

April 3, 2009

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SOMALIA: POLITICAL PROGRESS, HUMANITARIAN STALEMATE

Somalia remains the site of the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with regional consequences that require greater international attention. The formation of a new government has so far meant little to the more than three million Somalis in need of emergency assistance inside the country. Aid agencies are struggling to respond to the needs of more than 500,000 refugees in neighboring countries. Donor governments need to be more generous in responding to refugee needs, especially in the Dadaab camps in Kenya, while also strengthening the African Union peacekeeping mission, AMISOM, to perform its limited mandate inside the country.

NEW POLITICAL DYNAMICS WITH LITTLE HUMANITARIAN IMPACT

January marked a turning point in Somalia. Ethiopian troops withdrew their forces from the country and a new government of national unity was formed. The new government is composed of both Transitional Federal Government (TFG) officials and members of the former opposition group, the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS). While hard-line opponents remain, the new TFG offers the best opportunity in almost 20 years for a national government to attain the legitimacy needed to bring together voices from Somalia's broad political spectrum.

The tenuous political progress, however, has yet to translate into safety for civilians, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance remains difficult. The government continues to be violently opposed by various Islamic groups, most notably al Shabaab. Forty thousand Somalis have returned to Mogadishu in recent months, but around 1.8 million remain displaced in the country and throughout the region, and thousands continue to flee each month to neighboring countries.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ UNHCR and donor governments should mount a full-scale diplomatic effort, including reaching out to Kenyan refugee and human rights NGOs, to gain Kenyan government permission to expand Dadaab refugee camp to a fourth site.
- ❑ UNHCR should develop and present a revised proposal for needs in Dadaab, with costs for improving existing infrastructure and camp expansion clearly delineated, and donor governments, especially the U.S., should provide generous support to this revised proposal.
- ❑ The United States should prioritize a broad diplomatic agenda and significant humanitarian assistance to Somalia over a narrow security agenda.
- ❑ Donor governments in cooperation with the United Nations and the African Union should bolster AMISOM capacity to carry out its current mandate, but not expand it or seek to deploy a larger UN force.
- ❑ Donor governments and members of the UN Security Council should focus on security sector reform with a view to strengthening the government and creating conditions that would allow for the withdrawal of AMISOM.

Somalis live in some of the worst conditions imaginable – from the slums of Aden to the cramped camps in Dadaab, from drought-stricken villages in south central Somalia to teeming neighborhoods in Nairobi. Somalis die at sea while trying to reach Yemen, are threatened by boys and men with guns in Mogadishu, and face demands for bribes and harassment while trying to find asylum in Kenya. Almost nowhere can vulnerable Somalis receive the humanitarian assistance and protection that are their rights.

DETERIORATING SITUATION IN DADAAB

Dadaab, in Kenya's northeastern province, is host to three refugee camps established in 1991. Originally designed to accommodate 90,000 refugees, they now constitute the largest refugee site in the world, with 250,000 residents as of February 2009, more than 95 percent of them coming from Somalia. The situation in Dadaab changed dramatically in 2007 when Ethiopian military forces intervened in Somalia to overthrow the Islamic Courts Union. Large numbers of Somalis began to flee the violence and the deteriorating humanitarian conditions that ensued. The Kenyan government closed its border with Somalia in January 2007 on grounds of national security, and in May 2008 shut down the Liboi reception center, which had served as a registration and transit point for refugees crossing into Kenya.

The border closure has done little to deter displaced Somalis from seeking safety in Kenya; more than 100,000 have arrived in Dadaab in the past two years, with thousands more going to Nairobi and other parts of the country. Moreover, shutting down the reception center has disrupted the registration process and increased cross-border trafficking, as well as opportunities for the exaction of bribes from border guards.

The high number of arrivals in recent months has stretched resources and infrastructure well beyond capacity. The main problem is the lack of land on which to build a new camp to decongest the existing site and house new arrivals. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that only a third of the new arrivals in the past twelve months were given plots of land; others had to find relatives already settled in the camps.

The overcrowding means that international standards for basic services are not being met. There is a shortfall of 36,000 latrines and 50 percent of the refugees have access to less than 13 liters of water per day. In January, 26 cases of cholera were reported at Hagadera and six in Dagahaley. The humanitarian community is on edge. "We are like firefighters," an aid worker told Refugees International.

WHAT CAN BE DONE IN DADAAB?

One relatively easy step that would have a significant, immediate benefit is reopening the Liboi reception centre. This will ensure an orderly and humane screening and registration process, while having the added benefit for the Kenyan government of reducing cross-border security threats.

Resolving the land issue to allow a fourth camp to be constructed is more challenging. UNHCR has handled lengthy negotiations with the Kenyan government poorly until very recently. The Refugee Agency failed to reach out to donor governments for support and to pursue alliances with Kenyan refugee and human rights organizations. Meanwhile, competing political interests at national and local levels, bureaucratic impediments and grievances from host communities have all complicated the issue. A sustained diplomatic initiative is required by senior UNHCR officials, supported by the UN Country Team and key donor governments, to conclude the negotiations positively.

Obtaining new land will not solve all of Dadaab's problems. Dadaab is the equivalent of a mid-size city, and the challenges facing camp managers in Dadaab resemble those facing government in a community with inadequate revenue: overtaxed water and waste systems, deteriorating housing, and lack of employment opportunities. Short of engagement on the part of development agencies, donors' year-on-year grants need to be made flexible and reflect the reality that Dadaab will continue to be the home for several hundred thousand Somalis for the foreseeable future, regardless of the political situation inside Somalia.

UNHCR Kenya has issued a \$92 million appeal for its Dadaab operation, an unprecedented amount. The appeal is short on details, and donors have asked for a more comprehensive appeal which would outline the expenditures associated with rehabilitating the existing camps and creating the new site. UNHCR must issue a revised appeal, and donors should fund it generously.

A SEVERE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION IN SOMALIA

The humanitarian situation inside Somalia remains severe. While more funding is needed to increase assistance, there are key steps that the UN, aid agencies and the Somali government must also take to alleviate the crisis. Food security indicators are critical, particularly in the central regions where rates of acute malnutrition are above emergency thresholds. A drought is expected to persist into 2009. The distribution of food and relief items has been compromised

by the suspension of activity from one major aid agency, as well as continued threats, kidnappings and assassinations of aid workers. Humanitarian access has marginally improved in recent weeks, however. For example, informal armed checkpoints have reportedly been removed on major axes following the departure of Ethiopian troops.

The United Nations has issued a consolidated appeal of \$918 million for programs inside the country. This is a large sum, but it reflects the enormous scale of the needs and the high costs of operating in Somalia. The response to the appeal so far has been tepid – only 19% of funds have been pledged and about half of this amount is carryover from 2008. Staff of humanitarian agencies fear a growing complacency on the part of donors because of the progress on the diplomatic front.

While the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) has worked skillfully with Somali political leaders to create the current opening, he has made a number of statements that have riled up the humanitarian community. He has castigated aid agencies for negotiating with armed opposition groups and local authorities, arguing that it undermines the federal government and lends legitimacy to opposition groups. He insists that humanitarian agencies make their program decisions based on the need to support the fledgling government. That is difficult for agency staff to accept, not just on the grounds of humanitarian principle, but because they know that many members of the current government were part of an apparatus that was predatory towards civilians and humanitarians.

The SRSG has broached the possibility of establishing a “green zone” – a protected area in Mogadishu where internationals would live and work – as a way of demonstrating concrete support for the government’s relocation to the capital. Establishing a green zone would be expensive, demand heightened international security, and, based on the Baghdad experience, would barely lessen the distance between international civil servants and the Somali people. The imposition of an international presence through force has a disastrous history in Somalia, and there is little prospect for the green zone initiative to escape this legacy.

Political actors, including donors and the TFG, must accept the independence of humanitarian agencies and that aid should be in response to needs. Ultimately, the most direct path for the Somali government to legitimacy is through providing security to the people, including by creating an environment in which humanitarian agencies can work safely and effectively.

Aid agencies need to recognize that aid in Somalia is especially political because it is one of the few sources of wealth

and power in an anarchic and resource-poor environment. For better or for worse, aid bestows legitimacy on those local actors that are seen to authorize or facilitate its delivery. Therefore, the direct and indirect costs of delivering aid need to be carefully analyzed with the interests of the population in mind, and the risks to the security of agency staff in providing it. That analysis may suggest the desirability of greater flexibility and cooperation with the UN in some instances.

AMISOM'S CHALLENGES

A key component of the international community’s engagement in Somalia remains the African Union Peacekeeping Mission in Somalia. AMISOM, authorized in February 2007, has a mandate to protect key TFG officials and infrastructure, support the training of Somali security forces, and create security conditions conducive to the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The force has never been adequately staffed or resourced.

AMISOM is not capable of creating broad area security in Mogadishu and works in cooperation with the government security forces. Under the terms of the 2008 Djibouti peace agreement, the existing TFG and ARS troops will comprise the nucleus of a new Somali security force. These combined forces, numbering approximately 2,700, now control certain neighborhoods in Mogadishu. They are currently operating without basic systems of command and control, however, or even administrative backstopping.

For some time, international support to the AU mission has been uncoordinated and inconsistent, and the force has suffered from a chronic lack of troops and equipment. The recent deployment of an additional Ugandan battalion brings the total AMISOM force strength to roughly 4,000 troops, only half of its mandated 8,000.

Since the withdrawal of the Ethiopian forces, AMISOM is ostensibly the only remaining foreign military force on Somali soil, and has since become a lightning rod for insurgent rhetorical and military attacks. In recent months there have been a number of deliberate attacks on AMISOM forces, the worst of which resulted from two coordinated and targeted suicide bombings in which eleven AMISOM soldiers were killed.

AMISOM has come under considerable criticism for its response to attacks on its convoys and positions. Retaliatory attacks that have resulted in the injury or death of civilians have been instantly publicized by insurgent groups via radio, discrediting AU forces and turning public opinion against them. AMISOM lacks a professional public information capacity to respond to allegations made against it.

Furthermore, the AU's inability to support AMISOM forces with credible investigations after the fact leaves questions unanswered and allows rumors to circulate unchecked.

Some of these challenges are beginning to be addressed. In an effort to resolve the resource shortages, the UN Security Council took steps in January 2009 to ensure more predictable financial and logistical UN support. Resolution 1863 authorizes the use of UN assessed peacekeeping contributions to fund a UN support package, including medical and communications support, and creates a trust fund to marshal voluntary contributions to the force.

In an attempt to regain the trust of Somalis, and under pressure from the UN, civil society organizations and the TFG, AMISOM has publicly stated its commitment to modify its approach to deal with insurgent attacks. AMISOM forces now only return fire when they can visually identify the attacker, and only use weapons that allow for direct fire.

NEXT STEPS FOR AMISOM

AMISOM is controversial, but its role is critical to the very existence of the TFG. President Sharif and government ministers – including many who would, in principle, like to see AMISOM go – have acknowledged that there is a need for AU troops until the TFG is able to consolidate its own police and security forces.

AMISOM does not have the means to properly secure the areas it controls. The new deployment of a Ugandan battalion and the expected deployment of an additional Burundian battalion will have a significant effect. AMISOM will require further resources – including troops and additional air, sea and land transport assets – in order to properly consolidate its positions. It also requires greater capacity to communicate directly with the Somali people to reinforce popular consent for international efforts as politicians and insurgent forces challenge their legitimacy.

As the international community seeks to reinforce AMISOM capacity, it should avoid the temptation to expand its mandate. A more aggressive, conspicuous mission would make it both a greater target and a potential source of public political discontent, threatening the delicate balance that the new Somali President has so far managed to strike.

Further, talk of deploying a UN peacekeeping operation should be put on hold. A large, multidimensional peacekeeping operation, such as the one described in the January

2009 Secretary General's report, would be a polarizing and destabilizing symbol of foreign meddling on Somali soil.

Instead, the international community should focus its attention on the development of an indigenous security sector capacity, building on and funding the programs to vet, train and equip a professional community police and national security force. If there is a concerted effort to develop effective security sector institutions now, it will serve to reinforce both the credibility and territorial control of the new TFG, mitigate the need for a UN deployment, and expedite the withdrawal of AMISOM.

NEW LEADERSHIP, NEW U.S. POLICY

The Obama administration has a chance to completely revamp the U.S. approach to Somalia. A new U.S. strategy should take a regional approach and balance short term counter-terrorism objectives with diplomatic and humanitarian ones.

Pursuing a diplomatic agenda is essential. Sheikh Sharif's success will depend largely on his ability to negotiate with hardliners and bring them into the transitional framework. The U.S. needs to accept the outcome of those negotiations, as it will be the only basis for durable security. The U.S. will need to engage with other donor countries, most notably the Gulf States which have been diplomatically active in Somalia. The recent alliance of the TFG and ARS may mean that western and Arab interests are partially aligned.

Any visit to Africa by President Obama will surely include Kenya, where he is regarded as a native son. This will provide an opportunity for him to address the crisis in Somalia. He needs to acknowledge the scale of the humanitarian crisis inside the country, as well as the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have fled to places like Dadaab. President Obama will also need to communicate clearly to Somali leaders and to Somalis at large that the U.S. will respond positively to a more inclusive government that is working for a peaceful Somalia.

Vice President for Policy Joel Charny, Peacekeeping Advocate Erin Weir and Advocate Patrick Duplat assessed the situation for displaced Somalis in Somalia and Kenya in March.