

IMMIGRATION

'We just want a fair trial': How the 'Somali rocket docket' is upending the asylum process

Immigration attorneys say their clients have been rapidly scheduled for court dates, in many cases with out-of-state judges, raising due process concerns.



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Ibrahim, who asked to use a pseudonym for fear of retaliation, fled to the U.S. in 2023 after receiving death threats from an insurgent group. His asylum case is one of many by Somali applicants that was scheduled this year for rapid processing. Credit: Chris Juhn for Sahan Journal

The next few weeks could determine the safety of Ibrahim, a Somali asylum seeker.

Ibrahim fled to the United States in 2023 after facing repeated death threats from an insurgent group. He applied for asylum, received his work permit, landed several caretaker roles and is now the father of a U.S. citizen daughter.

But the timeline of his asylum case abruptly sped up this month. And he's not alone.

In recent weeks, immigration attorneys in Minnesota and other states say scores of Somali asylum clients have had their hearings expedited, creating concerns over due process and access to attorneys, a phenomenon colloquially referred to as the "Somali rocket docket."

Advocates also say that the majority of the hearings have been presided over by out-of-state judges in virtual courtrooms, raising questions about **observer access to court proceedings**.

During one week in late February immigration attorney Steven Thal said he had 23 master calendar hearings — "an intolerable number for an individual attorney to handle." The rapid-fire and unmanageable scheduling of cases is "an unprecedented assault against Somalis," he added.

Ibrahim, who asked to use a pseudonym out of fear of retaliation, had his initial immigration hearing — known as a master calendar hearing — unexpectedly scheduled for this month. His final hearing to decide his future in the U.S. will be held in April, only four weeks later.

Typically, final hearings are scheduled around a year after initial hearings.

The sudden change to the asylum process added further complications to an already difficult year for Somali nationals in Minnesota, Ibrahim said, as he has watched his community increasingly targeted by the federal government.

"Everything was promising, and we have waited the wait time, and we have been working," he said, of Somali asylum seekers. "After the new administration came in, they have made things so much [more] difficult for immigrants. How Somalis have been targeted is way different from how everyone else [has been treated]."

In an email to Sahan Journal, Kathryn Mattingly, spokeswoman for the Executive Office of Immigration Review, said that any immigration judge can hear any case at any time throughout the country to assist with caseloads.

“There is no ‘fast-tracking’ for immigration court cases. All cases are adjudicated in accordance with the applicable law. Moreover, EOIR is required by federal law to adjudicate asylum applications within 180 days,” Mattingly said. “The suggestion that EOIR should delay adjudicating certain groups of cases is contrary to both EOIR’s mission and the law.”

‘Impossible to keep track’

Minneapolis attorney Robin Carr said the flurry of expedited hearings for Somali clients started in late January for her, as hearing notices began clogging up her electronic calendar.

“It’s just impossible to keep track of my schedule by just looking at these notices that I receive electronically, because there’s just too many,” she said.

Carr is one of the Minnesota attorneys most affected by the influx, since Somali asylum seekers make up a large portion of her client base.

Kelsey Hines, an attorney based in Roseville, said she is facing similar challenges, as what was typically a manageable caseload has become impossible to maintain. Hines Immigration Law has 113 cases of asylum seekers in removal hearings, 73 filed by Somali nationals.

All but 10 of the Somali clients’ cases have been rapidly set for hearings since early February. Her other clients, including those from Ethiopia, Kenya, Afghanistan, Cameroon, Guinea, and Liberia among other countries, have not had expedited hearings.

She said the situation has overwhelmed firms like hers and Carr’s that focus on asylum cases.

“I’ve never in my career — and I’ve been doing this for 10 years — I’ve never had even two clients with the same master calendar hearing on the same date and time,” Hines said.

“We’re rolling up with 14 clients at once.”

Hines said that means, in some cases, clients may be forced to attend their hearings without legal representation.

“It’s blitzing one attorney’s docket to essentially make it so they can’t represent what was an incredibly ethical and manageable caseload, making it so these people literally don’t have the ability to even have an

attorney,” she said.

“The client is forced to either A) log on to WebEx by themselves without an attorney, or B) I’m, like, scrambling, asking every attorney friend I know to cancel their dentist appointment to show up for this person.”

The Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a data research center based at Syracuse University, reports that asylum seekers are much **more likely** to have their cases denied if they are not represented by legal counsel.

Attorneys say when they have requested hearing delays because of the intolerable caseloads, they have been met with hostility from immigration judges.

Hines shared digital audio recordings of court proceedings with Sahan Journal with client consent. In the audio, which documents several master calendar hearings with Immigration Judge Abdias Tida, who is based in Houston, Texas, the judge is heard saying the scheduling is “not that serious,” as Hines tries to emphasize her unmanageable caseload.

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Out-of-state hearings

The Advocates for Human Rights, an immigrant rights organization tracking cases at Fort Snelling Immigration Court, has been monitoring the influx of Somali cases which began appearing as Webex-only hearings on Feb. 17 and on court dockets a week later.

According to Amy Lange, director of The Advocates’ court observation project, from Feb. 27 to Mar. 11 there were around 170 hearings held for Somali nationals. She said every hearing was held virtually with out-of-state judges.

The Advocates have documented seven judges assigned to these cases: Craig Defoe (Illinois), Sherron Ashworth (Louisiana), Chris Brisack (Texas), Andrew Caborn (Texas), Nina Carbone (Colorado), Philip Taylor (Georgia) and Abdias Tida (Texas).

According to data from **TRAC**, from 2020 to November 2025, the judges had an approval rate of 23.3% with two — Ashworth and Taylor — having approval rates at or under 10%. Data on Judge Tida is unavailable because TRAC only reports on judges who have decided at least 100 asylum cases in the given period.

TRAC says rates are shaped by judicial philosophies, the type of cases on each docket, current immigration policies, legal representation and the nationality of the asylum seeker.

Former Immigration Judge Ryan Wood said out-of-state judges may not have the same grasp on the intricacies of Somali asylum cases.

“What is concerning is that our bench in Minnesota has significant experience with Somali cases, which are very complicated. There’s a very complicated history, unique Eighth Circuit law, on these issues.”

Wood also said that the EOIR director and the Office of the Chief Immigration Judge have the authority to prioritize certain cases, but that pulling cases based on nationality is unprecedented.

“I can’t think of another example going through all the other priority dockets, where ... silently the EOIR has pulled cases forward based on nationality.”

“My view is always to try and give the benefit of doubt, but I’m struggling to see how this is aboveboard,” he added.

According to Hines, this is a pattern that is playing out nationwide, with her Somali clients in Hawaii and Colorado also affected by the expedited hearings.

Mariana Hanna, a San Diego immigration attorney, has experienced a similar flurry of hearings for her Somali clients. She said all of her Somali clients except one had been scheduled for hearings over the next several months, and she now often has several hearings a day, four to five days a week.

Court secrecy and communication lapses

Since the cases are primarily assigned to judges outside of Minnesota, most hearings are hosted virtually on Webex. The only exception is when a client lives near the judge's jurisdiction.

According to The Advocates for Human Rights, this has created public access concerns for court observers. Lange said access to these virtual hearings has been limited. She said usually, observers log on and wait to be admitted to the hearing, but never are.

"There have been enough dockets posted that we know that we are logging on when Minnesota cases are happening, and we're not getting in," she said.

Communication with clients has also been increasingly difficult for lawyers suddenly inundated with dozens of cases a week. Thal said reaching clients detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is particularly challenging.

Thal said when he attempted to mail preparation materials to a detained client with a hearing abruptly scheduled for Feb. 27, his client didn't receive the materials until the day before the hearing. When Thal called the facility, he said he was told by ICE they would arrange a call back.

"I never heard back," he said.

At the hearing, Thal said he explained to the judge he had been unable to communicate with his client, and asked for a continuance, or postponement, of the hearing.

"I said it infringes on their right to counsel," Thal said. "The judge really didn't care, and went on with the hearing."

Lasting consequences

The expedited hearings coupled with the lingering aftermath of Operation Metro Surge have taken a toll on the Somali community according to Amara Omar, a paralegal with Hines Immigration Law.

"A lot of these people have not been working for months because of the Metro Surge operation, so obviously a lot of them are very, very anxious," she said. "A lot of people have been coming to us saying, 'Oh, I don't want to do it, can it be rescheduled?'"

Hines said that though her firm meticulously chooses strong asylum cases to represent, the fast-tracking means she's unsure if her clients will be granted relief, even those who have experienced female genital mutilation and other severe human rights violations.

"I would guess more than half of our Somali clients have witnessed an immediate relative killed in front of them," she said.

For Ibrahim, asylum is a matter of life or death.

"Right now, in Somalia, I'm labeled as a traitor. Going back there is just walking into a camp of lions," he said. "I know I'll never get out of it."

Ibrahim said that he knows many people in his situation who have been evicted from their homes or left food insecure after being afraid to work during the height of Operation Metro Surge. As his final trial date rapidly closes in, he has been reflecting on the emotional cost of immigration enforcement for his community.

"We are not asking for handouts, we just want to be treated as human beings," Ibrahim said.

"We just want a fair trial, a fair hearing."

Correction: The timeline for the influx of Somali cases at Fort Snelling Immigration Court has been updated in this story.

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