

# foreign policy *in focus*



Interhemispheric Resource Center  
and  
Institute for Policy Studies



## Somalia

For many in the U.S., Somalia is viewed as a powerful symbol of United Nations peacekeeping failure. The inability of the international community to respond quickly to Somalia's mass famine and internecine warfare in the early 1990s (which followed the collapse of a U.S.-backed military dictatorship) is often cited by U.S. critics of the UN. But the situation in Somalia is far more complex.

Located on the Horn of Africa along the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean, Somalia is a largely homogenous society. The vast majority of its 6 million people share a common language, religion, and ethnic origin, as well as a primarily pastoral, nomadic tradition.

### Key Points

- Somalia was a victim of U.S.-Soviet cold war rivalry.
- The country was flooded with arms and its military dictatorship kept in power by both superpowers.
- A combination of power vacuum, draught, and competition among rival militias for scarce resources led to the crisis of famine and warfare of the early 1990s.

Somalia, divided during colonialism between Britain and Italy, won independence as a unified nation in 1960. In 1969 a military coup, led by General Siad Barre, toppled Somalia's nascent parliamentary democracy, banned political parties, and dismantled the national assembly. Over the next 20 years Barre concentrated much of Somalia's economic activity and political control in Mogadishu, ignoring the rest of the country. This imbalance gave rise to fighting over increasingly scarce

resources and to the creation of militias accountable to faction leaders.

During the cold war both the U.S. and Soviet Union vied for influence and control over Somalia because of its strategic location along oil routes from the Persian Gulf. In the 1970s the USSR armed and aided Somalia. Barre, in turn, professed socialism to win Soviet military support for his drive to annex Ethiopia's ethnically Somali Ogaden region. After the Soviet Union switched support to Ethiopia's new Marxist military government, Somalia lost the Ogaden war.

By the early 1980s the U.S. had replaced the Soviet Union as Somalia's military patron. U.S. military aid to Somalia during the 1980s totaled more than \$200 million, with hundreds of millions more in economic (primarily food) aid. The U.S. sought to maintain its influence in this volatile area, and to counter the Soviet presence in Ethiopia. Barre gave the U.S. a naval communications facility at Berbera on the Gulf of Aden, which had previously been under Soviet control.

The simmering conflicts among Somali elites and rival militias broke out in a full-blown civil war in 1988. Three years later the Russians abandoned Ethiopia as the Soviet Union collapsed. These factors led to the ouster of Barre in 1991. Despite his regime's repression and corruption, the U.S.-backed Barre until the end. Then, after years of creating Somalia's dependence on imported food, the U.S. pulled out. The enormous quantities of military hardware from Somalia's cold war-era sponsors virtually guaranteed the country's long-term destabilization.

Barre and the U.S. left Somalia in dire straits, and the popular hopes for a second independence evaporated. A power vacuum led to further anarchy and civil war that promoted leading militia leaders to top positions because of their military might. The country's agricultural base had been neglected and eroded. A serious drought took hold, food became increasingly scarce. As famine loomed, political and social chaos grew, and militias fought to control food as a weapon of power. International organizations, including the International Red Cross, warned of the need for a massive global response, but little help was forthcoming.

Only after CNN and other media finally carried shocking pictures of starving Somali children did Washington and its allies begin to plan a relief and peacekeeping mission. In April 1992 the UN intervened with a mandate to make Somalia safe for distribution of food and other aid. While the worst of the famine soon abated, UN efforts faced serious challenges.

Somalia's strategic location as a cold war pawn helped fuel the country's economic collapse and the civil war, and has continued to dictate Washington's poorly executed responses. The sometimes competing U.S. and UN missions were both ill-defined and out of touch with Somalia's social reality. As a result, international intervention failed to create the conditions necessary for Somalia's economic and social recovery.

The UN force lacked sufficient resources and political and financial support for an effective humanitarian mission. Many U.S. and UN officials viewed the famine in isolation from its underlying political roots. The initial UN operation, begun in April 1992, was headed by Algerian diplomat Mohamad Sahnoun, who tried to implement a decentralized distribution and economic development plan to help rebuild Somalia's shattered social fabric. The U.S. and other Security Council members opposed Sahnoun's nontraditional approach, and he was soon forced to quit. He was replaced, after a brief interim period, with an American admiral who followed the more traditional—and flawed—policies Washington favored.

In December 1992 the U.S. military, flush with its Gulf War victory, entered Somalia. The U.S. Marines landed on a deserted beach in Mogadishu with an official mandate, like the UN, to create a safe environment for food distribution. However, soon the U.S. forces were given a separate and very different mission: to capture and remove Somalia's main warlord leader, General Mohammed Fareh Aideed. In their hunt for Aideed, the Marines quickly abandoned all pretense of playing an even-handed humanitarian role. In turn, Aideed's militia began targeting U.S. and UN soldiers. "Mission creep" entered the U.S. vocabulary as U.S. soldiers waded into Somalia's civil war. In June 1993, 23 Pakistani UN peacekeepers were killed and more than 60 wounded in a firefight with Aideed's troops. Two hundred Somalis also died in the battles.

In October 1993, 18 U.S. Rangers were killed in a fierce battle with Aideed's forces. Televised footage of the fighting and the body of a dead American soldier being dragged through the streets quickly turned American public opinion against U.S. involvement in Somalia. Although the Rangers were part of Washington's own separate Somalia operation, the incident was played and replayed as a major "UN failure." Under pressure at home and with warlord Aideed still at large, Clinton pulled out all U.S. troops during 1994.

Most Somalis had viewed the UN and U.S. intervention with high hopes that they would relieve the famine and end the conflict. But while mass starvation was

halted, the political and economic roots of the crisis remained unresolved.

The U.S. commanders' insistence on dealing only with military leaders rather than crucial voices of Somalia's beleaguered civil society served to undermine local efforts toward humanitarian reconstruction and normalization of life. Following decades during which Somalia was over-armed by outside powers, the U.S. intervention served to exacerbate existing difficulties by further empowering the already strong militia leaders.

In the years of civil war, countless women have been raped, an estimated 300,000 Somalis have died, and hundreds of thousands either internally displaced or forced to seek refuge in other countries. The situation in most of Somalia is largely stabilized. However, while Aideed's death in August 1996 sparked initial peace overtures, since that time there have been more outbreaks of fighting, particularly in Mogadishu.

Washington has accepted and perpetuated the stereotype that the Somalia conflict is a tribal or ethnic clash. By ignoring or underplaying that the roots of the conflict—a battle for scarce resources and a power vacuum following superpower abandonment—the U.S. not only distorts Somali history but also absolves itself of any responsibility for the crisis.

Since 1993 Washington has pointed to Somalia as a symbol of failed peacekeeping and, more broadly, of the failure of the United Nations. The UN was widely, and wrongly, blamed for the gruesome deaths of the U.S. Rangers, despite the fact that they were not part of the UN operation—which President Clinton finally acknowledged during a 1996 presidential campaign debate. Yet many Americans, both policymakers and the public, continue to hold the UN responsible. This has been used to justify U.S. refusal to pay UN dues, as well as opposition to the re-election of UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

Poverty will continue as long as Somalia is dependent on food imports, remains at a disadvantage because of unfair trade practices and commodity price fluctuations, and does not receive appropriate international support for local agriculture and other sustainable development measures. Meanwhile, the cold war legacy of underdevelopment and oversupply of weapons continue to feed the militia's battles.

### Key Problems

- Cold war legacy of arms supplies continue.
- The U.S. views African crises, including that in Somalia, as ethnic or tribal while ignoring other causes.
- The UN was widely, and wrongly, blamed for the gruesome deaths of the U.S. Rangers, despite the fact that they were not part of the UN operation.

## ***Global Focus: A New Foreign Policy Agenda 1997-1998***

*Edited by Tom Barry (IRC) and Martha Honey (IPS)*

This collection of policy briefs describes current U.S. foreign policy, examines its problems, and prescribes alternative policies.

\$15.95 plus \$3.00 shipping and handling.

Since U.S. troops pulled out from Somalia, Washington has largely washed its hands of any active involvement. The Clinton administration needs to replace its inaction with a policy of active support for Somalia's reconstruction. This should be undertaken in collaboration with the UN and the Organization of African Unity (OAU), along with international and Somali aid, relief, development and human rights organizations.

The U.S. must support and help develop effective implementation mechanisms for the long-standing embargo on the sale of arms to Somalia. Continued arms sales undermine the emergence of civil society and leadership, perpetuate the power of the militia leaders who are largely unaccountable to the population, and further disrupt Somalia's already fragile economy.

## Key Recommendations

- Support regional, African-based peace negotiating processes.
- Following disarmament, an increase both U.S. and multilateral economic assistance, with Somalis themselves determining the type of aid needed and the type of conditionality accompanying assistance agreements.
- Stop blaming the United Nations for U.S. policy failures in Somalia.
- The U.S. should support tighter enforcement of the arms embargo and the disarming of the warlords.
- Washington should encourage regional, African-based peace processes.
- The Clinton administration should stop blaming the United Nations for U.S. policy failures in Somalia.

Washington should take the lead in cracking down on any U.S. arms dealers who may be providing illegal arms to anyone in Somalia. U.S. diplomatic efforts could win allied support for a stronger arms embargo. Washington should also contribute to a thorough mine-removal campaign.

The U.S. should support local, regional, and international efforts at conflict resolution and reconstruction. This must include a program to demobilize and disarm the militias. The OAU in particular should be encouraged to play the leading role in establishing peace processes, and Washington should be willing to pay a substantial part of the costs of such an effort, while encouraging its European allies and Japan to contribute as well.

In an effort to advance the peace process, the U.S. should consider funding a conference on peace and reconciliation in Somalia bringing together Somali non-governmental organizations (NGOs), elders, intellectuals, women, professionals, youth, and others. The goals of this conference should be to enable Somalis to develop their own vision of a way forward out of the current

quagmire.

The U.S. should support higher levels of bilateral and multilateral development assistance to Somalia. The aid should be targeted to support community-based development projects such as schools, health clinics, water systems, and other social infrastructures. Identifying and creating the projects should be carried out by NGOs as well as by Somali official agencies, particularly those with specific emphasis on issues of gender equality and committed to the economic empowerment of Somali women—a sector of the population generally ignored but central to Somalia's economic sustenance. U.S. representatives should insure that multilateral aid from the IMF, World Bank, and other institutions is not conditioned on structural adjustment policies that worsen the standard of living for the majority of the population.

Since the withdrawal of U.S. troops, most U.S.-based aid agencies have withdrawn their international workers. Washington should consult with representatives of the international aid agencies to determine the needs in Somalia, and work to provide the NGOs with the financial, security, and logistics support needed to reestablish their presence inside Somalia, as well as consulting with those NGOs to determine how best the U.S. official assistance—both humanitarian and development—might best be targeted.

Because of Washington's role in precipitating Somalia's crisis, through its cold war arming and political football-playing, the U.S. should significantly increase the number of Somali refugees allowed entry to the United States. Current levels of refugee access for all Africans is abysmally low: in 1995, for example, of an estimated total of six million African refugees, primarily women and children, only 4,779 were allowed entry to the United States.

The U.S. should abandon the pretext that the disastrous U.S. military mission in Somalia was somehow the UN's fault. Debate over the U.S. role in the UN, and the UN's place in U.S. foreign policy, should be based on fact, not on distortions.

*Written by Emira Woods, Program Coordinator West Africa and the Horn of Africa, Oxfam America.*

*Foreign Policy in Focus* is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). It is supported by subscriptions, by financial support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and by various church organizations. *In Focus* internships are available.

**Editors**  
Martha Honey (IPS)  
Tom Barry (IRC)

**Production**  
Grant Moser

**Communications Director**  
Erik Leaver (IRC)

### Orders and subscription information:

**Mail:** PO Box 4506  
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87196-4506  
**Phone:** (505) 842-8288  
**Fax:** (505) 246-1601  
**Email:** resourcectr@igc.apc.org

### Editorial inquiries and information:

<b>IRC Editor</b>	<b>IPS Editor</b>
<b>Phone:</b> (505) 388-0208	<b>Phone:</b> (202) 234-9382/3
<b>Fax:</b> (505) 388-0619	<b>Fax:</b> (202) 387-7915
<b>Email:</b> resourcectr@igc.apc.org	<b>Email:</b> ipsps@igc.apc.org
<b>Website:</b> <a href="http://www.zianet.com/infocus">http://www.zianet.com/infocus</a>	

# sources for more information

## Organizations

### Africa Faith & Justice Network

PO Box 29378  
Washington, DC 20017  
Voice: (202) 832-3412  
Fax: (202) 832-9051  
Email: afjn@igc.apc.org

### Africa Policy Information Center/Washington Office on Africa

110 Maryland Avenue NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
Voice: (202) 546-7961  
Fax: (202) 546-1545  
Email: apic@igc.apc.org and woa@igc.apc.org

### African Rights

11 Marshalsea Road  
London SE1 1EP UK  
Voice: (44-171) 717-1224  
Fax: (44-171) 717-1240  
Email: afrights@gn.apc.org  
Website: <http://webzone1.co.uk/www/sudan/report6.htm>

### Bread for the World

1100 Wayne Avenue, #1100  
Silver Spring MD 20910  
Voice: (301) 608-2400  
Fax: (301) 608-2401

### Center for Concern

3700 13th Street NE  
Washington, DC 20012  
Voice: (202) 635-2757  
Fax: (202) 837-9494

### Human Rights Watch/Africa

485 Fifth Avenue  
New York City, NY 10017  
Voice: (212) 972-8400  
Fax: (212) 972-0905  
Email: hrwatchnyc@igc.apc.org

### Oxfam America

26 West Street  
Boston, MA 02111  
Voice: (617) 482-1211  
Fax: (617) 728-2595

## Publications

Africa Rights, London:

"Somalia: Operation Restore Hope: A Preliminary Assessment," (May 1993).

"Somalia: Human Rights Abuses by the United Nations Forces," (July 1993).

"Violent Deeds Live On: Landmines in Somalia and Somaliland," (December 1993).

Chris Giannou, "Reaping the Whirlwind: Somalia After the Cold War," Bennis & Moushabeck, eds., *Altered States: A Reader in the New World Order* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing Group, 1993).

Michael R. Gordon & John H. Cushman Jr., "After Supporting Hunt for Aidid, U.S. Is Blaming UN for Losses," *New York Times* (Oct. 18, 1993).

Jim Lewis, *A Modern History of Somalia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988).

Robert M. Press, "Retreat From Somalia," *Christian Science Monitor* (Feb. 27, 1995).

Said Samatar, *Somalia: A Nation in Turmoil* (London Minority Rights Group Report).

Abdi Samatar, ed., *The Somali Challenge: From Catastrophe to Reconstruction* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994).

Abdi Samatar, "The Destruction of State and Society in Somalia: Beyond the Tribal Convention," *Journal of Modern African Studies* (Vol. 30, #4, 1992).

Stephen Shalom, "Gravy Train: Feeding the Pentagon by Feeding Somalia," *Z Magazine* (February 1993).

Hugo Slim & Emma Visman, "Evacuation, Intervention and Retaliation: United Nations Humanitarian Operations in Somalia 1991-1993," in John Harris, ed., *Sovereignty and Suffering* (London, UK: Pinter/Save the Children, 1994).

## Subscription Information

You can subscribe to *In Focus* at one of three levels, you can receive *In Focus* in one of five ways, and you can choose which categories of *In Focus* you want to receive. Please mark the level of subscription you want, how you want *In Focus* delivered to you, and the topic categories you want. There is no extra charge for email delivery to mail and fax subscribers. (Individual copies of *In Focus* are \$2.50, postpaid; bulk orders of *In Focus* are \$12.00 for 10 copies, postpaid; orders for delivery outside the US are double the listed prices.) Make checks payable to the Interhemispheric Resource Center. We also accept VISA and MasterCard.

### U.S. Subscription Level

- \$15 10 briefs  
 \$30 20 briefs  
 \$60 50 briefs

### Foreign Subscription Level

- \$30 10 briefs  
 \$60 20 briefs  
 \$120 50 briefs

### Delivery

- Regular mail  Regular mail & email  
 Fax only  Fax and email  
 Email only

### Topic Categories

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> All (receive all briefs)   | <input type="checkbox"/> Economic Aid   | <input type="checkbox"/> Mexico                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Foreign Policy Overview    | <input type="checkbox"/> Global Governance/United Nations                     | <input type="checkbox"/> South America              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trade and Investment       | <input type="checkbox"/> International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and Debt | <input type="checkbox"/> Africa                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Government Agencies        | <input type="checkbox"/> Food and Farm  | <input type="checkbox"/> Middle East                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Military and Peace         | <input type="checkbox"/> Border and Immigration                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Asia/Pacific               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Human Rights and Democracy | <input type="checkbox"/> Central America                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Western Europe             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Environment                | <input type="checkbox"/> Caribbean  | <input type="checkbox"/> Central and Eastern Europe |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Labor                      |   | <input type="checkbox"/> Former Soviet Union        |

Name		Institution	
Street Address			
City		State	Zip Code
VISA/MasterCard Number		Expiration Date	
Signature	Daytime Phone	Fax Number	Email Address