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## THE SOMALI CRISIS

Ruth Iyob

*Catastrophe has fallen on the land*.....  
*Do not be dazzled by their gifts**They carry a lethal poison**They'll wrest your weapons from you*.....  
*Brothers, what sort of country can it be**Where people fall into slavery**to them on every side?*Sayyid Maxammad Cabidille Xassan,  
1920

These words, uttered seventy-two years ago, hold true today. A second catastrophe—one which has pitted Somali against Somali—has indeed fallen on Somalia. The piled arsenals that we see today were the "gifts" of yesterday when Somalia's General Siad Barre ruled by the gun. The lethal poison of death and destruction has catapulted Somalia into its current state of anarchy and starvation. One cannot help but echo the Sheikh's question "what sort of country can it be?" What has led Somalia on this path of self-inflicted destruction? "What sort of country has Somalia become?" Does the launching of "Operation Restore Hope" signal a hope that, with international intervention, the human suffering we are witnessing can be stopped?

Somalia occupies an area of 637,660 square kilometers and is slightly smaller than Texas. It has a coastline of 3,025 kilometers on the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. In the north west it is bounded by Djibouti and in the south and west it shares borders with Kenya and Ethiopia respectively. Somalia represents an exception to the norm in post-colonial Africa where most countries are inhabited by multi-ethnic communities and different religious groups. By contrast Somalis share a common language, a common lineage, and religion.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, the people of Somalia were broadly divided into two communities according to their mode of production: the pastoralist *Somaale* and the agriculturalist *Saab*. The *Somaale* are composed of four clan-families: the *Dir*, *Darod*, *Hawiye*, and *Isaaq*, while the *Saab* consist of two clan-families: the *Digil* and *Raxanwayn*. Colonial intrusion and urbanization have since introduced new occupations although the traditional economic division of labor persists in the

although the traditional economic division of labor persists in the countryside. Urban migrants still retain their affiliations to their clan-families which are clustered within the two communities. The *Rer* or "household" is a crucial component of the clan-family structure that characterizes Somali politics. Equally important to the understanding of the political equation of Modern Somalia is its colonial history.

This region, which literally forms the "horn" of Africa, is at the juncture of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The first European power to penetrate the territory was France in 1859, followed by Great Britain in 1884. Italy entered the foray in 1889. Anglo-French rivalry due to the opening up of the Suez Canal led to Anglo-Italian treaties. The Haud region in the north was occupied by the British while the southern areas and the Ogaden (contested by Ethiopia) were ceded to Italy, thereby limiting France's presence to Djibouti. Somali inhabitants were thus separated by the arbitrary colonial boundaries drawn up by the imperial competitors during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Somali resistance to the tripartite invasion of alien forces holds a proud place in the history of anti-colonial resistance.<sup>2</sup> But despite a 25-year long war led by the religious reformist, Sheikh Sayyid Maxammad Cabidille Xassan, the territory fell to the technologically superior European armies.<sup>3</sup>

Italian colonial rule abruptly ended with the defeat of the Axis forces in 1941. The decolonization of Somalia did not result in the immediate transfer of power to indigenous authorities nor were the "lost lands" returned to the Somali fold. Italian Somaliland was placed under British Military Administration until 1950. In December 1950 Italian Somaliland became a UN Trust Territory with Italy as the administering power for ten years.<sup>4</sup> In July 1960 the Republic of Somalia was formed out of a union of the former British and Italian Somaliland(s). Somali-inhabited areas which had come under colonial rule, such as the Northern Frontier District (NFD), became part of Kenya, while the Ogaden was incorporated into imperial Ethiopia.

Somalis in Kenya and Ethiopia became minorities within their new boundaries. From 1960 onwards the independent Republic of Somalia began to petition for "the restoration of its lands and unification of all Somali peoples." The "Greater Somalia" doctrine became the new government's priority in foreign policy and led to border conflicts with both Ethiopia and Kenya.<sup>5</sup> This doctrine played a key role in the OAU's consensus that Pan-Somalism signified an irredentist threat and a source of instability in the Horn.<sup>6</sup> Although it failed to attain diplomatic support for its claims the Republic of Somalia continued to unsuccessfully pursue its claims militarily using arms acquired from both the U. S. and the U. S. S. R.<sup>7</sup> The priority given to establishing a "Greater Somalia" led to the neglect of domestic economic development

and regional conflicts. This "outward-oriented" nationalism which focused on the unification of Somalis in the diaspora was the impetus for the militarization of Somalia. U. S. policy, which did not reflect a "realistic perception of the interplay of the regional social forces at work" contributed to the increased militarization of Somalia.<sup>8</sup>

President George Bush's announcement of "Operation Restore Hope" on December 4, 1992 underscored the proportions of the Somali crisis.<sup>9</sup> The President authorized the dispatch of 16,000 Marines, 600 Air Force, 10,000 Army, and 1,500 Navy personnel to Somalia. The objectives of Operation Restore Hope were primarily humanitarian—to ensure that food and vital supplies reach Somalia's starving population, a difficult task in the current state of anarchy. Why has "Operation Restore Hope" been authorized now? What led to the failure of earlier plans by the UN? What is the explanation for the lack of action on the part of the OAU? All these are questions the answers to which we may have to wait for. The intervention is initiated by the world's most powerful nation which is sending the largest number of troops from the U. S. with the approval of the UN.<sup>10</sup> It is being carried out eleven months after the world witnessed skeletal apparitions of starving children. Eleven months during which the effects of famine and drought were exacerbated by the outbreak of hostilities between the political groups that ousted the former dictator, General Siad Barre.<sup>11</sup> The answers to these questions will undoubtedly have implications for the success or failure of this international intervention. The lessons to be learned are great and will provide a precedent for future humanitarian interventions in the changing post-Cold War era.

The present crisis in Somalia is one of the post-colonial nation-state's unfulfilled aspirations and unaddressed grievances.<sup>12</sup> A misguided, outward-oriented nationalism led to the formulation of policies which isolated the new state as an "irredentist" threat. Regional fears of Pan-Somali goals led to alliances and counter-alliances. While the Somali government(s) unsuccessfully attempted to realize its (their) goals militarily assisted by both superpowers at different historical periods the demands of the Somali people for reform were ignored by the outside world.<sup>13</sup> Worse still, a dictatorship which flagrantly violated human rights, abused and misused state power and resources was sustained for two decades by the superpowers.

Somali national politics was derailed by Pan-Somalism which was state-driven and outward-directed emphasizing the rights of self-determination of Somalis in the diaspora. Political opposition groups which emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s shared a common goal of ousting Siad Barre's regime.<sup>14</sup> Ideological as well as regional (Northern vs. Southern tension dating back to pre-1960 union) frictions hampered the emergence of a political platform envisioning the post-

authoritarian Somalia. These same opposition groups were also faced with the problem of breaking free of the Pan-Somali tradition which linked nationalist aspirations with the doctrine of "Greater Somalia." Opposing this tradition was somewhat of a betrayal of one's kinfolk. Staying true to these tenets, though, posed for the nationalists a more dangerous option—that of aligning with the Barre regime which maintained its pursuit of bringing back those in the diaspora back to the Somali fold. The consequences were that "inward-oriented" Somali nationalism was stifled by the coercive authoritarian regime of Siad Barre, and, after the realization of the first objective, fragmented and then imploded.

In January 1991, the United Somali Congress (USC) ousted Siad Barre from power but conflicts among the leadership led to a split. The new interim government, led by Ali A. Mahdi, was immediately challenged by General Mohammed Farah Aidid's forces. The volatile situation was exacerbated by the continued presence of the ousted dictator who remained in the country protected by troops loyal to him. Whereas other dictators sought asylum in exile (Idi Amin in Saudi Arabia; Numeiry in Egypt; Mengistu in Zimbabwe), Siad Barre found refuge for sixteen months inside Somalia! Nuruddin Farah, writing in exile during this period when thousands of Somalis left their country to avoid death, noted this ironic twist of fate:

... a savaging crisis taking place in a land where there is a cult of contempt for Siyad Barre's corrupt ways, Siyad who is currently enjoying the quiet of an undisturbed siesta in his ancestral village when at least half of the population of the country go to bed and wake up in terror?<sup>15</sup>

Farah's question reminds one of the Sheikh's question when he asked his fellow Somalis in 1920: "What sort of country can it be?" In 1992, Farah seems to be asking himself, his countrymen and countrywomen, and the world at large: "What sort of country has Somalia become?" Far from being a rhetorical question, the answer was out there for all to witness. Somalia has been reduced to a twentieth century Hobbesian nightmare where "life is nasty, short and brutish." The world's attention to the tragic proportions of the Somali crisis was belatedly drawn by the announcement of the largest intervention in the history of Africa. Although there were some who considered the U.S.-initiated and UN-approved intervention as an "unnecessary and imprudent" step,<sup>16</sup> there seems to be consensus that such an extraordinary measure was called for. One may even add that if an effectively coordinated regional and international strategy had been

agreed upon earlier, the loss of lives and property damage could have been lessened.

Humanitarian intervention is a well-established principle of international law and has many precedents in history.<sup>17</sup> What is unique about "Operation Restore Hope" is that it is the first of its kind in the African continent in the post-Cold War era.<sup>18</sup> In the past, international intervention served as a camouflage for superpower rivalry for "spheres of influence."<sup>19</sup> "Peace-Keeping" was a mechanism for ensuring that a certain territory did not fall into a particular ideological camp. The dispatching of troops in the Cold War period resulted in the distribution of military hardware to government in power or opposition groups engaged in armed struggle or *coups d'etat*. It appears, at present, that with the dissipation of international ideological conflicts and the resolution of regional conflicts by the beginning of the 1990s that the imperatives of *realpolitik* are no longer validated.

The current crisis of Somalia owes a great deal more to its modern political history and the legacy of a 22-year long dictatorship supported by both superpowers, the vestiges of unresolved grievances from the colonial era and the problems inherent in an underdeveloped country. The media's portrayal of the current Somali crisis as one of "warring factions" has tended to reduce the country's complex social hierarchy to "clan wars," which neglects crucial political, economic, and social factors that led to the current tragedy.<sup>20</sup> Although internal social dynamics and structure have contributed to the crisis they are not the sole factors that have led Somalia to the dismal abyss in which it finds itself.

Securing food supplies and ensuring their distribution may be the first step towards alleviating the suffering of Somali peoples. Disarming the population, a prerequisite to containing rampant lawlessness, may also lead to the creation of an atmosphere conducive to dialogue and negotiation between rival factions. The next step is for the Somali people, to answer the question of "what sort of a country they want. . . ." At this juncture, what the Somali people want must be addressed as well as what their leaders are willing to concede. Somali nationalism—with its curious amalgamation of primary affiliation and nationalist sentiments—will encounter a test of its durability in the months to come. For the reconstruction of Somalia will certainly require the restructuring of socio-economic and political modes of interaction. In fact, the entrenched clan structure and time proven modes of negotiations practiced by the society may well prove to be part of the solution, rather than the problem that the outside world perceives it to be.<sup>21</sup> "Operation Restore Hope" may succeed in its humanitarian tasks but the restoration of normalcy and re-establishment of the rule of law may require the sending of peacekeeping forces. "Operation

Restore Hope" is not equipped nor is it authorized to deal with the tasks of peacekeeping. Sensitivity to regional political dynamics and the selection of negotiators that are not perceived as threats to Somalia are crucial factors to keep the fragile peace that is emerging. Careful scrutiny of selected peacekeeping forces may avert the type of impasse evident between ECOMOG forces and Liberian factions. Perceptions (justified or not) that a particular country's peacekeeping forces<sup>22</sup> have political motives may derail the progress towards conflict resolution.

As the 20th century approaches its last decade, it is important to realize that old modes of conflict resolution, strategies and tactics of the Cold War era, and the criteria for selecting of effective mediators have changed. In the Horn, the regional *status quo* has been transformed, altering the old adage of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The enemy is no longer an external force, symbolized by colonial rule, but a complex equation made up of five decades of indigenous misrule abetted by the imperatives of Cold War rivalry. In the case of Somalia, the present crisis is significantly more than the total sum of its warring factions, or the nefarious clan-style politics. It is a manifestation of unresolved conflicts with origins as far back as 1941 when Somalia emerged into statehood. The crisis could be viewed, as Coleman and Sklar argue, as "... a decision or turning point, the outcome of which can be for the better or for the worse."<sup>23</sup> The current Somali crisis is an example of things turning "for the worse." In fact, the emergence of new leadership, as the Somali case shows, does precipitate new conflicts. The experience of this crisis during the transition from authoritarian rule may yet point to another critical juncture where the grievances of the past and the needs of the present may be addressed in a positive and constructive way.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>The term "tribe," currently being used interchangeably with "clans" is a misnomer and leads to a misunderstanding of the nature of Somali society.

<sup>2</sup>Somalis waged wars of resistance from 1900-1920 not only against the European colonizers but also against the encroachment of the Christian empire of Ethiopia which participated in the carving up of the Somali territories with France, Britain, and Italy. As a Christian empire, Ethiopia obtained military and diplomatic support from European governments in its mission to expand its empire and convert Somalis to Christianity. These conflicts were carried over to the postcolonial era. Somali demands for restitution of its "lost lands" were rejected by both the UN and the OAU. For an analysis of these conflicts which spilled over to the postcolonial period, see I. M. Lewis (ed.), *Nationalism and Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa* (London: Ithaca Press, 1983) and John Markakis, *National and Class*

*Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>The Sheikh, dubbed by the British as the "Mad Mullah," was a follower of the Saliyyah sect of Islam and claimed to be the long awaited *Mahdi* (Savior). He exhorted his followers to get rid of the "infidel invaders" and preached a more orthodox form of Islam than the followers of the established *Quadriyyah* order.

<sup>4</sup>For more information on the history of Somalia, see I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of Somalia: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa* (London: Longman, 1980).

<sup>5</sup>I. M. Lewis, "Pan-Africanism and Pan-Somalism," *Journal of Modern African Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 2, June 1963.

<sup>6</sup>Marie-Christine Acquarrone, *Les Frontiers de Refus: Six Separatismes Africaines* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1987).

<sup>7</sup>Raymond W. Copson, "African Flashpoints: Prospects for Armed International Conflict," *Orbis*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Winter 1982, pp. 909-911.

<sup>8</sup>Edmond J. Keller, "United States Policy in the Horn of Africa: Policymaking with Blinders On," in *Gerald J. Bender, James S. Coleman, and Richard L. Sklar (eds.), African Crisis Areas and U. S. Foreign Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 178.

<sup>9</sup>For a summarized blueprint of "Operation Restore Hope" see "U. S. Plan To Aid Somalia," *The Atlanta Constitution/The Atlanta Journal*, Saturday, December 5, 1992, p. A8.

<sup>10</sup>Earlier in March 1992, the Security Council of the UN had authorized the establishment of an observer mission to monitor the cease-fire agreement between the two major factions led by General Aideed and interim president Ali Mahdi.

<sup>11</sup>For a summary review of events that took place from January 1991 to July 1992, see Peter Biles, "Somalia: Diary of Destruction," *BBC Focus on Africa*, October-December 1991, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 24-26.

<sup>12</sup>The unmet aspirations refers to Pan-Somali nationalism which prioritized the "reunification" of its peoples torn asunder by colonial boundaries—an aspiration that quickly became a government policy leading to border conflicts, wars and tensions with Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti; unaddressed grievances refers to demands of Somali nationals socio-economic equality, governmental accountability, and civil liberties—demands to which the government(s) responded by coercion for the majority and cooptation of the privileged few.

<sup>13</sup>The Egal/Shirmarke government enjoyed the support of the U. S. from 1960-69 until the declaration of Somali Socialism by the Barre regime in 1969 which formally joined the Soviet camp. During 1977-1978, the Carter Administration's refusal to accede to Revolutionary Ethiopia's demands for more arms due to human rights violations led to a reversal of alliances with the Soviets supporting Ethiopia and the U. S. reverting back to its earlier support of Somalia. See Donald Pettersen, "U. S. Policy in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia Abandoned? An American Perspective," *International Affairs*, Vol. 62, No. 4, Autumn 1986.

<sup>14</sup>From 1978 until 1991 five groups have emerged. The Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) was established in 1978; the Somali National Movement (SNM) in 1981; the United Somali Congress (USC) in 1989; the Somali Patriotic



Movement (SPM) in 1990; and the Somali National Front (SNF) was formed in 1991 by members of Siad Barre's Marehan clan and ex-government soldiers.

<sup>15</sup>Nuruddin Farah, "A Country in Exile," *Transition*, Issue 57, 1992, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup>Said S. Samatar, "How To Save Somalia," *The Washington Post*, Tuesday, December 1, 1992, p. A19.

<sup>17</sup>Michael Akehurst, "Humanitarian Intervention," in Hedley Bull (ed.), *Intervention in World Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

<sup>18</sup>For a summary of past interventions classified as "humanitarian" see Victor Le Vine, "U. S. Action in Somalia Has Many Precedents," *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, December 6, 1992.

<sup>19</sup>Steven David, "Realignment in the Horn: The Soviet Advantage," *International Security*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall 1979, pp. 69-90.

<sup>20</sup>For an example of this type of reductionist approach, see Jane Perlez's report from Belet Uen, Somalia on August 28, 1992, "Barrier to Somali Unity: Clan Rivalry," *The New York Times*, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup>The current crisis is mainly one of attaining power by leaders of armed opposition leaders exacerbated by rampant lawlessness and cuts across clan lines. Ahmed A. Samatar argues that "... when facing an external enemy—clanism as an apogee of unity, has been a source of unity, has been a source of solidarity; on other occasions it has produced dangerous sectarian tendencies." Although the enemy facing present-day Somalia is an "internal" one the same logic could be applied. See *Socialist Somalia: Rhetoric and Reality* (London: Zed Press, 1988), pp. 9-12.

<sup>22</sup>The term "peace-keeping" is not defined in the UN Charter but Chapter VI of the Charter outlines the means as encompassing negotiation, inquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, and resort to regional institutions or arrangements. For details see N. D. White, *The United Nations and the Maintenance of International Peace and Security* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 169-229.

<sup>23</sup>James S. Coleman and Richard L. Sklar, "Introduction," in Bender, Coleman and Sklar (eds.), *Op. Cit.* p. 3.