Death of 10-year-old girl prompts first FGM prosecution in Somalia's history

Campaigners say investigation into case of girl who bled to death marks a ‘defining moment’ for country

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Somalia’s attorney general has announced the nation’s first prosecution for female genital mutilation after a 10-year-old girl bled to death following a traditional cutting last week.
The announcement has been described as a “defining moment” in a nation where 98% of all women and girls undergo FGM, the highest rate anywhere in the world.

Speaking at a conference on FGM in the capital, Mogadishu, on Wednesday, attorney general Ahmed Ali Dahir said he had sent a team of 10 investigators to interview Deeqa Dahir Nuur’s parents and the village cutter who performed the fatal operation.

“We are ready to take it to court,” Dahir told an audience of officials, journalists and religious leaders, organisers reported on Twitter.

Deputy prime minister Mahdi Mohamed Gulaid, who also attending the event hosted by the Global Media Campaign to End FGM and the Ifrah Foundation, said: “It is not acceptable that in the 21st century FGM is continuing in Somalia. It should not be part of our culture. It is definitely not part of the Islamic religion.”

State prosecutors have been dispatched along with the criminal investigation bureau to Galmudug state, where the operation took place, to collect evidence, Gulaid added.

“The prosecution of those involved in Deeqa’s [death] will send a strong message to the country,” he said. “This is really a defining moment for Somalia.”

The surprise announcement has been welcomed by campaigners all over the world. FGM survivor and activist Ifrah Ahmed, 26, said the declaration “had taken everyone by surprise”.

“It shows just how quickly things can move when there is political will,” said Ahmed.

Previous campaigns to end FGM, which is upheld by conservative and religious groups but technically illegal under the constitution, have proved futile.

“It is great news that the attorney general is taking this girl’s death seriously,” said Brendan Wynne of Donor Direct Action, a charity that supports anti-FGM groups worldwide.

“Although there isn’t an effective FGM law in Somalia, we hope a prosecution can happen to send a signal that this extreme form of violence will no longer be tolerated. Somali girls are dying because of FGM. There is no excuse to not reduce it completely in this generation.”

Most girls in Somalia undergo the most severe form of circumcision between the ages of five and nine, during which external genitalia are removed or repositioned and the vaginal opening is sewn up, leaving only a small hole through which to pass menstrual blood. The operation is often performed by untrained midwives or healers using knives, razors or broken glass.

Together with her three sisters, Deeqa was taken by her mother to Olol village in Galmudug state, where the traditional cutter performing the operation is believed to have severed a vein. Deeqa was taken to hospital, where she haemorrhaged to death two days later.

Her passing was first noted by Somali journalist and distant relative Nafisa Ogle, who was asked by Deeqa’s uncle for a large container to help prepare the girl’s body for burial.

“I said: ‘What do you need the container for?’ And he said to wash the body, the girl had died from the cut. By then they had brought Deeqa to the hospital and I went to check if it was true, and I put the news out on Twitter. Then all the journalists came to report what had happened to her.”
 According to Ogle, Deeqa and her three sisters all underwent FGM at the same time. “The mother is going completely crazy – she had her three other daughters cut at the same time, by the same cutter. The sad thing is that the parents think FGM is normal and didn’t recognise the dangers.”

Deeqa’s passing is the most high-profile death in many years in Somalia, where complications from FGM are generally denied and rarely publicised.

Campaign group 28 Too Many said that although Somalia does not have specific legislation criminalising FGM, offenders could potentially be prosecuted under a penal code that makes it illegal to cause harm to another person.

Maggie O’Kane, director of the Global Media Campaign to End FGM, said the attorney general’s announcement was being heralded in Somalia as “huge”, but warned that progress on banning cutting may be slower than hoped.

“The fact that the attorney general has actually put his head way above the parapet and said he will prosecute is extraordinary,” said O’Kane.

“We will see how huge and fierce the debate in Somalia will be if the prosecution does go ahead. But it will be a long road for a country that hasn’t yet even banned FGM.”

This article was amended on 27 July 2018 to remove the word urine from a sentence that referred to the vaginal opening being sewn up, “leaving only a small hole through which to pass urine or menstrual blood”.

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