



Struggling for Peace in Somalia

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Somalia, Somalia: What Has Happened to the Beloved Country?

by Chantal Logan

For the average American, the name of Somalia is tied to the image that was flashed across the world in 1993, of triumphant Somali youth dragging the corpses of American soldiers in the dusty streets of Mogadishu. The recent movie *Black Hawk Down* has expanded on that image and in the wake of September 11, the word “terrorist” has been added to the already marred view of Somalis. Yet, for some Mennonites, those images are not the ones that come to mind when they think of Somalis.

Unknown to the Mennonite community at large and certainly the international media, Somalis and Mennonites started a relationship 50 years ago that has endured until today. It is for this reason that a Mennonite presence in the area continues to be possible and fruitful in the midst of very complex and difficult circumstances.

Independence and Hope

Fifty years ago, when the first Mennonite family arrived, the Somalis were eagerly waiting for their independence. The southern part of the country, a former Italian colony, was under the trusteeship of the United Nations. The northern part was still under British rule. In 1960, the two regions became independent and then joined to form a new state, the Republic of Somalia.

But for the instigators of independence, this was only a beginning. The goal was that other territories where Somali lived

(the Ogaden region under Ethiopian rule, the *Côte française des Somalis* under French rule, and the Northern Frontier District, which went from British to Kenyan rule) would also become part of the new state. But the dream was never to come true.

Worse still, 43 years later, the territory of the former Republic of Somalia is split into three main areas. In the northwest, Somaliland proclaimed its independence in 1991; in the northeast, Puntland declared itself an autonomous region in 1998. The rest of the country is divided into fiefdoms whose control varies with the fate of local militia, warlords, or clan politics.

At this writing in February 2003, while the sixteenth international peace conference is being held in Kenya, no overall settlement has yet been reached. Everyone is at a loss to explain why the crisis has lasted so long.

Independence, like everywhere else in Africa, had brought great hope. It was particularly felt at the time, by Somalis and Europeans alike, that there was something unique in the birth of this new nation state. The reason was that the new country was made up of what was considered a very homogeneous group of people. The Somalis were seen essentially as a nomadic people who shared one language (Somali), one culture, and one religion (Islam) but had been divided through the vicissitudes of colonization. Homogeneity as the basis for national cohesion was believed to be a recipe for guaranteed success.

The “Bantu Somalis”: The First Victims of War

In 2002 the U.S. government announced that it would resettle a few thousand “Bantu Somalis” because of their status as an oppressed minority in Somalia.

The “Bantu Somali” do not fit into any neat category. They bear different clan names, which vary from one region to the other. Most of them live along the rivers and are farmers. Some anthropologists consider them the original settlers of Somalia.

But in the south, many of them are descendants of former slaves, since many Somalis were slave owners. In the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, these slaves found their way to the south, having escaped or bought their freedom.

The slaves were not of Somali origin, since Islam teaches that you cannot take another Muslim into slavery. They came from neighboring countries. For this reason some “Bantu Somali” have different features. The Somali people speak of them having “hard hair” (*jareer*) and “short fingers” (*fara gaab*) versus the Somali, who have “soft hair” (*jileec*) and “long fingers” (*fara dheer*). The term “Bantu Somali” is now widely used, though some Somali intellectuals object to its use because of its racial overtones.

The “Bantu Somali” are known to be a peaceful people who do not fight. As farmers, they are often the victims of the pastoralist (nomadic) groups, especially in the dry season when the pastoralists drive cattle on their plots of land and destroy their crops. Because of their vulnerability, they are often in a vassal relationship with the more powerful Somali clans, which sometimes give the “Bantu Somali” weapons so they can fight along with them.

Still, the builders of the modern Somali state were aware that to the nomad in the bush, the concept of national identity was new and foreign. His identity was founded in the clan he belonged to: it was by reciting his genealogy that he learned at an early age who were his kin and where his loyalty lay, not by virtue of a written piece of paper, be it passport or identity card. So the leaders of independence used what was at their reach to build a sense of unity among their people. In a culture where the spoken word holds great power, they composed “patriotic poetry” to get their message across.

Throughout the history of the Republic of Somalia, many attempts were made to create a sense of oneness among the members of the nation. The most formidable one happened in 1969 after a military coup that put Mohamed Siad Barre in power. The new leaders hailed the change as a revolution, and adopted scientific socialism as their ideology.

The Somali language was written down and gradually adopted as the medium to teach in the schools, replacing English, Italian, and sometimes Arabic. The schools were nationalized, including the ones run by Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM), and a common curriculum was adopted. To defeat tribalism, people were forbidden to identify themselves through their clan affiliations. In 1977, the country waged war against Ethiopia as another attempt to cement national unity. But the defeat in 1978 started to undo the painstaking work of building a national identity.

As the opposition mounted, the regime became more repressive and turned into a dictatorship. As he felt threatened, Siad Barre started using tribal politics to stay in power and the opposition to the government became more entangled in tribal issues. When he was overthrown in January 1991, the opposition split and no one group became strong enough to assert its control over the country.

Clans Provide Structure

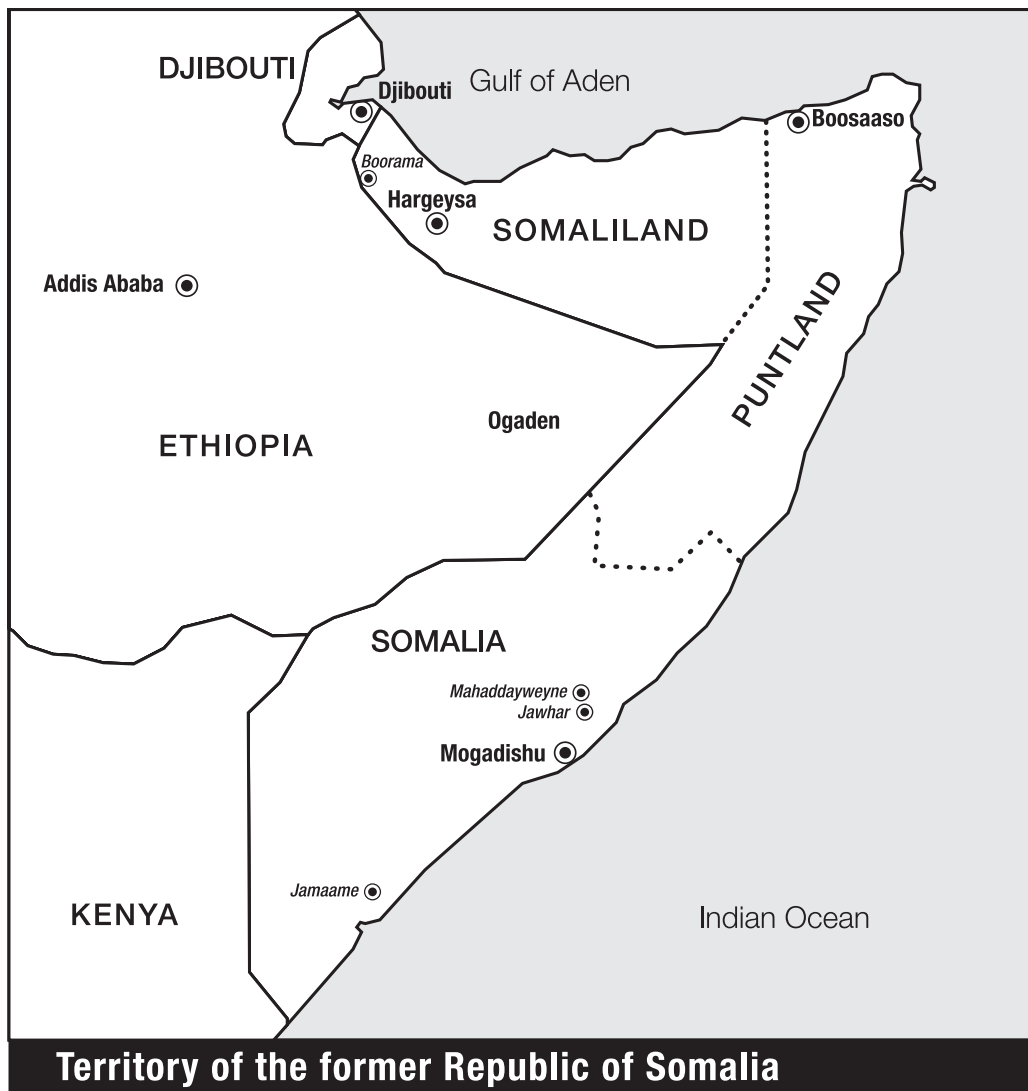
After all the government institutions collapsed, people did not know where to turn for protection and survival; the clan as a closely knit group of family units became the only safety net in a chaotic situation. It was not that the people had not acquired a sense of belonging to one country, it was that there was no country left to belong to.

The demise of the Somali state cannot be understood without taking into account the general wave of looting that occurred at the onset of the civil war. Like many of its counterparts on the African continent, Somalia had adopted a model of state borrowed from the European countries. Called sometimes *l'État Providence*, the state was seen as the Great Provider for the people, and consequently the source of income and wealth. The idea of *l'État Providence* led in Africa to the subtle and dangerous implication that the president of the nation was *l'Homme Providence*, provider and father figure who *owned* the wealth of the nation and therefore had the right to distribute it among his protégés, be they clan members or political allies.

Siad Barre, like others elsewhere, followed that practice. So when he was taken out of power, the people went on a general spree of looting in the capital city of Mogadishu, stripping clean every government office, from the central bank to the schools. The people took away what they perceived belonged to the president and his clan (who had previously become rich at the expense of the Somali people and took many government resources as they left power) to claim it now as their own. But what made that looting so destructive is that the military arsenals were also looted. Somalia, being on the side of the Soviet Union first and then of the United States later in the cold war, had received huge amount of arms. Almost overnight, every young man found himself with a gun in his hands terrorizing the population regardless of clan affiliation. The figure of the *mooreyan* (the Somali word for the young, armed criminals) appeared and has stayed ever since. Uneducated, prompt to anger, a mercenary par excellence, he hires himself to the highest bidder and forms the backbone of the warlord militia. With the guns in the street and in the absence of law enforcement, the power came to be in the hands of the man with the most gun power.

Although clan affiliation is seen only as a divisive factor, it also has mechanisms for making peace and imparting justice. When there is a conflict, clan elders are called upon to reconcile the warring parties, but the proliferation of arms displaced the power from the traditional elders to the famous or infamous “warlords.”

When the international community tried to broker peace among the warring parties, they dealt with the men with the guns but



The “Bantu Somalis”: The First Victims of War (continued)

Of late, MCC has sponsored reconciliation talks between groups of “Bantu Somali” who had been at war because of killing that had occurred when they sided with different clans. The worst tragedies occur when the clan they helped is defeated; they are then left helpless against the reprisals of the victorious clan.

During the early years of the civil war, as the troops of the former government fought with the opposition, the “Bantu Somali” suffered terrible losses: their farms were destroyed, their women were raped, and all their seeds stored for planting during the next season were taken.

Since then, they have been able to survive and live in relative peace. Yet in a country where there is no law or order, anybody can take their land, abuse them, and even kill them without ever being challenged. In spite of those difficulties, some feel that it is better to die in one’s own country than live as a refugee. MCC has helped many “Bantu Somalis” to go back home. So far the ones who have gone back are living in peace and are happy to be back.

The U.S. decision to resettle a large group was received at first with great jubilation, but disappointment has set in as the process is lengthy and the situation at the refugee camp (with limited food) is very difficult. Many of the “Bantu Somali” refugees still see resettling in the United States as an opportunity to be educated and have a better way of life, but they are committed not to forget their country and the people left behind. Once in the United States, they will discover that discrimination does not happen just in Somalia.

—Chantal Logan

without much success. In 1992, famine swept the country and the U.S. army went on a “humanitarian mission” under a United Nations mandate to help with food distribution: it tried to overpower the guns on the ground with a greater military force. But it ended in the tragic way that everybody knows about (though most North Americans probably don’t know that the Somali death toll from the “Black Hawk down” rescue operation was between five and ten thousand!), and the U.N. mission folded soon after.

For a while, Somalia ceased to make the headline news. It regained some coverage in 2000, when at the initiative of the president of Djibouti a peace conference was organized, which sidelined the warlords and called on the civil society to participate. It was held in Somali fashion with long debates and search for consensus.

When after almost a year a transitional government was elected, it was received with great enthusiasm from the people. Unfortunately it failed to assert its authority in the capital Mogadishu and soon lost the trust of the people. The reasons given for that failure are multiple: lack of backing from the Western nations concerned about perceived ties between the transitional government and Muslim fundamentalist groups, corruption among members of the government, the printing of fake Somali currency, and even, according to some, exclusion of the warlords from the process.

Now, in the background of the latest attempt at brokering peace, the new super-power agenda is the war on terrorism. Although this attempt is taken at the initiative of Inter-Governmental Authority on Development, a regional organization, the

The following poem addresses the armed militias and draws their attention to the reality of the dispute among them—a dispute that does not serve any purpose, but only adds to the suffering of the already war-weary returnees, who were keen on only one thing—rebuilding their lives.

Shatter not, my newly mended heart
Force me not to the refugee life
Where cold, hunger and misery
reside
For I have just tasted the comfort
of home
Kill not the surviving heroes,
Who miraculously escaped death
Crush not the handicapped ones,
For they have barely recovered,
Young man with the gun,
Whom are you shooting? Me?
For, there is no enemy in sight.
Have you ever seriously wondered?
What became of our brave fighters?
Whatever happened to all our
buildings?

—From Amina Mohamoud Warsame,
*Queens without Crowns: Somali
and Women's Changing Roles
and Peace Building* (Stockholm:
Life and Peace Institute, 2002),
pp. 42–47. Used by permission.

While the Somalis are struggling to find answers, we walk alongside them, working and dreaming of a better tomorrow. But many of the Somalis appreciate that we do more than just dream and work: it matters to them that we also pray.

initiative comes from the fear that a country without a central government can be a haven for terrorists.

Standing by the Somali People

Faced with a country in disarray, both EMM and MCC looked for ways to stand by the Somalis in this time of crisis. Because of their long history in the area, they had in their hands a tool that most other organizations did not have: longstanding relationships. In a situation where there is no more legal structure and therefore no more recognizable legitimacy from a Western point of view, the question of who you should deal with becomes paramount.

On the issue of peace, in partnership with the Swedish organization, Life and Peace Institute, the Mennonites in the early 1990s were pioneers in encouraging the participation of elders and other members of the civil society at peace conferences. Recognizing the power of women as peacemakers, MCC and EMM also supported the training of women in conflict resolution and their participation in the peace process. It advocated for a bottom-up approach, encouraging regional conferences organized by the Somalis themselves. Since an overall settlement in the south is not yet in place, the EMM/MCC office in Nairobi continues to support meetings of elders to resolve conflicts between small groups in the absence of a local administration.

In the area of relief, MCC very early partnered with Somali groups to implement programs on the field rather than doing it themselves. That choice helped avoid many of the pitfalls of relief and development work in Somalia. In a country where there is no police force, half of the people hired by the international organizations are armed security guards.

In the main cities whose control is under different clans, the location of an office largely determines which group will benefit the most from the presence of the organization. Kidnapping of expatriates or robberies of facilities often happen when a group feels it has been left out by the international organization in the hiring or distribution process. But trustworthy Somali organizations, run by people who live on the ground, can operate without creating major disturbance in the area.

Relations of trust go a long way: from counting on your partner to care for you on a visit to seconding short-term volunteers to a local Somali institution. By focusing on relationships rather than programs, it is possible to make a difference in very uncertain times.

The Future

The question we ask, then, is: What does tomorrow hold for Somalia? The Somali tragedy defies the theories that see the roots of conflict in ethnic and religious differences. Why could a common ancestry, a common language, and a common religion not hold a nation together? And since they did not, around what can Somalia rebuild its sense of nationhood? Now that there is no more independence to fight for, which common vision can inspire the rebirth of a Somali state?

While the Somalis are struggling to find answers, we walk alongside them, working and dreaming of a better tomorrow. But many of the Somalis appreciate that we do more than just dream and work: it matters to them that we also pray.

Being Muslims, many Somalis say that peace will come when God wills it. This we also believe, but we trust besides that God's blessing is on the peacemakers who help make it happen and hold on to the promise that "the meek shall inherit the earth."

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Making Peace in the Traditional Somali Way

by Abdullahi Mohamed Shirwa

The fundamentals of the Somali peacemaking process are based on the traditional wisdom of the Somali people, and are safeguarded by people with good intentions, like the traditional and religious leaders and creative poets and artists.

Parents bring up their children by telling them stories about the importance of a peaceful life. On the other hand, they warn them about the negative effects wars would have on their lives. However, it seems that nowadays there is some sort of disconnection from traditional ways of life, and as a result, the role of the guardian of cultural values has been marginalized lately. However, the morning prayers of the old folks are still the same: "Allah bless us with peace and plenty of milk, and protect us from wars and famine."

According to the Somali cultural way of life, peace and milk are among the most precious items that symbolize a good life. Peace brings prosperity and tranquility. But on the contrary, wars and famine are viewed as signs of destruction and death.

The Somali way of peacemaking is divided into three stages: (1) conflict prevention, (2) conflict resolution, and (3) peacebuilding.

Conflict Prevention

There is a Somali proverb that says, "If you hear trouble taking place in a faraway distance, no matter how far, it will soon be at your feet." The hidden wisdom of the proverb is that we are living in a global village, and therefore problems happening elsewhere in the world are likely to affect us in one way or another.

And that is why traditionally Somalis first sought to gather all the relevant information available in the surrounding areas, to assess the security situation before the outbreak of any eventual hostility. After all the necessary data regarding the security situation on the ground was obtained, then the local clan elders convened a security meeting. In such meetings the focus was mainly put on defense preparations, deciding whether to change location, and sending a delegation to the area of the conflict.

Another reason for taking these preventive precautions was to avoid revenge-taking afterwards. As the following story will illustrate, clan elders always sought first to reconcile the warring parties.

Two Men Killed in the Bay Region

Two men, both called Hassan, from one of the clans living in the bay region of Somalia were killed by men of another clan. The clan of the men who killed the two men did not send a word of apology or condolence to the family of the deceased men, as is the usual and expected behavior.

So the young men of the clan that lost the two men were angry and prepared to take revenge for their kinsmen, as expected of them according to their tradition. But the *malaq* (chief) of their clan and the other elders strongly resisted any move toward revenge. Instead, the *malaq* and his men opted rather for an attitude of waiting and seeing how the other party would react. They waited and waited but it was all in vain.

Then one day the *malaq* called a meeting of elders and said to them, "I suggest we take some gifts to that clan which killed our two Hassans." At the beginning his idea was totally rejected by the rest of the elders.

Those who strongly opposed his proposal began their argument by saying such a move was against all existing traditional norms and values and would be viewed as weakness on their part. After a long and heated dialogue among the elders, they finally agreed, as the *malaq* had proposed, to send a delegation led by the *malaq* himself, carrying gifts to the other clan in order to make peace between the two clans.

After the arrival at their destination, the leader of the delegation spoke by saying, "Gentlemen, even though you have killed two Hassans from us, and up to now you did not even apologize to us, we have decided to come to you and this gift is a token to prevent other Hassans, now living, from being killed. We have taken this move with good intentions, with the sole aim of reconciling our hostile communities. And we hope you will not take it in a sinister way."

continued on page 6

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The peace poems women composed . . . were intended to raise the consciousness of the masses to the importance of peaceful co-existence between the different clans. One of the most famous peace poems, composed by Saado Abdi Amare, moved many people when it was first recited by the composer in 1994. The following lines are excerpts from that poem . . . :

O, Deeqa, I am truly at a loss
Of the real intentions of this war.
Unlike unrelated people who can
drift apart.
My own people are fighting one
another,
Neighbours are fierce at each
other's throat,
My plight has no match
On both hands have my clothes
caught fire [an expression used
when one is related to both
warring parties]
Knowing nothing of swimming
Was I taken away by a current
From the bitter *da'ar* tree
And of fatal poison had I my fill
Why do people from this bank
Despise people on the other
Why must weary orphans flee
again?
Must grieving mothers suffer
afresh?
Out of desperation, rejected I
Hargeysa and my own people
Only to flee hastily from newly
visited Berbera.
Deeqa, I am totally at a loss.

—From Amina Mohamoud Warsame, *Queens without Crowns: Somali Women's Changing Roles and Peace Building* (Stockholm: Life and Peace Institute, 2002), pp. 42–47. Used by permission.

Children's Voices

Below is a song (translated from Somali) that was sung by a five-year-old girl to a group of men during the Badhan peace intervention (see p. 8). The song moved some of the men to tears.

Plastic bags come in handy
At times like these
Plastic bags are light
Let my mother have one

She needs to stuff our property
All that is important to carry
It is time to run
Before we get caught up in the fight

My mother owns only one back
To carry me, my old grandma,
Hawa, Halima, and little Yusuf
I hope I can run faster
So as to give little Yusuf and
Grandma a chance
To ride on my mother's back

The plastic bag is heavy
It contains *kibis*, water, and
mugmad
I hope Mummy can afford
To buy survival items
It's as expensive
As the heavy load on her back

Will Mummy manage?
Oh, what a burden she has to carry
During these times of war

Then one day the *malaag* called a meeting of elders and said to them, "I suggest we take some gifts to that clan which killed our two Hassans."

The elders of the receiving clan appreciated the move taken by the *malaag's* clansmen. They apologized to the visiting delegates and promised to pay, on the spot, the blood price of the two Hassans. The elders of the two clans agreed to cease all kinds of hostilities and made a peace accord.

Conflict Resolution

Somali people believe conflict is a part of everyday life. To support this assumption there is a Somali proverb that says, "The teeth and the tongue are close neighbors, and yet they sometimes bite each other."

According to the traditional Somali way of conflict resolution, the elders summon the opposing parties to a meeting under the "court tree," which is known as a place of mediation. According to customary law, all the concerned parties are required to be present before the presiding jury of elders at the agreed place and day. If any case is considered to be very serious by the presiding jury of elders, normally they would invite other mediators to assist them.

Traditionally, mediators were required to prove themselves to possess beyond any doubt the following qualities:

1. Patience, in every aspect of life (in the face of hunger, thirst, physical abuse, mistreatment, and so on)
2. Ability to speak in a pleasant way, like a gentleman
3. Ability to listen and observe well

Before proceeding to the court tree, each party meets separately under a meeting tree to discuss among themselves and formulate a position. Each party also selects capable and authorized persons to represent its case before the jury of elders (or "mediating elders").

The proceedings at the court tree go forward based on traditional rules with the goal of building a consensus for peace that is satisfactory to all concerned parties. The procedures are based on the kinds of issues that are to be addressed and how many negotiating groups there are. The following roles are defined:

1. Chairperson (usually the senior one among the jury of elders)
2. Communicator (summarizes the essence of the views expressed by the opposing parties)
3. Religious groups (observe and advise based on principles of Islam)

4. Verbal note taker (assists the mediating delegates by repeating what was said earlier)
5. Spokesperson (announces the decision and persuades the parties to accept it)

The accused party is expected as a token of goodwill, after the matter is settled, to offer a ewe sheep as a sign to heal the injured parties' wounds, which were caused by their clansmen. The sheep itself or something of equivalent market value is acceptable in such situations.

The practice of calling in Somali, "Sabeen xir!" ("Tether of the ewe sheep," or "I give you this ewe sheep as an apology") signifies respect, admission of one's shortcomings, seeking to restore community relations that were broken, and cementing friendship anew. On the other hand, after accepting the ewe sheep, according to Somali customary law, the receiving party normally returns half of whatever was given as payment. Then both parties exchange warm words of appreciation and willingness to establish new, friendly community cooperation.

The "tether of the ewe sheep" can be either a message of apology or a live animal, offered to calm the injured party.

Farah Suusle, Peacemaker

Elders mediating two warring clans met under the court tree and started discussing how best to end the hostilities among these clans. As they continued in their discussions, some of the delegates from one of the warring clans took a very uncompromising position, and the going seemed to be getting very tough.

So at that moment Farah Suusle, a brave and peace-loving mediating elder from one of the warring clans, stood up and requested that the mediators ask the gentleman who had taken the uncompromising position: "What are your conditions for peace?"

The man said, "I demand that your clan come here before my clan, carrying shoes in their mouths [an extreme humiliation] and crawling on the ground. Only then will I consider accepting a peace deal with your clan."

Farah Suusle stood up immediately, as soon as the man had finished speaking, took his shoes off his feet, put them into his mouth, and started crawling on the ground toward the man who had made that demand.

And the war and all hostilities between these two clans ended, simply by the humble and peace-loving actions of Farah Suusle.

Peacebuilding

The Somali peacebuilding process reflects traditional methodology. According to the rules of war engagement, certain categories of people are not to be attacked: children, women, religious people, elders, peace mediators, prisoners of war, in-laws, and travelers.

Since Somali communities move about very frequently, from one place to the next, it traditionally was not allowed to harm travelers on the way by terrorism or highway robbery. In fact, travelers were viewed as messengers bringing news from faraway places, and therefore were considered as sources of valuable information.

Women delegates were accorded with special considerations, as we will find in the following story.

One time in the past, many camels were looted from members of a clan in the Hiran region. The clansmen of the camel owners decided to send a group of women delegates, led by a woman who was by birth related to the men who took away their camels, but was married to, and had some children with, one of the men whose camels were looted. After the women negotiators had reached their destination, the leader demanded that her clansmen return the camels they had taken out of her flock. After several days of heated discussions between the men who looted the camels and their elders, they finally agreed to hand over to her all the camels of her husband.

After she got her own camels, she said to the elders of her clansmen, "Gentlemen, what about the camels of these women who are here with me now? I tell you, it will be a very shameful act on your part if you send these women back empty-handed. Please, give them back to their camels as well, so we can all go back to our families with joy."

At last all the camels were handed over to the women delegates.

A delegation of elders accompanied the convoy of the women and camels back to their homes safely. Then all the elders from both clans met and made a peace agreement.

Conclusion

In the past the Somali way of making peace was generally based on collective decision-making and transparency, and was spear-headed by skillful and honest people, who were well acquainted with the basic needs and concerns of the people. These men were generally guided by the principle of peacebuilding as outlined above.

Most of the conflicts in the past were confined to limited areas, and between a small number of clans, with no political agenda behind the conflicts.

We are seeing widespread anarchy and lawlessness in some parts of the country. But there are still some places within the country where the traditional way of peacemaking is bearing fruitful results. Good examples are Somaliland, Puntland, and some parts of southern Somalia.

Abdullahi Mohamed Shirwa is a nongovernment agency worker in Mogadishu, Somalia.

Gentlemen, what about the camels of these women who are here with me now? I tell you, it will be a very shameful act on your part if you send these women back empty-handed.

Somali Women Peacemakers

Women's direct involvement in all forms of conflict resolution and peace building processes was minimal in the past. In the specific area of conflict resolution, women had an indirect role to forge peace between conflicting parties. Sealing final agreements between warring parties with the exchange of brides was one way of doing this. The logic behind this strategy was the sowing of trust between the two warring clans because the exchange of brides was a gesture of good will and a genuine wish to let bygones be bygones and start a peaceful relationship. . . .

Since exogamy was widely practiced among the Somali people, the very fact of a woman marrying into another clan was in itself a precaution against future disputes developing into violent confrontations. It was much easier for the elders of the two clans who had already forged an alliance through the marriage relationship (*xidid*) to reach an agreement when conflicts arose. Moreover, in some cases, women themselves acted as peace envoys to their respective clans to break the ice. Sending a woman was safer during the initial stages of resolving a conflict when peace agreements had not been reached, for women belonged to both clans either by marriage or by birth.

Somali women have a special vocation for peace. Since they often marry outside their clan, they are used as natural intermediaries when there is interclan fighting.

Trying to Convince Men and Women to Make Peace

by Fatima Jibrell with Chantal Logan

Somali women have a special vocation for peace. Since they often marry outside their clan, they are used as natural intermediaries when there is interclan fighting. But since the civil war, women have done even more: they have become active peacemakers through the many organizations they have created all over Somalia.

Yet Somali women, like all other women in the world, can be as much warmongers as any men: they can get caught up in the madness of war, asking their men to avenge the death of their loved ones. In an interview at a Somali peace conference in February 1997, I said:

Let us not pretend innocence. Women must accept their share of violating the Allah-given rights of others. Since 1991, women have been igniting fires that burn lives still. Women have empowered and encouraged their husbands, their leaders, and their militia to victimize their fellow countrymen. . . . Women cry, they grieve, they remain weary—but do not learn the lesson—a lesson that has cost them more than they will ever know.

Working with women for peace, then, is a multifaceted work. If it indeed involves persuading men to lay down their weapons, it can entail convincing women of the importance of peace but also helping them to realize that they have the power to intervene successfully in the peaceful settling of disputes. This is what I, along with a group of other committed women, discovered when in May 2001 we intervened to try to deflect a conflict that had started to escalate in our region.

Violence in Sanaag

The problem started in Sanaag, a region that is claimed by both the Puntland and Somaliland administrations. Somaliland in 1991 declared its independence, claiming as its borders the ones of the former British colony. But within those borders lay two regions, Sool and Sanaag, that have strong ties with the people of the Puntland region.

Toward the end of May 2001, a referendum was organized by Somaliland in order to determine whether the Eastern Sanaag peo-

ple wanted Somaliland or Puntland as their governing administration. The stakes were high for both administrations as the results of the referendum could bring recognition by the international community of the legitimacy of their claims, and possibly even statehood for Somaliland.

In an effort to gain votes and support, both administrations had used bribery and coercion to recruit youths to support them. The two opposing administrations, taking advantage of the poverty and lack of opportunity, had formed stations of armed militia in every village in the region. The context then of that referendum was highly explosive.

The referendum went well in the regions where Somaliland administration was accepted but not in the contested region of Sanaag. Ballot boxes were delivered in a town called Hadaaftimo, the home of the Warsangeli clan community of Sultan. The community was divided into two violently opposing parties. The two parties disputed over the ballot boxes. Both parties had their armed militiamen who stayed in confrontation, which caused one man to be killed.

According to the Somali tradition, elders settle disputes. If a person commits murder, the murderer is supposed to be taken to the family that has lost a member. His family reserves the right to kill him in revenge or deliver him back to his family in exchange for a hundred camels or more—based on how, why, and who killed—as the dead man's blood price. In the above-mentioned case, the killer was a 14-year-old boy. He was released as the elders sought to consult for three days, with the permission of the extended family of the deceased man.

Disregarding the elders' consultation, three men from the bereaved family shot the main mediating elder, who was a leader of a peace movement in the town of Badhan. This elder was a cousin to the sultan, the traditional leader of the whole Warsangeli clan.

The shooting of the elder devastated the multiple subclans, especially those close to the bereaved. Civil war began and each side prepared for war. In a period of two days, twenty-six people were killed; a five-year-old girl and three women were severely injured.

The historically peaceful town turned into a battlefield. All the people in Badhan were directly or indirectly affected by the war. Some people panicked and fled to Hingalool and El-Buh, a drought-ridden region, while others moved to the city of Boosaaso.

Schools were closed and businesses shut down. Everybody was afraid to go outside. As a result daily prayers in the mosques were no longer offered, women could not look for food, and children were not let outside to play. Overall, interclan hostility intensified.

Preaching Peace

My organization, Horn Relief, intervened in the eastern Sanaag region and mobilized elders with the support of the Warsangeli diaspora and those in Boosaaso. We offered them transportation and fuel to enable them to travel to Badhan for peace negotiations.

After a fortnight, the peace delegates managed to stop the killing and shooting. However, hostility amongst the subclans prevailed. There were enormous challenges to be overcome. There was a counterattack by some women who were being used by warring parties to deter the peace process. Some of the diaspora community created another obstacle as they sent funds to sustain the fighting, each to his own subclan.

Horn Relief preached peace by sending messages and telephone conferences to diaspora groups. They carried out peace campaigns behind the scenes through peace mediators. Various peace mediators were mandated to negotiate for peace in different settings. These mediators faced challenges from women and children supporting this or that side of the war who took arms and used stones to fight their enemies.

At this point, Horn Relief joined hands with a neutral group of women peace supporters. Many women active in the violence from both sides were met and counseled by the neutral women in Badhan. The neutral group met and worked with each woman's group active in the violence and shared information on who had violated cease-fires.

The neutral group identified and influenced pro-peace members from both violent groups, however active they may have been in the violence. This then created a domino effect in the rest of the community, where people started turning to peace and solutions rather than revenge. Yet the battle was not won.

As usual, it is difficult to please everyone. Not everybody supported the peace mediators. Some families, which had lost their members, still wanted to avenge the killing of their loved ones. In Badhan, various distant elders arrived and intervened with an effort to create peace. Finally a cease-fire was adopted. However, on the onset of Ramadan (the Muslim month of fasting for the poor) the elders left. The question remained: How could peace be sustained?

The Peace Network

The Women's Coalition for Peace (Horn Relief, We Are Women Activists, and the Galkayo Education Center for Peace and Development) went to work on peace issues. The group appointed members from five regions (Nugaal, Sanaag, Sool, Mudug, and Bari) and prepared a peace education package. This was made up of role-plays, peace messages, poetry, and counseling sessions.

On January 11, 2002, thirty women from Puntland traveled to Badhan. The group conducted a five-day peace campaign in Badhan. They visited fighting factions, each in their own camps. They also visited youth groups and elders of the two opposing factions. During these visits, they preached peace, nonviolence, and reconciliation; they also listened and learned.

They appealed to the religious sentiments of the people by quoting Qur'anic verses about peace and brought their male audiences to tears by the poems they created, which described the hardships women and children endure during conflicts (see sidebar on p. 6, "Children's Voices"). They also gave lessons on good governance, power sharing, and human rights. By combining a variety of methods that integrated tradition with novel practices they were able to be effective.

Many people who had participated in the killing felt remorseful and vowed to support the peace process. The Women's Coalition for Peace has yet to visit the militiamen; we hope this will be done during the second phase. So far, the fighting has stopped and there is peace.

Yet the women know that the battle for peace is not won. What happened in Badhan illustrates the complexities of making peace in Somalia: in the absence of a legitimate state, the issue of territoriality is subject to constant dispute; the multiplicity of actors who even include people of the diaspora

Somali Women Peacemakers (continued)

Women's role in conflict resolution and peace building came to the forefront during the internal conflicts within Somaliland that occurred after the end of the civil war. . . . Although women did not participate directly in the negotiations and peace conferences that took place throughout the country, they nevertheless, contributed a great deal to the exploitation of the prevailing anti-war sentiments. The main contributions of women towards the peace building processes were:

- They mobilised people for demonstration against war
- They composed emotion-charged songs and poems in support of peace
- They chose envoys among themselves and sent them to participate in peace conferences without receiving any formal invitations from the organisers and made touching speeches there
- They made a lot of awareness raising on peace through their organisations
- They persuaded their husbands to stop the fighting
- They gave logistical support to peace conferences, such as contributing money and preparing food for the delegates
- And they submitted declarations to warring parties

—From Amina Mohamoud Warsame, *Queens without Crowns: Somaliland Women's Changing Roles and Peace Building* (Stockholm: Life and Peace Institute, 2002), pp. 42–47. Used by permission.

Thirty women from Puntland . . . preached peace, nonviolence, and reconciliation; they also listened and learned.

obscures the process; and the lack of jobs in a war-torn country makes it easy to recruit young men as militia.

Peace Lessons

In spite of all those difficulties, the women are committed to keep on working for peace. They learned many lessons from this experience. It has taught them that it takes a lot of patience to convince people that revenge is counterproductive. They learned that it takes a long time to reach the desired goal of peace.

It also has taught them that taking small

steps can go a long way and that individuals, especially children, readily embrace a plea for peace when they understand how they can benefit from it. But maybe the most important lesson they have learned is that they have the power to influence the warring parties and can (and also should) contribute by their teachings to the creation of a culture for peace.

The road to peace is long and hard but now that they have made the first steps, they know that they cannot stop.

Fatima Jibrell is director of Horn Relief, in Boosaaso, Puntland.

Mennonites and Muslim Somalis

by Bertha Beachy

Into Somalia (1950–1959)

A camel caravan dipped in and out of sight in the Somali bush. The last camel carried a nomadic house. I blinked in disbelief—a transistor radio dangled from the frame! This dry land produced worldly politicians, fierce clan loyalties, and eloquent poets.

In 1950 this slice of East Africa caught the attention of Orié O. Miller, representing Eastern Mennonite Mission (EMM). After due investigation, the Wilbert Lind family swung down onto a small flatboat on January 16, 1953, near the capital city, Mogadishu. Thus began the first Mennonite mission relationship in Islamic Africa. The Swedish Lutheran Mission (SLM) had come and gone. The Catholics remained and the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) arrived in 1954 and left in 1974.

Though these Somali-speaking people had been divided at the 1884 Berlin conference among the French, British, and Italians, they were unique in Africa. They shared mainly one language and one nomadic background, and they were nearly 100 percent Muslim.

Lind began listening as he traveled up and down the land. English-language schools became the priority, along with some health care requests. Nurses and teachers—three couples and three Pax men—arrived in short order. As soon as permission was granted,

the building began in the north at Mahaddayweyne and later in the south in Jamaame. A boarding school for boys, a day school, and two health clinics began functioning by the early 1960s.

Trust began developing through these many contacts.

Beginnings and Endings (1960–1969)

In 1960 the cry “Somalia ha nolato!” (“Long live Somalia!”) pulsed through the land.

Independence brought together two Somali areas formerly ruled by Italian and British colonialists. Three other Somali areas—Djibouti (formerly French Somaliland), the Ethiopian province of Ogaden, and the Kenyan Northeastern Province—were not included. Fierce clan loyalties threatened the country’s unity from the beginning. Nine years later an assassin’s bullet killed the second president. The night after his burial a bloodless coup took place. On October 21, 1969, an army general, Mohamed Siad Barre, took charge and continued to move Somalia toward the Soviet Union and scientific socialism.

In 1962 the mission opened a 25-bed hospital with two years of nursing training in Jamaame plus an intermediate school in Jawhar. But rumors swirled around the mission partially because they had connected

When Chantal Logan visited Somali peace activist Fatima Jibrell in her home while she was recovering from an illness, Fatima announced to a Somali friend, “You know, the Mennonites pray for us!” She sees this as a gift despite the difference in religious faith.

—Bertha Beachy

with former SIM seekers. Without warning all activities were closed down in March of 1962. By July parents of our students managed to reopen the schools.

On July 16, 1962, Canadian missionary Merlin Grove sat registering new students in Mogadishu. Unknown to anyone, a religious man had joined the line. With sixteen quick strokes he killed Merlin and stabbed his wife, though she survived. Within 24 hours a very subdued few buried Merlin.

A constitutional change that year stated there should be no proselytizing. The mission did serious reflecting. The following year the government requested that all private schools teach Islam and Arabic; they would provide the teachers and books. EMM agreed to allow this. SIM closed their elementary schools.

The Eternal Memorial (1970–1979)

One felt the audible listening of Somalis as the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC) organized centers in each local community. Young scouts happily carried out the wishes of the SRC and taught scientific socialism. The EMM builder constructed a memorial for the SRC at Jawhar. The SRC helped to open the mission secondary school there.

On October 21, 1972, during the celebration of the revolution, the SRC floated leaflets from the sky. They had begun writing the Somali language with the Latin script. Two years later hundreds of grade school and secondary students from Mogadishu fanned out across the land to teach their fellow Somalis the new way of writing. Many urban youth came back sporting Somali nomadic dress and hairdos.

We quickly noted that all private schools, clinics, hospitals, and printing presses were nationalized from this day on! This included all but two of our projects. We had 35 expatriate adults in Somalia. All EMM teachers had to be approved by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Those with Bible degrees were promptly rejected. One by one, other staff had to leave until only ten teachers remained in responsible positions.

Eventually, the MOE wrote that they no longer needed us. We sorted all our files, burned some, and shipped those that remained to Nairobi on May 20, 1976. The seekers had chosen their own leadership and began meeting in the cathedral. By 1989, the bishop was assassinated and the cathedral was bombed.

Refugees and Mennonites (1980–1989)

Siad Barre attacked the Ogaden but failed to wrest it from Ethiopia. Clans in northern Somalia objected to Barre's actions and he bombed that area in 1980. Two years of famine followed by a flood created more than a million and a half refugees. The United Nations asked Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to provide 12 volunteers, who came that same year. More than five thousand tons of Mennonite "corn for the Horn (of Africa)" followed with money to help with the delivery into the camps. Many of these Somalis came from a nomadic lifestyle. MCCers worked in agriculture, nutrition, development, and education. But nine years later MCC left after a second Land Cruiser was stolen at gunpoint.

MCC's International Conciliation Service worked with Ergada, a cross-clan group of educated Somalis living in North America, beginning in 1989.

Siad Barre became and more and more paranoid. He installed his own clan everywhere and imprisoned many other Somalis.

The Relationship Continues (1990–present)

Clan-based militia caused the General to flee Somalia in 1991. The next leader held power briefly until clan warlords moved in. They provided guns and *qat* (a mildly narcotic plant) to camel herders in exchange for protection, and life became very difficult in the south. The north seceded in 1991 and called itself Somaliland, while Puntland from the northeast followed in 1998.

The Mennonites established an EMM/MCC office in Nairobi in 1991 to stay in contact with Somalis. Two nurses seconded to another organization went to Mogadishu 1992. They were evacuated within months because it became too unsafe for foreigners. This was repeated in Jamaame in 1998 but the work lasted only weeks.

Ergada sent a peacemaker in to work in 1991. As he met with clan elders someone threw a grenade into the house. He lost a leg but survived. It became very dangerous to live outside one's clan area, or to work for an international organization, or to be non-Muslim. Some good friends died because of one of these factors.

The Nairobi office often worked on peace projects with a Swedish group, Life and Peace Institute. In 1991 they supported a five-month traditional clan elders conference

Eastern Mennonite Missions' 50 Years in Somalia

In 2003 Eastern Mennonite Missions is celebrating 50 years of ministry to Somalis, including collaboration with Mennonite Central Committee on Somalia programs in recent years.

The celebration includes releasing a commemorative book (Omar Eby, *Fifty Years, Fifty Stories: Mennonite Mission in Somalia* [Telford, Pa.: DreamSeeker Books; Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2003]) and holding several gatherings and a special display. For information, contact Jane Hooley at (717) 898-2251 or janeh@emm.org.

The events scheduled after publication of this newsletter include:

July 12, 2003—EMM Global Fair including a display of Somali cultural items. Lancaster Mennonite School, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

August 2, 2003—Somalia Biennial Student/Teacher Reunion in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

October 23–26, 2003—Anabaptist consultation on Islam: The Church Meeting the *Ummah* (Muslim Community). Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia.



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in Boorama. Seven years later two Mennonite teachers taught at Amoud University in Boorama for one semester.

Supporting Somali peace conferences and training became a priority with special attention to women's groups. Women marry across clans and are deeply concerned about the future of children. But more education for individuals, support of schools and libraries, and some development projects also evolved. Everyone took a deep breath of hope when the neighboring countries supported a peace conference in Djibouti. A transitional government took over in 2000 but for many reasons could not even control Mogadishu. At this writing the sixteenth peace conference for Somalis is meeting in Nairobi, having moved there from Eldoret, Kenya.

In 1991, missionary teachers visiting Canada met with former Somali students. They continue to meet every other year in Pennsylvania or Canada. Somalis across North America join the group around wonderful Somali food, slides, and remembrances that may evoke a Somali poem.

Another series of meetings had begun even earlier, in 1979 in Pennsylvania, and continues there today. Each month former Mennonite missionaries meet to pray for Somalis we know and love. Our urgent prayer today is for peace for Somali people everywhere. Computers and e-mail facilitate the sharing of information and concerns. Perhaps our prayers are our greatest gift.

No Mennonites live in Mogadishu now (though the EMM/MCC representative visits regularly). But Somalis have remained in our hearts these 50 years.

Bertha Beachy taught English and managed a bookstore in Somalia. Later she helped Somalis produce three literary primers and administered the Somali desk for EMM and MCC in Nairobi.