



Thursday, 18 November, 2004

Anarchy in Somalia: The lawless Horn of Africa

Somalia is the only country in the world where there is no government.

Somalia has been without a government since 1991, when President Barre was ousted and the nation was plunged into lawlessness and clan warfare. Each clan has its own militia, but they have also since split into sub-clans.

Somalia is now divided into a myriad of different fiefdoms controlled by rival warlords, who occasionally clash for territory.

So what is life like after over 15 years without a government?

No public spending

Driving 30 miles from one of the airstrips near the capital, Mogadishu, to the city, you pass seven checkpoints, each run by a different militia.

At each of these "border crossings" all passenger vehicles and goods trucks must pay an "entry fee", ranging from \$3 - \$300, depending on the value of the goods being carried - and what the militiamen think they can get away with.

There is no pretence that any of this money goes on public services, such as health, education or roads.

Much of it is spent by the militiamen on *khat*, an addictive stimulant, whose green leaves they can chew for hours on end.

Those who can afford it travel with several armed guards - and then you can pass the road-blocks unmolested.

Much of south Mogadishu appears deceptively calm but parts, including the north, remain too dangerous to visit.

While Siad Barre is commonly referred to as a dictator and people were press-ganged into fighting wars with Somalia's neighbors, some now remember with fondness that at least schools and hospitals were free.

It is now estimated that only about 15% of children of primary-school age actually go to school, compared with at least 75% even in Somalia's poor neighbors.

In Mogadishu, many schools, colleges, universities and even government buildings, have become camps for the people who fled to the capital seeking sanctuary from fighting elsewhere.

Kidnappings

Makeshift shelters made from branches, orange plastic sheets and old pieces of metal cover what were once manicured lawns outside schools and offices.

And since some of the militiamen started to kidnap aid workers, demanding huge ransom fees, many of the aid agencies have pulled out, leaving many of those in the camps without any assistance whatsoever.

It is estimated that 70% of the country's livestock has died, two million people are in need of food aid and a further 500,000 are wandering the country searching for help.

The UN World Food Program has launched an appeal for more than \$500m to help countries in the Horn of Africa, (\$326m of which is earmarked for Somalia) but there is one question that it has not yet answered.

If that sum is raised, how can the UN and other aid agencies get the food to Somalis who need it when much of the country is too dangerous to travel in?

The reason no one is stopping the kidnappings or thefts is because Somalia also no national police or army.

"Some of my children sell nuts in the street to earn some money. We can't afford to send them to school," says Ladan Barow Nur.

She lives in what was a school in Mogadishu. There are no toilets in what is now a refugee camp, and in the rainy season, diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, diarrhea and dysentery spread quickly.

Some schools, universities and hospitals continue to operate but they are mostly privately run and charge fees.

The many thousands of people like Mrs Ladan are unable to pay the \$3 it costs to see a doctor and so people die of diseases which could be easily prevented or cured.

In the very harsh reality of Mogadishu, guns and other military hardware are freely available in a market not far from the city center.

I was advised that it was too dangerous to visit, as customers were constantly firing the weapons to make sure they work before buying them.

Passports for sale

The lack of a government also means that the US dollar is the currency of choice.

Somali shillings are still used but the notes only come in one denomination - 1,000, worth about seven US cents.

Similarly, the printing of passports has been privatized. For just \$80 and in less than 24 hours, I became a Somali citizen, born in Mogadishu.

For a slightly higher fee, I was offered a diplomatic passport, with my choice of posting or ministerial job.

With passports and guns freely available, those wanting to launch terror attacks have just about everything they need.

And some fear that in the absence of any other authority, terror training camps could be set up in Somalia.

In June 2006, the United States warned of a new threat from al-Qaeda in Somalia, brought on by an alliance of Islamic militias - the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). After securing the capital city of Mogadishu, the UIC immediately imposed Islamic Sharia law, which is a strict law code following the religious beliefs of Islam, to restore law and order.

That year, the Bush administration tried something different: war by proxy. It gave a green light for Ethiopia to invade Somalia. The plan was for Ethiopia to squash an Islamist movement and reinstate a Somali government that had lost control of most of its territory.

The US has good reason to worry about al-Qaeda activities in the region.

Somalia is widely believed to have been the base for the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks that blew up the US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya – killing 218 Kenyans -- and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania – killing 11 people -- in August 1998.

It is also believed to have been the source of the al-Qaeda attack on an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, Kenya in 2002 – which killed 13 people -- and a failed attempt to shoot down an Israeli airliner by a surface-to-air missile that was flying from Kenya to Israel in 2002.

In order to prevent al-Qaeda establishing itself in the region, the US set up a base in neighboring Djibouti in late 2002, as part of the Combined Joint Task Force: Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), with 2,000 troops based there. While the center of operations is in Djibouti, there are US military bases in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda – all focused on not letting the trouble from Somalia spread throughout East Africa.

But the Pentagon is reluctant to return in force to Somalia after two of its helicopters were shot down by Somali gunmen and 18 US troops killed in 1993 in what became known as the Black Hawk Down incident.

Instead, the CIA has widely reported to have been secretly funding Somali warlords with cash since February 2006, operating out of the US embassy in Nairobi and flying the money into remote Somali airstrips.

In 2007 and 2008, on a number of separate missions, the US actually fired several missiles into Somali towns in an effort to take out Islamic insurgents and al-Qaeda terrorists.

The latest attack was in early May 2008, when an overnight air strike by the US killed several Somalis, including Aden Hashi Ayro, al-Shabaab's military commander and suspected al-Qaeda chief in Somalia. Ayro had connections with Afghanistan as he trained there in al-Qaeda camps in the 1990s. He even is believed to have built al-Shabaab on the tenets of the Taliban - the former rulers of Afghanistan.

Between 2002 and 2003 a group of Somali youth, angry with the lack of progress in attempts to establish a government, joined ranks to push their goal to create (by any means necessary) a state governed by Islamic Sharia law.

Chief among them was the al-Shabaab. These young Islamist fighters launching attacks around Mogadishu today are a radical Islamist organization known in English as "The Youth."

Considered a terrorist group by the United States, they are the military wing of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). The US alleges that some of al-Shabaab's leaders are "affiliated" to al-Qaeda.

They are violently opposed to the presence of Ethiopian troops on Somali soil - as well as African Union peacekeepers.

"Our goal is to have Sharia as the permanent law of our country, and to get the infidels out of our country, whether they are Ethiopians or Americans."

But many Somalis do not share al-Shabaab's vision for an Islamic state in Somalia.

The Islam practiced in Somalia has traditionally been moderate and tolerant.

"It's a real concern of ours - terror taking root in the Horn of Africa. We don't want to see another safe haven for terrorists created," said Sean McCormack, then State Department spokesman, said in a May 2006 press conference.

But over two years on since the US-backed Ethiopia attack, the plan has backfired.

Still Trouble

Because there is no government to organize and set up a tax system, roads are in awful shape, often flooding and turning into lakes for days, banks are non-existent, schools are shut down, and because there is no electricity, there are no working stop lights. The international airport in Mogadishu is now home to herds of camels, sheep and cows.

The waters off the coast of Somalia have even become some of the most treacherous in the world - swarming with well-armed pirates, searching for prey to hold to ransom.

Piracy has existed in Somalia's coastal waters since the country plunged into civil war years ago - the anarchy on land has spread to the sea. Piracy is a symptom of the power vacuum inside Somalia.

The 1,880-mile Somali coast has become one of the most dangerous areas for ships. This is dangerous for the entire world as vessels heading into or out of the Red Sea or passing through the Gulf of Aden constitute a major portion of the world's shipping.

Attacks on fishing boats, cargo ships and yachts have surged. But ships carrying food aid on behalf of the United Nations are among the most frequently hijacked vessels since March 2005.

The pirates are very good at what they do. They run sophisticated operations using the latest hi-tech equipment such as satellite phones and GPS. Between six and 10 gunmen in small fishing boats, heavily armed with rocket-propelled grenades and AK-47s, wander offshore in search of any vessel they can find. They use speedboats with very powerful outboard motors to approach their target.

Sometimes ships unloading their cargo are attacked as they have to anchor 500m from the shore, with dozens of small boats and maybe 100 porters traveling back and forth, slowly unloading the goods.

Sometimes, the gangs will send out distress signals or send messages saying they are stranded. This lures ships towards them. They then attack with Kalashnikovs or rocket propelled launchers.

To actually hijack the ships, the pirates first use grappling hooks and irons - some of which are even rocket-propelled - and climb aboard using ropes and ladders.

A recently hijacked Dubai-registered ship reported that the pirates posed as thirsty fishermen in dire need of drinking water - only to hijack the ship at gunpoint after being allowed on board.

Ransoms are now routinely paid and the going rate is in the region of \$500,000 for one ship, its cargo and crew.

In April 2008, separate Somali pirate attacks took 30 hostages on a luxury French yacht hostage for a ransom of \$2m and 26 members of a Spanish fishing boat for a ransom of \$1.2m, which was paid by the Spanish government.

In 2008, there were over 111 attacks on shipping off the Somali coast, according to the United Nations. The average ransom has tripled since 2007, as has the number of ships taken. The Kenyan foreign minister estimates that pirates have received \$150m in the past year in ransom payments. By comparison, the United Nations Development Program's annual budget for Somalia is \$14m.

On land, Bashir Aden Ibrahim has been a gunman in Somalia for 14 years. He works at a check-point, where he stops passenger buses, taxis and trucks. If the driver doesn't pay, he won't let him through. This is how he earns the money he needs to live.

"The gun rules Somalia today and my gun is the tool of my trade - it is my pen," says Ibrahim. "If we fight, we fight for our clan. I know this is not a good life but it is the only thing I can do at the moment."

A cattle herder, Abdullahi Abuker Mahamud, has a similar experience. "We were chased off our land by another group who were better armed than us," says Mahamud. "I am able to take the cows through the checkpoints without anyone asking me for some of my cows. But sometimes freelance gunmen come and steal my money or some of my cows and I can't do anything. I am not armed."

A former Somali army major, now a refugee in London, summed up life without a government very well.

"There is nothing you can do when kids with guns steal everything you have, even your clothes. I'm from a small clan, so I was unable to fight back," he said.

"Here, there are rules which people respect and so you can get on with your life in peace."

Today

In 2006, the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) took control of Mogadishu, as well as much of southern and central Somalia. They were a group of Sharia courts that united and combined to form a government. The Islamists also threatened to seize the Ogaden - Ethiopia's Somali-speaking eastern region.

But a transitional government backed by Ethiopian troops threw out the Islamists from Mogadishu in December 2006.

Since then, though, Islamist insurgents have carried out almost daily attacks.

Abdullahi Ahmed, Somalia's increasingly notional president, has admitted that a variety of Islamist insurgents once again dominate most of the country, leaving only two cities, Mogadishu and Baidoa, in the hands of his increasingly notional government.

Worse, the strongest of the insurgent groups, the *Shabab*, is even more radical than the Islamic Courts movement which the Americans and Ethiopians originally took on. It is suspected of being linked by money to the pirates (who hand over a slice of the ransom in return for protection) and by ideology to al-Qaeda.

The Shabab now controls much of south Somalia and chunks of Mogadishu.

As a result of the fighting, hundreds of thousands of people have fled the violence in Mogadishu. Aid agencies say 20,000 are fleeing every month and more than two million rely on food aid.

It is estimated at least one million people have been internally displaced by almost perpetual civil conflict in the failed Horn of Africa nation since the collapse of its central government in 1991.

"I have seen the situation in Darfur, northern Uganda, some parts of Congo, but what is actually happening now in Somalia is indeed the worst kind of humanitarian situation in Africa in many years," Hassan Noor of the Oxfam organization said.