



Republic of Somaliland

Statement given by the Somaliland Delegation at the Conference
on Refugee Protection and International Migration in the Gulf of
Aden, Sana'a, Yemen, 19 and 20 May 2008

Mr. Chairman
Honorable Ministers
High Commissioner for Refugees
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my distinct pleasure and honor to address this august meeting on Refugee Protection and International Migration in the Gulf of Aden in Sana'a, the capital city of the fraternal people of Yemen, whom we have very close relations over centuries and we share the same culture and religion. We are confident that while we are enjoying the Arab hospitality, our deliberations will come to a successful conclusion.

Let me also pay special tribute to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees for the commendable role they played in convening this conference and the European Union for funding it.

We extend our profound appreciation to the Mixed Migration Task Force on the dynamic and effective manner with which they have been supporting and helping mixed migrants in our region.

Mr. Chairman,

The movement of people within and from the Horn of Africa is not a new phenomenon. Thousands of people and their animals move seasonally from the Haud in the Somali region of Ethiopia to the Guban, the coastal areas, in search of water and pasture, and back using the same route.

Since the late 1800s, Somaliland labor migrants crisscrossed the world oceans as seamen and they were one of the first African migrants who settled in places like Antwerp, Cardiff and Liverpool and the Eastern Sea board of the US New York, Baltimore and Philadelphia. In the Second World War, hundreds of Somalilanders took part fighting for the allied forces of Great Britain and France as well.

Over many centuries, movement of people to and from the Arabian Peninsula and Somaliland existed. Somalilanders have fought side by side with King Abdul-Aziz Al Saud who went on to unify the scattered parts and splintered tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, which laid the foundations for the modern state of Saudi Arabia. Today 90 percent of Saudi nationals of Somali origin are their descendants.

Before the oil boom, Aden was the destination of traders, transit and labor migrants from our part of the world. In the fifties, Somalilanders coming from Aden influenced the struggle for independence from the British. In the late sixties and during the struggle for independence in South Yemen, thousands of Yemenis of Somaliland origin migrated to Somaliland escaping the war. With the oil boom in the gulf, over quarter of a million people have migrated from Somaliland to the Gulf.

However, the biggest movement of people occurred between 1988 and 1992, when in 1988 the entire population of Somaliland took asylum in refugee camps in Ethiopia to escape crimes committed by the Somali state against them. With the liberation of the country from the former dictator, over one million people moved spontaneously from camps in Ethiopia, Djibouti and from the South mainly Mogadishu to towns in Somaliland. From 1997 to 2006, under UNHCR's voluntary repatriation program, more than two hundred thousand people returned to Somaliland from refugee camps. All most all of those who returned came back to nothing and had to start from below zero levels. Similarly, the rural urban migration is going at an alarming rate, leaving behind the old and feeble in the countryside and the working force settle in IDP make shift camps.

Fortunately, the peace and stability our country has been enjoying over the past seventeen years is an indicative of the fundamental changes, which have taken

place in the region. After almost twenty years during which Somalilanders have lived as refugees, Somaliland is now a sanctuary for refugees seeking asylum from persecution in other countries.

Mr. Chairman,

Unfortunately, today countries in the region are seeing migration of a different kind – trafficking of humans, which is a resurgence of the degrading institution of slavery. Approximately 30,000 are trafficked into the Arabian Peninsula from the northeast coast of Somalia each year resulting in the death of hundreds of Ethiopians and Somalis who travel for days, often by foot, across Somaliland from Ethiopia to Bosaso or Djibouti with the aim of crossing the sea to Yemen.

The conflict in Mogadishu continues to prompt movement from Somalia to Yemen, which is a point of transit for migrants en route to Saudi Arabia, Gulf Countries, Europe and other destinations in search of work. Most of the migrants are young men and women between the ages of 15 and 30. This problem of people leaving Somalia and Ethiopia to try to reach Yemen, some of them ending in the streets of Gulf cities, is part of the rise of criminal activities in major Gulf cities.

Indeed the MMTF Strategy to address Mixed Migration through Somaliland spells out the common agreed priorities in the area on both sides of the Red Sea for the years to come. We believe that agreement on the Strategy content paves the way for the identification of joint priorities and activities in mixed migration management. We are on the process of developing approaches and practices to manage these flows, and we are willing and happy to share those with the members of this Conference and of course, we are willing also to learn from other partner states in this process.

The Conference also coincides with our own efforts to control our sea from piracy and human trafficking. Hijacking vessels and taking their crews hostage at an increasing rate from only 2 ships in 2002 to 31 in 2007. It is something that worries the world and more specifically countries in the region.

Somaliland is not internationally recognized, the Somaliland government is a region authority, and is willing to and, under the given circumstances, quite

capable of safeguarding its coastline. Cooperation with Western navies and countries of the region more specifically Yemen would go a long way to improve the situation at least in the Gulf of Aden coastline drastically – to the benefit of all seafarers, Somalis or others.

Coincidentally, I should also report to the conference that our Coast Guards have succeeded to prevent two boats that were attempting to use Somaliland territory for human trafficking. We have saved almost two hundred people from eminent death. In another operation, we apprehended the ringleaders responsible for kidnappings of foreigners in Puntland.

Mr. Chairman,

In the past few years, we have been concerned about the fact that the task of managing immigration in the country had been grossly under-estimated and has not been properly resourced. Somaliland government is drafting a new law to strengthen the prosecution and punishment of traffickers, making human trafficking a crime with severe penalties. It is also the policy of the Republic of Somaliland to repress piracy, consistent with Somaliland law and international obligations, and to cooperate with other nations in repressing piracy.

If I concentrate on the plight in which Somaliland finds itself, its dimensions and gravity, as a destination and transit country, it does not mean that we are not concerned with what is preoccupying the rest of the region. While refugees and asylum seekers account for a relatively small portion of the movement of people going in and out of Somaliland, but their reasons for moving is protection-related. More often than not, such movements are irregular and a burden, in the sense that they become a burden on the limited resources available to Somalilanders (competing in the jobs available, accessing clean water, places in already overcrowded schools, contributing to creating poor sanitation because they live in squalid conditions). Many of the people who move in this manner often place their lives at risk, are obliged to travel in inhumane conditions, and are exposed to exploitation and abuse.

With the continued state of insecurity and anarchy prevailing in Somalia for the last 17 years, thousands of Somalis were forced or obliged to flee their homes and came to Somaliland for asylum. This complicates the asylum process, as the UN

considers refugees from Somalia as Internally Displace People (IDPS) because they have not crossed an internationally recognized State border, while my government recognizes them as refugees and not citizens of Somaliland.

The majority of these refugees reside in settlements around major urban towns of Hargeisa, Burao, Berbera and Las-anod, where they live together with returnees returned under the voluntary repatriation program. The proportion of households headed by women (for example widows) is as much as 30% in some settlements, rendering them potentially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

We face a situation to continue to host thousands of Somalis since internal displacement ends only upon IDPs' return to their place of origin. However because return is not possible and IDPs cannot go back to their homes in Somalia, this can lead to a situation where internal displacement holds little prospect of ever ending.

I must say from the onset that as one of the root causes of mixed migration flows is the fact that the majority of Somaliland people have been denied the right to travel as most countries have refused to accept the old Somali passport and are yet to accept as a traveling document the Somaliland passport. These policies have generated a situation where most of our people are seeking foreign passports and using any means to obtain traveling document, at times at the expense of their lives.

At present, Arab Gulf countries have limited or stopped labor visas they used to issue to Somalis. Arab repositioning on issuing labor visas to people from Somaliland would help tremendously in reducing smuggling of people. For this reason, we urge Arab countries of the region to engage constructively with us on these issues as genuinely and as sensitively as possible.

Interstate and Intra-Regional Cooperation on Migration Management in the IGAD, Region organized jointly by the African Union, IGAD and IOM, 12-14 May 2008 underlined the need for a renewed political commitment in the development of a comprehensive regional Migration policy. It is, however going to be impossible for us to talk of building this capacity as an isolated regional initiative that does not take into consideration the political realities existing on the ground specifically in the IGAD region. This is an important priority for

Somaliland, bearing in mind, we need to benefit as well from other initiatives especially regional ones in order to meet the challenges and harness the opportunities that migration presents in a new era of globalization.

We cannot prevent mobility. The odds are against this, not least because of the impossibility of policing our borders and the prevalence of people smuggling and trafficking. The objective therefore should not be to prevent movement, but to manage and regulate the many sensitive issues at stake, including national security and identity, social harmony and economic progress, in a manner, which protects individual rights and State interests, promotes a proper sharing of responsibilities and maximizes the benefits that migration of all sorts can bring to host societies.

I am most certain that the deliberations of the Conference will assist a great deal in suggesting further practical ways in which governments in the region can optimally exploit the possibilities for cooperation in this regard. As a state, we regard such movements as a threat to our security. It has become imperative for us to address this phenomenon in a more coherent and comprehensive manner.

Accordingly, I must also say that we are encouraged by the decision to convene this Conference to explore issues of capacity in the management of mixed flows in the region. To cope with the current situation, Somaliland needs sustained assistance from the international community in the following areas:

1. International agencies to increase livelihood support to IDPs and people making the crossing.
2. Increase awareness programs to prevent the crossing.
3. Assist us in the existing Somaliland laws review and reform process and preparing for consideration such amendments as may be necessary to enhance our ability to comply with international law.
4. We propose a more operationally oriented instrument of cooperation to combat the transnational threats of maritime piracy by introducing joint naval exercise and other mechanisms for information sharing and cooperation on law enforcement operations. This requires supporting our Coast Guards to monitor, identify, and intercept suspected vessels in our national waters.

5. Provide regulated labor migration to Arab Gulf countries to prevent illegal migration.

I wish to assure you that the government of Somaliland will extend the hand of cooperation by taking forward the implementation of the Regional Approach, and want to establish linkages with regional countries, regional and international organizations involved in mixed migration. Your continued assistance and support of our endeavors are vital at this crucial time to save lives.

Thank you