

# After the peace comes the storm: Somalia's relentless crisis

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## Introduction

By the middle of June this year, the few optimists among the observers of events in Somalia, which has been without a nationally effective state since the collapse of Siad Barre's regime in 1991, were able to seize upon developments in Djibouti to raise hopes that the agony of the Somali people might be ameliorated.<sup>1</sup>

On June 9, just as it seemed that the week-long meeting in Djibouti involving representatives of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and leaders of the exiled opposition Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) had ended in failure, the two sides engaged in direct talks for the first time and produced what was essentially a ceasefire agreement. The accord committed both parties and their allies to cease hostilities against each other within thirty days, for an initial period of three months. They also promised to permit unhindered humanitarian access to an increasingly needy population, to refrain from inflammatory declarations or actions, and to establish a joint security committee under the chairmanship of the United Nations.

The UN was also to provide the chairman for a high-level committee, also to be formed within a fortnight, to follow up on issues relating to political cooperation between the parties and concerns over justice and reconciliation. These issues were to be discussed at a conference to be held before the end of July. This conference has yet to be staged and the committees formed, though a spokesperson for the UN's Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) has indicated that these events may happen before the end of August.

But the key to the agreement lay in those articles addressing the need for withdrawal from Somalia of the Ethiopian forces supporting the TFG. They called on the UN to provide a stabilisation mission to permit the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops within four months. Such a stabilisation force had been anticipated in the UN Secretary-General's report on Somalia in March, though it may be doubted whether he foresaw so urgent a need for its deployment. There was also an element of ambiguity in the Djibouti agreement that left open the degree to which Ethiopian withdrawal was dependent upon the arrival of foreign peacekeepers, and the nature of their mandate.

In recent years appeals from Somalia for rapid and effective UN military assistance had gone unheeded, but none of these originated from a meeting organised and chaired by the Special

Representative, and personally encouraged by a visit from the UN Security Council. To have achieved even this much progress in negotiations in so short a time did credit to the unflinching energy and diligence of the SRS, Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, who had long argued the urgency of seizing this opportunity.

## Spoilers on the ground and leadership divisions

There were plenty of other actors in the Somali tragedy, however, who were determined to thwart the peacemakers. Not least among these was the militant youth of al-Shabaab, designated a terrorist organisation by the US government in February. Rifts within the ARS leadership also emerged, as hardliners in Asmara denounced as traitors those who had gone to Djibouti. The riposte from the ARS negotiators in Djibouti was that the leadership of the movement in Asmara was being manipulated by an Eritrean government determined, for reasons of its own, to keep the Ethiopian army committed to deployment in Somalia.

A question soon arose concerning the degree of control that either of the pro-peace camps could exercise over the armed forces engaged on the ground. This was particularly relevant with regard to the armed insurgents belonging to clan militias, Islamic courts or al-Shabaab that continued to make dramatic gains in their armed struggle against the TFG and its Ethiopian protectors. Over the two months that followed the peace accord, divisions in the leadership of the ARS and, subsequently, the TFG also emerged into full view, raising further questions about the viability of the Djibouti agreement.

The hardliners in Asmara, under the leadership of Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, condemned in Ethiopia and the United States for alleged links with al Qaeda, rejected the Djibouti accord as irrelevant to the liberation struggle in Somalia, clearly indicating that forces loyal to them would not be bound by the ceasefire, and that no ceasefire was possible until Ethiopia had completely withdrawn its forces from Somalia. Aweys moved subsequently to usurp the leadership of the ARS, only to be opposed by others still in Asmara. This meant that the ARS had effectively split in three.

By early August, the TFG leadership was also in disarray. Ostensibly this situation arose from attempts by Prime Minister Nur "Adde" to dismiss the belligerent mayor of Mogadishu, Mohammed "Dheere", a long time ally of President Abdullahi Yusuf. The president revoked the dismissal and a cabinet revolt ensued, in which Yusuf's followers attempted to bring down Nur Adde's government. Mutual threats of votes of no confidence and impeachment ensued, and as of the time of writing the power struggle remains unresolved, though the prime minister and the "peace camp" appear to be gaining the upper hand over a presidential party reluctant to see its powers curtailed or bargained away. The Ethiopian government also appears alarmed at Yusuf's intransigence and the difficulties of extracting itself from the Somali morass if a violent counter-insurgency campaign continues in Mogadishu.

## Humanitarian crisis and a possible UN force

All of this has happened against a background of increasing desperation among the Somali people, about a third of whom are imminently in need of urgent assistance as a result of displacement, the ravages of war, and the effects of a disastrous harvest. This spoke to the necessity of a prompt and favourable response from the UN Security Council on the issue of military assistance if the moment was not to be lost and the peacemakers isolated.

It is evident that whatever interpretation one chooses to give the terms of the Djibouti accord, its implementation and the impetus of an uncertain peace process depended upon the replacement of the Ethiopian military by a UN-sanctioned stabilisation force. This always seemed unlikely, since the UN had already spelled out the high quality of the troops required - self-sustaining, experienced in the use of minimum force but capable of effective, but restrained, combat if necessary. Those countries in a position to contribute such troops were understandably reluctant to do so in an environment in which losses were inevitable. It was also clear that much of such a force would have to come from Muslim countries if local militant propaganda and mobilisation against the peacekeepers was to be offset.

Nevertheless, however improbable such a deployment, a visit by the UN Security Council to Djibouti to bolster the talks in June sent a signal that the matter had received serious thought, and that plans might well come close to fulfilling these conditions. Certainly, the urgent encouragement of the UNSC might have been expected to lead to something more than the virtual silence that has followed from that body.

As was to be expected, no sooner had the agreement been signed than the spoilers on both sides intensified their efforts to thwart its realisation. As the violence ratcheted upwards, the humanitarian situation on the ground deteriorated still further, making international relief even less likely for the two million or so Somalis now dependent upon it for survival.

In political terms, for the UNSC to have raised hopes and then basically walked away from the ensuing mess may prove disastrous. Indeed, under such circumstances it might have been better had there been no agreement at all, because an aborted accord simply makes the positions of moderates on both sides politically untenable, and plays directly into the hands of those who see a military stalemate or outcome as desirable.

## Militias versus the Ethiopians

The report of the UN Secretary-General in late July speaks of sending a security assessment mission to Somalia only in September, so any hope of a peacekeeping deployment within a timeframe that might pave the way for Ethiopian withdrawal seems out of the question. In the meantime, the militias fighting to evict the Ethiopians appear to be extending their operations and adopting an increasingly aggressive posture, completely rejecting the idea of a negotiated settlement. This, of course, suits Eritrea's government, which seeks to enmesh Ethiopia in an unwinnable war of attrition in Somalia that proves embarrassing to the authorities in Addis Ababa, and a distraction from the unfinished business of settling their mutual border dispute. There are credible accounts of Mogadishu warlords rearming to reassert their interests in the local war economy against the revival of the Islamic Courts and the political ambitions of the jihadist el-Shabaab militias. They may also be anticipating the complete collapse of the TFG, which controls only a minute and ever-diminishing portion of Somalia.

## Conclusion

In short, the situation resembles that prevailing before the Ethiopian intervention of 2006, except that now the possibilities of a peaceful outcome are much more remote. The military defeat and dispersal of the Islamic Courts of south central Somalia in December 2006 and January 2007 has resulted in the destruction of a tenuous civil peace in the area, the exacerbation of Darod-Hawiye clan competition, and the emergence of a resistance movement with increasingly radical credentials. Unintended consequences have emerged on a massive scale, not least the further erosion of the TFG's local legitimacy.

In the meantime much of the population of Mogadishu has fled, as have people from other centres embroiled in chronic conflict. Aid agencies are unable to reach the needy with adequate assistance, both because of warlordism and conflict on land, and new forms of organised piracy along Somalia's extensive coastline.

The valiant attempts of Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, the UN SRSG, to galvanise the international community into providing the physical and material backing for the Djibouti peace accord appear to have been in vain. Barring unforeseeable developments scarcely short of miraculous, the plight of the Somali people seems set to worsen.

At almost every stage, it seems, external political intervention in Somalia has a deleterious effect on the fortunes of local society: the ill-considered and unconditional recognition of the Transitional Federal Government, comprised principally of warlords supported by Ethiopia; the US support for Ethiopian intervention due to alarm over the growth of an essentially benign Islamic courts movement; the violence that has accompanied the subsequent nationalist insurgency and its radicalisation along religious lines; the pursuit of diplomatic strategies unsupported by security commitments on the part of the UN; and the disastrous consequences for the moderates on both sides of the Somali political divide. None of this bodes well for the future; and while the reformation of the Somali state can probably wait, there being no apparent reason why Somalis desperately need a state so long as local administrations can provide a modicum of security and order, the humanitarian situation allows for no such delay.

The optimists appear to have been sold short on Somalia, yet again.

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