



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on the Somalia February 2008

"The people can take no more. Dramatic news continues to arrive from Mogadishu. Fighting persists and the people cannot take any more. At (the) moment it is difficult to see a solution. After 15 peace conferences, the last one in Mogadishu in August, Somalia's political leaders have still not reached an agreement for a stable and lasting peace." --Bishop Giorgio Bertin, Apostolic Administrator of Mogadishu, November 16, 2007

BACKGROUND

Somalia is the only country in the world without a central government, the epitome of a 'failed state'.¹ According to the Caritas Director in Somalia, the violence has driven as many as 114,000 residents of Mogadishu to flee their homes recently. Over 400,000 people had already fled violence in Mogadishu in early 2007, almost half of the city's population. Over 1.5 million people are surviving on foreign aid.

The Republic of Somalia was established in 1960 when Great Britain and Italy joined their two protectorates. For nine years the country was ruled by a democratically elected government until it was deposed in a military coup by Major General Muhammad Siad Barre. Siad Barre set up a socialist government and ruled until 1991 when he was overthrown in clan warfare that has continued. Shortly thereafter the northern region of Somalia split from the rest of the country to create the Republic of Somaliland. Despite over twenty five years of chaotic warfare in Somalia, Somaliland has remained relatively peaceful.

For many Americans, Somalia is infamous for the failed U.S./UN peacekeeping intervention to bring an end to the civil war in 1993. Since the departure of U.S. forces, the country has remained embroiled in civil war despite 14 attempts to negotiate peace. The last attempt in 2004 led by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development brought to the fore the Somalia Transitional Federal Institutions (TFIs). TFIs is a government in name only. It consists of a 275-member parliament that elected an Ethiopian-backed warlord Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed as president. The government first established itself in Nairobi, Kenya as it was too dangerous in Mogadishu. In 2006 it moved to Somalia, but based itself in Baidoa to avoid the insecurity of the capital.

The TFIs are opposed by a number of factions, most notably the Islamic Courts who held sway in the South of the country. Aligned against the Islamic Courts militia is another militia group, backed by the U.S., called the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism. In May and June of 2006 fighting broke out in Mogadishu that resulted in the Islamic Courts taking control of Mogadishu and most of the South and Central parts of Somalia.

In December 2006, fearing continued dominance by the Islamic Courts militia, Ethiopia, backed by the U.S., invaded Somalia and routed the Courts militia. Subsequently, the United States conducted operations in Somalia to find and attack the terrorist suspects that they hold responsible for attacks on U.S. interests in the region. A year after the invasion, the Islamic Courts have regrouped and with growing support from within Somalia, they are waging an increasingly bloody insurgency against the Ethiopian army. Somalia has become Ethiopia's 'Iraq'.

¹ See "Somalia's Terrorist Infestation", Eben Kaplan posted on CFR.org. (accessed 12/7/2007) and "Blowing the Horn", John Prendergast and Colin Thomas-Jensen, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007. This Backgrounder drew on these sources.

In response, the Africa Union has committed 6,000 troops for a peacekeeping mission. 1,600 Ugandan soldiers are on the ground, but they are under-equipped and outmanned and cannot successfully separate the warring militias. The U.S., the international community, the African Union and Intergovernmental Authority for Development (a subregional group of nations seeking to quell conflict) must move the combatants to a negotiated ceasefire and task the African Union troops with monitoring its implementation.

Many observers claim that there are terrorist groups who have taken advantage of the lawlessness in Somalia to establish safe havens for themselves from attacks by the U.S.² One group is the al-Qaeda cell that is believed to be responsible for the U.S. embassy bombing in Kenya, a hotel bombing in Mombasa and a missile attack against an Israeli passenger plane. Another group is a collection of Somali jihadis that was formed in 2003 and is believed to have been behind the murder of an Italian nun, Sr. Leonella, in 2006. Both groups operated freely in Somalia until the Ethiopian invasion when U.S. air forces attacked and dispersed them. Despite their continued presence in the country, there is no evidence of Somali Islamist groups joining forces with these terrorist cells. In light of this reality, U.S. military attacks on terrorists that also cause significant casualties and damage among Somalis may only worsen the situation.

Given the extreme insecurity in Somalia, very few international aid groups are present to alleviate the suffering. There are, however, forty international NGOs who support projects remotely from Kenya. In a recent meeting the agencies, including Catholic Relief Services, concluded that the insecurity precluded humanitarian programs. The Catholic Church in Somalia is small and does not offer a foundation on which to build large-scale relief programs. Caritas/Somalia does operate health clinics with out-of-country assistance from Catholic Relief Services and CAFOD (Catholic Fund for Overseas Development).

USCCB POSITION

On December 5, 2006 USCCB wrote to Stephen J. Hadley, the National Security Advisor, to urge a de-escalation of the conflict and called on the UN and the international community to pressure the parties in the conflict to negotiate a ceasefire and a peaceful resolution of the disputes. That same month the Ethiopian army invaded Somalia with U.S. backing.

ACTION REQUESTED

USCCB recommends the U.S. take the following actions:

1. Modify its narrow and exclusive approach to the conflict in Somalia from combating terrorism to include promoting negotiations between the factions in the conflict to secure a ceasefire and resolve the issues that led to the fighting.
2. Work with the UN, Western nations and the regional Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) to create a power sharing government that is inclusive of all parties and their interests.
3. Working with the same international partners, help the Transitional Federal Institutions to coalesce into an actual Transitional Federal Government.
4. Working with international and regional partners, develop a strategy to build a robust AU force capable of enforcing the end of fighting in order to buy time for negotiations to end the war.
5. Recognizing that the Ethiopian Government is a major partner of the U.S. in the struggle against terrorism, pressure Ethiopia to modify its strategy in Somalia to work with the TFI's current leadership to reach out to the Islamic Court leaders to develop a power sharing arrangement and move towards a fully representative transitional government.
6. Assist the AU forces to set up conditions under which humanitarian agencies can begin to aid the hundreds of thousands of people of Mogadishu.

For information: visit www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/callafrica/somalia.shtml or contact Stephen Hilbert, USCCB, 202-541-3149 (phone), 541-3339 (fax), Shilbert@usccb.org.

² Kaplan, Eben, Somalia's Terrorist Infestation, CFR.org