

The New Somalia: A Grimly Familiar Rerun



Abukar Albadri/European Pressphoto Agency

Somalis are fleeing Mogadishu, heading to villages where there is no government, but at least no warfare.



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By JEFFREY GETTLEMAN
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NAIROBI, Kenya, Feb. 20 — Fierce mortar attacks killed at least 15 civilians in [Somalia](#) on Tuesday, and for a country that had seemed on the verge of ending 16 years of chaotic violence this is the new status quo.

Nearly every day, government forces and insurgents shell each other across Mogadishu's already dilapidated neighborhoods, scattering bodies and any remaining traces of hope. Gun prices are soaring and more clans are joining the underground, while an outbreak of cholera sweeps the countryside.

“To tell you the truth, I’m pretty worried,” said Mohammed Ali Mahdi, a top clan elder. When the government came to Mogadishu, “I felt we were going the right way. Unfortunately, that’s not the case anymore and soon it’s going to be too late.”

It is hard to believe, but Somalia is actually becoming a more violent and chaotic place. That is not how it was supposed to be. Nearly two months ago, an internationally-supported transitional government ousted the Islamist forces and steamed into Mogadishu, the capital, with great expectations. But confidence in the government — never very high — is rapidly bleeding away.

Somalia seems to be just shy of total collapse — again — because the Ethiopian troops who provided the muscle to throw out the Islamists are withdrawing, yet none of the peacekeepers promised from other African countries have arrived.

Hundreds of families are streaming out of Mogadishu, hoisting mattresses on their backs and following pitted roads to villages where there is no electricity, medicine or even the faintest hint of government, but at least no warfare. At least, not yet.

“We can’t stand the shelling anymore,” said Hassan Mohammed, a father of four, who was headed to a village in the south.

There was a burst of optimism beginning Dec. 28, when government troops, with Ethiopian firepower behind them, marched into Mogadishu and planted the hope that the anarchy was ending. Cheering crowds poured into ruined streets. Aid experts in Nairobi circulated ambitious reconstruction plans. Ethiopian and American officials, who had worked together to overthrow the Islamists, breathed a mutual sigh of relief.

But what has happened in the past few weeks has killed that mood. A deadly insurgency has started, beginning with a few clans connected to the Islamists and now expanding to several more. Many government troops refuse to get involved. “We’re not going out there,” said Dahir Hassan, a police captain, from the confines of his police station. “If we get hurt, who’s going to take care of us?”

All analysts agree that the violence will continue and probably intensify unless the government reconciles with clan leaders, who control, as much as anyone controls, what happens in Somalia.

But so far, there’s been very little of that. Instead of reaching out to truly influential figures, analysts say the government has picked ministers not because they have any substantial support among their clans but because they will do the government’s bidding. The result is an increasingly isolated, authoritarian and unpopular government in which the transitional president, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, is accused of behaving more like a clan warlord — which he was — than a national leader.

“Where this government is heading is so far from where the international community wants it to go,” said Ali Iman Sharmarke, one of the owners of the HornAfrik radio station in Mogadishu.

A common complaint is that the transitional government — transitional being the operative word — is not working itself out of a job as promised. Donor nations agreed to pay the salaries of Somali officials with the understanding that those men and handful of women would shepherd the country to democratic elections in 2009. But there has been almost no progress toward setting up an election commission, let alone taking a census. Many Somalis say they would be more inclined to support, or at least

tolerate, the transitional government if they thought it was indeed transitional.

To be fair, ruling Somalia, which has not had a functioning central government since 1991, is no easy task. Thirteen previous governments have been formed and 13 previous governments have failed.

Abdirahman Dinari, the government's chief spokesman, said the criticism about the government's selection of ministers was just an excuse. "These people wouldn't be happy with anyone in power," he said, conceding that the government, on its own, did not have the skills to pull the country together. "We need help."

But Mr. Dinari said help had been slow to arrive, partly because international organizations were spending millions of dollars on a staff based in Kenya, which is deemed a much safer place to work, instead of investing those resources in Somalia.

But many say that argument rings hollow. Security in Somalia does not depend on foreign troops or foreign aid. At least, it never has. In the early 1990s, the United States and the [United Nations](#) poured hundreds of millions of dollars into stabilizing Somalia and they failed notoriously, leaving the country as capriciously violent and hopeless as ever.

Then along came the Islamists, who during their six-month reign last year pacified the hornet's nest of Mogadishu by persuading clans to voluntarily disarm their militias and persuading Somalis, most of whom are Sunni Muslims, to buy into their Islam-is-the-answer solution.

One Western diplomat laughed when asked if a modest force of peacekeepers — the [African Union](#) is proposing around 8,000 — could deliver the level of stability that the Islamists had delivered on their own.

“No way,” he said, speaking anonymously under diplomatic rules. “And the government’s urgency for peacekeepers shows you just how badly they’ve done with reconciliation.”