ICWA
LETTERS

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

MM-7 1999
SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

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Recognizing Somaliland

HARGEISA, Somaliland, Republic of **January 1999**

By Marc Michaelson

Somalilanders have a bit of a psychological complex, as well they should. These people of the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, in what was the northwest region of Somalia prior to the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, have accomplished a tremendous amount in the past seven years. They have reestablished peace, security and stability; constructed a unique system of traditionally-rooted democratic governance; begun rebuilding war-devastated infrastructures; and created a free market economy that even the Freemen of Montana have lauded in their journal of radical laissez-fairism.

So, why the complex? Well, in spite of these achievements, nobody seems to notice Somaliland. The breakaway nation remains invisible, unrecognized, ignored. Not one country has granted Somaliland diplomatic recognition. To maintain the tidiness of the international system, except in rare and extenuating circumstances, national borders are considered inviolable. Somaliland is thus still technically a region of Somalia, even though Somalia has no government and for the past seven years has essentially ceased to exist as a "state." Just as Somalia defines the term "collapsed state," Somaliland could aptly coin a new term—"invisible state."

Somaliland's existence is peculiar, unidentifiable. It is a pseudo-country of sorts, an anomaly on the international scene that nobody quite knows how to handle. For this reason, the Somaliland "government" has been unable to solicit bilateral assistance or support. For lack of any diplomatic alternative, Somaliland often gets treated as an *ad hoc* entity floating in what is popularly perceived as a sea of Somali clan chaos.

The international community's failure to make sense of Somaliland, and their corresponding neglect of it, have been blessings in disguise. Somaliland's recent experiences with the tasks of peace-building and nation-building have been extremely difficult, but they have been wholly organic, emerging from within rather than imposed from without. Somalilanders have had to look deep within themselves to figure out how to restore sanity to their war-devastated society. Their success has largely been due, ironically, to having been isolated, ignored and forgotten. These conditions have forced Somalilanders to be self-reliant and innovative.

Now, as Somaliland nurtures its fragile peace, its nascent government, and budding economy, the international community needs to notice what is happening there. It needs to encourage these positive developments, and avoid squashing Somaliland's achievements through not-so-benign neglect. Constructive engagement is vital at this stage of the upstart nation's fledgling experiment. It is time to begin "recognizing" Somaliland—if not diplomatically, at

Continued on page 4

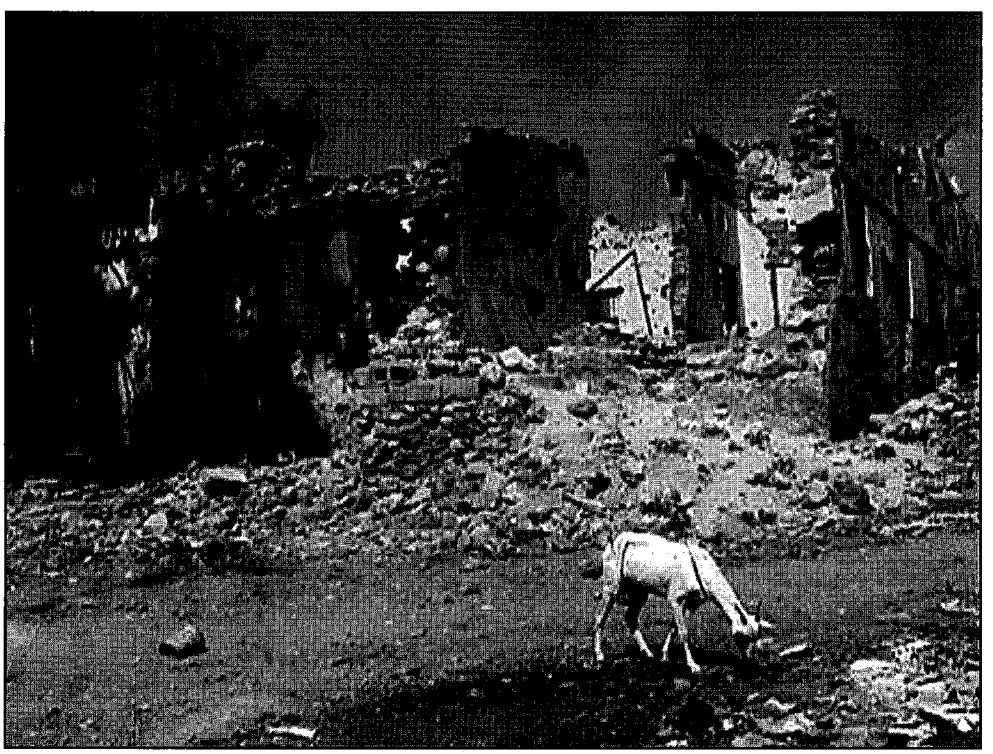
A Brief History of "Somaliland": Colonialism, Dreams of Somali Unity, and State Collapse

The history of Somaliland and the heart of its case for independence begins in the 1880s. During the European scramble for Africa, the Somali people, one of the largest ethnic groups in East Africa, were divided into five administrative constructs — French Somaliland (later Djibouti), Abyssinia (Ethiopia), Kenya, Italian Somalia, and the British Somaliland Protectorate. Throughout the 1880's, a series of treaties were signed between Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia, the British, French and Italians, to carve up the Horn of Africa. In so doing, the Somali people were parceled out into separate European-constructed political units. Colonialism superimposed various administrative systems and different European languages, cultures and experiences on the Somali populace.

Somaliland became a British Protectorate in 1884. It was never considered a full "colony" (like Kenya, for example), and was maintained primarily for two reasons: first, to protect the British garrison in Aden across the Red Sea, and second, as a supply of cheap, high-quality livestock for that garrison. Britain neither invested major resources to develop Somaliland, nor did it import large numbers of foreigners to rule the country. The British system of "indirect rule" was relatively decentralized and utilized traditional clan authorities as administrative instruments. As such, the colonial experience of the north varied greatly from that of the south, where the Italians had installed a strong, centralized administrative presence.

In 1954, Britain ceded additional Somali lands to Ethiopia, further limiting the seasonal migration of pastoralists, and galvanizing nationalist sentiment. This, and the liberation momentum sweeping through Africa, led to Somaliland's independence from Britain on 26 June 1960. Four days later, the southern, Italian part of Somalia also became independent, and the two territories, despite their 75 years of radically different colonial rule, merged on 1 July 1960. Among the Somali people, there existed a strong desire to reunite and form a pan-Somali state (including Djibouti and parts of eastern Ethiopia). The joining of Italian Somalia and British Somaliland at the moment of independence represented the first dramatic step in this quest to build one nation for all the Somali people.

But the dream of a united Somalia was never to be realized. The small colony of French Somaliland



House destroyed by Somali government bombing of Hargeisa in the late 1980's

had stronger economic ties to Ethiopia, and thus was the first to betray this dream in 1977, when it decided to become the independent state of Djibouti. Likewise, two Somalia military campaigns against Ethiopia in 1964 and 1977-78 attempted to gain control of the Somali-populated Ogaden Region; both ended unsuccessfully. The quest for a pan-Somali state ended in failure.

At the same time, Somalia itself began to unravel. After nine years of democratic rule (1960-69), a military *coup d'état* elevated Mohamed Siad Barre into the presidency. Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, was in the south, and the vast majority of government resources were spent there.[1] Neglect of the north, along with Siad Barre's increasingly repressive rule, fomented considerable dissent among the northern clans. After Somalia's embarrassing defeat by Ethiopia in the Ogaden War (1977-78), Somalis abroad began to organize opposition to the Mogadishu regime. The Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) formed in 1978, and the Somali National Movement (SNM) was launched in 1981; both established bases in Ethiopia, and were supported by Ethiopia's head of state, Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam — both as a means to destabilize the Somali government and to keep the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), an Ogaden-based rebel group, at bay. Both the SSDF and the SNM sought to overthrow Somalia's government. But as the SSDF waned in the mid-1980's, the Isaaq clan-dominated SNM gained strength and populist support.

The course of Ethiopia's civil war in Eritrea also influenced events in Somalia. In 1988, after the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) scored a massive victory by taking over the Ethiopian military's garrison in Afabet, Mengistu's back was against the wall. He could no longer afford the diffusion of his forces in the north (Eritrea) and simultaneously repel Somali-backed WSLF insurrections in the east. He thus made peace with Siad Barre's government and agreed to eject the Somali National Movement from Ethiopia.

The SNM, now homeless and in desperate straits, launched a massive surprise attack on Hargeisa, the principal city of northern Somalia. Siad Barre's retaliation was ruthless. He carpet-bombed Hargeisa and Burao and indiscriminately terrorized and killed Isaaq people throughout the north. As the SNM battled for control of the north, a coalition of rebel groups, led by the Hawiye-based United Somali Congress (USC), threatened Barre's rule in the south. Finally, on 26 January 1991, Barre and his battered forces fled Mogadishu. While the USC and other factions struggled to fill the power vacuum in the Somali capital, the SNM consolidated its positions in the north.

Just three days after Barre's defeat, Ali Mahdi (head of the Abgal sub-clan faction of the USC) proclaimed himself president of Somalia without consulting the SNM or other key politico-military groupings. The north feared an imminent repeat of the southern domination that had plagued them since union in 1960. While the SNM had never officially maintained secessionist ambitions, they rapidly declared independence in May 1991. Somaliland was reborn at the moment Somalia as a state ceased to exist. The south plunged into a disastrous civil war, with numerous warlords and their gangs of thugs vying for state control.

This warlord-led violence overwhelmed traditional Somali systems of conflict management and governance. Prominent elders, traditionally responsible for peacemaking, were unable to control heavily armed warlords and their private armies. The disintegration of the Somali government and emerging "rule of the gun" combined to exacerbate a deadly drought in 1991. The resulting famine ultimately spurred the U.S./U.N. interventions from 1992-1994. In December 1992, U.S. Marines landed in Mogadishu to lead the 30,000-man United Nations Task Force (UNITAF) troops comprising "Operation Restore Hope." They brought with them plenty of humanitarian good will and good intentions, and inadvertently paved the road to hell with them. The U.S. intervention failed due to a confused mission, a poor understanding of Somali clan organization, and the infusion of massive amounts of food aid and other resources that served the warlords themselves.

Luckily for the people of northwest Somalia, the self-declared Republic of Somaliland was totally ignored by the U.S. intervention. This "fortunate neglect" enabled Somalilanders to build peace in their own way, using traditional mechanisms to regain control of their war-shattered society. The south of Somalia, due to the massive infusion of material assistance and a hokey series of silly warlord peace conferences, seven years later has still failed to restore peace, stability, and security, much less any functioning government. In the meantime, the great strides made in Somaliland have been ignored — and this neglect by the outside world may be the primary secret to their success.

[1] In the 1980's, only 7% of Somalia's development resources were spent in the north.

least through acknowledgment and support of what's happening there.

THE SOMALI SHIR: RESTORING PEACE AND BUILDING GOVERNMENT

In Somaliland, peacebuilding and nationbuilding have been simultaneous processes, each deeply rooted in indigenous mechanisms. While the world focused on problems in the south of Somalia — state collapse, famine, warlordism — and then the U.S. and U.N. interventions meant to solve them, Somaliland quietly put its own house in order. Rather than hold high-profile, western-style peace conferences, the people of Somaliland turned to a traditional Somali institution, the *shir*, to deal with their formidable post-civil-war challenges.

A *shir* is a massive traditional congress in which representatives of concerned clans and sub-clans gather to consider common problems, make decisions, and resolve conflicts. It is a huge event, often including thousands of people and lasting from a few weeks to several months. Official delegates represent each clan; they speak and vote on behalf of the clan, frequently leaving the proceedings to consult with other clan members and then returning to continue the consultations. All adult men are allowed to participate in the *shir*, to share their own ideas and perspectives. Women typically exert their own influence and contribute through their husbands.

The ultimate goal of the *shir* is to arrive at agreements based on compromise and consensus. A *shir* represents a strong commitment to reach accommodation. It is not meant to fail or break down. There are no time limits or other restrictions; regardless of all other considerations, the proceedings must continue until acceptable accords are reached.

The *shir* process is highly democratic in the broadest sense of the term.[2] All segments of society are represented, the proceedings are participatory, and consensus is paramount. *Shir* are *ad hoc* meetings, held whenever deemed necessary rather than at regular intervals. They are adaptable and flexible processes, not rigid, orchestrated affairs. Since clans themselves are fluid constructs, *shir* participants may vary over time. The agenda is similarly flexible, varying in response to changing circumstances.

Since 1991, three major *shir* have been held in Somaliland: Burao 1991, Borama 1993 and Hargeisa 1997.

Immediately after the fall of Siad Barre in January 1991, a mini-*shir* was held by the SNM leadership in Berbera, the relatively undamaged port city of the north. At that meeting, the SNM discussed next steps, and resolved not to seek retribution against those clans (especially the Gadabursi and Dulbahante) that had sided with the Barre government during the civil war.[3] At the end of this mini-*shir*, plans were made to reconvene in Burao for a larger, more inclusive grand *shir* to consult all the northern clans on the future.

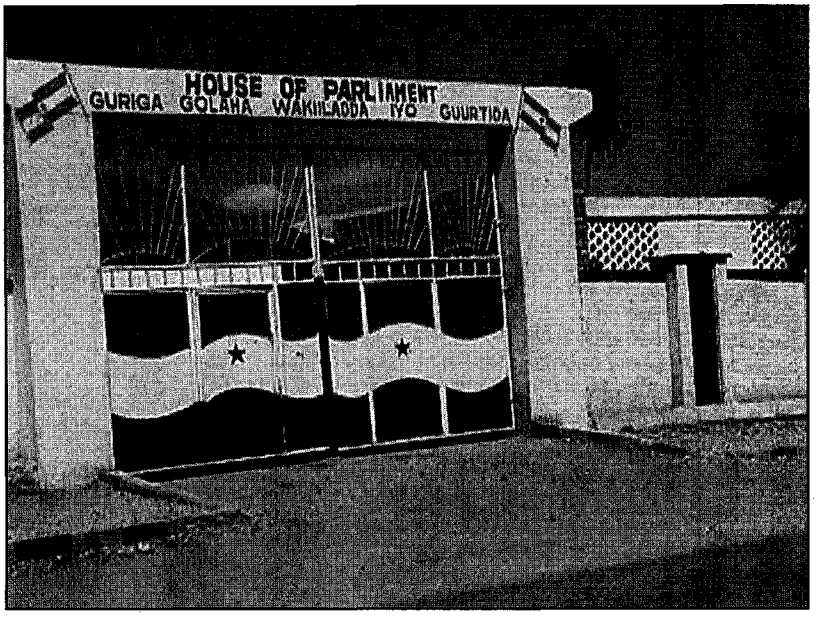
Berbera port

When Ali Mahdi, leader of the Abgal sub-clan (Hawiye clan), unilaterally named himself president of Somalia on 29 January 1991, the SNM was outraged. The prospect of another repressive southern government was

[2] Here I am using a very broad concept of democracy to connote participation in governance. This is not a strictly western conception, based on institutions such as elections. Such western forms of majoritarian, winner-takes-all democracy have proven inappropriate in other socio-political contexts. In Somalia's clan-based system legitimacy is derived by clan approval. Institutions, laws, and political leaders imposed without ratification by clan leadership are perceived as illegitimate and are opposed, often by force. Therefore, to maintain political stability in Somalia, an inclusive, clan-based form of consensus democracy is necessary. The *shir* is one such traditional democratic mechanism.

[3] For the most part, the SNM refrained from seeking retribution. However, there were two notable exceptions. First, in Berbera, 400 Somali government, army and security officers were detained; 80 of them were deemed responsible for brutal crimes against the people of the north and were summarily executed. The others were released. Shortly thereafter, in Borama, approximately 150 Gadabursi clan members (who had supported the Barre regime) were killed in a swift and violent attack that remains shrouded in considerable mystery. These two events occurred within one month of the end of the war, after which time the SNM refrained from seeking revenge against its former adversaries.

unacceptable. Responding to events in Mogadishu, the Burao *shir* raised and debated the issue of secession. Abdirahman "Tuur", Chairman of the SNM, advocated a loose federation with the south. His proposal was rejected, and the *shir* resolved to revoke the merger agreement of 1960 and secede from Somalia. Somaliland declared independence on 18 May 1991, and selected "Tuur" as the first president of the Republic. The Burao *shir* lasted for one month, and concluded with an agreement to meet again in two years' time—to draft a constitution and set up the general institutions of government.



Gates of Somaliland's House of Parliament, decorated in the green (top), white (middle) and red (bottom) of the national flag

The Borama *shir* had to grapple with these formidable tasks of nation-building. After four lengthy months of discussions, a draft National Charter was agreed upon, forming the basis for a constitution and structures of governance. Some 2,000 people participated (including 150 official delegates).[4] Mohamed Ibrahim Egal[5] was elected President and charged with the task of setting up a government.

The most recent *shir* was held in Hargeisa in 1997 and sought both to end the latest civil war and elect the President. With regard to *process*, this *shir* was perhaps the least democratic and inclusive of the three. It was dominated by the standing government and the agenda was carefully orchestrated by Egal to serve his own political objectives. Observers allege that Egal used his political clout and outright control of government finances to "pay off" the delegates, and effectively buy the votes he needed to pass his agenda. Unsurprisingly, Egal was re-elected and formed a new government, this time dominated by his own sub-clan, the Habr Awal.

These process deficiencies notwithstanding, the Hargeisa *shir* succeeded in restoring the balance of power between rival Isaaq sub-clans. From 1991 to 1997, numerous mini-civil wars plagued different parts of the country. Since the Hargeisa *shir*, security has significantly improved, and the tenuous peace has held. Reconstruction and rehabilitation activities have also intensified, as confidence in a more peaceful future has stimulated investment and rebuilding of homes, businesses and infrastructures. While President Egal's heavy-handed political maneuvering may not have been exemplary democracy, the effectiveness of the outcomes can not be overlooked. In such cases, the ends may well justify the means. Ultimately, time will judge the Hargeisa *shir* — will the new stability endure or have new seeds of dissent and instability been sown?

* * * *

For the past few years, the interplay between the emerging Somaliland government (based on modern western political structures) and traditional clan mechanisms like *guurti* (elders' conferences) and *shir*, has been quite interesting. In some ways, traditional structures have been incorporated into the government. For example, the *Guurti* (House of Elders) is the upper house of parliament. It is composed of clan elders and is broadly representative of the people. The House of Representatives, by contrast, is comprised of "elites"; its members are, generally speaking, more modern, urban, and western-educated than their colleagues in the *Guurti*. There has been some degree of tension between the two bodies, and the elites of the lower House tend to look down upon their counterparts in the *Guurti*.

Similar tensions — between the common people and central government — exist at the local level. The Somaliland government has gone to great lengths to establish regional and local administrations. However, the process has not been democratic, as the President has appointed all of the major posts. People living in second-

[4] Mark Bradbury, "Somaliland: CIIR Country Report", London: Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR), 1997.

[5] President Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, a seasoned political insider, is well-known throughout Somalia. He was the last civilian Prime Minister of Somalia, serving from 1967-1969 prior to the military *coup d'états*. Some people believe he continues to harbor broader political ambitions. One person remarked "Egal sees himself as a big engine running a small car [Somaliland]." Should Somalia reconstitute itself, some suspect he might abandon the Somaliland "project" and jump at the opportunity to rule the whole Somali state.

Abandoned and looted house in Burao

ary towns tend to view government authorities with suspicion, and see them as largely irrelevant. Their deep-seated experiences with poor governance in the past has predisposed them to very low expectations. As a result, when conflicts erupt at the local level, the people would rather handle them according to customary law (*xeer*) and through elders' conferences (*guurti*), rather than submit them to the local law-enforcement officials. Witness Burao, a town due east of Hargeisa that has repeatedly experienced clan strife and civil war throughout the past ten years.

During Siad Barre's ruthless attacks on the Isaaq people, Burao was repeatedly bombarded. Then, after Somaliland's self-declared independence, there was brief fighting in Burao in 1992, and a prolonged civil war was centered there from 1994-96. Eventually clan elders initiated a peace process that succeeded in restoring calm.

The devastation in Burao is evident everywhere throughout the town. Abandoned houses, shops and markets are riddled with holes from artillery exchanges. During lulls in the fighting, the people of Burao themselves looted most salvageable building remnants — metal doors, windows, corrugated iron roofs. Much as in Mogadishu, a "green line" marked no-man's land in the center of town. This area, laden with landmines, separated the two sub-clans, the Habr Yonis to the west and the Habr Ja'llo to the east. During the most recent civil war in Burao, the Habr Ja'llo and other clans fought on the side of the Somaliland government, while the Habr Yonis militia, backed by Abdirahman "Tuur" and supported by Mohamed Farah Aideed, fought against them.[6]

At a recent *khat*-chewing session[7] in Burao, five elders recounted the series of peace conferences that ultimately managed to disengage the two sub-clans. At the beginning of the discussion, they repeatedly emphasized the "deep-rooted" state of harmony in the town, and said that a war could never again happen there. Their over-eagerness to convince me of the durability of Burao's

Two Burao elders at our khat-chew

[6] Abdirahman "Tuur" was the first president of Somaliland, chosen at the massive Berbera *shir* in 1991. Later, he decided to oppose Somaliland's independence, and moved to London and Mogadishu where he was backed by the UN (to oppose Somaliland's secession) and Mohamed Farah Aideed, a warlord from the Hawiye clan. Aideed, convinced that he was the rightful president of all of Somalia, fostered this revolt of the Habr Yonis to gain a foothold in the north and to undermine the Somaliland government. Aideed was getting all of his ducks in a row in preparation for his ultimate ascendancy to the presidency. Ultimately his plans failed — the Habr Yonis lost the war in the north, and he never defeated the other warlords in the south.

[7] *Khat* is a narcotic leaf that Somali men chew in the afternoons. *Khat*-chewing sessions are excellent venues for socializing and learning about Somali culture. As people chew *khat*, they become more relaxed, and speak openly. Somalis also conduct much of their business, including peace meetings, while they chew.

stability, seemed instead to betray the precarious and fragile nature of the current peace.

They downplayed the destruction wreaked by the latest civil war (1994-96), insisting it was much less destructive than the war with Siad Barre, and claiming that local elders resolved it immediately. This contradicted other sources, including the town's mayor, who personally showed me the most devastated areas leveled during the 94-96 conflict. Likewise, the elders' so-called "immediate" resolution of the conflict took place over five large meetings; the process lasted several months and didn't begin until the town had already been ravaged. The glowing picture they painted appeared as much an effort to convince *themselves* that such brutality and destruction could never be repeated, as it was an attempt to convince me of the same. They wanted me to "believe," but their faintly masked uncertainty revealed their own strained desire to be "believers" as well.

Burao's Mayor Mohamed Hussein walks through the skeleton of a meat market destroyed during the civil war. His administration, he says, plans to rehabilitate this and other key infrastructures.

Peace is thus far from guaranteed, and maintaining peace is an ongoing process in Somaliland. In this fragile environment, where conflicts over resources and clan feuds regularly occur, the dangers of conflict escalation are ever-present. Peace-preservation therefore demands continuous nurturing and attention.

Again, take Burao, where those five elders sat with me, chewing *khat* and ruminating on the permanence of stability and security in the area. Just two miles away, on the other side of town, 20 elders from the Habr Ja'llo and Habr Yonis sub-clans had also assembled — not to reflect on the problems of the past, but to rescue yet another inter-sub-clan dispute from the perils of escalation.

In August 1998, three men from the Habr Ja'llo subclan were killed by members of the Habr Yonis sub-clan. In the past, such incidents sparked retribution, more violence and frequently war. Not this time. Elders of both sub-clans met immediately to discuss how to control the situation, and to solidify reparations arrangements. The traditional "blood price" of 100 camels for each person killed was agreed, and the meetings adjourned. Time passed, and the Habr Yonis failed to make good on their agreement. With tensions rising, again there was potential for renewed clashes. And again, instead of resorting to violence, another meeting was called to find out the reason for the delay. Apparently, the Habr Yonis were having difficulty identifying the culprit(s), which in turn would determine who within the clan bears how much responsibility for payment. Long consultations were held to hammer out a new agreement and time-frame for the payment. The Habr Yonis re-emphasized their intent to pay, but pleaded for more time, they didn't have enough camels to make the payment.

On 2 December 1998, the two groups of elders met at the Regional Government office in Burao. The Governor of the Togdheer Region, Mr. Abdi Ibrahim Warsama, informed me of the meeting scheduled for later that day. Neither he nor any of the other government officials would be in attendance. In this and many similar affairs, the government and traditional systems coexist on parallel paths. The two are not integrated, but each contribute to the maintenance of peace in the area.

The elders' conference began some time after the 2 p.m. Muslim prayer. Elders from the two concerned subclans sat opposite each other on large mats laid out along the periphery of the rectangular meeting hall. The chairmen of the meeting, the two Sultans (traditional leaders) of the respective sub-clans, sat at the head of the room, symbolically positioned between the two groups. All in all, 20 men had gathered to discuss the delays of Habr Yonis' blood-price payments.

The pace of the meeting was unrushed, the deliberations slow and measured. In a free-flowing style the participants offered their contributions one-by-one; lengthy speeches were launched, some lasting as long as 30 minutes. Somalis pride themselves on oratory prowess. The ability to spontaneously deliver a poetic speech, laden with proverbs and deep meaning, is a prerequisite for respect within Somali society. Such capacities exemplify the wisdom, perception, and experience of the speaker. In these venues, the meeting resembles a series of solilo-

quies, rather than a heavily interactive dialogue.

The atmosphere was relaxed, the participants casually listening to the speaker-of-the-moment as they lounged with their elbows resting on large pillows, chewing *khat* and drinking sugary milk-tea. There were no heated debates nor vicious attacks; responses to provocative comments were made calmly and maturely. Patience seemed the order of the day. Resolution of the contentious issue seemed a foregone conclusion, but might take some time. At 5:45 pm the entire group adjourned for prayers, and honored Allah together, the two sub-clans intermingled on the same prayer mats, humbly facing Mecca.

During the latest prayer break one of the participants told me "We are talking about how to consolidate peace. We are not going to the law [i.e. to the government judicial system] to take care of this situation. That will cause even more problems. We want to handle it ourselves, and maintain control." These elders were absolutely determined not to let this dispute escalate. They would keep talking until they reached an accommodation. At 7:15 p.m. I left the *guurti*. With darkness falling outside the meeting hall, two kerosene lanterns were lit and the consultations continued.

THE STATE OF GOVERNANCE IN SOMALILAND

"Though it continues to be plagued by serious problems of disputed authority, corruption, and weak administrative capacity, Somaliland enjoys governance of higher quality than any other part of Somalia. Its administrative capacity is probably comparable to that of some of the poorest, weakest States in the developing world."

—Human Development Report, Somalia 1998

This back-handed compliment is indicative of the international community's ambivalence toward the Somaliland government. Expectations are so low that the mere existence of government institutions is considered a triumph. But for all its weaknesses and problems, the Somaliland government deserves measured praise.

True, corruption and kickbacks are rampant, and tribal nepotism has skewed central-government staffing in favor of President Egal's Habr Awal sub-clan. Most ministries are mere facades behind which little work of substance is undertaken, while the state's limited resources are squandered by Ministers buying fancy cars, building fancy villas and supporting the clan folk back home. Promises of decentralization — to devolve power to democratically-selected councils at the local level — have been delayed as the President installs his personal picks important regional and local government offices.

Despite its serious imperfections, and much to the credit of President Egal's determined leadership, government-building continues apace. The draft constitution is to be submitted for adoption or rejection in a national referendum within the next couple of years. It includes three independent branches of government — executive, legislative and judiciary — modeled to some extent on the American system. The first round of national elections is scheduled to take place before President Egal's current term expires in 2002.

One of the big question marks is how Somaliland will fare with a centralized, western-style, democratic system of government. It is just such a system that distorted Somalia's intricate clan dynamics and plunged the country into the disastrous civil war from which the south has still failed to extricate itself. The "traditional" democratic institutions (*shir* and *guurti*) that enabled Somaliland to restore peace and governance in the north are now being slowly phased out as the final transition to "modern" democracy takes place. The dangers of abandoning consensus-based traditional institutions in favor of modern "winner-take-all" democracy are obvious, especially in the Somali political context. However, the process is on track and appears a foregone conclusion; debate and discussion on these fundamental issues are virtually non-existent.

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To put Somaliland's government in proper perspective, it is important to keep in mind the context in which this government has arisen. The conditions in 1991 were so bad that the establishment of a woefully inadequate government that has survived for seven years is no small feat. By 1991, Hargeisa and Burao, among other places, had been destroyed; infrastructures were ravaged; thousands had been killed and hundreds of thousands of others had fled as refugees; landmines posed a constant threat, hindering travel and the return to abandoned homes and towns; lawlessness, banditry and the barrel of the gun reigned supreme. At the end of the civil war, Somaliland had absolutely no government, no peace or security, and a collapsed economy.

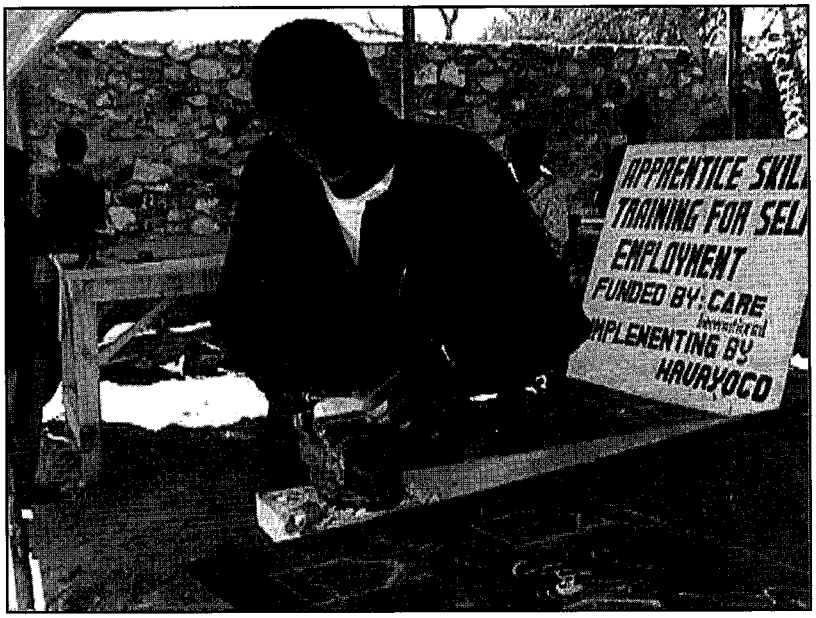
In just a few years, this situation has been reversed, and many trends point to better times ahead. There is now a government (albeit not a great one), peace (precarious though it may be), and a considerable amount of business activity. There have been major obstacles and civil war along the way, but still the government presses on. It's difficult to justify grand praise; nevertheless, kudos to the government for surviving and making small and measured progress 'till now.

Like the international community, Somalilanders themselves feel ambivalent toward their government. There is widespread criticism of the government, but most people seem willing to tolerate it. They are tired of fighting, and have extremely low expectations for those who rule them. Any home rule is bound to be an im-

provement upon Siad Barre's repressive reign from Mogadishu. Somalilanders are practical people. They are prepared to solve their own problems. They will find a way to rebuild their lives, their homes and their businesses. And, using traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution, they assume take responsibility for preventing further war and violence on their own.

* * * *

Perhaps the government's most notable achievement stems not from what it has done, but from what it hasn't done. Somaliland's government has not stymied private enterprise, or stifled free expression, or prevented the development of civil society. It hasn't interfered with nor rigidly controlled the private arenas of life. It hasn't over-regulated, over-taxed or otherwise counterproductively intervened in the economy. Some of this nonintervention may reflect the government's lack of capacity more than an intentional hands-off policy; however, to give Somaliland's government the benefit of the doubt, it may be "enlightened nonintervention," an acknowledgment that if left alone, the innovative, resourceful, entrepreneurial Somali populace will rebuild the country of their own accord.



Woodwork trainee at a center run by Havoyoco, a local non-governmental organization

The government has certainly created an "enabling environment" in which private initiatives have the opportunity to flourish. In less than a decade, Somaliland's civil society has blossomed. In some respects it may have even overgrown. For example, there are now more than 400 local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) registered in Somaliland. Nearly every clan, village, interest group and profession has established an association or NGO. Some are hardly functional, and others have been labeled "briefcase NGOs" because they amount to little more than a guy with a briefcase. The number of NGOs is likely to decrease in the coming years since only those with sufficient implementation capacity will attract the funding and public support needed to survive. Still, the enthusiasm, dynamism and can-do spirit of this nascent nongovernmental sector is a hopeful development. NGOs are filling some of the massive social-service gaps left by the dysfunctional and poorly funded government ministries. Perhaps well aware of its limitations, the government has encouraged these NGOs, and enabled a strong civil society to begin to emerge.

Sheep for sale at the market in Bura

Likewise for the business sector. Somaliland's pastoral economy is heavily reliant on the export of livestock, especially to Saudi Arabia. The country produces some of the highest quality livestock in the world. However, the vulnerabilities of Somaliland's monolithic economy have recently become glaringly evident, as fears of Rift Valley Fever triggered a Saudi ban on the import of Somali livestock in mid-1998. While replacement trade with Yemen and Dubai has filled some of the gap, the livestock ban has been disastrous for Somaliland's economy. Government revenue is highly dependent on livestock taxation, and these sources have dropped by 60 percent. Remittances from

Woman selling khat by the bunch

Somalis living and working abroad have helped people weather the ban, but pastoralists and traders alike are definitely feeling the crunch of economic hard times.

Fortunately, other more encouraging economic trends are also evident. A new entrepreneurial spirit has arisen, and again, the government deserves a good share of the credit. The government's laissez-faire, non-interventionist policy has silently nurtured the private sector. Somaliland's urban and quasi-urban centers, especially the capital Hargeisa, have witnessed a spurt of small-business activity. Hargeisa's outdoor market hums with activity as fresh local produce and a broad range of imported consumer goods are hawked side by side. Women sell tightly wrapped bunches of *khat*, imported daily on trucks from Ethiopia. Most impressively, scores of money changers sit on the street with piles of Somaliland shillings displayed in front of them, eager to buy dollars, Ethiopian birr or just about any other currency one might dream of carrying. This is truly amazing. In an area wracked by endemic violence and insecurity, the fact that money changers can sit in public with heaps of cash is an unmistakable testimony to how far Somaliland has come.

Hargeisa was destroyed in the war. In a few short years, much of the city has been rebuilt, not by public assistance, but through private efforts. Some sectors of the economy have grown very rapidly. For example, the telecommunications sector currently boasts three major private phone companies, with others in the pipeline. SITCO, the latest entrant, launched operations in late October 1998, and has introduced long-distance telephone rates of $1.00/min. peak and $.80/min. off-peak, to anywhere in the world. These rates, it claims, are the lowest in all of Africa. Government regulation of these sectors has lagged behind, permitting rapid growth, but also causing some problems. For instance, all of the phone companies have inefficiently built their own individual networks; currently, it is impossible to place a call from one network to another network. Eventually the kinks will get worked out and some degree of sectoral integration will be necessary. Mergers may occur to avert bankruptcies due to ruthless competition. The free market will work in tandem with the slowly sputtering government, which is due to consider regulatory legislation in its upcoming session.

As these dynamic new enterprises mature, they will offer much-needed diversification to Somaliland's pastoralist-dominated economy. This will spread the risks of reliance on the livestock trade, and help cushion the impact of periodic droughts and trade bans that have occasionally crippled the economy in the past.

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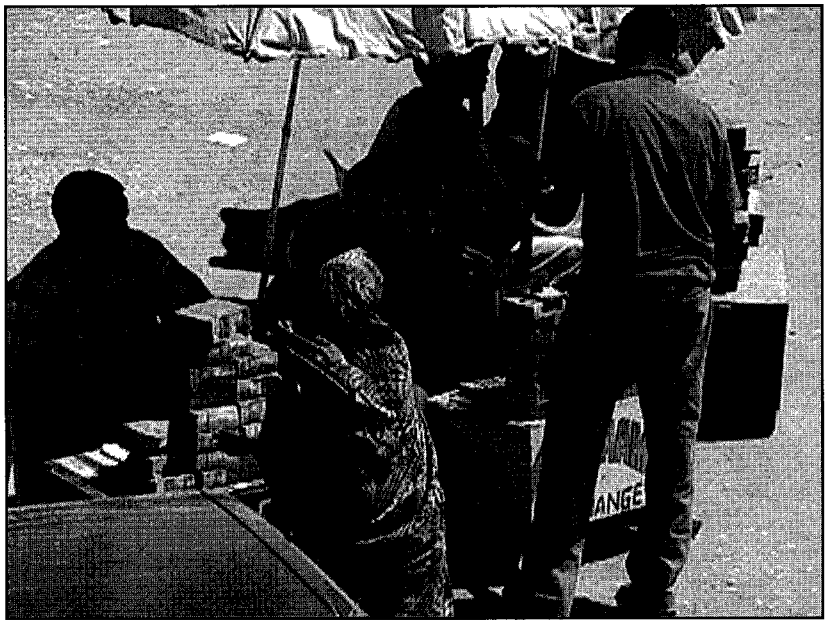
Somaliland has come a long way in its seven years of unrecognized independence. Periodic power struggles

Hargeisa's open market

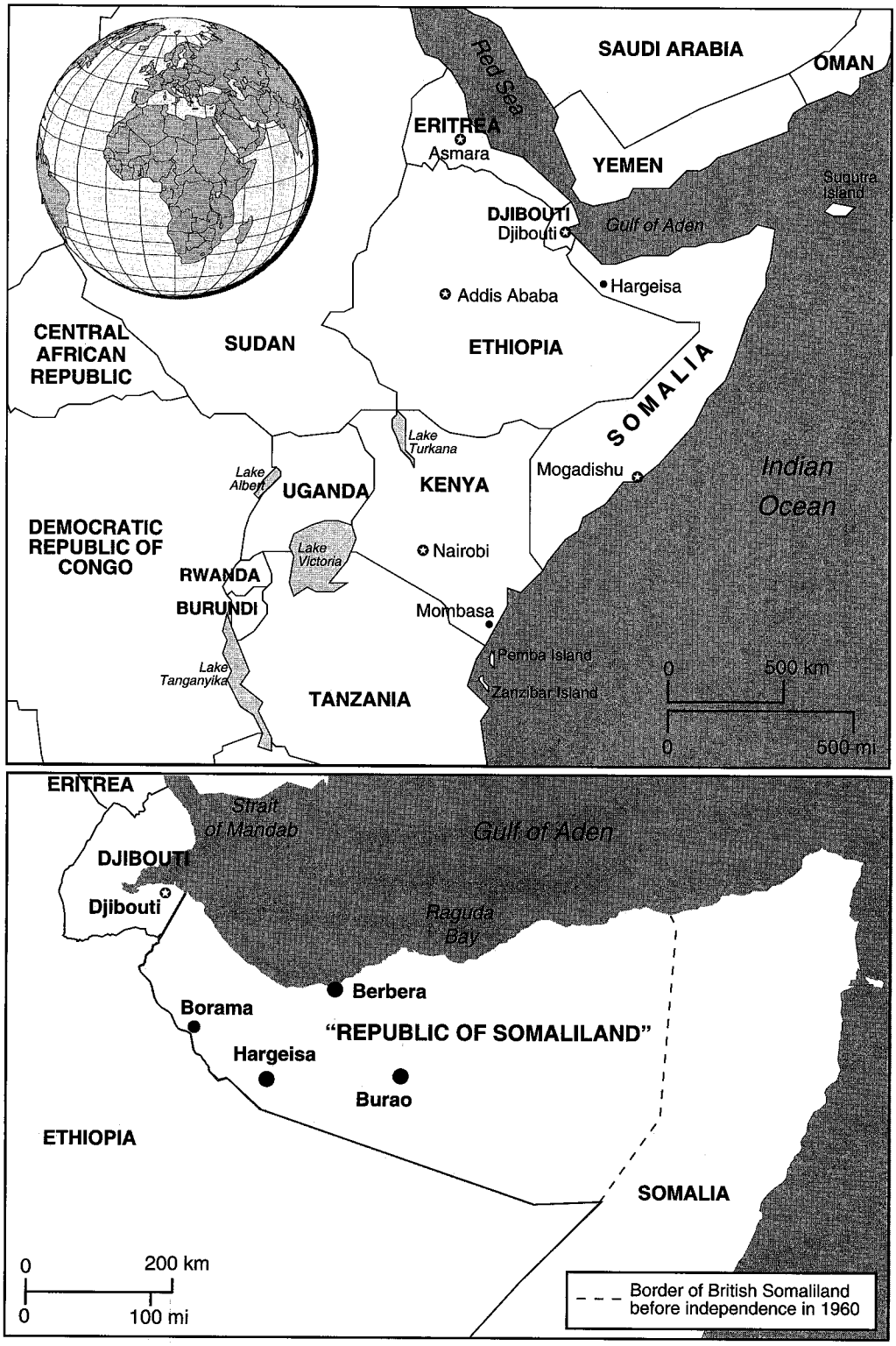


Money changers sit streetside with piles of Somaliland shillings on display

and a few rough civil wars notwithstanding, the country has managed to muddle through and build new foundations for peace and governance. As the international community ignored them, Somalilanders have used their own ingenuity and indigenous institutions like the *shir* to restore sanity to their war-plagued nation. Now, as the process of building government continues, and to consolidate the hard-earned peace, Somaliland needs gentle nudges of support. Overbearing donors, with their strict conditions and pre-fab development programs, should stay away. What Somaliland needs are flexible, open-minded international partners.

Official diplomatic recognition may not be forthcoming, but such formalities need not retard progress. Somaliland doesn't need ambassadors, fancy cars or cocktail parties. It needs simple, concrete assistance to help the nation recover from its troubled past. By pouring massive resources down the bottomless pit of southern Somalia, and ignoring the positive developments in the north, the international community has been sending the wrong signals. It is rewarding the chaos, violence, and self-destruction of warlords, while punishing the innovation, hard earned stability and initiative of a determined young nation.

Somaliland's needs are basic — water, education, health care, demining. By providing assistance in these sectors, the international community could send an important message to the people of Somaliland: '*We see your struggle, we recognize your progress, we support your efforts.*' This is precisely the type of recognition Somaliland desperately needs. ❑


SAUDI ARABIA
OMAN
Red Sea
ERITREA
Asmara
YEMEN
Socotra Island
DJIBOUTI
Djibouti
Gulf of Aden
Hargeisa
Addis Ababa
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
SUDAN
ETHIOPIA
SOMALIA
Lake Turkana
Lake Albert
UGANDA
KENYA
Mogadishu
Indian Ocean
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO
Lake Victoria
Nairobi
RWANDA
BURUNDI
Mombasa
Pemba Island
Lake Tanganyika
Zanzibar Island
TANZANIA
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500 km
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ERITREA
Strait of Mandab
Gulf of Aden
DJIBOUTI
Djibouti
Raguda Bay
Berbera
Borama
"REPUBLIC OF SOMALILAND"
Hargeisa
Burao
ETHIOPIA
SOMALIA
0
200 km
0
100 mi
Border of British Somaliland before independence in 1960

INDEX
ICWA Letters by Marc Michaelson

Entries refer to ICWA Letter (MM-1, etc.) and page, with Letter number given before each page entry

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; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. 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]**

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.

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