



HORN OF AFRICA BULLETIN

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HORN OF AFRICA BULLETIN SUBSCRIBER SURVEY 2008

Dear HAB-subscriber,

It has now been a bit more than a year since the new format of the Horn of Africa Bulletin (HAB) was launched. For us working with HAB, it has been an interesting year where we constantly did and continue to do our very best to make HAB a relevant and useful product for practitioners, scholars, students and other interested people within and outside the Horn of Africa. In order to help us to ensure that we actually achieve this goal, we would need your support.

Please complete our subscribers' questionnaire!

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Thanks a lot for your contribution!

Best wishes,
The HAB editorial team

Somalia: twenty years of nightmares

While current Somali events hit the headlines of international media, the twentieth anniversary of the Somali civil war went largely unnoticed. Many would argue that, in times of imminent crisis, dwelling on historic incidences is dispensable. Yet, I suspect that the failure to commemorate Somali history is part and parcel of the amnesic attitude that characterises the world's dealings with Somalia. After all, it is easier to disregard a people's plight if one can ignore its past in the first place.

At individual level, history is about remembering as much as about reconstructing chronologies and timelines. Personally, I often remember the moment I first saw Brava town. It was in January 2001 and I had been traveling with my aid agency colleagues from war-ridden Mogadishu towards southern Somalia. After a tiresome drive on a bumpy gravel road, we reached a junction where we turned eastward. Our battered vehicle climbed a small hill and we encountered breathtaking beauty: Brava town, an ancient seaport, appeared on the slopes of the Indian Ocean, its white houses, walls and mosques glowing majestically in the afternoon sunbeams. It is hard to describe Somalia's grace and it is even harder to describe the misery of this impoverished Horn of Africa nation.

It was in Brava and its surrounding Lower Shabelle region that I first learned about the realities of the Somali civil war. Locals told stories about clan violence, random shootings at checkpoints, girls and women raped at night, property looted at gunpoint, children starving to death, and families torn apart by displacement.

The Somali civil war erupted in full force twenty years ago. In the end of May 1988, government planes bombarded the northern cities Hargeysa and Burco to quell a rebellion by the Somali National Movement (SNM). The air strikes and ensuing ground massacres killed sixty thousands civilians, antagonised the local Isaaq clans and eventually led to the proclamation of the breakaway Republic of Somaliland in May 1991.

In January 1991 another rebel group, the United Somali Congress (USC), had successfully ousted the detested Siyaad Barre regime from the capital Mogadishu. However, hopes for a fresh political start were shattered when factional infighting, state collapse and famine engulfed the country. Undoubtedly, Somalia's nightmares of the last two decades are all manmade. They had been sparked by colonial injustices at the hands of Italy, Britain and Ethiopia. They were nurtured by the militarisation of Somali society during the Cold War. They are kept alive by morally bankrupt leaders who excel in personal enrichment, fostering inter-clan violence, and signing empty peace declarations.

As if this wasn't enough, an Ethiopian military campaign against the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) in December 2006 catapulted Mogadishu from a situation of relative calm into an African Baghdad. Since 2007 soldiers of President Abdullahi Yusuf's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and its Ethiopian backers are bogged down in a bloody confrontation with Islamist militants and other insurgents supported by neighbouring Eritrea. Hundreds of thousands of civilians fled Mogadishu to escape the indiscriminate mortar fire, stray bullets, improvised explosive devices and kidnappings by the conflict parties.

Despite these horrors, the world largely ignores the present Somali tragedy. It is not, as one might speculate, because of missing on-the-ground information. Somalia is famous for its efficient telecommunications and courageous local journalists provide round-the-clock reporting via radio and websites. Rather, the international community's silence speaks volumes about its failures to deliver upon the promises made to the Somali people. Once declared a test case of post Cold War humanitarian intervention in the 'new world order', Somalis saw the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) peacekeepers and aid workers arrive, fail and depart again. Western countries sponsored over a dozen Somali peace processes facilitated by regional powers, foreign diplomats and the United Nations (UN). They produced

little more than a series of virtual governments and courted the warlords who had destroyed the country in the first place.

More recently, U.S. attempts to prevent Somalia from becoming a terrorist safe haven backfired spectacularly. By financing Mogadishu's unpopular warlords and siding with Somalia's historic adversary, Ethiopia, the Bush administration handed Islamic hardliners a huge propaganda victory. Rather than restraining Mogadishu's warring factions, enforcing the UN arms embargo, and holding war criminals accountable, Western powers have become complicit in Somalia's culture of violence, impunity and lawlessness. Twenty years of failure to address the Somali conflict confront the West with its own inadequacies. Vows to build peace, promote democracy and protect human rights in the global periphery are superseded once again by humanitarian disengagement and a short-sighted anti-terrorist agenda.

Somalia serves as an uncomfortable warning of what is likely to happen to countries like Afghanistan or Iraq once the international community tires of its promises. Yet much could be done to improve Somalia's condition. Instead of focusing its efforts on killing Islamist radicals, the U.S. could pressure its Ethiopian ally to withdraw its troops. A resolute effort to deal with Somalia's displaced, hungry and traumatized population would save lives and help repair America's damaged reputation. Rather than clinging to the fiction of a state reconstruction process spearheaded by the undependable TFG, the UN would be well advised to strengthen the local authorities, which have earned legitimacy by maintaining pockets of security and delivering services in the midst of civil strife. As peaceful Somaliland demonstrates since 1994, bottom-up state building does work. Finally, diplomats must stop pretending that the Somali problem can be solved domestically. Future talks between members of the opposition Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) and the TFG need to put both Ethiopian and Somali security concerns on the negotiation table.

Twenty years after the outbreak of the civil war, Somalia teeters on the edge of total disintegration. It is high time to end the nightmares that haunt beautiful Brava town and a despairing Somali population

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Food crisis and armed conflict in Somalia

The food riots in Mogadishu in May 2008, in which thousands of people violently protested against the rising food prices in the Somali capital, portend a bleak future for the violence-torn country of Somalia in the Horn of Africa. From a broader perspective this food crisis, which has a global spread, might deteriorate the prevailing situation of conflict not only in Somalia but also in other conflict-torn countries in Africa and world. Reportedly, during the ongoing violence about 700,000 out of 1.5 million people have fled from Mogadishu. Somalia, a majority Muslim country, has witnessed for the last seventeen years armed conflict of a catastrophic proportion, killing thousands of people, displacing more than one million and destroying the economy.

The Somali scenario came to limelight in 1991, when the dictator Mohammed Siad Barre was ousted from Mogadishu and replaced by a series of transitional governments, which all proved ineffective. In fact, the country has lacked a functioning national government since 1991. Again in 1993, with the killing of 18 US peacekeepers and gunning down of two helicopters by militants affiliated to Mohammad Farah Aideed, the Somali crisis came into international notice.

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Editorial information

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Editorial principles

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