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SOMALIA – THE DARK SIDE OF HUMANITY

The Somali Democratic Republic is tearing itself apart. It is no longer a coherent state. In the capital city of Mogadishu and in the various refugee centres in the north and the central part of the country, thousands have died in mindless internecine inter-clan rivalry. While warlords vie for power, countless numbers of refugees and displaced groups experience the low life of untold suffering and misery in a land full of unreason.

GENESIS OF CONFLICT

Since January 1990, when rebels defeated former Somali dictator Major General Mohammed Siad Barre, most Somali factions have recognised Ali Mahdi as the interim president. General Mohammed Farah Aidid, the chairman of the rebel United Somali Congress (USC), however, contested Mr Mahadi's election. General Aidid and Mr Mahdi are both members of the USC; but they are from rival subclans.

Since last November, heavy shelling and indiscriminate gunfire in Mogadishu have taken the lives of several thousand people, mostly civilians, many of them women and children.

In the heady days of the Cold War, Somalia was seen by both the United States and the former USSR as a strategic gateway to the Red Sea. One consequence of this simplistic realist understanding of the country's strategic importance, was that it became awash with billions of dollars of armaments, eagerly supplied by Washington and Moscow, among others.

With the collapse of Major General Mohammed Siad Barre's dictatorial rule, followed that of central authority. Consequently, armed gangs and warlords have roamed the countryside ever since. With the end of the Cold War, Somalia no longer figures prominently in the strategic and political calculations of the United States and the newly-formed Confederation of Independent States (CIS). Consequently, human suffering and tragedy are largely forgotten outside of the region. Somalia has become the gateway to hell.

PEACE-MAKING AND THE UN ROLE

The United Nations-sponsored cease-fire negotiations of last month between members of Somalia's warring clans, reflect a changing role of the UN in peace-keeping and preventive diplomacy. Newly-elect UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, has impressed upon the Security Council the need to focus its attention on the latest crisis in the horn of Africa. Within the UN there is now a wider recognition that internal conflicts can and do have wider international implications.

The Somali talks at UN Headquarters in New York provide a real test for such UN efforts. Instead of waiting for regional and continental organizations such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to intervene, the UN is more likely to get further involved. The world body has come under sharp criticism in the international media, and from Somalis, for not having acted sooner and more decisively.

UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who frequently dealt with the Somali conflict as a senior official in the Egyptian foreign ministry before he took up his new post in January, impressed upon the Security Council the need to take 'appropriate action'. In response, the Security Council passed Resolution 733 (23 January 1992) calling for an arms embargo against Somalia. In the resolution, the Security Council urged the parties to the conflict to agree to a cease-fire and asked the secretary-general to increase UN humanitarian aid to war-torn Somalia. The council also urged the warring parties to take steps to ensure the safety of UN personnel sent to Somalia to provide aid.

Though neither Mahdi nor General Aidid are taking part in the UN-brokered talks, each has sent three representatives. The respective representatives have been given full authority to take decisions on behalf of the two warring factions.

Representatives of the OAU, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the Arab League met with Boutros-Ghali last month in the first phase of the talks. Representatives of the two warring sub-clans also subsequently joined the discussions.

Though the UN-brokered talks have achieved very little, the talks are backed by influential personalities from within and without the country. Calls for the UN to send a peacekeeping force are getting stronger. Despite some initial discussions for sending such a force, there has been no decision to do so. Francois Giuliani, the secretary-general's spokesman, says the terms of the cease-fire would have to be

adhered first and questions about more humanitarian aid and the safety of aid workers would also need to be resolved. Moreover, there are special requirements under Chapter VII of the Charter that have to be met to sanction direct UN involvement in the conflict.

IMPLICATIONS

The gratuitous, barbaric violence in Somalia has already pushed Somalia to the brink of famine. The International Red Cross has warned that unless a major relief operation is launched urgently, then there will be wide-spread famine. Hunger stalks Mogadishu, but it is worse in the interior. Famine is pervasive among the nomads of Biadoba, in Somali's central region, where hundreds have already died. Up to 90% of the children are hopelessly malnourished.

A devastating drought in 1990 and the wide-spread social dislocation caused by the war to topple former President Siad Barre in January 1991 has left thousands of people profoundly weakened and impoverished. Farmers have sold off their livestock in an attempt to survive, and grain for this year's planting season has been consumed.

The bitter inter-clan fighting in the Somali capital has prevented the safe distribution of food. In January, 8 000 tonnes of emergency food aid stored at a Mogadishu port by a non-governmental aid agency, CARE, was looted as negotiations stalled over its safe passage and fair distribution within a divided city. The looted food worked its way to the local market, but the price of food is beyond the reach of most families who have had no formal employment for over a year. The Indian Ocean port is now in the hands of the chairman of the United Somali Congress (USC), General Mohammed Farah Aidid, whose forces are still engaged in brutal battles with those of interim Somali president Ali Mahdi Mohamed.

The disintegration of the Somali state could also reverberate in neighbouring Ethiopia, itself under threat of breaking up, as well as in the deeply divided societies of Chad and Sudan. The sacrosanct OAU principle of inviolate borders, will be powerfully challenged by the disintegration of the post-independence Somali state. This in turn, may open the proverbial Pandora's box, with various other African states in decay. Clearly, Somalia contains the seed of instability, with implications that could go well beyond the immediate region, and not only in the form of thousands of refugees.

Finally, Somalia also presents the UN and the OAU with the daunting task of conflict resolution and peace-keeping. Once again, the OAU's capacity to intervene effectively in this latest horrible human fracture, has been found wanting.

Jan Smuts House
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