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# OGADEN

## A state of decay

There are almost no schools, no roads and no hospitals. Food is scarce and trade in life's basics has been blocked. The Red Cross, the last of the big aid-agencies, was expelled in July. But, in plentiful supply are guns and bullets. Welcome to Ogaden state in Ethiopia, home to the desperate and the dying.

By REBECCA HINCHEY

Ogaden is a barren land with a rich geology. Home to vast quantities of under-explored oil reserves, the precious resource has only added to the difficulties of a region steeped in conflict.

Everyone is a loser in the 50-year-old Ogaden war.

The people of Ogaden look back to betrayal, subjugation and war and look forward to more of the same. Refugees from the land have lived for decades with uncertainty, hopelessness and the fallacy of the United Nations telling

them it's safe to go home.

The US and British governments' donations of hundreds of millions of dollars, designed to prevent the growth of Islamic terrorism, are instead being used against the civilian population to the opposite effect.

And finally the Ethiopians, whose 'democratic' government neglects their basic needs and perpetrates human rights abuses, while spending vast sums on a military campaign against the Somali people of Ethiopia.

This conflict has its beginnings in the European colonialism of the nineteenth century.

In the early 1800s Somalis in Ethiopia enjoyed a largely peaceful life. With no central government, clans wandered freely between the present-day Ogaden and Somali regions, following predictable rainfall to feed their cattle.

The arrival of European explorers in the 1850s shattered this existence. The British Empire quickly laid claim to the lands of East Africa. France, Italy and Ethiopia were hot on their heels. They too saw East Africa as an area of strategic and economic importance.

To the horror of the Somali chiefs, a British treatise in 1897 ceded parts of Ogaden to Ethiopia.

The divided Somalis tried to resist colonial rule, but internal clan conflicts and a lack of modern weapons left them hopelessly disadvantaged. By the 1920s, the Somalis were all but defeated.

At the same time, there was increasing conflict between the superpowers in the region. In 1935 the Italians invaded Ethiopia and annexed British Somaliland into Italian Somaliland.

In 1941, with World War II at its height, Britain defeated the Italians in the region and reoccupied Ogaden and British Somaliland, along with Italy's portion of Somalia. Ironically, the British victory meant that for the first time in history much of the Somali population was united under one rule.

In 1954, Ogaden came under the rule of Ethiopia, despite their differing ethnicities and differing administrative histories. Six years later, the British and Italian Somalilands united to form present day Somalia.

For its part, Ethiopia warned the Somalis in Ogaden: "You are by race, colour, blood and custom, members of the great Ethiopian family. And as to the rumours of a 'Greater Somalia', we consider that all Somali peoples are economically linked with Ethiopia, and therefore, we do not believe that such a state can be viable standing alone, separated from Ethiopia.

Relations quickly deteriorated. In 1960 the Ethiopian Government voided the treaty which allowed Somali pastoralists to move freely between Ogaden



## Ogaden: Ethiopia's second largest state

Ogaden is home to about five million people, most of whom are ethnically Somali. The Somalis are mainly nomadic pastoralists, in constant search of ever shrinking pastures for their livestock. Most are illiterate and few have skills outside of their traditional, nomadic and herding lifestyle.

The second largest state of Ethiopia, Ogaden shares borders with Djibouti in the north, Somalia in the east, Kenya in the south and other Ethiopian states in the west.

and Somalia – a substantial hardship for the Somali Ethiopians who relied on this passage for their livelihood and survival.

By 1964 the government's repression of the recently formed Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) resistance broke out into war, with Somalia also entering the fray. The intervention of other nations resulted in a negotiated truce in 1965.

The uneasy peace was short-lived. In 1977 a vicious war broke out between Somalia and Ethiopia over the Ogaden.

Somalian troops invaded Ogaden, taking advantage of an Ethiopia, which had been left vulnerable by the ousting of its long time emperor, Haile Selassie.

It proved a fruitless move, with the intervention of the USSR and its ally Cuba on the side of Ethiopia. Despite their previous support for Somalia, the Soviet Union sided firmly with the Ethiopians. Somalia, no match for the Soviet's superior finances and arms, withdrew their forces from Ogaden in early 1978.



Photo by Zachary Garber

## Life in Kenya's refugee camps

For 30 years they have lived on UN rations, and even these twice daily meals are sometimes a luxury. During heavy rains the international trucks get bogged and basic staples do not reach the camps.

"The food we eat in camps, it's the food you give to horses," said Mohamed Barruud, a worker at STARTTS, a second generation refugee from Ogaden and a Somali community leader in Australia.

"I had no idea. We're all very grateful for what the UN gives us. It wasn't until I went to America that I saw what we eat in camps is what animals eat in the west," he said.

Hundreds of miles from the major cities and towns, the camps exist in the most underdeveloped parts of the country. Like much of Africa they are dry, dusty and incredibly hot. At times the heat is so intense that even the hardened Ethiopian Somalis cannot leave their huts. Boredom, uncertainty and listlessness are facts of life.

"There are some schools but only up to year 6 or 7. Kids can go to school but it's just entertainment really," said Mohamed. "Sometimes they are in huts and sometimes just sitting under a tree. Three hundreds students share one classroom and one teacher.

"After that there's nothing left. There's no jobs, no high school, no universities."

Safety is another issue, particularly for women. There is violence between

different clans and tribes in the camp, as well as violence between camp inhabitants and the local Kenyan communities. The Kenyans, who mostly are desperately poor too, have guns. They frequently rob camp members and rape women.

In a 2002 report, Dr Eileen Pittaway and Linda Bartolomei deplored the lack of safety for women and girls in Kenya's Kakukma refugee camps.

"Women from both these communities [refugees and local Tukarana/Kenyan population] are most often the victims of this conflict," they wrote. "There are regular reports of rape and sexual mutilation of refugee women by gangs of Tukarana men. Most recently a 60 year-old woman was raped and her genitals were mutilated.

"The incidence of rape and sexual violence is extremely high and domestic violence is commonplace. The abduction and sale of young girls as brides, the forced marriage of widows and the physical and sexual abuse of those in mixed marriages is commonplace ... Women who are raped by rival groups, especially those who give birth to babies, are stigmatised and harassed and are in urgent need of protection."

Many Ogadenians have left the Kenyan refugee camps to try their luck in other nations or to look for work in the bigger cities. With no skills, no education and no work permits there is not much

on offer. They take the most menial and low paying jobs – polishing shoes in Nairobi or doing back-breaking work unloading trucks.

Tens of thousands have tried to escape to other countries. Many have died on the Somali coast as they tried to flee to Yemen or South Africa. Overcrowded boats, deadly waters and an inability to swim have proved a lethal combination for thousands.

Life in South Africa is not safe either. The local population views them as job and wealth stealers, Somalis, both Ogadenians and others, are considered an easy target. There are no investigations when they die. Many have been murdered by South African gangs.

At least 70,000 Ogadenians remain stateless in Kenya alone. Just 25 families have been granted permanent visas in western countries, representing a tiny portion of the total population languishing in squalid camps and shanty towns.

The failure to provide either a safe returning environment or resettlement has completely demoralised the multigenerational Somali Ogadenian refugees.

The first arrivals in the refugee camps across Kenya, have watched subsequent waves of asylum seekers from Sudan and Somalia being assessed, processed and granted passage to a new country while they continue to wait.

The 1980s saw a mass movement of refugees from the Ogaden region to Somalia. Although official hostilities had ceased, war had destroyed all the limited infrastructure and a crippling drought had laid the country to waste.

Yet Somalia was not a safe place either.

Initially the Ogaden Somali refugees were tolerated. While some resented them taking land, the Somali nationalist feeling of the time meant the Ogaden refugees

were left alone. Life for the refugees was basic, even austere, but it was about to get much worse.

Despite deep divisions, dreams of a greater Somalia gave the clans a common cause. The issue that joined them was their hatred of the corrupt President Siad Barre and a desire to overthrow his brutal Somali government.

By the close of the 1980's both US and Soviet support for the two warring nations was fading. Without US support,

Barre's government collapsed. After he fled to Kenya in 1991, tribes, rebels and warlords fought for power. However, when no single leader emerged the economy collapsed and dreams of a united Somalia died. The anarchy that followed hit the refugees hard.

More than half a million Somali Ethiopian refugees were living in Somalia at the time. Everyone was forced to flee - the Ogadenians included - or be caught up in the violent attacks between different tribes.

Thousands of Ogaden refugees – mostly women and children – died in the little-known Banbalaayo massacres of 1991 and 1992. When their camp came under attack, the Ogadenians were showered with thousands of bullets. Many fell to the ground, dead or dying. Those that didn't tried to run but their only option was to cross the river behind them. Only a few were able to swim. Some men survived, but almost all the women and children drowned.

Banbalaayo – which roughly translated means 'desert of hell' – remains an unpunished and unrecognised atrocity today. Ogadenians in other camps joined the hundreds of thousands of Somalis escaping to Kenya, marking the beginning of a refugee crisis that continues to envelop that country today.

## Government abuses ethnic Somalis

The range of abuses committed against the Somali people in Ethiopia spans the breadth of human cruelty. It is part of a long-running and bloody history of conflict that has its roots in ethnic rivalries and attempts to control the Ogaden region.

Although Ethiopia receives hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid, Ogaden remains a virtual wasteland. Ethiopian money in the region is spent on soldiers and weaponry.

"The government claims that we are part of Ethiopia, but they have done nothing whatsoever in sharing resources with other Ethiopians and building things for the people," said Abdullahi B Feytin, an Ogaden community leader living in Australia.

"If Adam came back to earth today he will remember Ogaden because there is no change; no roads, no hospitals. The way god created it is the way it is," he said.

Trade blockades and movement restrictions mean that Ogadenians are unable to travel to the markets with their livestock or access pastures for their animals, exacerbating an already dire food situation.

Obstruction is officially denied by the Ethiopian Government, but the United Nations and Human Rights Watch report that trade and aid are not being allowed to reach Ogaden.

"The attacks on villages and economic blockade may be part of a strategy to force thousands of people from rural areas to larger towns and deny [the rebel militia group] the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) a support base," a spokesperson for Human Rights Watch said.

Whatever the intention, the effect is catastrophic. Mass starvation is just around the corner. If the people cannot access food aid or sell their produce at market, there will be almost nothing to eat by the end of the year.

Food prices already point to the looming disaster. The Famine Early Warning System Network recently announced that the cost of essential provisions in some areas of Ogaden had more than doubled in just one month, 50 kg of rice has risen from US\$24 to US\$55.

"Our people are dying because of hunger, disease and malnutrition," said Hassan Ibrahim Belle, another Ogaden community leader in Australia.

"It is genocide, the food blockages, the expulsion of the international organisations, the killing of intellectuals," he cried.

If Ogadenians are anxious about food, they are terrified of the Ethiopian forces.

Eye witness after eye witness reports villages being burned, livestock confiscated and women gang-raped.

According to Human Rights Watch, Ethiopian soldiers killed 21 people from the Labiga village when they refused to hand over their livestock in June this year.

Gettleman, a journalist from the New York Times, reported on the abuses after a visit early in 2007.

"Ambaro, a 25 year-old now living in the capital city told me she was gang-raped by five Ethiopian soldiers in January. Troops come to her village every night to pluck another young woman," Gettleman wrote.

"Moulalin, a rheumy-eyed elder, said Ethiopian troops stormed his village in January looking for rebels and burned much of it down. 'They hit us in the face with the hardest part of their guns,'" he said.

Torture and arbitrary detention are reportedly widespread. Amnesty International claims that political prisoners, particularly those suspected of links with the ONLF, are being detained and brutalised. Common methods of torture include beatings on the feet while hanging upside down and electric shocks.

As one forty year-old woman told Gettleman: "Soldiers took me to a police station, put me in a cell and twisted my nipples with pliers".

She told how government security forces routinely rounded up young women under the pretext that they were rebel supporters so they could bring them to gaol and rape them.

## Ogaden off limits to journalists

While horror stories from Ogaden are disturbingly common, both from refugees and those still living in the state, hearing about them is rare.

The Ethiopian Government wants to ensure the world does not know what is happening in the state. Reporters are not allowed into the region and those in other areas of Ethiopia are in great danger – as three New York Times staffers recently found out.

Reporting on the Ogaden conflict from an unrestricted area of the country in April this year, they were arrested by military officials and held incommunicado for five days. Their equipment was confiscated, they were threatened and Vanessa Vick, a photographer, was assaulted. No explanation was given for their detention.

And yet foreign reporters are treated better than local journalists, some of whom are on capital charges.

# The rise of the Ogaden National Liberation Front

In 1984 the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) was officially founded under the stewardship of a youthful chairman Abdirahman Mahdi. The militia army, the most powerful rebel group in the region today, is made up of ethnic Somalis from the region.

While the ONLF claims it targets 'legitimate' military and political targets, they are also guilty of human rights abuses, including the high-profile killings in April of nine Chinese and 64 Ethiopian civilian oil workers.

The ONLF wants more autonomy for the region and a UN backed referendum, whereby Somalis in Ethiopia can decide

their own fate. They also are opposed to other nations reaping the rewards of their oil without compensating the Ogadenian people.

They use violence, kidnappings and bombings to achieve their aims and are responsible for countless insurgencies against the Ethiopian Government.

Despite their violent tactics, the ONLF have the support of most Somalis living in Ogaden. This is largely in reaction to the appalling treatment of the Ogadenians at the hands of the Ethiopian Government.

Mohamed Barruud just wants the violence to stop.

"When will we stop helping people

with guns and start helping them with education," he laments.

Despite fierce opposition to the ONLF tactics, he understands their motives.

"The people we call rebels [ONLF] today, they are the people whose mothers were killed, whose sisters were raped, whose stock was confiscated and whose villages were burnt.

"It's awful, but the more you commit big crimes, the more people pay attention to you.

"When my aunts, my uncles my cousins were killed, no one cared. But when 75 oil workers were killed, the world began to take notice," he said.

## Greater oversight of aid needed

The New York Times' interest in the area was sparked in part by the White House's support for the Ethiopian regime.

The Ethiopian regime is dominated by Christian members who are a key African ally in the United States' 'war on terror'.

Both the American and British administrations provide hundreds of millions of dollars in financial, military and intelligence aid to the Ethiopian government. However, according to some US Senators, there is very little oversight of this assistance. No one is ensuring it is not being used to fight a war against civilians in Ogaden.

In an August 2007 letter to the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, 10 US Senators wrote:

"As you know, last month the Ethiopian Government announced a crack-down on Ogaden National Liberation Front rebels operating in Ethiopia's eastern Somali region after the rebels attacked a Chinese-run oil exploration field in April. While the threat posed by the rebels is real and increased security measures in the areas are warranted, the military's operations appear to go far beyond what can be justified by national security concerns.

"Although aggressively denied by Ethiopian authorities, reports of murder, torture, rape and village burnings have been corroborated by independent observers and aid groups struggling to respond to the growing humanitarian crisis in the region.

"For years, the State Department's own Human Rights Country Reports have cited unlawful killings and arbitrary detentions by Ethiopian security forces and police, most of which have never been investigated or resolved. In the meantime, the United States Government has been providing increased non-humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia, with a request to nearly double that support next year."

## Where to from here

Their words appear to have had some effect. The United Nations has just sent a fact-finding mission to the region to investigate human rights abuses, as well as food, water and health needs of the population.

For the first time, Washington has allocated \$19 million in funds specifically for Ogaden.

But such actions will not bring about peace unless a lasting solution can be

found. Patchwork aid and food allocations are useful, but only in the short-term.

"We are asking peace loving nations, free nations, to make sure that the genocide, the killing and the human rights abuses in Ogaden stop," said Hassan Ibrahim Belle

"The world responded to problems in Kosovo, Bosnia and Darfur, they responded in Iraq and Afghanistan, the world responded in East Timor. I ask that they do similar in this area too.

"The solution is to make sure that the referendum takes place. Let the Ogadenians for once in their life decide what they want to do with their lives," he said.

"It is only a small problem now, but it will become a big problem like Darfur," said Abdullahi B Feytin.

"I would love to see Australia and the international community taking notice and trying to intervene before it becomes the world's problem," he said. ■

## Find out more

For information about how you can support the Somali's living in Ethiopia please call Mohamed Baaruud on 0412 811 466 or email mohamed.baaruud@sswaha.nsw.gov.au