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Political developments in Somaliland

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Summary

The self-declared Republic of Somaliland has in recent years been lauded for its stability, largely avoiding the violence of Somalia. [The UK Government has described Somaliland as a “beacon” for democracy.](#)

However, the International Crisis Group think tank says Somaliland’s [“hard-earned stability is at risk”](#).

During 2022, political tensions emerged between the Government and opposition parties over the sequencing of the presidential elections (scheduled for November 2022) and the election to decide which political associations would become the three official political parties. Somaliland

has a constitutional limit on the number of political parties, designed to promote inter-clan dialogue.

After the presidential election was postponed, Somaliland's Parliament extended President Muse Bihi Abdi's term of office by two years. The main opposition parties have refused to recognise the extension. The UK Government has urged Somaliland's political actors to "[agree on an electoral roadmap](#)."

Separately, the UN estimates [over 80 people have reportedly died](#) in clashes between Somaliland forces and local militias in Las Anod (also known as Laascaanood) in early 2023. Accounts differ as to who is involved in the fighting. The [UK Government has condemned the violence](#) and urged all sides to adhere to a ceasefire and allow unhindered humanitarian access.

1 The Republic of Somaliland

A former British Protectorate, British Somaliland briefly declared independence in 1960 before uniting with Somalia. The outbreak of civil war and the collapse of President Siad Barre's regime prompted Somaliland to declare independence in May 1991. Somaliland is self-governing, with an independent government and regular democratic elections. The capital is Hargeisa.

Somaliland is not recognised as an independent state by Somalia or any other country. However, it has been lauded for its political stability and democratic handovers of power. A UK Government Minister, Chris Heaton-Harris said "[in recent years, Somaliland has made great strides towards an inclusive democratic process, and tht forms the bedrock of its stability](#)."³

1

Developing a democratic political system

Upon declaring independence, Somaliland began a process of reconstruction and state-building. A constitution affirming independence

³ [HC Deb 18 January 2022 c305](#)

and introducing a multi-party system was approved by referendum in 2001.

Since then, several presidential and parliamentary elections have taken place, albeit with some delays, with peaceful handovers of power.

The first election cycle took place over two years, beginning with local council elections in December 2002, followed by a presidential election in April 2003 and finally parliamentary elections in November 2005.

However, extensions have stretched the time in office for local councillors, members of the legislature and the President:

- Local council elections that should have been held in 2007 were postponed until 2012
- President Dahir Rayale Kahin, elected in 2003 for a five-year term, extended his term until he was defeated by opposition contender Ahmed Silanyo in the presidential election of 2010.
- President Silanyo then remained in office beyond his five-year term until presidential elections were held in November 2017.
- Parliamentary elections were repeatedly delayed, with Members elected in the 2005 election remaining in office until fresh elections for the House of Representatives were held in May 2021.⁴

The Centre for Policy Analysis, based in Somaliland, says the current political stalemate over the licencing of political parties is the result of the repeated extension of terms and delays to elections.⁵

1.1 Only three political parties allowed

The constitution limits the number of political parties to no more than three. The constitution also makes it unlawful for any political party to be based on regionalism or clannism.⁶

The selection process for the three political parties eligible to participate in national elections is set in the Law for Regulation of Political Associations and Certification of Political Parties (Law No. 14). Political

⁴ Centre for Policy Analysis, [Somaliland's renewed stalemate: the consequence of extensions](#), Somali dispatch, 6 June 2022

⁵ Centre for Policy Analysis, [Somaliland's renewed stalemate: the consequence of extensions](#), Somali dispatch, 6 June 2022

⁶ Centre for Policy Analysis, [Somaliland's renewed stalemate: the consequence of extensions](#), Somali dispatch, 6 June 2022

associations would compete in local council elections, with the three receiving the most votes eligible to stand for subsequent elections.

To allow for changes to parties, in 2011 the law was amended to allow for the registration of new parties every ten years. In the 2012 local elections, three parties - UCID (the Justice and Welfare Party), Kulmiye and Waddani - received the most votes and were licenced as official parties for the next ten years.⁷

The local council election schedule would have had elections in 2017 and again in 2022. The 2017 elections were postponed until 2021, meaning no local council elections in 2022 when the political parties licences expire.

In 2021, Somaliland's Parliament responded to the problem by amending the law to change how new political associations compete to become parties. Parliament removed the linkage with local council elections, instead creating a direct election for political associations and parties. Disagreement between the President and Parliament over the amendment resulted in the Supreme Court ruling in favour of Parliament's amendment.

However, when this election for new political parties should take place is a matter of dispute, as the sequencing of the vote with the Presidential election has become an issue. Crisis Group says, "there is no obvious legal mechanism for extending the soon-to-expire party licences beyond ten years."⁸

1.2 2017 Presidential election

The three official parties, Kulmiye, Waddani and UCID, contested the Presidential election, held on 13 November 2017. Kulmiye's candidate, Muse Bihi Abdi, was elected President with 55.1% of the vote. Waddani's candidate claimed fraud, but the Supreme Court upheld the result.⁹

1.3 2021 parliamentary election

The bicameral (two-chamber) Parliament consists of the Guurti — the House of Elders — and the directly elected House of Representatives.

⁷ Centre for Policy Analysis, [Somaliland's renewed stalemate: the consequence of extensions](#), Somali dispatch, 6 June 2022

⁸ [Overcoming Somaliland's worsening political crisis](#), Crisis Group, 10 November 2022

⁹ Centre for Policy Analysis, [Somaliland's renewed stalemate: the consequence of extensions](#), Somali dispatch, 6 June 2022

Various delays, including discord over the composition of the National Electoral Commission, resulted a long gap between the 2005 and the 2021 elections.¹⁰

However, Somaliland was widely congratulated for the parliamentary elections, held in May 2021. The opposition parties scored a surprise victory against the ruling Kulmiye Party, which stepped aside after Waddani and UCID won a majority of seats in the legislature. Crisis Group described the (overdue) elections as an “[important step in Somaliland’s state-building and democratisation efforts](#)”, although they also highlighted the lack of female representation in parliament.¹¹

The UK Government also commended Somaliland for the “successful conduct” of the elections, saying the “transparent and peaceful nature of the balloting process is testament to Somaliland’s commitment to democratisation, security and stability.” The UK contributed £1.97 million to support election costs and fund an election observer mission.¹²

1.4 2002 Presidential election delayed

During 2022 differences emerged between the Government and opposition parties over the sequencing of the presidential election and the election for political parties. The sequencing matters, International Crisis Group says, because “the ruling party and opposition both see the evolving electoral calendar as central to their political fortunes, and both are trying to control it.”¹³

Crisis Group says President Bihi and his Kulmiye Party are believed to favour holding the party vote first, thinking that their party’s chances will be boosted if newer and potentially lesser experienced parties gained licences.¹⁴

By contrast, the opposition Waddani and UCID parties favour holding the presidential vote first.¹⁵ According to the Centre for Policy Analysis, this is because they fear potentially losing out to new political associations, and therefore it is in their interest to hold the presidential election first.¹⁶ Africa Confidential reports that Bihi supporters have created nine political associations to undermine Waddani and UCID.

¹⁰ [Somaliland is on a rocky political path](#), Deutsche Welle, 1 December 2019; [Building on Somaliland’s Successful elections](#), Crisis Group briefing 174, 12 August 2021

¹¹ [Building on Somaliland’s Successful elections](#), Crisis Group briefing 174, 12 August 2021

¹² [PQ11564 \[Somaliland: Elections\]](#), 10 June 2021

¹³ [Overcoming Somaliland’s worsening political crisis](#), Crisis Group, 10 November 2022

¹⁴ [Overcoming Somaliland’s worsening political crisis](#), Crisis Group, 10 November 2022

¹⁵ [Overcoming Somaliland’s worsening political crisis](#), Crisis Group, 10 November 2022

¹⁶ Centre for Policy Analysis, [Somaliland’s renewed stalemate: the consequence of extensions](#), Somali dispatch, 6 June 2022

In August 2022 Reuters reported several people were killed when security forces clashed with protestors demanding presidential elections be held in November.¹⁷

In September, the electoral commission announced the postponement of the presidential election to mid-2023, saying they needed nine months to organise the poll. The commission said the election “is not viable due to time, technical and financial constraints.”¹⁸

When will the Presidential election be held?

In November 2022 the Guurti (House of Elders) responded to the electoral commission’s delay by extended the government’s mandate for two years, pushing the presidential vote to November 2024.¹⁹

The main opposition parties rejected the extension and said they will not recognise the legitimacy of the president and the government.²⁰

It is unclear if or when the elections for political parties and the president will be scheduled. The three parties have reportedly agreed to set up a committee of three members each to help find a solution.²¹

2 International recognition of Somaliland

No country has recognised Somaliland since it declared self-independence in 1991. The UK does not recognise Somaliland as an independent state and believe it is for Somaliland and the Federal Government of Somalia to decide their future.²²

In June 2020 the leaders of Somalia and Somaliland held a Consultations Summit in Djibouti.

In October 2022 the UN Security Council encouraged the resumption of dialogue between the Government of Somalia and Somaliland to “build confidence and strengthen political coordination.”²³

¹⁷ [At least five people killed, 100 hurt in Somaliland protests](#), Reuters, 12 August 2022

¹⁸ [Somaliland postpones presidential election until next year](#), Reuters, 25 September 2022

¹⁹ [Somaliland lawmakers vote to extend President’s term by two years](#), Voice of America (Reuters), 1 October 2022

²⁰ [Somaliland parties snub President after vote storm](#), France 24, 14 November 2022

²¹ [Somaliland: President and opposition parties discussed the crisis in Lasanod, fighting continues](#), Somali Dispatch, 11 February 2023

²² [PQ120188 \[Somalia and Somaliland: Development aid\]](#), 2 December 2020

²³ [UN Security Council resolution 2657 \(PDF\)](#), 31 October 2022

2 Unification in 1960 and campaign for independence

Between 1884 and 1960 Somaliland was a British Protectorate. To its south, the rest of what was to become independent Somalia became an Italian colony.

As nationalist movements grew in strength during the 1950s, Britain and Italy gradually began to synchronise plans for the independence of their respective Somali colonies. Somaliland became independent on 25 June 1960. Somalia became independent on 1 July 1960. The legislatures of the two countries met in joint session immediately and announced their unification as the Republic of Somalia.

However, it quickly became evident that unification was not based on equal representation or status; the south was undoubtedly the dominant partner in the new Republic.²⁴

During the 1980s an armed movement dedicated to the overthrow of President Siad Barre, the Somali National Movement (SNM), emerged in the north of Somalia. By the late-1980s there was full-scale civil war. With the Barre regime crumbling by January 1991, the SNM seized the capital Hargeisa. In May 1991 the Republic of Somaliland was declared. A long campaign for international recognition began. The [Somaliland Government argues that it has restored its independence](#).²⁵

A more detailed account of Somalia and Somaliland's history can be found in Commons Library briefing [Interlocking crises in the Horn of Africa](#).

The African Union

The UK Government says that any new arrangements between Somalia and Somaliland would need to be recognised by the African Union (AU), describing it as the “pre-eminent regional body mandated to defend the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of its member states, of which Somalia is one.”²⁶

However, the AU is perceived to have “done little” to help address the dispute between Somalia and Somaliland, according to Institute for Security Studies analysis.²⁷ The South African-based Institute for Security Studies says the AU's lack of engagement has been “driven by its principle of respecting the territorial integrity of member states and

²⁴ [Interlocking crises in the Horn of Africa](#), Commons Library paper RP08-86, 24 November 2008

²⁵ [Our history](#), Somaliland Government, accessed 16 February 2023

²⁶ [PQ10054 \[Somaliland: Embassies\]](#), 9 June 2022

²⁷ [The AU should support Somalia-Somaliland talks](#), Institute for Security Studies, 24 July 2020

recognising colonial borders.”²⁸ Markus Virgil Hoehne, the author of several articles and books on Somali affairs, and a lecturer at the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Leipzig, suggests the AU wants to avoid “unpredictable secessionist dynamics”.²⁹

The African Union sent a [fact-finding mission to Somaliland in 2005](#) (PDF). The mission’s report explains that Somaliland’s territory is defined by the colonial borders inherited from the British colonial rule on accession to independence in 1960:

Somaliland has territory as defined by the colonial borders inherited by British colonial rule on accession to independence in 1960. In the north, the country is bordered by the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden adjoining into the Indian Ocean; Puntland State borders it on the east, while Ethiopia neighbours it on the west. To the north-west, Somaliland is bordered by Djibouti.³⁰

The AU mission said that since declaring independence in 1991, it has been “steadily laying the foundations of a democratic State.” It said the problems confronting Somaliland stem from a) the legacy of a political union with Somalia and b) the lack of recognition of Somaliland as an “independent sovereign state”. The report observes that Somaliland’s search for recognition is “historically unique and self-justified in African political history. Objectively viewed, the case should not be linked to the notion of ‘opening a Pandora’s box’”.³¹

Somalia has been a member of the African Union since 1963.

UK position

The UK [does not recognise Somaliland as an independent state](#). Successive UK Governments have taken the view that it is for Somaliland and the Federal Government of Somalia to decide their future, and for neighbours in the region to take the lead. This was articulated by the then Minister for Africa, Vicky Ford, in response to a written question in early 2022:

The UK – in line with the rest of the international community – does not recognise Somaliland as an independent state. Our policy remains that it is for Somaliland and the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to come to an agreement about their future relationship and for neighbours in the region and the African Union to take the lead in recognising any new

²⁸ [The AU should support Somalia-Somaliland talks](#), Institute for Security Studies, 24 July 2020

²⁹ [“Somaliland at 30: Still unrecognised, but alive and well”](#), African Arguments, 18 May 2021. On 7.3.22 we edited this sentence to add quotation marks to the words “unpredictable secessionist dynamics”.

³⁰ “Resume: AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland (30 April to 4 May 2005)”, African Union Commission, paragraph 8.

³¹ “Resume: AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland (30 April to 4 May 2005)”, African Union Commission, paragraph 8

arrangements. We continue to support and encourage dialogue between the FGS and Somaliland Government.³²

Several MPs voiced their support for the recognition of Somaliland during an [adjournment debate on the question of recognition on 18 January 2022](#) (led by Gavin Williamson MP).

Rushanara Ali MP argued that with an independent government, democratic elections and currency, Somaliland has “[shown the capability to establish a state](#)”. Tum Tugendhat MP suggested recognition would “[demonstrate that independent states that can govern themselves well in democracies can succeed, and we can partner with them.](#)” Barry Gardiner MP raised the possibility of a new Somaliland joining the Commonwealth.³³

The UK has a permanent presence in Somaliland through the British Office in Hargeisa which was established in 2012. The UK Government says it is “the only western country with a permanent office in Hargeisa” and engages with Somaliland on a range of issues including trade, investment, climate change and development.³⁴ The Government says it is a “leading partner of Somaliland” supporting its development and security.³⁵

The UK is supporting infrastructure projects. The UK’s development finance institution, [British International Investment](#), is investing in the expansion of the Port of Berbera in Somaliland by the Dubai based ports operator DP World, part of a £232 million investment in three ports in Africa.³⁶ The UK is also supporting the construction of a new Hargeisa bypass to reduce the time and cost of transporting goods between the port and Ethiopia.³⁷

The UK is the [penholder at the UN for Somalia](#). This means the UK takes the lead among the members of the Security Council for issues relating to Somalia and by extension Somaliland.

3 Violence in Las Anod in early 2023³⁸

The UK Government has been “pressing for an urgent end” to the violence in the town of Las Anod (also known as Laascaanood).³⁹ The UK has

³² [PQ105593](#), 25 January 2022

³³ [HC Deb 18 January 2022 c291-310](#)

³⁴ [HC Deb 18 January 2022 c308](#)

³⁵ [PQ48519 \[Somaliland: Development aid\]](#), 21 September 2022

³⁶ UK development arm in \$1.7 billion joint venture with Dubai operator, Financial Times, 12 October 2021; [PQ46021 \[Somaliland: Economic growth\]](#), 21 September 2022

³⁷ [UK Ambassador launches construction of the Hargeisa bypass](#), Gov.uk, 4 May 2021

³⁸ On 7.3.23 we revised and updated this paper to reflect latest developments.

³⁹ [PQ 153721 \[Somaliland: Violence\]](#), 6 March 2023

called for “all parties to adhere to the ceasefire, de-escalate, allow unhindered humanitarian access, and engage in constructive and peaceful dialogue.”⁴⁰

The killing of a local opposition politician in the town on 26 December 2022 sparked anti-government protests across the city.⁴¹ Reuters reported that protestors demanded that Somaliland cede control of the town and accused security forces of failing to end insecurity.⁴² In early February 2023 elders in Sool declared it was no longer part of Somaliland and wanted to form a separate state within Somalia’s federal system.⁴³

On 11 February the Somaliland Government announced a ceasefire, though Al Jazeera reports that “both sides in the conflict accused each other of violating it.”⁴⁴

Accounts differ as to who is involved in the fighting.⁴⁵ Abdulkadir Fooday, a Somali journalist based in Mogadishu, reports “there have been accusations, claims and counterclaims by belligerents in the dispute.”⁴⁶

The UN estimates at least 80 people were killed between 28 December and 28 February 2023, with a further 451 injured. More than 185,000 are reported to have been displaced, including an estimated 60,000 people who have crossed into Ethiopia.⁴⁷

Las Anod is the administrative centre of the Sool region. The Sool and Sanaag areas have long been contested by Somaliland and Puntland, a neighbouring semi-autonomous region in Somalia.⁴⁸ In 2018, Crisis Group published a report warning that deadly clashes at the time could

⁴⁰ [Joint Statement on Somalia](#), US State Department, 28 February 2023

⁴¹ [Situation in Somalia Report of the Secretary-General](#), UN Security Council, 16 February 2023, S/2023/109, para 8; Somaliland: Violence in Las Anod - a tug of war between states, The Africa Report, 27 February 2023

⁴² [At least 20 people killed in clashes in Somaliland](#), Reuters, 2 January 2023

⁴³ Clashes damage recognition campaign, Africa Confidential, 2 February 2023; Elders plan to establish new regional state in disputed Somaliland region, BBC Monitoring, 6 February 2023; ; [Fighting in breakaway Somaliland kills nine, officials and medics say](#), Reuters, 13 February 2023; [International concern as conflict grows in breakaway Somaliland](#), Al Jazeera, 1 March 2023

⁴⁴ [International concern as conflict grows in breakaway Somaliland](#), Al Jazeera, 1 March 2023

⁴⁵ Africa Confidential (log in required) reports on the differing claims in [Las Anod still under fire](#), 2 March 2023; [Hargeisa’s bloody own goal](#), 16 February 2023; [Clashes damage recognition campaign](#), 2 February 2023. This briefing does not attempt to assess who is, or is not, involved in the violence.

⁴⁶ Somaliland: Violence in Las Anod - a tug of war between states, The Africa Report, 27 February 2023

⁴⁷ UN OCHA, [Statement by Mr. Magatte Guisse, Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia ad interim, on the situation in Laas Caanood](#), 3 March 2023; [Tens of thousands arrive in Ethiopia, fleeing recent clashes in Somalia](#), UNCHR, 17 February 2023; [Somalia: Flash Update No. 2 Fighting in Laas Caanood, Sool Region, 14 February 2023](#), UN OCHA, 16 February 2023

⁴⁸ [Somaliland profile – full overview](#), BBC News, 26 May 2016; See also [Averting War in Northern Somalia](#), Crisis Group briefing no 141, 27 June 2018; [Interlocking crises in the Horn of Africa](#), Commons Library paper RP08-86, 24 November 2008

escalate into a protracted conflict. Writing that the conflict over Sool and Sanaag “has been gestating for decades”, Crisis Group said:

Both Somaliland and Puntland staked claims to these areas – with Somaliland’s bid based on boundaries drawn when it was a British protectorate, and Puntland’s on kinship ties between its largest clan, the Majerten, and the two main clans living in Sool and Sanaag, the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli.⁴⁹

In early February, the author, Markus Virgil Hoehne highlighted the risk of “further escalation into large-scale violence” and called on the international community to use their influence to demand a peaceful solution.⁵⁰

The Commons Library explored the history of the area in a 2008 paper, [Interlocking crises in the Horn of Africa](#).

3.1 UK and international response

During February 2023 the UK issued three statements on the situation in Las Anod, condemning the violence and calling for unimpeded humanitarian access, and to resolve the matter through dialogue.

The first two statements, on 7 and 14 February, were released by the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and were in conjunction with over twenty countries, including the United States, Russia, France, Germany, Ethiopia and Sudan.

- 7 February: The [UK and international partners are “gravely concerned” about the violence](#) in Las Anod and call for an “immediate de-escalation of violence, the protection of civilians, unimpeded humanitarian access and for tensions to be resolved peacefully through dialogue.”⁵¹
- 14 February: [The UK and international partners “strongly condemn the continued violence”](#) and demand an immediate stop to attacks against civilians. They “urge all sides to adhere to the ceasefire, exercise restraint, and engage in constructive dialogue to establish a pathway towards a peaceful resolution”, and to all unhindered humanitarian access.⁵²

⁴⁹ Averting war in Northern Somalia, Crisis Group briefing 141, 27 June 2018

⁵⁰ [Crisis in Lasanod: Border disputes, escalating insecurity and the future of Somaliland](#), African Arguments, 6 February 2023. On 7.3.23 we edited and shortened this paragraph and added the quote from Crisis Group in the paragraph above to better explain the differing claims.

⁵¹ [International partners call for an immediate de-escalation of violence in Laascaanood](#), UNSOM, 7 February 2023

⁵² [International partners strongly condemn the continued violence in Laascaanood](#), UNSOM, 14 February 2023

- 28 February: The UK issued a joint statement on Somalia following a meeting of representatives of Somalia, the United States, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates in Washington DC. Collectively they expressed concern about the ongoing conflict and called on “all parties to adhere to the ceasefire, de-escalate, allow unhindered humanitarian access, and engage in constructive and peaceful dialogue.”⁵³

Andrew Mitchell, the Minister for Development and Africa, said the UK had been “pressing for an urgent end to the violence” and had “raised the issue regularly” with the Somaliland authorities. Responding to a written parliamentary question, he said the UK will “continue to encourage talks between clan elders, and continue to engage all parties involved to try to bring an end to the violence and prevent regional instability.”⁵⁴

The UN Secretary General, in a report to the Security Council which included a description of events in Las Anod up to 7 February, described the violence as “alarming”. António Guterres called for an “immediate de-escalation of violence, protection of civilians, unimpeded humanitarian access and for tensions to be resolved peacefully through dialogue.”⁵⁵



Source: [Somaliland profile](#), BBC News, accessed 17 February 2023

⁵³ [Joint Statement on Somalia](#), US State Department, 28 February 2023

⁵⁴ [PQ 153721 \[Somaliland: Violence\]](#), 6 March 2023

⁵⁵ [Situation in Somalia Report of the Secretary-General](#), UN Security Council, 16 February 2023, S/2023/109, paras 8 and 94

4

Fear of famine in Somalia averted

In December 2022 the UN said a full-blown famine in Somalia had been averted “for now”.⁵⁶ An assessment of need by the FAO (the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN) projected thousands of people in Somaliland would face acute food insecurity.⁵⁷

Andrew Mitchell, the Minister for Development, announced new support for Somalia during a visit in December 2022. He pledged emergency support to help respond to drought and food insecurity. Altogether, the UK has provided nearly £61.2 million in humanitarian, health and nutrition funding for Somalia in financial year 2022 to 2023.⁵⁸

3 Further reading

- [Overcoming Somaliland’s worsening political crisis](#), Crisis Group, 10 November 2022
- [Even among unrecognised states, Somaliland is a special case – it is both completely independent and politically entirely isolated](#), Guardian longread, July 2018
- [Somaliland: The Horn of Africa’s Breakaway State](#), Council on Foreign Relations backgrounder, February 2018
- [Somalia-Somaliland: The perils of delaying new talks](#), Crisis Group report, 12 July 2019

⁵⁶ [Somalia: Famine narrowly averted – so far, warn UN humanitarians](#), UN News, 13 December 2022

⁵⁷ [IPC assessment for Somalia](#) (PDF), 13 December 2022. The IPC does not use the term Somaliland. Rather, it provides information by region, including Awdal, W. Galbeed, Togdheer, Sool and Sannag.

⁵⁸ [UK announces urgent support for Somali people facing famine](#), FCDO, 2 December 2022

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