

## UK Covers Up Somaliland Massacre Report

Britain's Foreign Office is censoring "vital information" on who shot protesters in Somaliland, after funding a police unit some blame for the killings.

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*UK diplomats will not declassify their assessment of who killed pro-Somalia activists at a demonstration in the bitterly contested city of Las Anod over the New Year.*

The censorship decision was made in response to a freedom of information request by *Declassified UK*.

Las Anod, which is home to around a quarter of a million people, is claimed by both Somalia's federal government and the breakaway northern administration of Somaliland.

Britain does not officially recognise Somaliland as an independent state but it has funded its security forces, including a unit suspected of carrying out the massacre.

The Foreign Office said last week that releasing its records from the incident "could potentially damage the relationships between the UK and Somaliland" and even jeopardise national security.

Around 20 people [died](#) from the shootings, according to a municipal doctor interviewed by Reuters.

The killings sparked months of open warfare, in which the local [Dhulbahante](#) clan - who generally favour union with Somalia - took up arms in a bid to stop Somaliland's army controlling the city.

148 civilians have died in the ensuing conflict since February, research by the charity Action on Armed Violence has found.

Its executive director, Dr Iain Overton, told *Declassified* the Foreign Office's censorship was "deeply concerning" and said British diplomats were withholding "vital information about

the violence against civilian protesters in Las Anod”.

Overton added: “The refusal to engage undermines the transparency that is essential for public trust. As casualties continue to rise, it is crucial that all parties prioritise the protection of civilians and work towards a peaceful resolution.”

### **‘Soaked in blood’**

Amnesty International said more than 600 people have been injured in the recent fighting, according to a new report released last week. Up to 200,000 others have fled.

The human rights group said international humanitarian law had been violated, claiming: “Somaliland security forces indiscriminately shelled the town, damaging hospitals, schools and mosques” by firing from military bases outside the city.

Amnesty added: “Among the civilians killed were women, children, older people with health conditions, and healthcare workers. They were mostly killed during indiscriminate attacks involving rockets, mortars, and other explosive weapons with wide area effects, which should never be used in populated areas.”

A seven-year-old girl was among the first to die in the fighting, when a shell hit her aunt’s house and shrapnel struck her head. Other casualties included a mother of seven children and a Red Crescent nurse.

An eyewitness who lost a niece in the shelling said: “We were engulfed with dust and smoke; we could not see each other. I heard Saynab scream. When we cleared our eyes, I found Saynab soaked in blood. She was already dead.”

But Michael Rubin, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, rubbished Amnesty’s report and suggested “perhaps...the United States and its European partners should arm Somaliland with more precise weaponry as it stands on the frontlines of a fight against insurgents and terrorists?”

### **Rapid Response Unit**

The ongoing violence in Las Anod is a setback for UK policy in the region, which has seen Britain forge closer ties to Somaliland’s de facto authorities than most other Western powers.

In censoring the documents, UK diplomats controversially relied on an exemption in the freedom of information act that is meant to protect international relations between states – even though the British government does not officially recognise Somaliland as a state.

It comes as substantial UK aid has gone towards strengthening Somaliland’s security forces, including the Rapid Response Unit (RRU), an elite police team implicated in the Las Anod killings.

The RRU was funded by British taxpayers for almost a decade until 2020, despite long-running concerns over its human rights record.

Overseas development minister Andrew Mitchell has said: “Exact figures for the amount of funding allocated to Somaliland’s police RRU are not available, as support was provided as

part of wider projects.”

The UK now funds a police “Counter Terrorism Unit” instead of the RRU. Britain’s defence ministry has previously paid Adam Smith International, a security consultancy, to train Somaliland’s military intelligence.

## Conservative backers

Somaliland has caught the attention of senior Conservatives. Mitchell, when he was a backbencher, supported calls for the UK to recognise its independence.

His colleague, Gavin Williamson MP, visited Somaliland in 2019 when he was defence secretary and met its top army general. He was accompanied by Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, the then head of the British army and former commander of UK special forces.

Williamson has since returned on a private visit – sponsored by Somaliland’s Chamber of Commerce – and holds honorary citizenship.

Another ex-defence secretary, Michael Fallon, has his eyes on Somaliland. Fallon is deputy chairman of Genel Energy, an Anglo-Turkish firm exploring for two billion barrels of oil in the breakaway region – against the wishes of Somalia’s government.

Their hydro-carbon prospects lie close to the geo-strategic Gulf of Aden, a major international shipping lane. Liz Truss, when she was foreign secretary, ploughed up to £232m into Somaliland’s largest port, Berbera. The investment was made through British Investment International, the old Colonial Development Corporation.

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Featured image: British Foreign Office Minister Henry Bellingham addressing the Somaliland Parliament, July 2011 (Licensed under OGL v1.0)

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