

Somalia President Admits Rapes by Security Forces
By Abdi Guled, Associated Press
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After months of denial, Somalia's government has for the first time acknowledged that its security forces were involved in rape cases that drew an international outcry by human rights groups.

Army commanders often denied accusations that soldiers were involved in a spate of rapes, blaming the crimes on the Islamic extremist rebels of al-Shabab who wore army uniforms to smear the reputation of the military.

"Those few among the security forces who rape and rob our citizens must be fought and be defeated just like Shabaab," said President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, while speaking to military cadets at a training camp in Mogadishu on Monday.

"Criminals who commit rape ought to be opposed just like (the Islamic extremist rebels of) Shabaab," said the president, in a statement issued by his office.

He also affirmed that his government would "fight those who rape as he'd fight al-Shabab," the Al-Qaeda-linked rebel group fighting his government and the African Union forces in Somalia.

In March, the New York based Human Rights Watch accused Somalia's security forces and armed groups of raping and beating displaced Somalis who came to the capital fleeing famine and armed conflict. But Somalia has begun military tribunals in which soldiers have been punished and the number of rapes have declined since then, say residents.

"The president's commitment to tackle abuses, including rape, by security forces, is an important first step but needs to be followed by concrete action, including proper vetting of police and military," said Leslie Lefkow, deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "And the government needs to appropriately investigate, suspend and prosecute members of its forces who commit crimes, in line with international standards."

Somalia's highest profile rape case was one in which an alleged victim accused government soldiers but was herself put on trial and sentenced to one year in prison for insulting the state institution. A reporter who interviewed her was also arrested and jailed one year for offending national institutions. Human rights groups denounced the convictions.

An appeals court acquitted and released the woman and the Supreme Court later overturned the verdict against the reporter.

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