects were arrested for questioning over links to Al Shabaab and ISIS.<sup>27</sup>

**2.1.5 Local/Clan Conflicts:** On Mar. 12, local media reported that 1 person was killed and 2 others wounded in North Galkayo after local militia claiming “land rights” clashed with security forces guarding the construction site for Galkayo’s new airport. Government officials and local elders had intervened and were resolving the matter over local fighters who lay claim to the land at the proposed airport site.<sup>28</sup> On Mar. 25, at least 4 people were wounded when armed militia attacked Puntland police forces and freed a convicted killer in Galkayo.<sup>29</sup>

**2.1.6 Security Sector Governance:** On Mar. 14, security in Puntland capital of Garowe was extra tight as more delegations arrived from Mogadishu and overseas, including federal ministers and former Puntland leaders.<sup>30</sup> On Mar. 17, at conclusion of the Puntland Consultative Conference, the communique expressed concerns about Somali National Army (SNA) being trained and equipped by Federal Government of Somalia, as the conference noted concern that a “lopsided and imbalanced military, and can pose a threat to the security, social trust, stability and integrity of the country.”<sup>31</sup>

## **2.2 Security Forecast**

**2.2.1 Violence Against Women:** The case in South Galkayo caused much trepidation within the wider community and triggered reminders of the gruesome rape and murder of 13-year-old victim Aisha Ilyas. The failed attempt arose questions about the contents of the needle. Doctors in South Galkayo said that they were examining the contents of the needle. Speculators believe that the attackers used some sort of anaesthesia, which could be very likely. As security concerns grow in Galkayo, the impact it is having on local women is noticeable, as women residents tell NAI that they do not feel safe moving around the city. The statement by President Deni, to pursue violence against women cases with vigor

especially the case of Hodan Shanleyste, will ease the angst of many girls and women, but justice will need to be coupled with improved security measures to ensure that women are not inhibited by insecurity and the threat of violent assault. It is likely that Puntland courts will continue the murder case of Hodan Shanleyste, when the threat of COVID-19 pandemic dissipates; however, it remains to be seen what the Puntland government will do about overall security in Galkayo.

**2.2.2 Sub-national Conflict:** The inflammatory statements by Galmudug administration's spokesman Osman Isse 'Taar-dhuleed' signals the attitudes of some political leaders in Galmudug, with regards to relations with neighbouring Puntland. The spokesman seemed to express a common view of Puntland as an administration with a history of attempting to undermine Galmudug state's legitimacy. The ramifications this can have on local peace and social cohesion are numerous, especially in Galkayo where both administrations govern. Puntland has also engaged in this kind of negative rhetoric, when in Dec. 2019, Puntland officials blamed Galmudug for supporting one side of clan conflict in Towfiq-Afbarwaqo towns of eastern Mudug region.<sup>32</sup> This kind of rhetoric is akin to the rhetoric heard in late 2015, in the lead up to the Galmudug state formation process. Only months after Galmudug was formed in 2015, a sub-national conflict between Puntland and Galmudug forces broke out, a ceasefire was declared, and once again all-out conflict erupted in late 2016. The Puntland administration's actions of allowing Ahlu Sunna leaders cannot be interpreted as Puntland undermining Galmudug, as Puntland and Ahlu Sunna group have engaged in security cooperation in the fight against Al Shabaab group in central Somalia. However, the Puntland government will need to do more to strengthen cooperation and coordination with Galmudug authorities to improve overall peace in Mudug region.

Sub-national tensions between Puntland and Somaliland continue to play out in the media, as the crowning of a traditional elder was engulfed by a battle of words between Puntland and Somaliland officials at the ceremony. The land claims by both sub-national authorities does not signal that the conflict is dissipating; rather, it continues to intensify as traditional ceremonies have become venues to politicize legitimacy to regions claimed by both Somaliland and Puntland.

It is difficult to determine if Puntland and Galmudug state's new leadership will make legitimate attempts to improve cooperation and coordination. This is desperately required, as insecurity in Galkayo continues to rise. However, as the COVID-19 crisis takes its toll, it is unlikely that the sub-national conflict between Somaliland and Puntland, or between Puntland and Galmudug, will escalate into armed hostilities.

**2.2.3 Regional Fault-lines:** The city of Las Anod, claimed by both Puntland and Somaliland but under Somaliland administration, was home to two major and troubling security incidents. The city is not known for VEO activity; however, the assassinations of two Somaliland senior officials within one month is cause for concern. Both attacks bear the hallmarks of VEO, although militant groups were not known to actively carry out attacks in Las Anod. The reported arrest in Las Anod of Yasin Kilwe, a veteran member of Al Shabaab group in Puntland, remained unconfirmed. Many security analysts are questioning how Kilwe, who is a notorious member of Al Shabaab, felt that he can travel within Somaliland's jurisdiction? The sudden rise in VEO attacks in Las Anod and the reported arrest may not be a coincidence and may signal that the Somaliland administration under Muse Bihi is putting an end to accusations of supporting Al Shabaab, a claim that successive Puntland administrations have made since 2011. It is unclear how entrenched VEOs are in Las Anod and the possible ramifications VEO activities in Somaliland-controlled parts of Sool region can have on security in Puntland.

**2.2.4 VEO/Counter-Terrorism:** Under President Deni, the Puntland administration has made battling VEOs a priority, but has been struggling with containing VEO attacks and operational capability in Galkayo and Bossaso. Some arrests of alleged members of Al Shabaab have occurred, but the extent to which counter-terrorism operations have been successful seem to be minimal when compared to the number of high-profile assassinations of Puntland officials and security personnel, during March and prior months. The attack in Garowe being the most notable, but attacks of officials in Galkayo and Bossaso have been increasing over the recent months, indicating that VEOs are increasing operations

as a direct response to the Puntland government's counter-terrorism pledges, increasing security operations and implementing major security reforms including training and equipping state police.

- 2.2.5 **Local/Clan Conflicts:** The killing over a land dispute at the proposed Galkayo airport site is a new development that will need to be rectified quickly, as this may hamper the proposed construction of the new airport. Land disputes that are not resolved quickly tend to lead to protracted local or clan conflict. The Puntland administration would be wise to resolve the issue quickly, as it may morph into a clan dispute over a Puntland-led investment initiative. It is likely that Puntland officials will attempt to resolve the issue, but how successful these attempts will be is yet to be determined.
- 2.2.6 **Security Sector Governance:** The communique at the Puntland Consultative Conference noted that Puntland is uncomfortable with how the FGS is recruiting and rebuilding the Somali National Army (SNA). It also may indicate that the Puntland administration is upset with how the Security Sector Reform (SSR) of Somalia is being managed. This is not a new allegation being levelled by the Puntland government. This has been a constant argument levied by previous administrations. Puntland's engagement in Somalia's SSR has been very minimal over the years and this continues to be the trend to date. Puntland will need to identify how it can engage in SSR activities during a period when it is lodged in a political dispute with the FGS. It is unlikely that, by the next reporting period, Puntland will see changes in the national SSR programme, given the current of COVID-19 crisis. It is more likely that Puntland will continue its local SSR initiatives without any assistance from the FGS.

## 3. POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

### 3.1 Puntland Consultative Conference Concludes in Garowe

- 3.1.1 **Key Developments:** In line with President Deni's announcement in Bossaso on Feb. 17, Puntland government hosted the state's first 'Consultative Conference' in decades in Garowe, between Mar. 15-17, 2020. The conference brought together many political stakeholders in Puntland, including the state government, FGS ministers and parliamentarians, former Puntland leaders, opposition figures, traditional elders, civil society, and Diaspora representatives.

On Mar. 13, only two days before the conference, a local politician criticized the conduct and preparations for Puntland Consultative Conference, saying that the conference committee was "inviting persons who prefer to seek further political polarization" and called on the Puntland president "to preserve the public interest".<sup>33</sup> On Mar. 14, Somali Foreign Minister Ahmed Isse Awad arrived in Garowe to attend Conference and commented that Somali President and Prime Minister "share their congratulations with Puntland" on the occasion of the Conference.<sup>34</sup> On Mar. 14, Puntland media complained the independent media was "banned" from reporting from the Conference and the move was criticized by media groups.<sup>35</sup> Some websites complained about the conference organizers' policy to give a "limited role" for the independent media.<sup>36</sup>

On Mar. 14, the Conference draft agenda was circulated; the agenda had three key pillars: "Puntland Affairs", including unity, peace and development; "Federal Affairs", including the federalization process and Puntland state's role in constitutional review, federal elections 2021, power and resource sharing model, and federal-state cooperation; and finally, the conference sought to address "Puntland role" in FGS-Somaliland dialogue process.

The conference communique included positive messages of unity of Puntland, commitment to good governance, and implementation of multiparty political system. On security, the communique called for the "elimination of terrorism in Golis Mountains", called on the government to "retrain illegal weapons in the hands of the general public", and take "immediate action to tackle illegal drugs and narcotics". On federal issues, however, the communique was critical and appealed to Puntland government to "postpone the review of the provisional constitution...until the upcoming election

following 2020/2021.” Furthermore, the communique called on, “Somali political stakeholders to converge for a consultative conference to deliberate and agree on ways to hold the 2020/2021 elections”.

The three-day conference concluded peacefully as planned. However, the conference aftermath paved the way for a series of press conferences among key political groups that brought to the public’s attention some of the conference’s internal disagreements. On Mar. 19, during the evening, President Deni concluded a private meeting with FGS ministers’ delegation. After the meeting, President Deni announced that he intended to travel to Mogadishu to invite federal leaders to the proposed Somali National Consultative Conference, to be held in Garowe.<sup>37</sup> On Mar. 20, FGS delegation led by Foreign Minister Awad told a press conference in Garowe that they were “disappointed” with some parts of the conference communique, including an appeal for Puntland to host a conference for “political stakeholders”. FGS ministers opposed the phrase “political stakeholders” because the phrase is used by Federal Government’s political opposition in Mogadishu.<sup>38</sup> The federal ministers also said that “some points” in the conference communique were “not discussed” by conference delegates.<sup>39</sup>

On Mar. 21, Puntland Interior Minister Mohamed Dhabanad, with Puntland ministers at his sides, told a press conference in Garowe that the Puntland Consultative Conference was a “Puntland event”, that “federal ministers from Puntland were invited”, and that it was “not an event for political negotiations” between the Federal Government and Puntland.<sup>40</sup> On Mar. 21, some federal parliamentarians from Puntland who attended the Conference responded to the FGS ministers’ objections by supporting the conference communique at a press event in Garowe. The federal MPs were largely seen as supporting Puntland government policy.<sup>41</sup>

- 3.1.2 **Analysis:** It was the first time that Puntland held a state-wide consultative conference since 1998. The conference was expected to bring together a diverse group of politicians and civil society. It was largely seen as an opportunity for Puntland to reaffirm its unity, territory and its role in federal Somalia. Overall, the conference was well-organized and seems to have reaffirmed the Deni administration’s federal policy. However, that policy became the centerpiece of the publicized dispute between FGS and Puntland after the conference. The press conferences and counter-press conferences held by FGS ministers, Puntland ministers and federal MPs, showcased the behind-the-scenes infighting between political forces vying for influence over the conference communique. Moreover, the conference reaffirmed Puntland state’s rejection of the constitutional review process, and the federal Electoral and Petroleum Laws; interestingly, FGS Labor Minister Sadik Warfa had remarked at the conference that “Puntland cannot reject the Electoral Law”.

The conference outcome was largely in favor of Puntland state’s political vision. However, the FGS ministerial delegation used the venue to voice their support for the Federal Government’s vision for Somali federalization process, and used the conference aftermath to create a political atmosphere of discontent. Puntland government’s reaction was confusing, at best. The Puntland interior minister strongly rejected the FGS ministers’ claims and indicated that the ministers were “invitees” to the conference, and therefore, not decision-makers. However, President Deni’s sudden announcement of a trip to Mogadishu sent confusing signals as to the Puntland leader’s intentions. Puntland government’s hardline policy vis-à-vis the FGS federalization process was softened once President Deni announced his intentions to travel to Mogadishu for talks with FGS leaders. In the end, the conference aftermath proved to be more important than the conference itself, as political events after the conference seemed to guide FGS-Puntland relations towards finding common ground.

- 3.1.3 **Forecast:** The first of its kind in decades, the Puntland Consultative Conference concluded in Garowe and the conference outcome, largely aligned with the Deni administration’s federal policy, is expected to guide Puntland state’s negotiations with the FGS.



### 3.2 Despite Uncertainty, Foreign Envoys Welcome Deni's Proposed Mogadishu Trip

**Key Developments:** Throughout March, it was clear that the FGS and Puntland continued their long-running disputes. On Mar. 1, Ahlu Sunna group's spiritual leader Moallim Mohamud arrived in Garowe. The leader arrived only days after armed clashes broke out in Galmudug state capital Dhusamareb, between forces loyal to new Galmudug President Ahmed Qoor-qoor and allied Federal Government troops, against Ahlu Sunna fighters.<sup>42</sup> Separately, on Mar. 4, Puntland and Jubaland state governments 'rebuffed' attendance at debt relief conference hosted by the Federal Government, which was scheduled to be held in Baidoa on Mar. 11, with Puntland requesting a 30-day delay and Jubaland accusing the FGS of attacking Jubaland territories with federal troops.<sup>43</sup>

On Mar. 6, a delegation led by Ahlu Sunna political leader Sheikh Shakir Ali Hassan and including former federal interior minister Abdisamad Moallim Mohamud travelled from Galmudug to Garowe, leaving Dhusamareb after Galmudug state forces and allied FGS troops seized control.<sup>44</sup> On Mar. 9, President Deni received at Puntland State House the UN Special Representative to Somalia Amb. James Swan, where discussions focused on Puntland-UN relations, Puntland-Federal relations, and upcoming Somali national elections 2020/2021.<sup>45</sup>

On Mar. 19, during the evening, President Deni concluded a private meeting with FGS ministerial delegation led by Somali Foreign Minister Ahmed Isse Awad. After the meeting, President Deni announced that he intended to travel to Mogadishu to invite federal leaders to the proposed Somali National Consultative Conference to be held in Garowe.<sup>46</sup> On Mar. 21, President Deni told a TV interview that he plans to go to Mogadishu and state capitals to "invite" leaders to proposed Somali National Consultative Conference, to be held in Garowe.<sup>47</sup>

On Mar. 22, the UN's Amb. Swan "welcomed" the Puntland president's proposed visit to Mogadishu to meet with Federal Government leaders.<sup>48</sup> On the same day, EU special envoy to Somalia Nicolas Berlanga "welcomed" the Puntland leader's proposed trip to Mogadishu and the expected meetings with Somali federal leaders.<sup>49</sup> However, on Mar. 23, President Deni told a TV interview that he suspects that the Federal Government is "foiling" Puntland state's proposed plans to host the Somali National Consultative Conference.<sup>50</sup>

3.2.1 **Analysis:** Expectedly, the FGS and Puntland continued to be at loggerheads over the federal elections 2020/2021 and other national issues. Ahlu Sunna group leaders arriving in Puntland, "on transit" to overseas according to Puntland officials, was an ill-advised move especially since the Galmudug state's new administration is unhappy with Ahlu Sunna leaders' behavior. Since Puntland and Galmudug are neighbours, it is imperative that the two state governments agree not to host armed groups or their leaders, as it could be misinterpreted as direct support. Separately, it was not immediately clear whether the debt-relief conference was postponed for 30 days as Puntland requested; however, it was another example of the dispute between the FGS and state governments, namely Puntland and Jubaland.

Significantly, however, President Deni's proposed trip to Mogadishu attracted the immediate support of the UN and EU special envoys, who are interested to bring together FGS and Federal Member States (FMS), to agree on a 2020/2021 electoral model. The Puntland government, backed by a state-wide consultative conference and enjoying domestic support in its political struggle with FGS, is poised to negotiate from a stronger position, if this backing is successfully transformed into political capital during federal-state negotiations. The international community's quick support of President Deni's proposed trip underscored a commitment to hold timely elections, whilst also exposing growing concerns that the long-running political dispute between FGS and Puntland might derail the 2020/2021 federal elections, unless a negotiated agreement is finalized.

3.2.2 **Forecast:** The FGS and Puntland are expected to enter into political negotiations over the next two months. While the Puntland Consultative Conference boosts the state government's domestic position, the final outcome of federal-state negotiations shall be decided in closed-door meetings among political leaders, with the international community as observers and arbiters.

## 4. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

### 4.1 Puntland State Prepares for COVID-19 Prevention

4.1.1 **Key Developments:** As the COVID-19 global pandemic began to reach epic proportions, public fear of its arrival in Somalia sent the country into a concerned frenzy of social discourse. Many were wondering if the Puntland Consultative Conference was a wise decision, given the global guidelines for limiting or preventing all public gatherings. This prompted the Puntland government to take pre-emptive measures to quell public fears. There were thousands of delegates from Puntland and the Somali Diaspora. On Mar. 8, the Puntland Ministry of Fisheries issued a directive banning all fishing boats from docking at Puntland harbours in an effort to prevent spread of COVID-19, according to Puntland Information Minister Ali Sabarey's press conference.<sup>51</sup> As the Coronavirus continued to grow exponentially, with suspected cases being reported in Mogadishu, the Puntland government took on more pre-emptive measures. Two weeks after the first directive banning all fishing boats, on Mar. 21, Puntland Ministry of Labour announced that all civil servants were to work from home starting on Mar. 21 until April 3. On Mar. 23, Puntland Ministry of Justice announced that it would shut down mosques over COVID-19 concerns, but later retracted that statement.<sup>52</sup> On Mar. 27, Puntland Ministry of Interior announced that the state's land boundaries with Somaliland and Ethiopia would be shut over COVID-19 concerns.<sup>53</sup> During a press conference on Mar. 28, Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire said that the FGS sent COVID-19 prevention supplies to Puntland and Somaliland.<sup>54</sup> The supplies were donated by Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba company, in a response to the COVID-19 outbreak. On Mar 30, Puntland leaders and officials held a meeting over security and COVID-19 prevention.<sup>55</sup> The outcome of this meeting included an announcement that the Puntland government allocated a budget of \$100,000 USD to COVID-19 Prevention and decreed a dusk till dawn curfew on all cities over COVID-19 concerns.<sup>56</sup> On Mar. 31, COVID-19 Prevention Committee announced that it had created sub-committees, which included the Outreach and Preparation Sub-committee, Finance and Commodity Sub-committee, and Security Sub-committee.<sup>57</sup>

4.1.2 **Analysis:** Puntland state and Somalia more broadly lack the capacity to tackle COVID-19 outbreak. In some ways, Puntland has a head start on the likely ramifications of this pandemic, and therefore, will need to assess its capacity and develop strategies and implement these strategies effectively and efficiently to impede the virus' conceivable spread in Puntland state. But not everything is bleak; Puntland has made significant efforts in setting up committees to manage operations and has assigned a new hospital as the designated quarantine area. Regular meetings and daily media briefings by the responsible bodies to address the COVID-19 situation have been instituted.

The preventative measures taken by the Puntland administration indicate that state officials are taking COVID-19 seriously. The establishment of the committee and the daily updates is also a very much needed source of information during a time of rampant misinformation. Yet, the committee's updates have not attempted to combat the misinformation being propagated throughout social media platforms, which downplay the COVID-19 threat on the Somali population. For instance, the government's decision to stop mosque congregations was rescinded due to the uproar from many that perceived the move as hindering religious freedom. But those in favor of keeping mosques and other public places where large numbers of people congregate are persuaded by an intense misinformation campaign being purported worldwide, and more specifically in Somali social media hubs. Studies have suggested that the impact of misinformation campaigns has had huge repercussions on the behaviors and attitudes of people globally in dealing with the health emergency and thus has contributed to the exponential growth of the virus. The Outreach and Preparation Sub-committee will have to develop a rigorous



information campaign that permeates all levels of society. It cannot depend on aid agencies or public donations to fund these campaigns, but will have to fund this through government coffers. The Sub-committee will also need to inform community leaders as to the severity of the issue and the reasons why public congregations are being discouraged.

One positive aspect is the Finance and Commodities Sub-committee. This body is essential to protecting the local economy, given that there are worries of food shortage, which may be imminent. The COVID-19 Prevention Committee said it was closely following food stocks and that food shortages were not a threat currently. The establishment of working groups is essential to combating the COVID-19 outbreak, but the more pertinent question should be: is the government financially and operationally ready to deal with a COVID-19 outbreak?

The Puntland government has allocated an initial budget of \$100,000 USD for COVID-19 response, and solicited public donations from the private sector and international donors. During this crisis, the administration would be prudent to garner public support and stakeholder engagement by allocating a bigger budget to COVID-19 prevention efforts and further explain how this budget will be utilized and for what purposes exactly. Public donations will be an integral part of the response, but in a context like Somalia, where corruption and aid mismanagement is a problem, the public will need to be reassured by government actions and commitment before they fork up any money. For instance, Puntland authorities have not elaborated on the utilization of the donations of supplies from the FGS, UAE donations and other sources. Furthermore, the nighttime curfew has impacted the local economy, with many small and medium businesses experiencing losses in revenue. Coupled by a significant drop in remittances, as the pandemic is deeply impacting the global economy, it is very likely remittances will continue to drop in the near future. The government will have to take the weakening purchasing power of its public into account and develop strategies to alleviate the financial woes of its constituents.

Comprehensive preventative measures factor in emergency preparedness. Developed countries with more emergency preparedness are struggling to deal with COVID-19 outbreak. The exponential spread and toll COVID-19 is taking on these countries is very worrisome for Puntland and the rest of Somalia. This is all the more reason that Puntland and Somalia as a whole need to act quickly and effectively and consult with subject-matter experts to ensure their strategies are successful. The capacity of health institutions, both private and public in Puntland, is in dire straits and not equipped to handle the COVID-19 response. Health professionals in Puntland interviewed by NAI stated that there was a massive shortage in respirators throughout Puntland's public and private health facilities.<sup>58</sup> The weak health infrastructure is mainly the fault of private health institutions that have valued profits over emergency equipment costs, resulting in multitude of health facilities that are deeply under-equipped and under-staffed to deal with health emergencies. Given COVID-19 symptoms, acquiring respirators will be Puntland's biggest concern as preventative measures, such as social distancing, is not a failsafe option. Another essential tool in battling COVID-19 is effective screening and rigorous contact-tracing that has been essential to curbing the spread of the virus in countries, such as South Korea.<sup>59</sup> Sadly, however, Puntland does not have the facilities or the equipment to identify COVID-19 patients, as the current procedure is to send suspected COVID-19 cases to test labs in Kenya. If Puntland wants to ensure that it is prepared to handle the COVID-19 threat, the state government will need to do everything in its capacity to ensure that they screen suspected cases, contact-trace effectively and provide health facilities with the necessary equipment to ensure better odds for the public.

Given the crisis Somalia is facing, political differences need to be put aside to ensure that Somalis as a collective are offered the best opportunity to effectively battle this health pandemic. The silver lining is that this crisis may be a key national issue that both the centre and periphery work together as a cohesive unit to tackle. Hamblin (1958) who asked why group integration increases during a crisis, answered the question by saying, "present in every crisis situation studied is a likely solution to the crisis problem – a solution that requires the cooperation of all or most of the members of the groups involved." The COVID-19 public health crisis, in fact, could lay the groundwork for further

cooperation between the FGS and the FMS, if both sides believe that cooperation is the only way to defeat COVID-19 pandemic.

**4.1.3 Forecast:** As of March, Puntland has yet to confirm any cases of COVID-19; however, current procedures for testing require a lengthy wait time. It is unclear how equipped Puntland will be if or when the outbreak is confirmed within Puntland state jurisdiction.

## **4.2 Progress and Delays in Infrastructure Development in Puntland**

**4.2.1 Key Developments:** Throughout March, Puntland state officials continued efforts to attract support for the state's infrastructure development. On Mar. 10, President Deni welcomed to Puntland State House in Garowe the Djiboutian ambassador to Somalia, Aden Hassan Aden, where discussions focused on Puntland-Djibouti cooperation in development and infrastructure investment.<sup>60</sup> The Djiboutian delegation, accompanied by Puntland ministers, also visited Gara'ad port construction.<sup>61</sup> Separately, on Mar. 16, speaking at the Puntland Consultative Conference, former Puntland finance minister Farah Ali Shire said, "Bossaso port is not functioning".<sup>62</sup> The next day, Puntland ministers of fisheries, ports and commerce held a joint press conference stating that port of Bossaso is "functioning well" and rejected rumours that the port was "shut down"; the Fisheries Minister said "some fishing boats" were banned from docking on Puntland coast due to COVID-19 concerns.<sup>63</sup> On Mar. 22, local media reported that President Deni told a TV interview that international donors would "re-start" the Galkayo-Garowe rehabilitation project, which was cancelled in 2018 over corruption allegations.<sup>64</sup> The project, funded by the EU, has stalled for years.<sup>65</sup> During the same TV interview, President Deni expressed "regret" that DP World subsidiary P & O Ports had not commenced Bossaso port expansion project; the port deal was signed in Apr. 2017 by the former Puntland administration.<sup>66</sup>

**4.2.2 Analysis:** Economic infrastructure development has been a cornerstone policy of successive administrations in Puntland, starting with construction of Bossaso Airport terminal in 2008. Since then, two international airports at Bossaso and Garowe with tarmac runways were constructed in Puntland, with international donations from Italy and Kuwait, respectively. The Gara'ad port construction project is a locally-led infrastructure initiative proposed by the former Puntland administration. President Deni visited Djibouti in Feb. 2020 and the Djiboutian ambassador's visit to Garowe was a follow-up. Independent sources confirmed to NAI that the Djiboutian government and an unnamed Chinese construction company were "interested" in investing in the ongoing Gara'ad port construction. Gara'ad port, located on the Indian Ocean coast, will become Puntland state's second major port once completed. Land-locked neighbouring giant Ethiopia, largely reliant on Djiboutian ports, is interested to find more options for port access, and thus Gara'ad port is a possible option. The fact that the Djiboutian government and friendly international companies are interested in Gara'ad port is a sign of growing cooperation between Djibouti and Puntland state. Separately, the Puntland administration's press conference response about the situation of Bossaso port was unnecessary, if ill-timed. Bossaso port has been the major source of revenue for Puntland since the 1990s and is perhaps the most reliable port in post-1991 Somalia. Meanwhile, President Deni's announcement that EU-funded Garowe-Galkayo Road Rehabilitation Project is expected to be relaunched is much-needed positive news, especially since the security and economic vitality of Galkayo has reduced significantly over the past 15 years as the main tarmac highway's conditions worsened year after year. The government should put more emphasis to commence construction or rehabilitation of key infrastructure, to ensure that Puntland state is prepared to compete economically as a regional logistics hub.

**4.2.3 Forecast:** Infrastructure development shall continue to be a top priority for the Puntland administration; however, it is unlikely that major infrastructure projects will be launched amidst the COVID-19 public health emergency.

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*New Access International (NAI Somalia), founded in 2012, is a non-profit Research and Development Agency based in Somalia. NAI Somalia specializes in research, organization and policy development, and project consulting work, and launched its **Somali Law and Policy Program** in January 2019, publishing the monthly **Puntland Situation Report** and the bimonthly **Somali Federalisation Monitor** that focuses 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.*

*W:* [naisomalia.com](http://naisomalia.com)

*E:* [contact@naisomalia.com](mailto:contact@naisomalia.com)

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