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## Current Affairs in the Horn of Africa (*Autumn 2018*)

by Run Doon

### Mogadishu

#### Somalia restores relations with Eritrea

Somali Federal President, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed 'Farmaajo', made a historic three-day visit to Asmara at the end of July, where he concluded an agreement with Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki, restoring formal diplomatic relations between the two countries.

This restoration of Somalia-Eritrea ties comes hard on the footsteps of the remarkably rapid normalisation of relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea. In the first week of September, Ethiopia reopened its embassy in Asmara, and on 6<sup>th</sup> September, Djibouti and Eritrea also formalised an agreement to resume diplomatic relations.

These steps are remarkable in a region that has long been beset by bitter intra-regional rivalries and periodic outbreaks of violence. The speed and direction of change strongly reflects the influence of the reformist new Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, who was only sworn into office at the start of April. The seismic scale of reforms he has introduced will, inevitably, affect the whole region in ways both intended and unexpected for many years to come.

#### AMISOM return Mogadishu Stadium to the city

On 28<sup>th</sup> August, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) returned the Mogadishu Stadium to the government for use for sports events. President Farmaajo and other officials attended the handover ceremony, with the President declaring that his government would restore the facility "to its former glory".

Since the collapse of the Somali government in 1991, the stadium has been occupied by a succession of armed groups. Following 1991, it was used by UN peacekeepers, while between 2008 and 2011 it was a training base for al-Shabaab, before they were replaced by the occupying Ethiopian forces, who used it as one of their main bases in Somalia.

The last sports event held at the 35,000-seat venue was a 2003 football match, but the stands and other facilities have fallen into disrepair and significant work will be required to return it to functionality as a sporting venue.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Mogadishu Book Fair

The 4<sup>th</sup> Mogadishu Book Fair took place over three days from 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> August at the Sahal Terminal of Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport. Organisers reported an increased number of participants from previous years.

### Al-Shabaab

#### More Mogadishu attacks

Two al-Shabaab attacks took place in Mogadishu in March. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 14 people were killed when a car bomb was detonated outside Weheliye Hotel in Maka al-Mukarama Road. Then, three days later, another attack killed two soldiers plus the suicide bomber outside parliament, after the soldiers stopped the vehicle as a result of the suspicious behaviour of the driver.

There was mercifully a lull through April, May and June in which al-Shabaab activities were focused outside Mogadishu, before the group resumed their murderous campaign. A 7<sup>th</sup> July suicide attack on the Ministry of Interior offices – very close to the location of the 25<sup>th</sup> March blast – killed nine people when an initial explosion was followed by a second outside the nearby police station and a two-hour gun battle between three attackers and security forces.

Attacks then followed on 5<sup>th</sup> August, when a car bomb was detonated outside the Bar Italia Café, again in Maka al-Mukarama Road, killing four people. Then on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, the Hawlwadaag local government offices were targeted with a huge explosion that destroyed a nearby Islamic school and a local government building, blew the roof off a mosque, and killed six people, including students. The impact of the Hawlwadaag attack was again mitigated by vigilant security forces, who stopped the driver from

getting closer to the target. It is perhaps an encouraging sign that security personnel are identifying a growing number of attackers before their attacks are underway, though the number of casualties and extent of damage remains substantial, and the individuals who successfully identify the risk frequently pay for their diligence with their lives.

As this column was being written, another attack was mounted on local government offices, this time in the Mogadishu neighbourhood of Hodan. Early reports were that, on 10<sup>th</sup> September, a suicide bomber again detonated a vehicle laden with explosives, killing at least six people. On this occasion, the bomber was able to ram his vehicle at speed into the Hodan administrative compound.

## Double truck bombs precede major attack in Buulo Mareer

On 1<sup>st</sup> April, two lorries packed with explosives were driven by suicide bombers into the AMISOM military base at Buulo Mareer, then a third vehicle bomb was driven into a Ugandan military convoy nearby. Those explosions were followed by a full assault on the military base by about 100 al-Shabaab fighters, while simultaneous, though smaller, attacks were mounted on Somali government posts in Baraawe, Qoryoley and Mashalley to prevent forces from those locations from reinforcing the Buulo Mareer contingent.

After heavy fighting over many hours at the military base, al-Shabaab troops then looted shops and attacked civilians in the area.

Reports of casualties diverged widely, as is often the case. The Ugandan People's Defence Force claimed to have killed 30 militants and to have lost four of theirs, but local reports indicated that 46 Ugandan soldiers and a Somali lost their lives in the fighting and al-Shabaab admitted to losing only 14 of theirs and killing 59 Ugandans. All the figures indicate a substantial attack.

## Football match in Baraawe targeted, Mogadishu grounds closed

On 13<sup>th</sup> April, a remote-controlled bomb was detonated inside a stadium in Baraawe town during a football match. Local sources claimed that the officials who had been targeted were not present at the time of the explosion, which killed five civilians.

As reported in this column previously, al-Shabaab ordered football grounds in Mogadishu to be closed in March. Some grounds initially complied for fear of attacks, though subsequently reopened at the urging of the government. Shabaab have repeated the

demand in the months following and have been punishing those who do not comply through neighbourhood courts controlled by them. The ongoing demands, while not fully successful, show the degree to which al-Shabaab remains influential in the capital in spite of their apparent removal in 2011.

For their part, al-Shabaab claim they are not opposed to football itself, but to the mixing of men and women and use of music at games, and they also complain that the fees charged for entry to games are unreasonable.

## Military in Afgooye and near Kismayo attacked

On 23<sup>rd</sup> July, al-Shabaab attackers detonated a suicide car bomb at an army base in Baar Sanguuni village, then stormed the base and over-ran it. The government sent reinforcements and were eventually able to retake the base after heavy fighting. The numbers of casualties are again widely disputed, with al-Shabaab claiming to have killed 27 government troops, while authorities maintain that Somali National Army personnel killed 87 militants.

Al-Shabaab had attacked the same base only a few weeks earlier in early June, claiming at the time to have killed a US soldier, two Kenyans, and nine Somalis.

Two days after the Baar Sanguuni attack, six Somali soldiers were killed when a roadside IED was detonated, targeting a military convoy on the road near Afgooye.

Another attack, this time on a military base in Afgooye on 5<sup>th</sup> August, was timed to disrupt preparations for a visit by Somali President Farmaajo. Police in Afgooye confirmed three dead, though al-Shabaab claimed that they had taken eleven lives. Once again, a suicide car bomber detonated his vehicle close to the entrance to the base and, again, soldiers spotted the attack as it occurred, firing at the attacker prior to the blast, and perhaps mitigating the damage to some degree.

## Major assault on Beled Xaawo

Al-Shabaab mounted a substantial attack on 13<sup>th</sup> August on the military base outside Beled Xaawo town, on the Kenya/Somalia border. A suicide attacker first detonated a vehicle bomb at the entrance to the base, before others stormed the compound, driving soldiers out and killing sixteen.

The attackers then entered Beled Xaawo town, attacking the police station and killing two civilians, before freeing some 35 prisoners. The local police

contradicted the Shabaab assertion that they freed the inmates, saying that police freed them so that they would not be killed by the attackers.

Kenyan helicopters were then deployed, and after an hour or so, the attackers withdrew from the town.

## Attacks in Kenya

Al-Shabaab have also continued to mount attacks in Kenya, killing five Kenyan soldiers at the end of August in Lamu County. As in Afgooye, a roadside explosive device was used to target a military convoy on 29<sup>th</sup> August, while on 8<sup>th</sup> August, six Kenyan troops were killed in a similar attack, also in Lamu.

## Somali Federal Regions

### Regional states sever relations with federal government

At the start of September, leaders of the federal regional states of Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Jubaland, Puntland and South West, held a four-day meeting to discuss relations with the Federal Government. Dissatisfied with federal measures to tackle al-Shabaab and to improve security generally, as well as with aspects of the federal structure being implemented by the Mogadishu government, the leaders declared at the conclusion of the conference that they were severing ties with Mogadishu.

Puntland President, Abdiweli Gaas, complained specifically about the process of constitutional reform being undertaken by the federal authorities, with the statement issued by the leaders noting that little progress had been made towards holding one-person-one-vote elections as scheduled for 2020.

While the rift between regional and federal governments is significant, there are also deep divisions within regional administrations. That fact was highlighted by statements from the deputy leaders of Galmudug and Puntland, who each criticised their own regional government's stance, calling for each region to continue cooperation with Mogadishu.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Garowe International Book Fair

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Garoowe International Book Fair took place between 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> July at the East Africa University. Boasting an attendance of 2,000 people, the book fair was organised by Toronto-based Somali language publisher, Scansom, and the SIDRA Institute (Somali Institute for Development Research and Analysis), and included participants from throughout the region and beyond.

## Somalia/Somaliland Relations

### Tukaraq conflict escalates

Somaliland had seized the village of Tukaraq, close to the Somaliland/Puntland border, in January 2018, as reported in the last edition of this column. At the time, feared escalation of the conflict did not occur, and there was a period of uneasy stand-off between Puntland and Somaliland.

However, on 15<sup>th</sup> May, much more intensive fighting broke out when Puntland forces attacked Somaliland positions, apparently in an attempt to drive them out of the town. Local reports suggest that close to 100 people on both sides were killed in the May conflict, which followed a period of growing pressure on Puntland President Abdiweli Gaas from his own constituents and parliament to wrest back control from Somaliland.

Representatives from bilateral and multilateral agencies, as well as elders and politicians from all sides have repeatedly urged calm, but in spite of fighting and calls for Somaliland to withdraw, they remain in Tukaraq. This is problematic for President Abdiweli Gaas, as Somaliland's continued presence there significantly damages his hopes for re-election.

### Somaliland/Somalia talks cancelled

Talks between Somalia's Federal government and the Somaliland administration were planned to resume on 29<sup>th</sup> March but were postponed for a month in the wake of Mogadishu's declaration that the DPU World deal to redevelop Berbera port was invalid. On 26<sup>th</sup> March, Somaliland President Muuse Bixi announced that the talks were cancelled.

Efforts continue to find a formula that would permit their resumption, but at the time of writing, no new schedule had been announced.

## Somaliland

### Post-election tensions continue as opposition calls for Electoral Commission to be replaced

Dissatisfaction from the largest opposition party at having lost the 2017 presidential election in Somaliland have continued through 2018. Largely relating to clan-based grievances, the post-election period has seen repeated recurrences in campaigns targeting organisations and individuals, and most particularly Somaliland's National Electoral

Commission (NEC). The opposition are insisting that the NEC commissioners be replaced in full, as they hold the commission responsible for their electoral loss.

Any decision to replace commissioners would almost certainly result in delays to combined parliamentary and local council elections, scheduled to be held in March 2019.

Related disagreements over the allocation of parliamentary seats also threaten to undermine preparations for elections which will be markedly more technically complicated than the presidential vote held in November 2017. The combination of local council and lower house parliamentary polls will see a huge number of candidates standing for a large number of positions and will therefore require a major logistical exercise organising ballots, security and so on.

The Somaliland President insists that the vote will be held on time, and the NEC are continuing to plan for it, but ongoing political disagreements suggest that the challenge remains huge.

## Ceel Afweyn conflict intensifies

A long-running dispute between two sub-clan groups in the eastern Somaliland town of Ceel Afweyn has worsened markedly since the November 2017 presidential election. While the dispute, between a sub-clan of the Habr Yoonis on one side, and of the Habr Jeelo on the other, significantly predates the election, it echoes political tensions that were exacerbated in that poll.

Ostensibly a conflict over clan grazing lands, periods of fighting have flared up over many years, but in April 2018, and then again in June and August, clashes have been unusually fierce, with a significant number of fatalities.

Two Somaliland commanders have accepted an invitation from Puntland, and defected from the Somaliland military, taking colleagues with them and establishing bases in Puntland. Worryingly, they have compared their actions with the SNM decision in the early 1980s to accept Ethiopian support to establish insurgent bases across the border in Ethiopia, enabling SNM forces to conduct periodic raids into what was then Northern Somalia.

Repeated visits to the area by clan elders and government officials have so far failed to resolve the issues. If conflict between Puntland and Somaliland continues in Tukaraq, and opposition to the government of President Muuse Bixi consolidates, the Ceel Afweyn conflict could feed into a widening

source of instability for Somaliland.

## 11<sup>th</sup> Hargeysa International Book Fair and Somali Studies International Association Congress

The Hargeysa International Book Fair marked its 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary by operating solely from the new home of the Hargeysa Cultural Centre for the first time. Run, as in past years, over six days from 21<sup>st</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> July, the Book Fair attracted a large number of guests from Somaliland, the region and further afield. The 2018 guest country was Rwanda, and this year's Book Fair was run in parallel with the Somali Studies International Association (SSIA) Congress, which took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> July.

While the Book Fair took place in the Hargeysa Cultural Centre, the SSIA Congress was co-hosted by the University of Hargeisa and the Cultural Centre. 2018 saw SSIA celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary as an organisation, with this 13<sup>th</sup> Congress being the first on Somali soil in eleven years.

## .so internet domain declared illegal in Somaliland

In March, Somaliland President Muuse Bixi declared it illegal for Somaliland website owners to use the .so country suffix for internet addresses (as in 'www.xxx.so', where .so denotes Somalia). Owners were given one month to adopt new web addresses. This followed a shift in domain name administration that saw the Somali Federal Government assume responsibility for managing the .so country-level domain.

## Ethiopia

### Violence in Jigjiga, ex-Somali Region president arrested, deposed

The rapid period of change ushered in by Ethiopia's new Oromo Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, has well and truly extended to the Somali Region.

Towns in the region have been the focus of unrest and a series of Friday protests since at least April of this year, as tensions between Somalis and Oromo have simmered and sometimes turned violent. That tension erupted at scale in Jigjiga on 4<sup>th</sup> August.

This latest unrest was exacerbated by growing distrust between the Ethiopian Federal Government and the Somali Regional Government. Regional President, Abdi Mohamoud Omar (better known as Abdi Illey), and many in his administration were becoming

increasingly worried that Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's reforms were likely to upset the comfortable position of the regional government, who had established a clear accommodation with powerful factions in the Addis Ababa government, in return for significant local autonomy. Abdi Mohamoud's regional administration have frequently been accused of committing substantial abuses of human rights in their quest to maintain control of the region. Abuses made possible by the autonomy permitted by the federal authorities.

With tensions high, federal troops had been deployed to the region on Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> August, with a brief to maintain order. Once in Jigjiga, they encountered the regional Liyuu Police, who President Abdi Mohamoud had built into a formidable force under his own control. There was initially a stand-off between the two forces and it quickly became unclear who had control of the city. In the apparent vacuum, widespread violence erupted on the Saturday, in which mobs attacked local businesses and community leaders.

29 people were killed in the violence, which lasted several hours, but by the end, federal forces had imposed control.

President Abdi Mohamoud, who had held the presidency for 13 years, was forced to resign on 6<sup>th</sup> August. He was arrested and flown to Addis Ababa in a military helicopter, where he is awaiting trial on serious criminal charges at the time of writing.

## New leader, flag and name for Ethiopia's Somali region

This abrupt change in circumstances ushered in a succession of additional adjustments. On 22<sup>nd</sup> August, Mustafa Maxamed Cumar 'Cagjar' was appointed as the new Somali State President

In the first week of September, the Regional Parliament voted to adopt a new name for the region. Whereas, it had previously been officially 'Ethiopia Somali Regional State', the 'Ethiopia' was to be dropped, leaving simply 'Somali Regional State' or, in Somali, just '*Deegaanka Soomaalida*'.

The flag too was to revert to the old style. The camel image that had been added by the previous president on the left-hand side is replaced with the white star on pale blue that reflects the heraldry of Somalia and was used in the past for the regional entity.

Commenting on the changes to flag and name, the new president maintained that "there is no contradiction between our Somali nationality and Ethiopian citizenship. We proudly uphold symbols of

Soomaalinimo without abnegating our national responsibility".

Incoming president, Mustafa Maxamed Cumar, is a well-known human rights activist, an economist and a humanitarian worker who has worked with the United Nations and Save the Children in the past. His words are impressive, but it is certain that he realises how challenging is the task of 'upholding Soomaalinimo' without 'abnegating' Ethiopian citizenship. But the endeavour is completely consistent with Federal Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's own approach, so at the least, he can expect support from the top.