

The African perspective on the Somalian crisis

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Once more, as usual, the electronic media have performed their duty as the world's mirror and town crier that brings the news into our living rooms and bedrooms. They have done it so very clearly, so very succinctly and vividly, with such a shrill and heart-rending pitch, that the most insensitive, the most hard-hearted, and most frivolous have been brought to attention, refusing to remain indifferent. The compelling images of "small, old men" with red-gray hair, bony thoracic cavities, scrawny hands, spindly feet, and puffy legs haunt us like unpleasant nightmares. Dull and ghostly eyes, sunken into the skull by hunger, stare at us hopelessly, accusing the world of its indifference to a vanishing generation. Portly and ballooned stomachs hang on frail skeletal structures that can barely carry them. Women lie about in hopeless desperation, hoping against hope, knowing full well that that was the end of the road, the end of their lives. Welcome to Ethiopia! Welcome to Biafra revisited!

To Africans, the Somalian crisis has its roots in European colonialism and, more specifically, in the colonial era in Africa, and in the arms race all over the world between the superpowers. Toward the middle of the 19th century, when the transatlantic slave trade was no longer viable economically to the western world, Europe introduced another form of slavery into Africa. It was known as colonization. It was a new method of not only exploiting all the natural resources of Africa, but also of using African labor very cheaply to exploit them. Colonization was an *in situ* slavery, much cheaper, less dehumanizing to Africans than transatlantic slavery, but very much more convenient for Europe. . . . Under the guise of a divinely sanctioned civilizing mission (the white man's burden), she looted, raped, pillaged, and decimated the African population with impunity. Such were the excesses of King Leopold of Belgium in the Congo Free State (now Zaire), that the very architects of the Berlin Conference were applauded and had to take away that part of Africa from King Leopold's control. The whole of Africa, with the exception of Liberia in West Africa and Ethiopia in the east, was divided up among the European nations at the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. From this partition came

French Somaliland, British Somaliland, and Italian Somaliland. One people, one ethnic group, one nation suddenly became three countries with three different citizenships.

For the next 75 years after the Berlin Conference, Africans, like their brothers transplanted across the Atlantic and reduced to servitude, lost control not only over their own lives, but also over the destiny of their fatherland. In July 1960, this land of Punt, this Somalia, made up of British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland, became the Somalia Democratic Republic.

Harsh cultural legacy of the colonial era

The post-colonial era should have ushered in real independence. But instead, Africa found herself beset by myriads of problems, not the least being the crisis of identity. Seventy-five years of colonization was not enough to assimilate properly the cultures of the colonizers. But it was sufficient to alienate Africans born into colonization from authentic and unadulterated African culture. . . . One regrettable consequence of this situation is that like bats, neither mammals nor birds, Africans are neither Europeans nor real Africans.

Somalia's strategic position in the Horn of Africa, like Africa's natural resources, is both a bane and a blessing to her. Occupying an area of land covering 246,200 square miles that stretches from the Equator to the Red Sea, Somalia is about 20 times the size of the states of Maryland and Delaware put together. It can take up all the land mass of the East Coast of the United States from Maine to the southern tip of Virginia. . . . Her geopolitical position is of strategic significance to both the former U.S.S.R. and the United States. *And, it is this very fact that is at the very core of the present-day Somalian crisis.*

The indiscriminate carving up of the African continent by colonial masters without any regard to ethnic and tribal differences, and lumping together people of different cultures and customs, laid the foundations of the future internecine and interstate wars. . . . And the genesis of the Somalian crisis is buried in the dispute over territorial boundaries between Ethiopia and Somalia. And once more, the culprit is Britain. Britain, after World War II, had ceded Somalia's western territory to Ethiopia. This territorial dispute was the pretext that the U.S.S.R. needed to establish a foothold on the eastern soil of Africa. After all, she was not present at

the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. The Somalia of General Muhammed Barre, backed by communist propaganda, suddenly found herself thrust into the 20th century's murderous military technology, but without the backing of 20th-century economic foundations.

In exchange for a foothold in the Horn, the U.S.S.R. built in Somalia, Africa's most modern naval base, in the Gulf of Aden. She also built Africa's largest military airport. She was not interested in building Somalia's economic structure, if ever she knew how. Her main goal was the spread of communism in the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa, using Somalia as a launching pad.

The change of guard in Ethiopia in 1974 changed Russia's policy toward Somalia, and, at the same time, barred the imperialists' intentions toward Africa as a whole. Africa has always been and still is a means to an end, and not the end in itself, to both the superpowers and the ex-colonial masters. She has always been, and still is, the peon in the African game of chess, where two superpowers have forever been trying to checkmate each other.

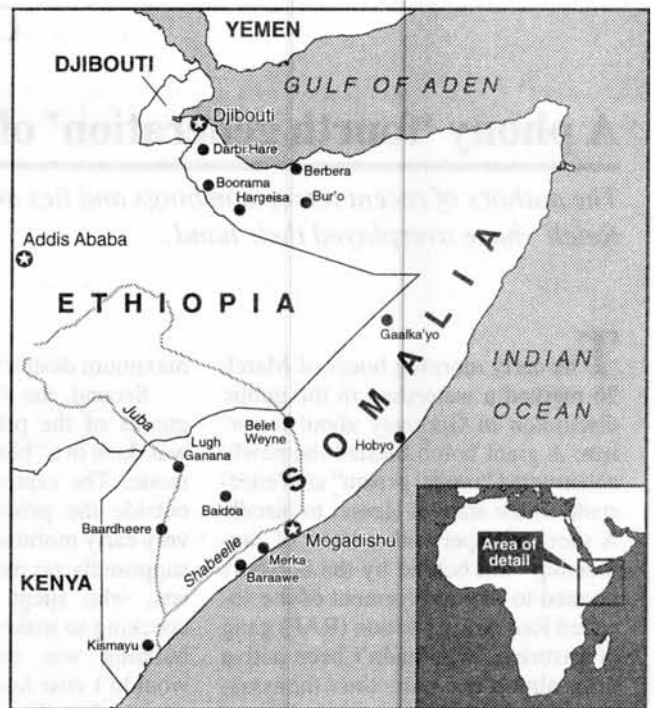
The aged Emperor Haile Selassie was dethroned in 1974, and Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam took over the reins of government in March of the same year. He proclaimed his regime a socialist one, thereby kicking out the United States. The sequel to this proclamation was as picturesque as it was dramatic. Russia abandoned Somalia for a bigger stake in Ethiopia. The United States moved over to Somalia. This goes to prove, once more, that both powers were not in the least interested in helping the combatting sides to resolve their differences. They fueled and helped to intensify the war which continued unabated and more devastating between 1977-79.

For the next decade, the American government poured hundreds of millions of dollars worth of ammunition into Siad Barre's Somalia to irritate the Soviet Union and check her influence in the Horn of Africa. . . .

While the American administrations from Presidents Carter to Reagan through Bush, were busy consolidating their position in Somalia, General Barre's excesses were benignly overlooked, and understandably so. (After all, America was not in Somalia to teach the art of good government.) Barre's unchecked excesses led to civil war. Once more, factions once united against a common enemy, i.e., Ethiopia, splintered and began fighting one another for hegemony inside Somalia. When Barre could no longer stem the mounting tide of opposition against him, he fled the country. The central administration collapsed, and with it all the non-state institutions that make for good government. As if the already chaotic situation were not enough, nature herself gave a coup de grace by causing a drought that lasted for six consecutive years and wiped out harvests throughout the land. The result is this phantasmagoria that we are witnessing. A dream that has turned into a nightmarish reality.

Who is to blame? The Somalians for being Africans occu-

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pying the most coveted position in the Horn of Africa? The vainglorious Britain that created, though unwittingly, the conditions that led to the Ethiopian-Somalian war? The Soviet Union, obsessed with communist ideologies, and intent on spreading those ideologies all over the world at all cost? The capitalist countries of the western world, especially the United States, determined to checkmate any Russian attempt at spreading communism? In the midst of all this, it is the innocent, the weak, and helpless that suffer. . . . When two elephants fight, as the saying goes in Africa, it is the grass that pays the price.

Why should anybody protest the American presence in Somalia after he has understood the genesis of that country's crisis? The U.S.S.R. is no more, or else she also should be there to clean up the mess that she helped to create. Everybody should be there for humanity's sake. The refusal to do so would mean the demise of this humanity. It is not shocking to any African that Thatcherite Britain of Lady Macbeth's reputation is absent there. The shrill cries of the Biafran babies that she starved to death about 23 years ago are still ringing in our ears. She never contributes to where there is no economic interest. And as for Africans, and Africa, when will they have the guts to stand up and tell the rest of the world, "Enough is enough, the rape is enough. Leave us alone," and really mean it? Until then, there will be more Somalias, more Ethiopias, more Sudans, more Mozambiques, and more Biafras.