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Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

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SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

Marc Michaelson is a Fellow of the Institute studying the challenges of nation-building in the Horn of Africa.

Border Economics: "Contraband" Trade in Ethiopia's Somali Region

JIJIGA, Ethiopia **August 1999**

By Marc Michaelson

I am an outlaw. Well, sort of. I'm not quite sure how it happened. I never felt pangs of guilt or sneakiness. I don't even fully understand what I did wrong, nor how I could have avoided it.

My crime? I transported "contraband" from Hartisheikh, an Ethiopian town close to the Somaliland border, to Jijiga, the capital of Ethiopia's Region 5.[1] And what were the damnable goods? Drugs, diamonds, stolen television sets? Nothing so dramatic. Just two Indonesian-made wrap skirts — the light, loose-fitting type Somali men wear during *khat* sessions.[2] I had been chewing *khat* regularly during my stay in Jijiga (it seemed the only way to gather information during the idle afternoons). So, on a day trip to Hartisheikh, I picked up two colorful wraps.

I didn't cross any international borders. I didn't consort with any shady underground Mafia-like figures. I didn't slip into any dark backrooms of derelict warehouses or smoky pool halls. I just moseyed down the dusty streets of Hartisheikh's sprawling outdoor market, saw some fabric that caught my eye, and bought it. The process felt no different than trading at any other market in Ethiopia. Yet here it was a criminal act.

Actually, to the best of my still-muddled understanding, it isn't a crime to buy things in Hartisheikh. Ethiopian police officers patrolled the streets, but made no effort to close down stores or apprehend shoppers. So I assume the market in Hartisheikh is legal. Where's the criminal offense? The crime is in the transportation of goods from Hartisheikh to Jijiga and other parts of the country. But Hartisheikh is *in* Ethiopia. Confused yet? If so, you are just getting the hang of border economics on the frontier between Somaliland and Ethiopia.

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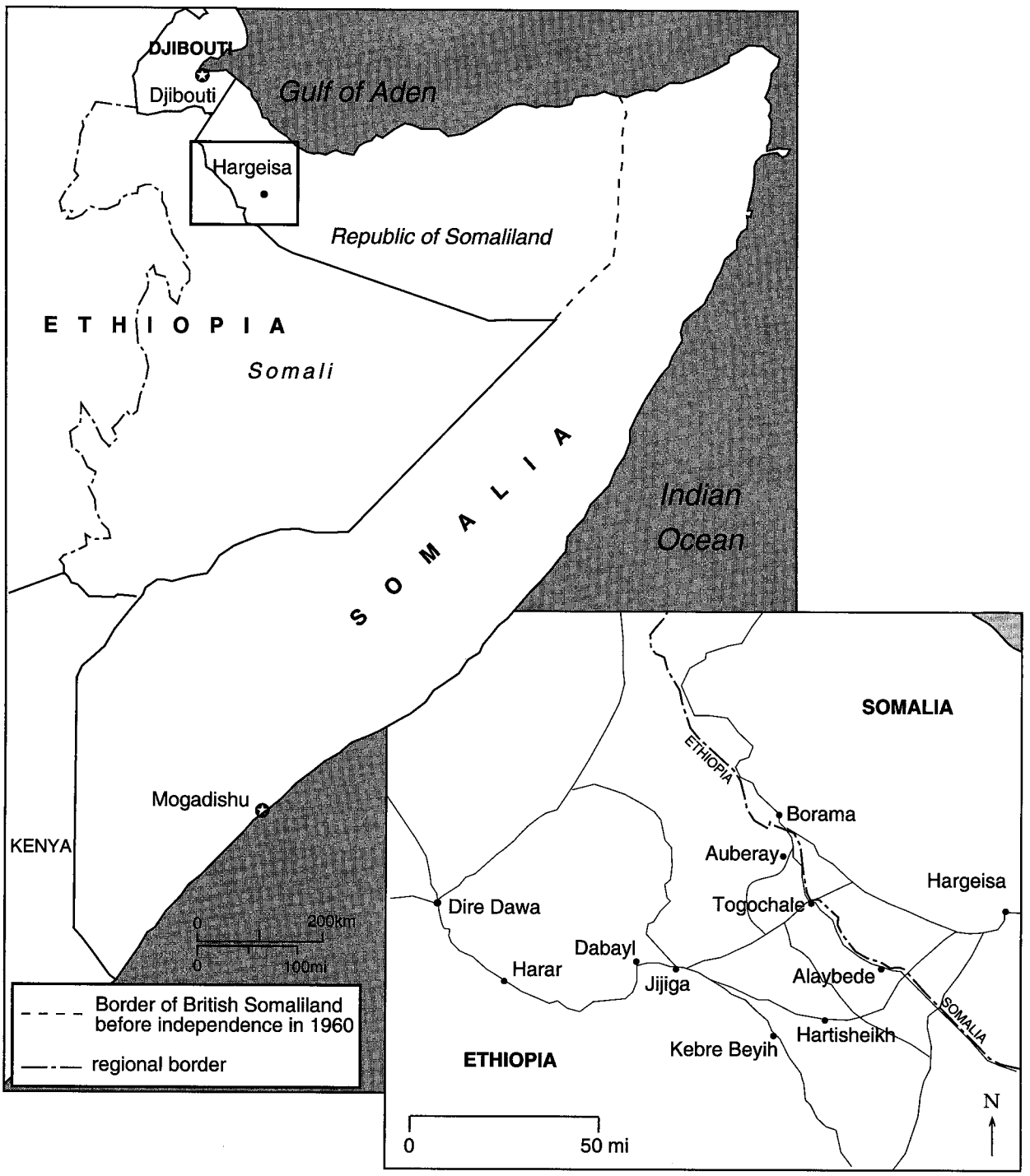
[1] Since 1994, the Ethiopian polity has been re-organized into nine ethnic-based regional states. Ethiopia's Region 5, the Somali Regional State, encompasses the eastern and southeastern sections of the country. Ethiopia's Somali Region should not be confused with Somalia or Somaliland. Somalia is the country bordering Ethiopia to its east. Somaliland, formerly a British colony, is the northwestern portion of Somalia that seceded (but has not been diplomatically recognized) in 1991. Many of the same clans live in all three of these areas—Ethiopia's Somali Region, Somaliland, and Somalia. The division of the Somali people into five different political units (some live in Djibouti and Kenya) is the arbitrary result of colonialism. The current article is primarily concerned with the border trade between Ethiopia's Somali Region and Somaliland.

[2] *Khat* is a narcotic leaf chewed by Somalis and some other groups in the Horn of Africa and throughout the Arabian peninsula. Friends and colleagues gather in houses, lounge on pillows, drink super-sweet tea, pluck the tender leaves off the stem and, stuff them into their bloated cheek cavities. *Khat* sessions are relaxing social events where ideas are exchanged in free-flowing discussion and debate.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Djibouti
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Republic of Somaliland
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Border of British Somaliland before independence in 1960
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I should have seen the portents. The day started off on the wrong foot, and after the first few hours of daylight, I probably should have packed it in and plunked back into bed with a book. My normally enthusiastic guide / translator, Abdel-Aziz, failed to show up at the Edom Hotel at our pre-arranged time of 8:30 am. Abdel-Aziz is a tall, thin man with teeth stained brown from habitual *khat*-chewing. And it was *khat* — the Grade A Awodhay variety I bought for him the previous afternoon — that kept him shackled deep in la-la-land that morning.

In a colleague's vehicle, I went over to Abel-Aziz's house at 9:20 am and found him groggily stumbling out the door. He hopped awkwardly on one foot as he pulled on a sock, flashing a goofy "not-guilty-even-though-my-hand's-still-stuck-in-the-cookie-jar" grin and apologizing profusely for being late.

It was a Friday, and in Muslim Somali Region, that meant government offices and many companies would be closed. An apt time for a day trip. We planned to visit Hartisheikh, a border town that blossomed in the past decade after thousands of refugees from Somaliland were settled there in the late 1980s.

At Jijiga's bus station, we piled into a Hartisheikh-bound clunker and waited for it to fill. After a half-hour, the bus was brimming beyond capacity. Additional passengers continued to hop on board, climbing over people and skillfully cramming themselves into tiny nooks. Our 3/4-sized bus, built to transport 25 adults comfortably, was eventually packed with 40. We were ready to go.

On the eastern outskirts of Jijiga, we stopped at a control point. Several plain-clothes "officials" boarded the bus to scope out the scene. One asked me where I was going, and demanded to see my passport. Feeling unusually (perhaps foolishly) bold, I told him I needed to see his immigration officer ID card before handing over my passport. Wrong response. He sneered at my audacity as if to say: "Is this piddly *ferenji* (foreigner) questioning *MY* authority?" But the guy wasn't in uniform; for all I knew he could be an illicit travel documents trader drooling over my gold-embossed American passport for a client in Yemen.

Losing his cool, he commanded me to get off the bus. Luckily (and surprisingly), the other passengers sided with me. They convinced him to show me his ID, after which I smiled sheepishly and pulled out my passport. Again, he asked me where I was going. Apparently Jijiga serves as the functional border post despite its location some 75 km west of the border. As far as Ethiopian immigration authorities are concerned, Jijiga is the final frontier.

I settled back into my uncomfortable seat, squished between an attractive young Harari woman and a thin, dark-skinned Somali man. Since we were practically sitting on top of each other and (by default) getting to know each other "intimately," I asked them where they were headed and why. As it turned out, every single person on that bus, except perhaps the driver and his assistant,

Abdel-Aziz alongside our bus to Hartisheikh

were traveling to Hartisheikh to go *shopping*. This was eastern Ethiopia's equivalent to the suburban American journey to the mall. They would buy all sorts of goods — clothes, fabric, electronics, edible oil, grains, sugar, you name it — and bring them (read "smuggle") to Jijiga, Harar and Dire Dawa. Each of these major eastern towns have market areas known as "Taiwan," signifying the distant imported origin of the "contraband" sold there.

About an hour down the road we had our first breakdown. This is not an unusual occurrence on public transportation, so I wasn't immediately alarmed. Over years of traveling on buses in Africa, I had made peace with the occasional breakdown, and saw it as an opportunity to stretch my legs and breathe in the scenery. After five minutes of tinkering, we were back on the road again, chugging toward our destination.

By the fourth breakdown, not more than ten miles from the first, my patience waned. I began launching idle threats, joking with the befuddled driver and telling him "we" (I included the other passengers for support) would hand him over to the police when (or rather "if") we arrived in Hartisheikh. Another frustrated passenger explained the system: "These guys know how to collect your money, they just don't know how to get you where you're going."

Luckily, a Save the Children/UK pickup truck came barreling down the road, and I frantically waved them down. After a rapid-fire explanation of our situation (i.e. begging), they welcomed us on board. We arrived in Hartisheikh less than a half-hour later.

The portly driver led us to a Somali restaurant where the delicious, seasoned roasted goat meat literally melted in our mouths. Less appealing was the side of rice drenched in milk. I've never acquired a taste for that particular Somali delicacy. By the time we had scarfed down our lunch it was 12:30 p.m., time for the mid-day prayer. Our timing was impeccably horrendous. During (and for several hours following) the biggest prayer of the week, most shops would close; families would eat lunch together and lounge around before re-opening in the late afternoon.

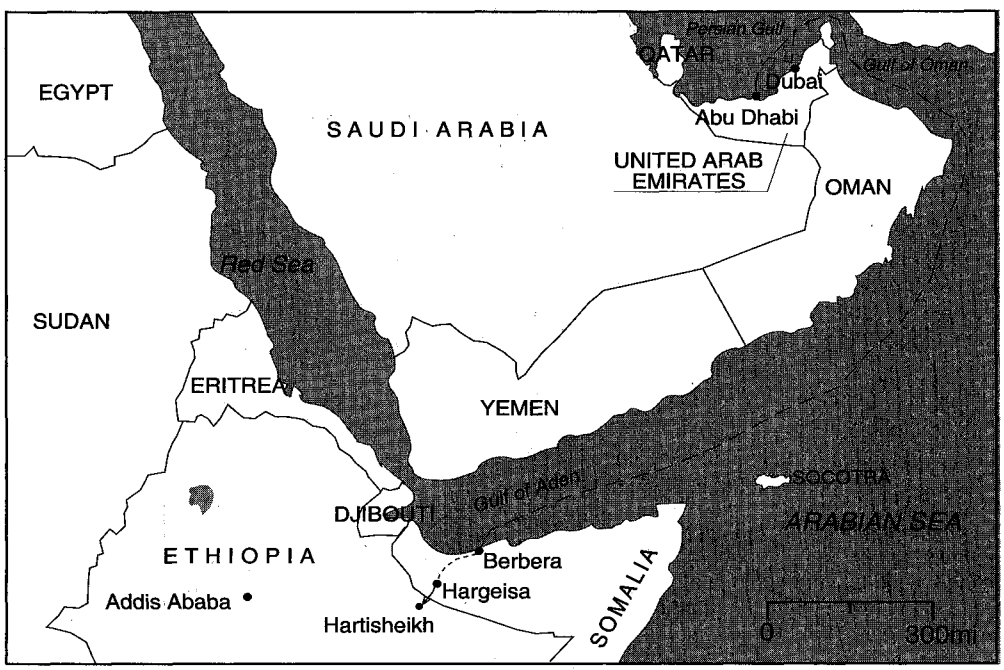
We didn't have time to waste, so we set off in search of any shops that remained open during the mid-day hours. We found a few, and conducted some interviews before I bought the wrap-skirts and crossed the line of the law.

* * *

Mohammed owns a sliver of a shop on the fringe of the market. Stacks of shoes, sport shirts and jackets line the cement walls, leaving a narrow pathway for customers to negotiate. Most of the clothes are labeled with unfamiliar names, but a few faked brands — Lee's, Adidas, Izod — are interspersed. Just inside the entrance, Mohammed's sole big-ticket items are prominently displayed: a dozen 14" JVC color-television sets.

All of Mohammed's stock was initially purchased by his brother who lives in Dubai. He sends the lighter items by plane to Hargeisa, capital of Somaliland. Heavier goods are transported by ship to Berbera, Somaliland's port, and then proceed to the Ethiopian border by land. The Somaliland government, unrecognized by other nations but still nominally functional, levies a nominal charge on imports, about 60 US cents per kilo.

With no government presence on the Ethiopia-Somaliland border, it's almost as if there's no interna-



tional border there at all. Mohammed brings his goods into Hartisheikh via the main road, essentially tax-free. I asked about transporting his stock to Jijiga — is it dangerous, do you pay customs? A knowing, devilish smile crept across his lips: "That's not our business. That's the worry of those who buy from us."

When I broached the issue of Ethiopian Custom's activities, Mohammed and other traders became uneasy and suspicious. Several "incidents" have occurred between Hartisheikh and Jijiga and around the border — high-speed chases, confiscation of goods and a few shootings.

Just three weeks before my visit, two contraband importers were killed by customs officials on back-to-back nights. Outraged Jijigans took to the streets. The group spontaneously swelled to a hundred, paraded to the Customs Office and Regional Administration and demanded action. The violent tactics of the customs authorities rang an all too familiar bell of government repression for Somalis. Most officers are still Amharas and other highlanders, groups that have historically ruled Somalis with an iron fist.

But with no legal route for importation yet established, what are traders supposed to do?

In the current legal vacuum, supplies imported through Somalia are not exactly "contraband". While such items aren't brought into Ethiopia legally, they aren't brought in illegally, either. Legal mechanisms should be established *prior to* any crackdown on illegal importers. Otherwise, business people are punished for circumventing a legal route that doesn't exist.

In the near future, this confusing situation is set to improve. The federal government plans to open four border posts (in Auberay, Togochale, Alaybede, and Dabayl). But these legal trade inlets alone may not significantly reduce smuggling. The porous border between Somalia and Ethiopia is more than 3,000 km long; policing it is unfeasible. And with Ethiopian duty rates of 40 percent plus 12 percent sales tax (on many items), many traders will search for new ways to avoid what they perceive as exorbitant taxes. Fatima, a Jijiga business owner, explained: "When the tax is too high — our customers are nomads and peasants — they can't afford it. If it was more reasonable, we would pay." Local poverty aside, Somalis are an enterprising lot; they are libertarian to the core and despite government interference, particularly when it eats into profits.

The Ethiopian government, for its part, appears determined to bring the contraband trade to a halt. In 1998, the National Committee for Somali Region Trade Promotion (NCSRTP) was created. Every month, this high-ranking group (including the Vice Prime Minister, Minister of Trade and several regional Bureau Heads) meets in Addis Ababa to tackle the vexing border-trade dilemma. The strategy they've devised envisions registration of importers and exporters, transactions by hard-currency Letters of Credit (L/Cs), and the creation of small-trader cooperatives.

One of the Committee members expressed confidence that these measures will bring the vast contraband trade into the formal economy. He sites the recent legalization of the *khat* trade as an example. *Khat* exporters have been issued permits and financial transactions are being conducted via hard currency L/Cs.

Khat has become the most profitable cash crop in eastern Ethiopian; exports to Somaliland alone have been valued between $250,000-$500,000 per day! Despite the region's historical reputation for producing the highest quality coffee in Ethiopia (Harar coffee), and some of the best fruits and vegetables, *khat* is now the crop of choice. Just as in many South American countries, the drug trade in Ethiopia has proven so lucrative, it has forced farmers to abandon food crops in favor of a cash cow with a buzz. A recent report from UNICEF estimated that farmers previously made 500-600 birr per year in fruit production, whereas they can make 6,000-7,000 birr from *khat* using the same piece of land.[3] Local nutrition is adversely effected, as a lesser variety of produce is consumed. The normally drug-tough Ethiopian government has been coy on the *khat* issue, and will likely remain so now that export taxes on *khat* have become a significant source of government revenue.

The flow of *khat* to neighboring countries shows that the border trade is by no means a one-way street. Some small-scale agricultural produce is exported to Somalia, and livestock raised by Ethiopian pastoralists are commonly exported to Arab countries through Berbera, Somaliland. Still, most consumer goods flow in the opposite direction, imported through Somaliland and into Ethiopia.

New Ethiopian trade policies face daunting challenges when applied to the Somali Region's vast number of small-scale importers and exporters. The high levels of customs duty and cumbersome bureaucracy will likely impede compliance. Hard currency L/Cs are also inaccessible to small traders and pastoralists — two socio-economic groups that rarely utilize the formal banking system. And, with such a long, porous border, forcing traders to comply will be near impossible.

Compounding the challenge is the Somali worldview. To most Somalis, international borders are

[3] By BBC Reporter Richard Lee in a report distributed by UNICEF July 22, 1999 as quoted in *Ethiopian Weekly Press Digest*, Vol. VI, No. 30, July 29, 1999, p. 4.

utterly irrelevant. They cross back and forth regularly — to visit relatives, graze livestock or buy supplies — often with no passport or other documentation.

Somali business owners prefer to trade with their kinfolk across the border, rather than with Amharas and Tigrayans in the more distant Ethiopian highlands. They complain that the highlanders are too bureaucratic and transport charges exorbitant. I asked one Jijiga store owner why she brings goods over the dangerous border with Somalia instead of from Addis Ababa. She raised her hands into a chokehold around her neck and her eyes floated into the back of her head, as if to signify the closed, suffocating nature of Ethiopian business.

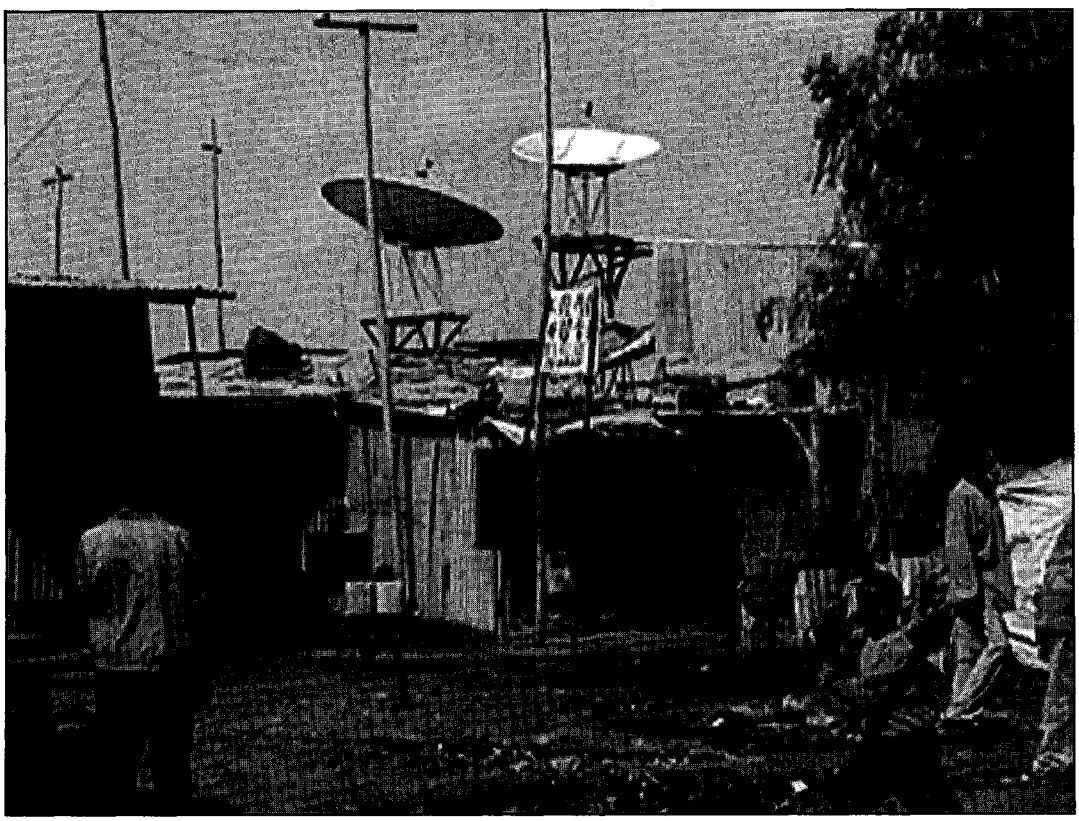
Somalis prefer their own informal, but much more efficient, trade mechanisms. Take two key sectors — telecommunications and banking. From Ethiopia, a three-minute telephone call to the United States costs $6.50, whereas the same call from nearby Hargeisa, Somaliland, costs as little as $2.40. The divergent efficiencies of financial transactions are even more pronounced. The informal Somali banking system is one of the fastest in the world. Monetary wires to/from Somalia are guaranteed within 24 hours, and usually received much more quickly. For example, in New York City, Yusuf deposits cash at a local Somali financial services outlet; he is charged a fee of 1-5 percent, and later that day receives a phone-call confirmation that the money was received by his brother in Hargeisa. In Ethiopia such transactions often require days or weeks, the path studded with ulcer-producing paperwork and bureaucratic stumbling blocks.

Price is another major consideration driving Somali traders further east. A 50-kg. bag of domestic Ethiopian sugar costs 200-225 birr in Addis Ababa; Brazilian sugar, imported through Somaliland, sells for 140 birr in Jijiga. Imported wheat flour (Addis Ababa - 187.50 birr; Jijiga - 140 birr), rice (Addis Ababa - 225 birr; Jijiga - 180 birr) and other staples are cheaper in Somali region as well. And, remember Mohammed's 14" JVC color televisions? He sells them for 1,100 birr in Hartisheikh. In Addis Ababa the price doubles to 2,200 birr.

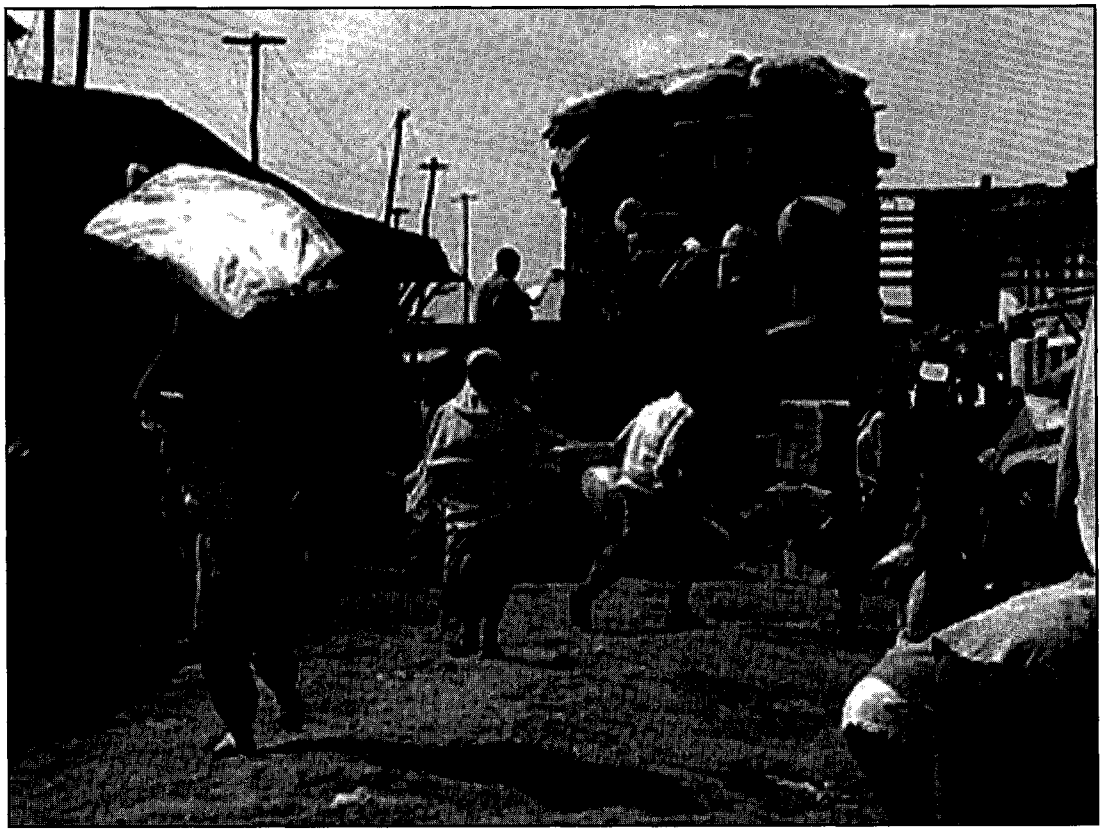
Prices and other efficiencies aside, Somaliland is both psychologically and geographically closer to Ethiopia's Somali Region than is Addis Ababa. Cross-border trade is conducted with fellow Muslims and in the Somali language (as opposed to the foreign tongue of Amharic in Addis). And it is physically closer — the bus from Jijiga to Hargeisa arrives in just three hours, whereas the bus from Jijiga to Addis Ababa takes two days.

* * *

What will happen when the new customs posts open, bringing the contraband conflict to a head? Ahmed, another store owner, says that customs officials from Jijiga and Addis Ababa recently visited Hartisheikh, and issued not-so-thinly veiled warnings: "They told us not to avoid the customs or we will be chased, shot at, and our items taken. Paying such high duties will



Hartisheikh's economic oxymorons: satellite dishes perched on corrugated-iron hovels



From Dubai to Somalia to Ethiopia — unloading contraband in Hartisheikh

hurt our business, but we must pay it. We are ready."

Fatima described the risks of illegal trade: "We depend on contraband. It changes. One day it is good, one day it is bad. One day you make it, one day you lose it. One day you might even lose your life." One large business owner expressed a willingness for compromise: "We don't engage in contraband trade for the love of it. We prefer the legal route. But we are forced into it. Contraband has its own prices and risks. If the government lowered the tax rates, it would serve as an incentive for us to go legal, and reduce our own risks."

* * *

The return trip to Jijiga further illuminated the ambiguity and confusion of Ethiopian customs policy in action. Again we traveled by bus, but this time it was crammed with knickknacks, not just people. The racks above the seats, under the seats, the aisles — all were packed with new suitcases, old grain sacks and an assortment of other containers, brimming with items en route to inland destinations for re-sale.

The driver's assistant collected our fares, 10 birr ($1.20) each, and later collected an additional 1-5 birr from passengers carrying contraband. This little kitty would be provided as a small "gift" to the customs officials in Kebre Beyih. As we approached the customs post in that town, the bus fell silent and the tension thickened. We pulled off the road and parked behind a new warehouse, the windows still painted with large white Xs from the recent construction.

We awkwardly disembarked, tripping over the bags and other *chatchkes* blocking the aisle. I nonchalantly carried my "contraband" wrap-skirts in a small plastic bag. A team of young hawkers offered us soft drinks, cigarettes, and chewing gum; ragamuffins and mothers with hungry newborns strapped on their backs begged for a few cents. My fellow passengers and I watched as a cadre of customs officers boarded our bus, and picked through the baggage with predatory zest. Two officials climbed onto the roof, and rifled through the packages tied on top. I asked several people what exactly they were looking for, but no one seemed to know. Some looked on nervously, hoping their goods would be overlooked, or pass the test, whatever it was. We all stood silently, befuddled by the arbitrary nature of the process.

The supervisor appeared uncomfortable with my presence. He questioned my interpreter — who is this *ferenji*, what is he doing here, where did he come from? Seemingly satisfied with the responses, he flashed me a grin and returned to the outside of the bus, where his staff had assembled a collection of suitcases. They opened each one and emptied out the contents. Some luggage was returned unscathed, but four unlucky suitcases were confiscated along with several items of clothing. I desperately wanted to photograph this curious process, but thought better of it. We reboarded the bus, and started to leave.

Just outside the gates of the customs warehouse we

pulled to the side of the road. Sitting next to me was Bayush, a sweet, soft-spoken woman from Harar who appeared to be in her mid-fifties. She sobbed, complaining to the other passengers that two of her suitcases were taken by the authorities. Bayush has four children at home, all in school. The meager profit she scrapes out — from buying in Hartisheikh and selling in Harar — is scarcely enough to provide for her family. To Bayush, confiscation can spell the small-trader equivalent of Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

A hefty, matronly woman sitting in the front of the bus urged Bayush to go out and try to retrieve her suitcases. Ten minutes later she and two others returned with their goods. Bayush claims to have paid no bribe, no fine, nothing. Why then, did the customs officers confiscate those items? They are poorly paid bureaucrats banished to one of the farthest, most isolated corners of the country. I suspect they use the vague policy and distant location for person gain — wiggling and waggling a few extra bucks from frightened traders. I attempted to broach this topic with my traveling companions, but they were reluctant to discuss the issue.

* * *

Small traders have worked out several creative strategies to avoid paying customs duty. The week before my trip to Hartisheikh, I traveled from Jijiga to Harar. The bus was loaded with all manner of contraband. The woman sitting behind me teetered nervously on edge, and looked ready to jump out of her pants at the drop of a hat. She intently stared out the window, scanning the countryside for lurking customs officers. At one point, she thought she spotted one. It was like an action scene from an old WWII film: "Red alert!!!! Bogey, nine o'clock!!!" She dove for one of her sacks just beside my seat, and crushed my finger in a desperate attempt to protect her goods from the evil force.

Just a kilometer outside town, the bus stopped. My high-strung neighbor and several others disembarked with their contraband. Several teens sprinted to greet them, eager to carry booty into town, on foot via back roads. The Harar Education Bureau explained that many students in roadside schools drop out, unable to resist the lucrative contraband transport gig. In the middle of class, kids jump out of their seats and rush for the road. They can make 10-25 birr a pop, depending on the value of what they carry.

Other smuggling stories sounded like they were plagiarized from slapsticky sitcoms. The Save the Children/UK staff member who rescued us on the road to Hartisheikh remembered two such incidents. On a bus to Harar, one trader feared that her 12 fancy new Adidas windbreaker jackets were endangered. Before arriving at the customs post, she distributed them to twelve fellow passengers. They wore the jackets (perhaps posing as a soccer squad) and then returned them after successfully crossing into town. One guy forgot the jacket wasn't his and put all his money in the breast pocket. It took him several hours to trace the jacket-seller to retrieve his money.

Another silly scene took place at the Jijiga customs post. A shoe-trader passed around new shoes to everyone on board. When they all disembarked at the customs post, peculiarly clad in shiny footwear, one of the inspectors noticed that the floor of the bus was cluttered with old shoes. Cleverly, he took all these old shoes off the bus, piled them up, and told the passengers he planned to burn them. This time, the customs officer won the battle of wits, outfoxing the smuggler. The passengers were forced to expose their comrade to save their own footwear.

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Our return bus trip from Hartisheikh to Jijiga was rather less eventful. Having already been inspected once in Kebre Beyih, the bus was searched again at the customs post in Jijiga. This time the process was quick, and my presence clearly influenced the officials to smile a lot and shove us on our way.

Thus ended our perplexing journey from Hartisheik. Several questions continued to stew in my brain. Why are there two customs posts on the same road, well within the borders of Ethiopian territory? Why isn't there just one? And what were they looking for anyway? I decided to visit the Customs supervisor the next day, to hear the official version, and see if I could make sense of this strange system.

The Jijiga Customs Office rests at the rear of a large compound on the eastern fringe of town. The grounds are barren; several confiscated trucks and Landcruisers rest along one side of the warehouse. Abdel-Aziz and I marched confidently through the gates and toward the administrative offices. We were quickly intercepted by a plain-clothes security agent. He barraged us with the usual questions — where were we going, what business did we have there, what was my profession, did I have identification. I decided not to repeat my previous day's boldness. No need to ask for his ID. This guy was a spook; it was written all over his face.

I pulled out my nifty ICWA ID card, which invariably puzzles local officials. Many officials can't read it, so to avoid embarrassment, they pretend to examine it carefully, and then just let me in. For good measure I also presented my permission letter, issued by the Office of the Government Spokesperson in Addis Ababa. That worked like a secret handshake, and he led us up to the office building.

The Customs Offices are housed in one section of the warehouse, but the division of space is incomplete. Scattered around the entrance lay sacks of grain, beat-up oil cans, and what I assumed was other confiscated "contraband." I entered the office of Ato Tilahun, head of the

Jijiga customs post, and he welcomed me warmly.

I explained my mission: I wanted to ask him a few questions about the customs policy and activities in the area. His smile vanished and the warm welcome evaporated under a sheet of invisible ice. Like a true professional, Ato Tilahun maintained his composure and calmly delivered the standard, bureaucratic run-around. "This office," he said, "is actually supervised by the Regional Customs Office in Dire Dawa. I couldn't possibly speak with you directly. That would circumvent the normal communications route." Blah, blah, blah.

Ato Tilahun, an Amhara, displayed all the evasiveness and impenetrable bureaucratic tendencies that I'd experienced from highland authorities elsewhere. It is one of the major reasons I've enjoyed studying Somali society. Somalis are informal, and access is usually simple. Unannounced and without an appointment, I have shown up at the offices of Somali Directors and Ministers, and been welcomed.

Ato Tilahun politely refused to budge. I took the phone number of Ato Tsegaye, the Dire Dawa Regional Customs Supervisor, went into town, and called him. Again I rehashed may vitals, and asked if he could instruct Ato Tilahun to speak with me. Ato Tsegaye seemed much more open, and his tone indicated an awareness that the Jijiga post was drowning in a muck of corruption and funny business. He agreed to call Ato Tilahun right away. I said I'd return to the customs office in 15 minutes to conduct the interview.

Predictably, Ato Tilahun claimed he never received the call. He was visibly irritated now, and chose to ignore my presence in his office. He plunged his face in a memo as I sat awkwardly in the chair opposite. After minutes of tense silence, I suggested we call Dire Dawa. He dialed (what number I have no idea) and said there was no answer.

Becoming desperate, I tried to entice him: "I've heard several nasty rumors in town from local businessmen, and I thought it best to give customs a chance to tell its side of the story. If you refuse to talk with me, I'll have to assume that what they say is true."

But Ato Tilahun did not waver. "Do that. There are serious problems here. There is no way I will talk to you." End of discussion.

Then let's assume that the hearsay in town is true, even though many pastoralists openly admit to a penchant for exaggeration. Traders conveyed tales of shootings, confiscation, and Dukes of Hazard-style high speed chases through the wild frontier.

One businessman, Said (pronounced Sa-EED), crossed our path on the customs office compound. He eagerly offered us a farfetched story of his recent run-ins with the customs authorities. His tale was filled with contradictions and ridiculous claims. He seemed to think I was looking for a really wild and exciting story, and he was determined not to disappoint. The loony embellishment notwithstanding, I have little doubt that Said was chased and his goods were confiscated. The rest of the hyperbole is probably better sold to Hollywood for production as an action thriller for undiscriminating teens.

Several traders complained of corruption and lack of accountability in the Customs process. During the Derg rule (1974-91), they explained, confiscated goods were carefully registered, and the names, addresses and contacts of the nabbed owner were written down. At that time, there existed transparent mechanisms through which one could petition for the release of items. Of late, the system has essentially broken down — confiscated goods are just taken, with no record and no recourse. A gaping door for corruption has been ripped open. While confiscated goods become government property, their future sale or distribution is now untraceable; proceeds can therefore subtly slip into the pockets of shady officials.

The current Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government is far less repressive and authoritarian than the Derg. The EPRDF is implementing wide-ranging reforms in several sectors. And with the federal government's corruption angst, the shenanigans described above seem unlikely to continue for long. However, the Somali border trade is such a complex mess, comprehensive solutions have thus far proven elusive. The resultant policy ambiguity and supervision vacuum has enabled local customs officers to operate with impunity. As the new border posts open, and new legal routes are established, it is hoped that new systems and increased accountability will arrive with them.

* * *

Somali traders are crafty, and have proven adept at establishing efficient, profitable enterprises in some of the most godforsaken, rough conditions on the planet. They are a hardened bunch of risk-takers, and are unlikely to acquiesce to terms of trade they consider unacceptable. Thus, covert operations to catch illegal traders and threats of violence will do little more than pour acid into a festering economic wound. And superficial Band-Aid measures, like the four planned border posts, are unlikely (by themselves) to stem the hemorrhage of illegal trade through a 3,000-km border.

Thus the current standoff between federal authorities and local traders will not just vanish with the shifting of customs posts out to the border. A more fundamental set of changes are needed — a series of win-win reforms and incentives to encourage and entice com-

pliance. Creativity and continued dialogue between the Feds and the locals is the only way practical solutions will be found.

Should the government succeed in convincing Somalis to tread the legal route (by reducing tariffs and the like), revenues might actually climb. Should they fail, the border economy will continue to resemble the age-old cat-and-mouse chase. The hungry cat relentlessly pursues an elusive meal, while the deft mouse survives day-to-day, running like a fugitive. Both are distracted by the chase, stuck on a treadmill that saps their energy and diverts their attention from more pressing matters. And those pressing matters — the development of roads, telecommunications and other infrastructure; schools, clinics and other social services; peace and security — are all in their common interest. Such developmental imperatives, urgent though they might be, are also largely unattainable in an atmosphere wracked by perpetual disputes. The "contraband" dilemma is just one of many challenges demanding a new spirit of cooperation between federal authorities, regional officials and the private sector. The border economy is something of a test case — one that will show whether the Feds and locals can see beyond their past as adversaries, and envision a future as partners. ❑

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INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University.**[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Shelly Renae Browning. A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. **[SOUTH ASIA]**

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Paige Evans. A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Whitney Mason. A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam. **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." **[sub-SAHARA]**

Jean Benoît Nadeau. A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoît studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization." **[EUROPE/RUSSIA]**

Susan Sterner. A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Tyrone Turner. A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings. **[THE AMERICAS]**

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California.**[EAST ASIA]**

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Phone: (603) 643-5548 E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599 Web Site: www.icwa.org

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