

Editorial: The US and Somalia

The recent air strikes by the US on suspected positions of al-Qaeda operatives in Southern Somali have raised some serious and complex questions about the political situation in Somalia. Since the killing of 18 American troops in Mogadishu in 1994, the US has avoided direct military involvement in any hot spot in Africa. The question now is why has the US become directly involved with the events in Somalia? How successful will her mission in Somalia be? How legitimate is her claim that there are terrorists hiding in Somalia? Is it legitimate for a foreign country to invade another country, or carry out military operation in parts of that country? Will Somalia become the African equivalent of Iraq or Afghanistan where US military actions have created more problems, caused disproportionate collateral damages and compounded the so called war on terror? It is important that these questions be put in perspective by understanding the genesis and complex nature of the Somali conflict.

Somalia is properly speaking a failed experiment in nationhood. Since the early 70's when the then Somali dictator Siad Barre rode rough shod on the backs of Somalis flying the kite of a socialist agenda, there has been no good news coming out from Somalia. Barre was later ousted on 25 January 1991 by a combined element of various ethnic militias and guerrilla fighters. Unfortunately, by the end of his oppressive and corrupt regime, he had destroyed this beautiful land, and planted the seed of hatred among the tribal groups. In addition, he damaged the religious harmony that once existed among the various Islamic sects in the land, and the sparse Christian groups. The rise of Islamic extremism in Somalia, and the ever increasing number of war lords and ethnic and religious militias are not the result of al-Qaeda's presence in Somalia but rather because of the power vacuum in Somalia since the demise of Barre.

There is in Somalia a battle for survival. The fractured components of the state are in dire need of an organizing authority, which has been provided by the Union of Islamic Courts and the tribal war lords. If there is a burgeoning terror network in Somali, that is merely putative. The more fundamental question is why the international community abandoned the Somalis in the first place. Why did the US prop up the evil regime of Barre between 1977-1990 only to abandon the country when it no longer served US strategic interest against the then Soviet Union? How will US military actions in Somalia bring permanent peace and prosperity to Somalia? What plans does the US have for Somalia beyond her immediate interests of stopping a supposed Islamic insurgency and a potential terror network settling in Somalia? The US must take some responsibility for creating the political and economic quagmire that has plagued Somalia.

Somalia is a classical case of a failed state lacking an inner cohesion or any overarching identity that could hold the loyalty of the diverse groups in the country. Somalia's case is typical of many African countries who are struggling every day with political and religious crises as they seek political integration. Most African countries because of their colonial heritage were forced into nationhood by the strong-arm tactics of Western powers. African countries will never be politically integrated unless there is a radical

restructuring of the power relations in such countries to protect the rights and well being of all tribes, religions and interest groups. A political system is integrated to the extent that the minimal units (e.g., political actors, tribal groups, religious groups, etc.) develop, in the course of political interaction, a pool of commonly accepted norms regarding political behavior and a commitment to the political behavior patterns legitimized by these norms. Somalia has not been politically integrated since her independence. Barre was able to hold the country together through intimidation, gratification and other oppressive measures. By the time he was forced to flee the country, the very fabric that held Somalia together was already broken. How to reweave this fabric should be the main concern of all those countries, especially the US and Ethiopia whose presence in Somalia is causing a lot of unease among Somalis at home and abroad.

The sufferings of the ordinary Somalis today are unimaginable. With a devastated national psyche, broken national history, a dangerous spiral of violence and destruction, and a collapsed economy, life in Somalia can only be described in Hobbesian terms as being 'nasty, short and brutish.' Many Somalis have fled their native land for safety to countries like Canada, Germany, Holland, and Italy and are scattered as refugees in many countries in East Africa and beyond. But the question on the lips of every Somali is when will all these end. Why are the Somalis suffering so terribly? How can this ancient land of princes and princesses, this land of vegetation and beauty be restored?

As the international community ponders on how to rebuild this land, it is important that Somalia's unique history and cultural identities be taken into consideration. Somalis are very peaceful people and want a place that they can call home. This is very different from the pictures that many African watchers are painting, especially in Washington. According to the thinking in these quarters, Somalia has become the hotbed of Islamic extremism. The people who hold this position allege that the three most wanted terrorists in Africa, namely Fazul Abdullahi Mohammed, Abu Talha al-Sudani and Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan are hiding somewhere in Somalia. These three individuals are being accused of collusion in the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, as well as the attempted terrorist attacks on an Israeli hotel and airliner in Kenya. In addition, the US strongly feel that the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) that controlled Somali capital Mogadishu from June 2006 until they were uprooted and driven out by US-backed Ethiopian forces in December, 2006 is sympathetic to the cause of al-Qaeda. The call by al-Qaeda's Ayman Al-Zawahiri for Muslims to support their brothers fighting a Jihad in Somalia may go a long way in supporting the US claim that Somalia under the Islamists has become a hotbed for al-Qaeda's cells in Africa.

The Security Council's Resolution 1725 passed last December, calls for peace-keepers to be sent to Somalia to maintain law and order and give military protection to the Somali government led by Ali Mohammed Ghedi and Abdullahi Yusuf. I believe that this resolution if carried through could help to stabilize Somalia. Unfortunately, the invasion of Somalia by Ethiopian forces backed by the US has inevitably heightened the tension in the land because of the long-held antipathy and rivalry between these two ancient civilizations, since the Ogaden war (1977-1978). Failed states are alchemies for violence and terrorism, but the US has not shown that she is capable of enabling the peaceful

resolution of those factors which lead to failed states and state-sponsored terrorism. This is the case with Iraq and Afghanistan. Based on US record in Africa, there are no grounds to conclude that America's involvement in Somalia's internal affairs will bring a peaceful resolution of the protracted conflict in Somalia. This is because the strategic interest of the US is motivating America's action in the region. Achieving that interest in the shortest time possible is more important for the US than any other long term goal for Somalia.

- Stan Chu Ilo, January 16, 2007.