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

MM-21
SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

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

Puntland: Linchpin in Somalia's Quest for Peace

GAROWE, Somalia MARCH 2000

By Marc Michaelson

Somalia's international image is battered. Mention Somalia and warlords, chaos, "failed state" come to mind. Engraved most deeply in American memory is the image of a dead Marine being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. Operation Restore Hope failed to live up to its name and turned tragically into Operation Humble Superpower. Perhaps more than any international intervention of the 1990's, the UN/US humanitarian debacle in Somalia shattered the idealism and hope of the post-Cold War new world order. The U.S. learned the hard way that messing about in other country's civil wars is a dangerous, complex affair.

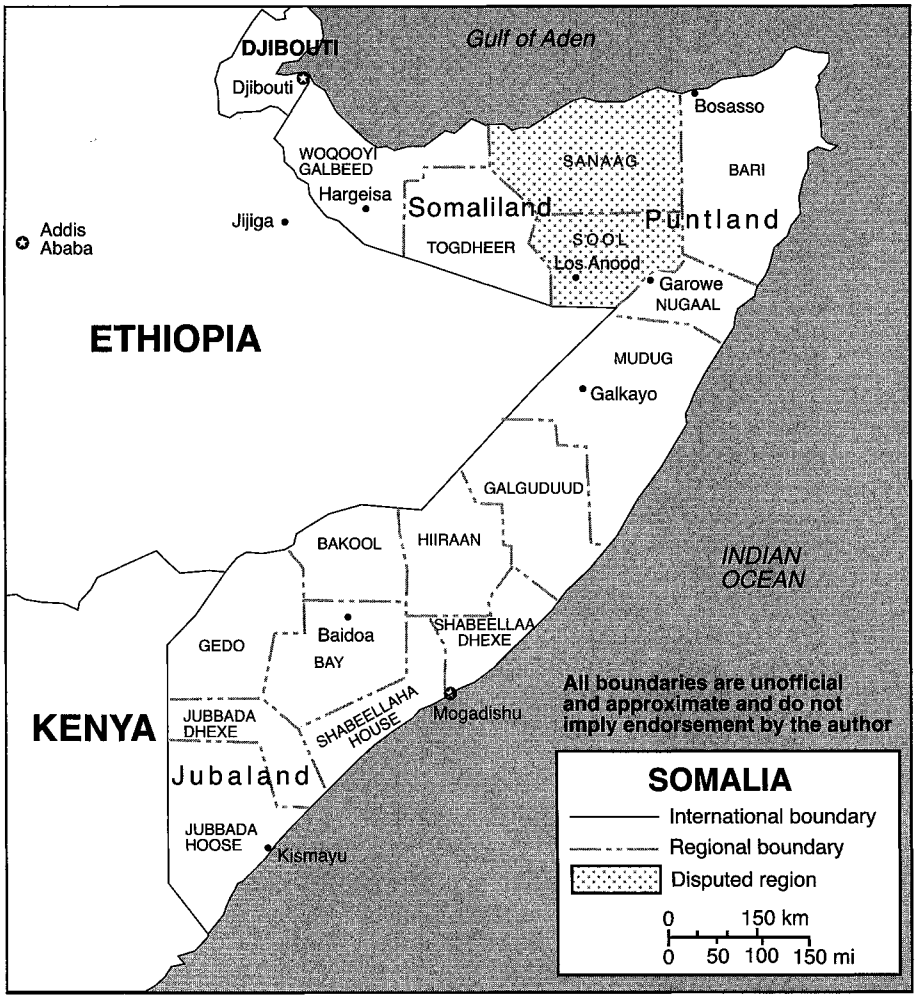
At the turn of the millennium, there are two Somalias. The north is peaceful, governed by regional administrations and booming economically. The south remains a civil-war disaster area. News of violent clashes continue to flow from Mogadishu, Kismayu and Baidoa.[1] Some warlords have died (Mohamed Farah Aideed) or disappeared (Mohamed "Hersi" Morgan), new ones have entered the scene (Hussein Aideed, Mohammed Hussein Adow) and a few elder statesmen of Somali disintegration (Ali Mahdi Mohammed, Osman Hassan Ali "Ato") continue the struggle for a nonexistent throne. These warlords share a common interest in perpetuating lawlessness and undermining peace.

Over the past few years, the Somali civil war has grown increasingly complex. Factions have split into sub-factions and sub-sub-factions, creating an ever-thickening morass of political confusion. Further exacerbating the situation, the Ethiopian-Eritrean border conflict has spilled over into a southern Somalia proxy war. Eritrea has reportedly shipped weapons and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) rebels into the area, and Ethiopian troops have penetrated deep into Somali territory to root out destabilizing forces.

In northern Somalia, recovery proceeds quietly apace. Two administrations — Somaliland (northwest) and Puntland (northeast) — have dramatically sprouted from Somalia's political ashes. Security and economic growth in the north (about 50 percent of the nation's landmass) is impressive, particularly since it has blossomed without major support from the international community.

The rebirth of northern Somalia has been nearly entirely indigenous. No high-profile peace conference boondoggles were held in nearby capitals, and no external mediators enticed greedy warlords with carrots or threatened them with sticks. The maintenance of clan peace and the rebuilding of shattered economies in Somaliland and Puntland have emerged through careful balancing of traditional

[1] One marginally positive development in the south has been the establishment of Islamic Shari'a courts. These law enforcement bodies have imposed some degree of justice and order, but at times even they have been dragged into the melee.



and modern political forces. For Somaliland and Puntland the future looks promising. The question is, will the South follow their lead?

* * *

Somaliland first emerged as a political unit when it became a British protectorate in 1884. After four days of independence in June 1960, Somaliland voluntarily merged with the previous Italian colony of the south, creating the Republic of Somalia. After Siad Barre's regime was ousted, Somaliland unilaterally declared independence in 1991. Nearly a decade later, Somaliland has yet to receive diplomatic recognition, but this detracts little from its accomplishments in setting up a functional framework for governance and economic development.[2]

Puntland is a more recent arrival on the political scene. In May 1998, elders from northeast Somalia ratified a constitution, appointed a government and formed the "Puntland State of Somalia." Unlike Somaliland, Puntland considers itself an integral part of Somalia — it is not seeking independence, but rather envisions itself as a "building block" of the future Somali state.

Puntland is a neophyte political entity, less than two years old, but has already established a marginally functional government administration. Peace and security are well-entrenched and new businesses are flourishing. But not all is rosy on the Puntland-scape. Sool and Sanaag, two regions claimed by both Somaliland and Puntland, represent a dangerous source of potential conflict. Galkayo (a town at the southern frontier of Puntland) is another pressure point, where clan tensions between the dominant Majerteen and their historical foes, the Hawiye, demand continuous care.

Puntland occupies critical space within Somalia. It sits physically and politically between secession-minded Somaliland and the turmoil-ridden south. Puntland's western and southern frontiers are simultaneously potential flashpoints and potential reconciliation points — they could either strengthen connections or explode into new violence.

BUSINESS IN BOSASSO

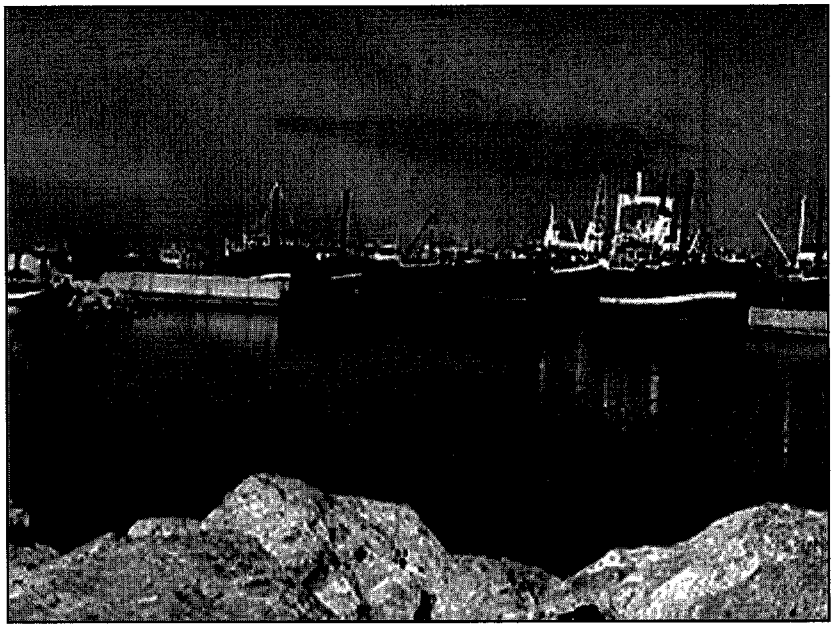
Puntland possesses more than 1,000 kilometers of strategic coastline, and Bosasso is its major port town. Livestock and frankincense are exported to Arab countries, and all manner of consumer goods — foodstuffs, electronics, clothing, vehicles — are imported from Dubai and other distant trade hubs. Additional business comes from Somaliland (where taxes are a bit higher), and from the war-torn south where Mogadishu and Kismayu ports have largely ceased to function. Despite being poorly equipped (there are no cranes, heavy machinery or storage facilities), Bosasso's port is thriving.

Somalis are an enterprising lot, and never truly bought into ex-President Siad Barre's (1969-91) scientific socialism. Laissez-faire-ism is something of a second religion in Somalia — government noninterference in the economy is sacred. To secure a small operating budget, Puntland does levy marginal taxes at the seaport, airport

[2] For a detailed look at developments in Somaliland, see my earlier piece "Recognizing Somaliland" (MM-7, January 1999).

and on vendors in different sectors of trade.

Since 1991, Bosasso's population has grown eightfold from 25,000 to an estimated 200,000 — a direct result of the civil war that displaced hundreds of thousands of Somalis. Some fled the country but most migrated from Mogadishu and other hotspots to their ancestral clan homes. Bosasso, unscathed by the civil war and itself a center of economic activity, attracted a massive influx.



Bosasso port

Bosasso's municipal budget is a paltry 300 million Somali Shillings (U.S.$33,000) per month. Undeterred, the town's new mayor, Osman Haji Mire, is intent on building confidence in the government by showing people that taxes are spent on services that benefit *them*. Since taking office five months ago, Mayor Osman has rehabilitated key roads to the port and airport, finished building a slaughterhouse and livestock market and started a garbage-collection service. He has also begun to increase accountability by using Puntland's nascent formal banking system for municipal finances. Mayor Osman says Bosasso needs international aid to meet the infrastructure and service needs of his town's growing population. In the meantime, his administration is doing what it can to keep the town functioning.

Importer Abdulkarim Hassan displays his goods

Puntland's economy (like neighboring Somaliland's) relies heavily on the livestock trade. Goats and sheep are sold "on the hoof" to Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Over the past several years exports have proven volatile. From February 1998 to May 1999, Saudi Arabia imposed a livestock ban on Somalia, citing fear of Rift Valley Fever. Exports decreased significantly, exposing the perils of over-reliance on a monolithic economic base.[3]

In good years, livestock-trade prosperity spins off into other sectors. Currency values fluctuate accordingly. During the peak export month (of Ramadan) in January 2000, one dollar bought just 8,800 Somali shillings; during low-export months the dollar has risen to 10,500 Shillings.[4] Somaliland's currency is even more closely tied to livestock. During the Saudi ban of 1998, the Somaliland Shilling devalued to 3,850 per dollar. Just over a year later, it has doubled

[3] In 1997, Somaliland's livestock exports valued $120.8 million and brought in about 80% of the area's hard-currency earnings. During the following year's livestock ban, exports dipped dramatically and the Somaliland government's tax revenues fell by 60%. Livestock exports from Bosasso were $14.8 million in 1997 and also plummeted the following year. (*Human Development Report—Somalia 1998*, UNDP, page 61). According to a forthcoming War-Torn Societies Project Report on the Puntland economy, sheep and goat exports (1991-98) peaked in 1992 at 1.15 million head and have since declined. During the ban in 1998, exports bottomed out at 344,220 head, about 1/3 the number sold in 1992.

[4] Interview with Jama Ismael, currency trader, Bosasso market, 20 January 2000.

Barakaat offices in Bosasso

in value to 1,950 Somaliland Shillings to the dollar.

In Bosasso as in Hargeisa (Somaliland), currency traders sit in the outdoor market displaying large stacks of money. They trade U.S. dollars, Ethiopian *birr*, Saudi *riadhs*, Kuwaiti *dinars* and just about any other currency that finds its way into Somalia. Such brash displays of money in the streets of an American or European city would instantly attract armed robbers. In Somaliland and Puntland, such crime is uncommon. These realities contradict images of a chaotic, crime-ridden Somalia.

Remittances represent Puntland's second largest source of revenue. Somalis living in the Diaspora regularly send money to their relatives. The Somali informal banking sector that facilitates these transactions is perhaps the most efficient in the world. Wire transfers are guaranteed within 24 hours, and a fee of 1 percent to 7 percent is levied on each transaction.

Telecommunications is another vibrant growth sector. Several companies vie for clients in different areas of Somalia. Soltelco and STC dominate the Somaliland market. NETCO and Somtel serve Bosasso. Barakaat operates cell-phone franchises in Mogadishu, Bosasso and Hargeisa.

Competition in the telecom sector is fierce. Recently, a vicious price war between Barakaat and NETCO pushed international rates from Bosasso down to U.S.80 cents per minute. Not bad, considering the same call ten years ago cost about $17 per minute.[5] The current rates are the lowest in Africa and the clarity on Barakaat's satellite system is spectacular.

Such cut-throat competition benefits consumers in the short term, but companies are destroying each other in an unbridled effort to gain market share. In 1998, SITCO's arrival (as a cell-phone operator in Hargeisa) shook up Somaliland's telecommunications sector and prices plunged. Now SITCO has disappeared into bankruptcy, a casualty of its own hard-ball, low-ball tactics. The two other major phone companies survived the onslaught, and are now competing with newly-opened Barakaat.

Another major problem in the telecommunications sector is the lack of regulation. Somalis disdain cumbersome bureaucracy and legal restrictions, but some level of coordination is desperately needed. Each telephone company currently maintains its own individual switching system. That means a Barakaat number can not call a NETCO line, or vice versa. Most international agencies (and some businesses) therefore must maintain two or three lines from different companies. To synchronize systems and resolve inefficiencies, the government needs to take regulatory action.

Overall, the Bosasso economy is booming. But in rural Puntland life is much more precarious and difficult. Drought and environmental degradation are forcing pastoralists to migrate in search of water and grazing land. Since the livestock trade is the backbone of the Puntland economy, the government would do well to provide services to the rural majority (water-access points, environmental conservation, animal health). Sustained growth in Puntland would demonstrate to the rest of Somalia what is possible with a bit of peace and ingenuity. That might just prove southern Somalia's best chance to emerge from the abyss —

Drought is forcing pastoralists to move in search of water and grazing land.

[5] Interview with Mohammed Hersi, Bosasso, 20 January 2000.

A Brief History of Puntland

Northeast Somalia, what is now Puntland, was the first area to rebel against President Siad Barre's rule. In 1978, Abdillahi Yusuf and a core of disenchanted, mostly Majerteen (sub-clan of Darod), formed the Somali Salvation Front (SSF); they later merged with other rebels to create the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) in 1981. On October 12, 1985, Abdillahi Yusuf was picked up by Ethiopian security forces and was imprisoned for several years. The SSDF collapsed.[6]

Based in Ethiopia, the SSDF was never able to mount a credible challenge to the Barre regime. However, the rebels did attract a brutal backlash of repression to the northeast. One traditional leader in Garowe says Barre cadres "killed suspected opponents, tied their bodies to the backs of vehicles and dragged the corpses around town as a warning to others."[7]

1991 signaled a political turning point for the region. The Somali and Ethiopian governments were overthrown. Somalia plunged into civil war as clan-based factions struggled to fill the power vacuum in Mogadishu. Abdillahi Yusuf was released by the new Ethiopian government and the SSDF was revived.

But northeast Somalia could not escape the turf battles enveloping the nation. Mohammed Farah Aideed (leader of a Habr-Gedir sub-clan of the Hawiye) attempted to seize control of Galkayo. Majerteen clansmen from throughout the northeast rushed to defend the town, and many young people lost their lives.[8]

In 1992, the Islamic fundamentalist organization Al-Itihad challenged the SSDF for supremacy. With support from rural pastoralists, Abdillahi Yusuf defeated them. As one observer put it: "In Somalia, power is derived from the countryside, not the towns. Without the support of rural folk, the politicians in the towns can not govern."[9]

Apart from these two blips of violence in the early 1990s, the northeast has been less affected by the civil war. By Somali standards, the population of the northeast is homogeneous, composed almost exclusively of the Darod clan. In fact, Puntland could have been named Hartiland because it is the traditional homeland of the Harti sub-clans (Majerteen, Warsengeli, Dulbahante) of the Darod.

Uncompromising respect of elders has also inhibited violence. Unlike the situation in other regions, gangs of renegade youths never perpetrated banditry and violence in the northeast. Some ex-militias, however, did set up roadblocks between Bosasso and Galkayo. By one taxi driver's count, there were 47 checkpoints on that road just before the Puntland administration took power in mid-1998.

One major impact of the civil war has been the internal displacement of Somalis. Residents of Mogadishu fled the war-torn capital and headed for their historical clan homelands, leaving businesses, homes and property behind. The northeast received a massive influx of Darods, many of whom were businessmen or bureaucrats in the Somali national government.

Worried that the clan violence of the south might spread to the northeast, and impatient with the failure of a series of Somali reconciliation meetings, the SSDF leadership decided to form a regional administration. A large meeting of respected elders and intellectuals assembled in Garowe in February/March 1998. After lengthy discussions, the group resolved to establish a regional government — not to seek independence from Somalia, but rather as a "building block" for future Somali reconciliation.

A second Garowe meeting convened a few months later to review the draft constitution. The national charter was endorsed, the Puntland State of Somalia was officially formed, and its first government (including a 69-member parliament) was elected on 23 July 1998. On that date, longtime SSDF leader Abdillahi Yusuf was appointed Puntland's first president.

[6] Much of the information in this paragraph can be found in *Human Development Report—Somalia 1998*, UNDP, page 100.
[7] Interview with Sultan Said Mohammed Grasse, Garowe, 23 January 2000.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Informal discussion with Mohamed Hersi, 22 January 2000.

learning from the experiences and successes of their brothers in the north.

PUNTLAND ADMINISTRATION

The Puntland constitution directly mentions the region's commitment to remain part of Somalia. Evidencing this commitment, the constitution lists certain functions that Puntland would cede to a central authority and others that it might share. Puntland envisions the formation of a national federal government in the future, coordinated by a weak central government.

Since the birth of Puntland in mid-1998, the administration has sought to maintain sub-clan balance in high government positions. The selection of ministers and department heads on the basis of who they are rather than what they can do is the subject of some debate and dissatisfaction. The younger generation desires "clan-blind" governance based on achievement, not identity.

One critic who recently quit a high government post grumbled: "The leaders of Somalia now are from the colonial time. They only understand 'divide and rule.' It's the year 2000, our leaders are behind the times." He says he resigned out of frustration with the low levels of capacity and motivation in the Cabinet: "There's no plan, nothing, just a group."

Others acknowledge the need for delicately balancing competing clan interests — to insure against the clan violence that has wracked other parts of Somalia. The Puntland government views its role first and foremost as protector of the peace. With this focus on the preservation of law and order, more than 70 percent of the budget is spent on police and security forces.

Sultan Absalam Sultan Mohamoud, a sub-clan leader in Galkayo, openly criticizes the Puntland administration as chock full of ex-military and ex-SSDF rebels. He perceives massive military spending to be wasteful, and advocates increased spending on education and social services.

Some Puntlanders complain that the constitution is more a theoretical than a living document. Human rights are flouted, and freedoms (like that of the press) are guaranteed only when government strongmen so desire. The mechanisms of governance need considerable strengthening — to ensure that laws and liberties are respected and applied equally, not merely at the whim of government cadres.

As these debates continue, it is important to keep in mind that observations of Puntland government performance are preliminary. The learning curve is steep and it will take time for the region's nascent administration to govern effectively. The Puntland leadership is prudent in prioritizing the maintenance of peace and security. As the south has painfully demonstrated, without peace, no development is possible.

STRESS POINT: SOOL & SANAAG

Most of northeastern Somalia is secure and uncontested. But Puntland does have two major stress points, and these frontiers engender dangers and opportunities to the future of the nation as a whole. To the west are the disputed border regions of Sool and Sanaag, to the south the trouble-plagued town of Galkayo.

Both Somaliland and Puntland claim jurisdiction of the Sool and Sanaag Regions. Somaliland employs a legal and historical argument, referring to the colonial border of British Somaliland, which included both regions. Since Sool and Sanaag were part of the British colony, and African colonial borders are considered sacrosanct, then the two regions must fall under the authority of Somaliland.

Puntland's claim is based on tradition, clan affiliation and popular will. The Warsengeli of Sanaag and the Dulbahante of Sool are sub-clans of the Darod, the predominant clan of Puntland. Somaliland is primarily inhabited by another clan, the Isaaq. Puntland argues that the voluntary merger of Somaliland into Somalia in 1960 invalidated the colonial border. And since clan represents the dominant source of identity, social organization and responsibility in Somalia, the Darod sub-clans of Sool and Sanaag should logically join their brothers in Puntland.

Both Puntland and Somaliland have been vying for the support and loyalties of locals. Both have sent high-level delegations to lobby elders. Both have included residents of Sool and Sanaag in their governments and have appointed governors in Los Anood (capital of Sool). Most recently, both sent "police" (in actuality, troops) to protect their interests in the area.

Jamal, a Puntland taxi driver who frequents the Garowe-Los Anood route, says there are about 300 soldiers from each side currently living in the town: "They sit and drink tea together, and are generally very friendly. Both sides say the same thing — 'This is our land; those others [troops] are our guests, we're just letting them stay here for some time.'"

Thus far, no fighting has erupted and local observers don't expect a violent confrontation. However, it is impossible to predict what will happen in Somalia, and the standoff remains a latent flashpoint. The current stalemate, tense though it may be, represents a chance for peaceful resolution of the dispute. Thus far, local and regional authorities have failed to establish a constructive dialogue.

Ismael Warsame, Chief of Cabinet of the Puntland

government, says, "We've approached Mohammed Ibrahim Egal (Somaliland's President) and said we want to negotiate, but he's refused." Compromise on this issue may be politically untenable for Somaliland, since the claim to independence depends upon the sanctity of colonial borders. If Sool and Sanaag opt out, Somaliland's case comes crashing down.

Ali Warsame

Ismael's certainty that Sool and Sanaag are part of Puntland and similar posturing by Somaliland officials strikes an all-too- familiar note in the sub-region. Both sides are absolutely sure that their position is correct, their adversaries' claims entirely invalid. This sounds hauntingly like Ethiopia and Eritrea in their border dispute over Badime.

Should the Sool and Sanaag issue linger unresolved, future trigger events could spark a military confrontation. Trench warfare, fleets of tanks and Mig fighter-jets seem an unlikely scenario in Sool and Sanaag. But even a limited military showdown would prove disastrous to the upstart Puntland and Somaliland administrations — damaging credibility and erasing their greatest asset: peace and security. Much better to address this tender issue diplomatically, and to agree on an interim arrangement that both sides can live with. The final status of the two regions can only emerge within the context of a broader national reconciliation agreement.

STRESS POINT: GALKAYO

Puntland's other trouble spot rests on its southern border. Galkayo is a major transit point for trade and the symbolic midpoint of the Somali people — 750 kilometers from Bosasso, 750 kilometers from Hargeisa, 750 kilometers from Mogadishu and 750 kilometers from Jijiga — more or less. During the past few years, Galkayo has come to serve as the functional boundary between the peace of northern Somalia and the violence of the south.

Two rival clans inhabit Galkayo — the Majerteen (Darod) and the Habr-Gedir (Hawiye). Conflict between these two clans has long historical roots, but intensified in the early years of the civil war. As Sultan Absalam Sultan Mohamoud sees it: "Galkayo is a very critical area. It is vital to Somalia's problem. Two of the most dangerous tribes are the Habr-Gedir and the Majerteen. No one can settle Galkayo peace until these two clans reconcile."

That may not be easy. Ali Warsame is a 42-year-old pastoralist who lives some 40 miles north of Galkayo. He has 60 goats and nine camels and says his area is peaceful. When asked if there are ever problems between the Hawiye and Darod, Ali points to a bullet scar on his neck. "In 1992-93, the Hawiye attacked Ba'adwein village to take a well. All of us Darod came to defend it, and we won." Ali estimates 20 people died during the skirmish, and he says there have been other conflicts since.

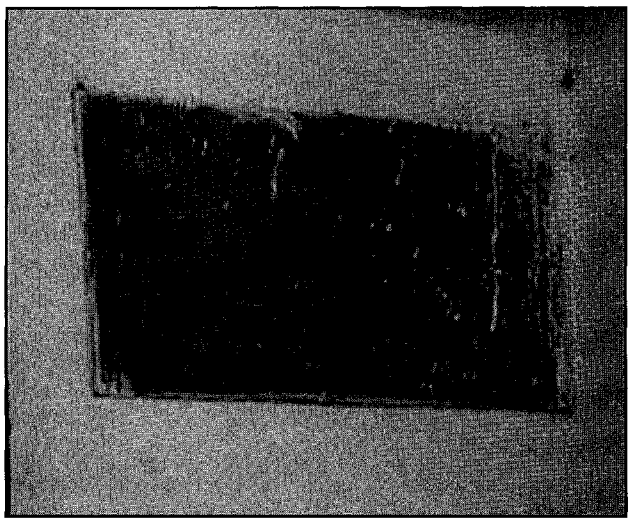
The emotional content of rural battles often spills into the towns; the Galkayo tension-meter always rises in the wake of fighting in the bush. Galkayo itself is divided by a "green line," a boundary that separates Darod neighborhoods from those of the Hawiye. Each clan stays on its own side. But active fighting in Galkayo has diminished since April 1993, when Mohammed Farah Aideed (United Somali Congress leader) and Abdillahi Yusuf (SSDF leader) struck a peace deal. Occasional outbreaks of violence still occur in the outlying areas of Mudug Region, but their frequency and intensity have diminished.

* * *

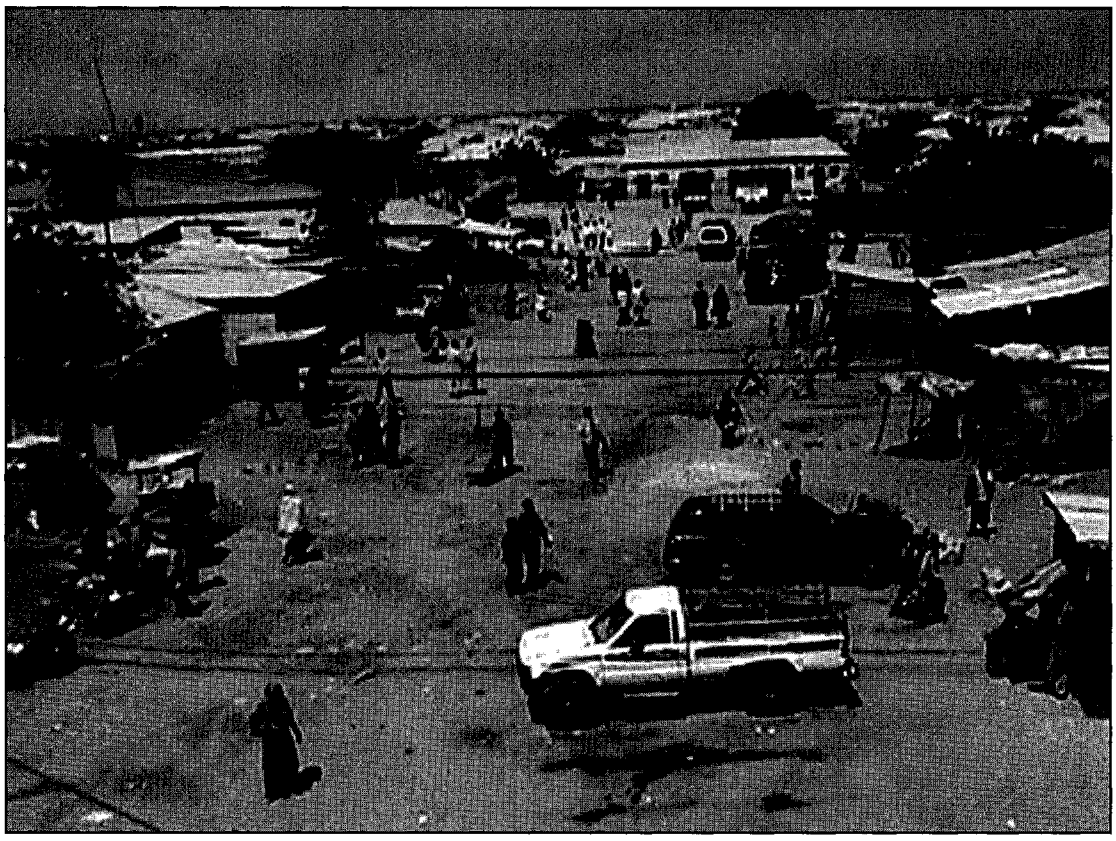
A sign at the entrance of Galkayo's Kamal Hotel forbids patrons from entering with knives, firearms or grenades. In an upstairs suite, three important government officials gather to meet me — Mudug Region Governor Abdirahman Mohammed Shahid, Galkayo Mayor Hussein Yamat and Parliamentarian Abdillahi Khalif Hashi. First and foremost on their agenda is the lack of international support. Abdillahi says: "Tell the people where you come from to help us with education, health, water and veterinary services."

All three men point to the serious development needs of the town and express frustration that they've received paltry levels of aid. Most international agencies have been reluctant to set up operations in Galkayo due to security risks.

Puntland officials downplay tensions and paint a rosy



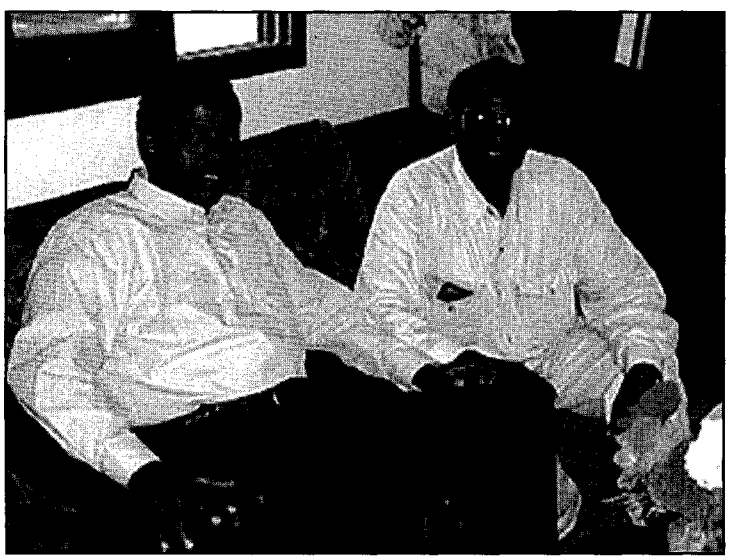
Sign outside the door of Kamal Hotel in Galkayo



View of Galkayo from atop Kamal Hotel

picture of Hawiye-Majerteen relations. Abdillahi: "There is no problem; everything is going well here. As you can see, the town is normal. Now there is no conflict between Hawiye and Majerteen." Abdirahman: "If you see downtown, there is peace. We are together for seven years."

Eager to prove the peace, they urge an overnight stay and promise to arrange a visit to the Hawiye side of town for the following day. Unfortunately, a tight schedule has limited this Galkayo visit to a day-trip. Still, the very fact that they need advanced notice to "arrange a visit" to the Hawiye side betrays the ongoing tension. The freedom of movement over the green line that officials painstakingly seek to portray just doesn't exist.



Mudug Region governor Abdirahman Mohammed Shahid (right) with a local businessman

Mayor Hussein says that in November 1999, Puntland's President Abdillahi Yusuf met Hawiye clan elders and tried to convince them to join the municipal administration: "They rejected it. They have relationships with Mogadishu — Hussein Aideed [Mohammed Farah Aideed's son and successor] and Osman Ato. They gave orders to these people from Mogadishu."

Governor Abdirahman adds: "The Hawiye politicians don't want progress here [in Galkayo] or in Puntland...They don't want their people to be together with us. The Hawiye leaders want to perpetuate the conflict; they benefit from it continuing." Such perspectives are certainly biased against the Hawiye. But throughout the south, in Hawiye and other clan areas, warlords and their gangs have a stake in perpetuating war and instability. As one Sultan explains: "Some people have an interest not to settle Galkayo. They have no

skills, no way to make money except through conflict."

Upon returning to our taxi, I put on my best poker face and tell the driver I want to go to the other side of the green line. He replies with a quick "No way," giggles nervously and then looks at me like I am insane. Earlier I had asked a Garowe-based researcher if I could visit the Hawiye side. He said: "*You* can, but your Majerteen guide can't. You'll have to leave him behind and go with a Hawiye."

The green line itself seems more a psychological than a physical phenomenon. The physical line is elusive, invisible, but remains deeply etched in the public psyche. At the southern end of town, the main road to Mogadishu functions as the green line. The eastern side of the road is Hawiye, the western side Majerteen. In actuality, the area is abandoned.

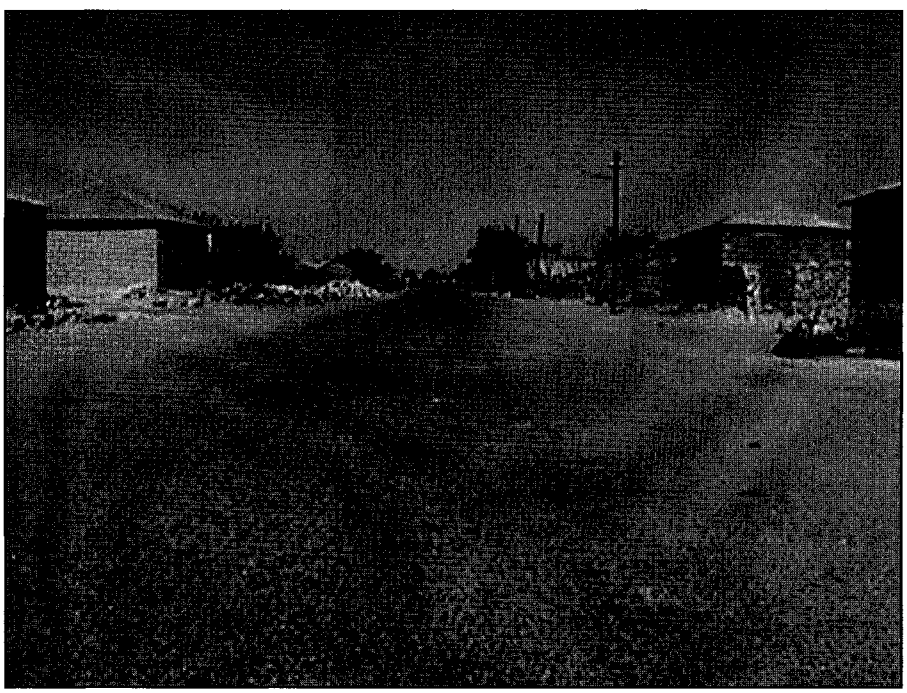
About 200 meters before the final roadblock on the road to Mogadishu, several large trucks unload fruits and vegetables. This is where the north-south handoff takes place. Traders meet at this spot, transfer their goods and then transport them to their marketing areas (north or south). In spite of the civil war, trade between north and south continues, and Galkayo serves as the link between the two.

Galkayo is not just a crucial trade center. It is also a critical political nexus and one that must be creatively managed if Somalia is to find a path to peace. The 1993 Mudug peace accord has reduced violent confrontations, but it must be built upon, expanded into other spheres of life. The Puntland government and Hawiye leadership need to figure out a way to establish a mixed and inclusive administration. They need to dismantle the green line so that Hawiyes and Majerteens can live and work together as in the past. The responsibility of the leaders is to create an environment of "normalcy," where lawlessness is not tolerated and cross-clan friendships and business partnerships can once again take root.

DJIBOUTI PEACE INITIATIVE

Since the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, reconciliation conferences have been held in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. At each of these meetings, focus was placed on warlords — their "leadership" was legitimized and they were charged with the task of making peace. These brutes, responsible for the death and destruction of their nation, were wined and dined; they hugged and exchanged niceties and in formulaic fashion vowed to reform their violent ways. But these warlords and their bands of thugs are the primary purveyors of war and lawlessness; they are the ones who benefit from the chaos. When they returned to Somalia and let the peace agreements unravel, no one should have been surprised.

The international community became bored with Somalia. Somalis appeared naturally inclined toward self-destruction — and with all the other crises brewing in the world, why waste time with a basket-case resistant to all efforts at national healing? Such analysis reeks of oversimplification. The words and actions of the warlords have been generalized to represent those of all Somalis. But just as Slobodan Milosevic and his genocidal henchmen don't represent the aspirations of all Serbs, neither does Hussein Aideed represent the hopes of all Somalis.



Abandoned "green line" area at the southern end of Galkayo

The failed reconciliation attempts of the 1990s were thus fundamentally flawed — they listened to and empowered the wrong forces in society. And they sidelined the elements of civil society — elders, women's groups, peace organizations, religious leaders — that were struggling for peace.

Enter a new Djiboutian President, Ismael Omar Guelleh. After decades of stagnant rule by President Hassan Gouled Aptidon, Djibouti elected his nephew and chosen successor in 1999. President Ismael brings youth, enthusiasm and a fresh, reform-minded perspective to Djibouti's stale political scene. He has also breathed new life

into the Somali peace process.

In his 22 September 1999 address to the United Nations General Assembly, the Djiboutian President leapt into the void of Somali peacemaking with a new initiative. He started with a vow not to repeat the mistakes of the past: "The challenge that we now collectively face...is establishing an authority to fill in the vacuum, which is continuously exploited by the Warlords...The Warlords have never agreed and will never agree on anything. Appeasing the warlords has not worked and never will."[10]

President Ismael's approach seeks to include a broader cross-section of Somalis in the deliberations. "It is time the Somali Civil Society, including intellectuals, artists and mothers, take the responsibility. The Somali Civil Society has matured politically during these years of suffering...And on the occasion of a true reconciliation conference, these representatives of the Civil Society, together with the Warlords, must come together to agree in definitive terms on the road to peace and national harmony..."[11]

President Ismael proposes a three-phase plan to restore governance to Somalia. In the first phase, the Warlords disarm, transforming their factions into political parties and themselves into law-abiding politicians. If they refuse to comply, in phase two President Ismael envisions a strong international response — sanctions against the Warlords, freezing their assets, banning them from international travel and charging them with crimes against humanity. Should such measures still fail to bring peace, phase three would entail an unspecified collective international effort "using all necessary means" to rein in the Warlords.

Thus far, most attention is being paid to the upcoming Somali national reconciliation conference, scheduled to be held from April 20-May 5, 2000 in Djibouti. Somalis have an insatiable appetite for news and debate, and at the moment, the Djibouti initiative is the talk of the tea shops.

In Puntland, there appear to be two general categories of opinion on the peace process. The average person on the street or in the bush expresses enthusiasm and hope. Tired of having their country ignored, they are thirsty for peace and a new government. President Ismael's plan is the only show in town. Most Somalis are thrilled that he is reviving and expanding the dialogue, and they believe he will succeed in securing peace.

Others, loosely defined as "intellectuals," express a more skeptical view. They are pleased that President Ismael has brought Somalia back onto the global radar screen, and they see the participation of civil-society actors (i.e. non-warlords) as a positive development. However, they fear President Ismael is after a quick fix, sweeping complexities under the carpet and oversimplifying problems that will take years to solve.

Take the contentious issue of representation at the reconciliation conference. Who will be the delegates and who will select them? Who should represent the areas where legitimate regional governments have already formed? To what level should clans be broken down — the sub-sub-clan or the sub-sub-sub-clan? What should be the role of warlords? Of traditional leaders (Sultans and Imams)? How should women be represented? And what of other groups in civil society?

And then there is Somaliland, the breakaway region that unilaterally declared independence in 1991. The Somaliland government supports the Djibouti initiative, but from a distance. Since it claims to no longer be part of Somalia, it will not attend.

Abdirahman Abdulle Shuke, interim director of the Puntland Development Research Center and a former Somali Minister of Education, believes that holding the conference so hastily amounts to "putting the cart before the horse." He believes President Ismael and his advisors should spend several months in Somalia, listening to and meeting people and leaders. He also worries that the interests of powerful regional actors (among them Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya and Egypt) might further complicate and subvert the process.

Shuke advocates a bottom-up process starting at the most micro-sub-clan levels and working up from there. He says that first, people must unify within their clans. They must work out their internal problems, select legitimate leaders and quell renegade elements within their own clans. Then and only then can inter-clan (regional level) and national reconciliation occur. Shuke believes this "building block" approach would take more than a decade to complete.

While such longer-term processes may seem technically sound, for an impatient international community quick-fixes are always more attractive. International partners want swift, tidy solutions with a start date, an end date and a definite budget. A ten-year process would be too unwieldy, complicated, unmanageable. Who has the time and patience to work on this for so long?

Shuke's analysis illuminates a key problem — Somalia is not yet ready for national reconciliation. The mere existence of horrific conditions — lawlessness, violence,

[10] Speech of His Excellency the President of the Republic of Djibouti Mr. Ismael Omar Guelleh at the 54th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, 22nd September 1999.
[11] Ibid.

starvation — by no means predetermines a successful peace process. The fact is that different parts of the country are at different stages of political evolution. Some regions have established governments, others remain clan battlegrounds. How can representatives from Puntland sit at the same table with those from Kismayu? They are coming from entirely different political realities — where will they start to build common ground?

Another advocate of bottom-up peacebuilding cites the Somali cultural inclination toward imitation. "Look at the economy. A few years ago, we had no telephone companies. Someone started one and now we have many. Same goes for purified water. There were no companies selling bottled and purified water and now there are more than ten. We Somalis watch each other; we are jealous. When one Somali gets a good idea, everyone else copies it."

What is true in the economic realm might prove applicable to the political arena as well. First, Somaliland set up its administration. Then came Puntland. Now others are trying to do the same (Jubaland, Bay and Bakool). Southerners see their northern brothers living in peace and rebuilding their economies — and they want the same for themselves.

Imitating the achievements of the north will not be simple. Somaliland and Puntland are each dominated by one major clan. The south is more heterogeneous, a muddled stew of different peoples. The southern clan landscape is more complicated and correspondingly more difficult to pacify. Compounding the challenge is the presence of several power-hungry warlords who have already successfully undermined traditional dispute-resolution forces.

One former official in the Puntland government believes, "The old generation of leaders must die off before peace will ever come. If these guys [warlords] come to Djibouti, they'll just quarrel." Another critic suggests that all the warlords be invited to the Djibouti conference: "When they arrive, arrest them, lock them up in jail and throw away the key!!" A provocative idea, but not likely.

While many observers hold serious doubts about the Djibouti peace initiative, they are reluctant to write it off entirely. It is certainly a step forward, and while they don't expect the wholesale success that President Ismael is banking on, they believe some headway will be made. But will the progress be significant enough to build new momentum and commitment — to harness support for the plodding, hard-nosed, longer-term process that is needed?

Puntland will be a major factor in the Djibouti peace process. By nature of its physical position between Somaliland and the troubled south, Puntland has a unique opportunity to connect, encourage and nudge. Puntland must positively influence its neighbors — enticing Somaliland to participate actively in future reconciliation processes, and prodding the south to follow its lead by establishing local and regional administrations. Only with these "building blocks" in place can the Somali state be reconstructed and a new, more durable political ethos emerge. ❑

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MM-21

Author: Michaelson, Marc
Title: ICWA Letters - Sub-Saharan Africa
ISSN: 1083-429X
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia; South Asia; Mideast/North Africa; Europe/Russia; The Americas

ICWA Letters **(ISSN 1083-429X)** are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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

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Four West Wheelock Street
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