

Somalia





When the United Nations left Somalia, in 1993, they spoke high words of handing the country back to the Somalis who were to get on with rebuilding their lives, their country, and establishing a democratic society. Nothing could have been further from reality, and everybody knew it.

The United Nations had been called in to intervene in a situation of ethnic infighting that had escalated to the point of chaos.

By the time of the fall, in 1991, of the Somali tyrant Siad Barre, the country had disintegrated into a turf war between clan-based warlords. With the government defeated, nothing was powerful enough to take its place. The country slipped further into chaos, with no government, no laws, no taxes, no police, no currency, no services, no schools, no passports – just the power of those who held the guns. Pretty soon, thanks in part to a drought, there was not much food either. Somalia had disintegrated.

The UN came into Somalia promising to “restore hope”, but the US, as leaders of the mission, began doing deals with the warlords before they had even landed. Burned by Vietnam and cowering to US public opinion, the last thing the US military wanted was any opposition. They promised General Aideed, the strongman of Mogadishu (or most of the city, at least) that they would not seek to disarm him, so the arms which had accumulated when Somalia played both sides in the cold war, remained in circulation. By the time the US/UN left one year and a half later, they had turned themselves into the enemy and done little to restore Somalia from its state of anarchy. The US left and, as journalist Scott Peterson put it, “turned the lights out on Somalia”.

Today, 15 years since the fall of Siad Barre, and 10 years since the departure of the US-led UN forces, Somalia is still without a national government, let alone



a functioning democracy. The lights have indeed gone out and few journalists bother to look into the darkness. The aid agencies that are working there have little to say. There is little up-to-date information on the state Somalia. It seems there is nothing to say. The world has left Somalis to fight things out between themselves amongst the ruins of a forgotten country, washing their hands of responsibility and declaring the problem too intractable to deal with.

Until recently, the US had effectively decided that Somalia does not exist. But now, they are making claims that Somalia (whatever Somalia is) is giving haven to terrorists. It seems not unlikely that

Al Qaeda would be attracted to Somalia - lawless and stateless, entirely Muslim, and just across the Gulf of Aden from Osama bin Laden's ancestral home of Yemen. So now Somalia - the people? the territory? or some local warlord? - is once again within the sights of US strategists. But the US has no effective authority with which to deal.

So what is the current state of play? Has nothing really changed?

Despite the problem of roaming bands of armed men, extracting "taxes" or simply stealing at gunpoint, there is an emerging order in many parts of the country/territory. Ironically, where multi-

national powers failed to create security or order, there is emerging a bottom-up order at the local level. Political scientist Ken Menkhaus writes of "fluid, localized polities involving authorities as diverse as clan elders, professionals, militia leaders, businessmen, traditional Muslim clerics and women's associations".

The adjudication of disputes by clan elders is a time-honored practice, and has taken the place of legally constituted courts. These usually carry out Sharia Law. Other newer practices have emerged. The news is not all bad and in some cases there is far more local and community participation, and a safer commercial environment,



than experienced for many years in Somali society. All without a central government.

Most significant political functions are carried out at village level, or in the case of Mogadishu, at the neighbourhood level. Sharia courts are operating in some areas, and some have local police forces. Security is often provided by armed neighbourhood watch groups who sometimes hire former bandits to carry out security functions. There is a symbiotic relationship between the bandits and the communities they sometimes terrorize. The communities pay them to provide security against other bandits.

There have been many attempts to

arrive at a peace settlement between the factions, but there are too many factions and none has enough power to guarantee a cease-fire and enforce any agreement. The country has gone passed civil war into sheer lawlessness. To the extent that there are sides in this conflict, no side has much authority or any legitimacy. They just have guns. In fact, to a large extent, all they are is young men with guns.

At present there is a transitional government trying to function in Mogadishu, although they do not even control the entire city, let alone the entire country. The government has been operating out of a hotel paid for by local businessmen.

Somalia is living out the nightmare of the psychologists who look at nations undergoing lengthy civil war and see emerging a generation of traumatized children who know nothing but lawlessness, violence, and the rule of the gun. Afghanistan and Palestine spring to mind, but the problems can be seen in many other places which have endured long-term civil strife – South Africa, Sudan, Zaire, Columbia. The young men riding about in technicals – open vehicle (their roofs have been sawn off) fitted out with anti-aircraft or other similar weaponry – were themselves the frightened children during the chaos of the early 1990's. They learnt well that security came from a pile of weapons, and at the cost





of turning on others to secure one's place as the toughest kids on the block. Furthermore, their own status and wealth would be eliminated by a peace-time economy.

These children do not appear to be fighting out ancient clan rivalries; they are playing out their own trauma and meting out the same lessons on the next generation. The clan rivalries and alliances are no longer the driving force behind the fighting. Many of the young men have long lost the support of their clans, and often their families, but they fight because in Somalia, to a large extent, that is what young men do.

Argument, however, about conditions in Somalia, is a rather fruitless exercise. Somalia as a country, a single political entity, no longer exists. Ken Menkhaus speaks of three Somalias. The north-west of the country has declared itself independent and is known as Somaliland. There has been some rebuilding of infrastructure, a revival of the school system, and there is a safe unlawful environment. The economy is growing, but there has been no recognition of independence by the international community. The northeastern region, Puntland, is also stable and free of conflict and was spared the destruction because it is home to one's single clan, the Mijerteen, with a strong tradition of conflict resolution by the elders. Unfortunately, Somaliland and Puntland are now in dispute over territory.

The south of the country is fragmented and the map has been redrawn by military conquest. Rival clans have fought over territory and so some clans occupy the territory of others and live in uneasy relationship with the population of the area is the control. Mogadishu, the capital, is fragmented and much of the fighting is within clans rather than between them.

The port remains closed. Other port cities are also divided by rival clans who fight over control of various facilities such as the docks where trade can be taxed.

Banana production has resumed in the Shabelle Valley and rival militias jostled for control of the exports. The profits from the banana wars helped sustain their military ventures rather than Somali society. In fact, there are allegations of forced conscription of village labour to work on the banana plantations.

Central Somalia and some pockets of southern Somalia are in transition towards recovery. There is rudimentary local authority and local production sustains the population and may provide for some trade.

It is a sad but unsurprising fact that Somalia continues to produce refugees. Also of concern is that some refugees have chosen to return home rather than endure the hardships and long-term uncertainty of the refugee camps, mostly across the border with Kenya. Outside intervention by Egypt, Ethiopia and Eritrea is further destabilizing Somalia as they play out their own rivalries by supporting various factions within the country.

It is hard to see how Somalia can find its way back, and if history is anything to go by, it is likely that outside agendas will create new obstacles to peace. Ironically, for a country with so much fighting, Somalia is one of the few countries in Africa whose borders closely resemble those of a pre-colonial nation. It seems a vain hope that Somalis can defy the odds, bury their differences, avoid their country becoming a battlefield for the "War on Terror", and make for themselves a peaceful nation-state. ■