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Current Affairs in the Horn of Africa (*Spring 2018*)

by Run Doon

Mogadishu

Federal government imposes unpopular tax

Under pressure from international financial institutions to increase state revenues from local sources, the Somali Federal Government has attempted on a number of occasions in recent years to introduce new taxes. In March 2014, the Somali cabinet approved a new tax system, but it has taken a further four years for collection to start in earnest in Mogadishu, with the imposition of a 5% sales tax in January 2018, to be collected in advance on goods arriving at the city's sea and air ports.

Things are not going smoothly, though, with business people accusing the government of employing illegal collection methods and objecting to the advance nature of payment.

Shopkeepers in Bakara market closed for two days in February in protest, and emergency talks between business owners and government officials were initiated.

So far, though, there is no resolution in sight. The talks collapsed at the end of February, with each of the parties maintaining their respective hard lines. On the business side, complaints include the fact that the government is using 'middlemen' as collectors, who are themselves profiting from collection in contravention of legal provisions that determine that only the government themselves can collect taxes. Businesses also insist that they have been offered too little acknowledgement of their role in providing roads, schools and other services.

On the government side, they point to the fact that international agencies have made increased state revenues a precondition for relief from Somalia's crippling national debt.

Night flights return to Mogadishu airport

For the first time in 27 years, runway lights were operational at Mogadishu's Adan Adde International Airport in February 2018, permitting night flights to resume. The airport authorities aim to introduce 24-hour airport operation to ease congestion at the increasingly busy facility.

Al-Shabaab

Attacks in Mogadishu continue

Al-Shabaab have continued to show their capacity to mount significant attacks, with continued use of suicide bombings the favoured method. The deadliest to date took place on 14 October 2017, with the Zobe Rescue Committee calculating that a staggering 582 people were killed when a truck bomb was detonated next to a fuel tanker near the K5 intersection, followed by a second explosion shortly afterwards in the Medina area. The K5 neighbourhood hosts numerous restaurants and government offices, and was crowded when the attack occurred. The extraordinary death toll makes this the third most deadly terrorist attack anywhere, after the attacks on 11 September 2001 in the US, and a multi-truck bombing in two Iraqi cities in August 2007 which killed almost 800 people.

While al-Shabaab did not claim responsibility, there was almost universal agreement that they were behind the attack, and tens of thousands of Mogadishu residents participated in protests against the group in the days following. The authorities also imposed a daytime ban in the city on heavy trucks and tankers.

A second Mogadishu attack on the Nasa Hablood Hotel occurred two weeks later, killing 46, and 23 police officers were killed on 14 December, when a lone suicide bomber dressed in a police uniform detonated his device amongst a group of police preparing for a parade.

The NGO 'Foundation for Defence of Democracies' calculated that there were 43 vehicle-based bombings

in Mogadishu in 2017, while a UN report in December 2017 calculated that 2,078 civilians were killed in attacks between 1 January 2016 and 14 October 2017. The UN report noted that 2,500 were injured, with 60% of deaths and injuries occurring as a result of al-Shabaab attacks.

After a period of a couple of months in which no attacks occurred in Mogadishu, another double vehicle bombing took place on 24 February 2018, targeting Villa Somalia and a nearby hotel and killing an estimated 45 people.

Al-Shabaab orders Mogadishu football pitches to close

In the first week of March 2018, al-Shabaab demonstrated their continued influence in Mogadishu, ordering football pitches to close. Private playing fields in the districts of Karaan, Heliwaa and Yaqashid did initially comply with the order. The Federal authorities countermanded the order a few days later warning pitch owners not to comply, and also threatening anyone found sending money to al-Shabaab with prosecution before a military court.

It wasn't clear at the time of writing whether the football grounds had reopened or anyone had been arrested for providing financial support.

AMISOM, the US and al-Shabaab

AMISOM withdrawal and second thoughts

UN Security Council 2372, adopted in August 2017, determined that AMISOM troop numbers should be reduced by 1,040 by the end of that year, with a phased withdrawal continuing after that time, culminating in a full pull-out by 2020.

The initial withdrawal occurred on schedule in December, but since then, a number of countries have been having second thoughts.

Uganda promised in November 2017 to deploy 5,000 troops outside of the AMISOM force, provided funding was forthcoming from international partners. In making the announcement, the Ugandan spokesperson argued that AMISOM troops are subject to an excess of rules, which have hindered operations.

A conference of troop-contributing countries (Kenya, Burundi, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Uganda) then met at the end of February 2018 in Kampala, issuing a statement that called for reconsideration of the UN

resolution and a return of troop numbers to the previous level. They decided that, although progress had been made in pushing al-Shabaab back, the situation remained delicate, and the insurgent group would likely recover ground were AMISOM troops to leave. The US have also declared their opposition to further troop withdrawal.

Kenya resumes border wall construction

At the start of 2018, Kenyan authorities declared their intention to resume construction of the border wall between their country and Somalia.

The project has been stalled as a result of a dispute with the governments of Somalia and Jubaland over the precise location of the barrier, with the Somali parties convinced the planned route encroaches on their territory. Representatives from regional and federal governments were promised the right to inspect construction.

Residents of the border town of Beled-Hawo had clashed with Kenyan troops in December over the claimed encroachment. In a sign that the difficulties are not yet resolved, Beled-Hawo officials declared in March 2018, with construction restarting, that they were closing the border to traffic; a move that was reinforced by the placement of Somali forces at the crossing.

US drone attacks in Somalia increase as part of general expansion in operations

The US use of drone attacks in Somalia, initiated by the Obama Administration in mid-2011, has been stepped up substantially under President Trump. 34 separate drone strikes were reported in 2017: more than double the number deployed in 2016. No less than 16 of those that took place last year occurred in the 11 weeks following the 14 October truck bomb attack in Mogadishu. All but three of those strikes targeted al-Shabaab groups, with the US claiming to have killed about 150 fighters; 100 in a single strike on a training camp northwest of Mogadishu on 21 November.

Significantly, the three remaining strikes targeted Islamic State fighters, who remain a small minority in Somalia, though apparently a growing one.

The US has also continued to use conventional air attacks, claiming to have killed a senior al-Shabaab commander, Ali Muhammed Hussein, in August 2017.

The Pentagon maintains that very few civilians have

been killed by US military operations, though other organisations claim that they have led to significant population displacement, exacerbated by ongoing drought conditions in some areas.

US troop numbers in Somalia have also more than doubled to 500 under Trump as part of a general expansion of Somali operations. However, US cooperation with Somali forces has proven more difficult, with most military and food aid to the Somali Army suspended in mid-December over concerns about corruption.

Somali National Army (SNA)

Puntland troops integrated into SNA

After an extensive period of negotiation, some 2,400 Puntland troops joined the Somali National Army in December 2017. Agreement was reached in principle in 2015 that each Somali Federal State would contribute 3,000 troops to the SNA to participate in a major offensive against al-Shabaab. However, reaching full agreement on the terms of that integration has proven difficult, with the Puntland contingent being the first to make the shift.

Major SNA offensive mounted in Hirshabelle and South West States

SNA operations throughout South-Central Somalia have continued over the past six months, with periodic attacks from al-Shabaab and counter-assaults. However, there has been a two-year gap since the SNA or AMISOM launched a major, concerted campaign against al-Shabaab. That changed after the huge October attack in Mogadishu, with the SNA launching a much-publicised retaliatory offensive in South West and Hirshabelle States, which neighbour the capital.

Operations started in November 2017 in the Lower Shabelle area of South West State when AMISOM troops moved to secure the road between Mogadishu and Balidoogle airfield. The operation continued in phases, clearing roads in the Afgooye area. In the new year, the campaign saw increased SNA and AMISOM activity, with an attack on Awdhegale town, in which al-Shabaab's regional deputy leader, Mohamed Abu Abdalla, was killed alongside eleven members of the group.

Al-Shabaab did mount counter-attacks of their own, failing in February to over-run a military camp outside Wajid town, but successful in assassinating a state minister and a parliamentarian in Balidoogle in March. There have also been persistent reports that

the group are actively recruiting larger numbers of children as fighters, and training older men.

The focus of SNA activity expanded to include Hirshabelle State in March, when SNA troops, operating alongside Ethiopian forces, took the Hiiran town of Moqorki at the start of the month. The area had been controlled by al-Shabaab for more than a year, and the combined Somali/Ethiopian force met heavy resistance.

A couple of days later, SNA troops also retook Balad town in Middle Shabelle, which had briefly been over-run by al-Shabaab. The SNA then mounted a significant campaign in Hiiran's primary city, Beledweyne, in which they arrested a number of militants, and seized a large quantity of arms and bomb-making equipment.

Concurrent with those operations, and also in Hirshabelle State, Somali forces launched a raid on an al-Shabaab base in Gambole, seizing the village and arresting a number of business people in the nearby Hiiran capital of Jowhar, accusing them of collaborating with the insurgent group in Gambole.

Operations in both states continued into mid-March, with SNA and AMISOM forces reported to be gathering for further attacks on al-Shabaab areas near Mahaday town in Hirshabelle.

Drought fears return

Humanitarian conference warns of continued threat

A major conference in London in March 2018 noted that famine was averted in 2017 as a result of concerted effort, with Deyr rains between October and December having eased the crisis.

However, April-June's Gu rains are forecast to be significantly poorer than the historic average, and with resilience destroyed by the earlier drought, there are concerns that further devastating conditions may recur in 2018. The Norwegian Refugee Council representative said that, by his organisation's estimate, half a million people remain in imminent danger of famine, with the UN estimating that 2.7 million remain in 'crisis' or 'emergency' states of hunger, and 5.4 million are currently reliant on humanitarian assistance.

The conference called for commitment of a further US\$1.5 billion to fund relief work designed to avert a return of the worst suffering.

Shabelle River runs dry again

For the third time in three years, the Shabelle River has dried up at a time when it would once have been full. Some blame Ethiopian dam-building upstream, while others point to the successive failure of rains and associated drought conditions.

DP World, Somaliland and the Somali Federal Government

Djibouti ejects DP World from Doraleh port

On 22 February, Djibouti seized control of Doraleh port from DP World, bringing to crisis-point the long-running dispute between the two. DP World condemned the move as illegal, citing a decision in London that upheld the agreement between DP World and the Djiboutian government as valid.

DP World have vowed to fight the seizure, insisting on an immediate return to arbitration in London.

Ethiopian confirms 19% stake in Berbera port

On 1 March 2018, Ethiopia confirmed a long-standing rumour that they had agreed to take a 19% stake in the Port of Berbera. The arrangement leaves DP World with a controlling 51% share, with the Somaliland government holding 30%.

The agreement lays the foundation for further Ethiopian investment in development of the Berbera Corridor, which is intended to link the port with Ethiopia, via the Tog Wajaale border crossing.

Ports agreements in Puntland and Somaliland declared void by Mogadishu

In a further setback to DP World's expansion plans in the region, the Mogadishu parliament voted on 12 March to reject all deals struck with them pertaining to Somali ports.

DP World are, of course, the principal party in the Berbera deal in Somaliland, but through their subsidiary P&O Ports, they also hold a contract with Puntland to redevelop Boosaaso port.

The Mogadishu decision was intended to negate both agreements, and adds to the rift between the Federal authorities, who have staunchly backed Qatar in the Gulf dispute, while all the other Somali states –

including Somaliland – have sided consistently with the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Newly installed Somaliland President Muse Bihi declared the Federal decision a 'declaration of war', and Puntland have also expressed their displeasure. Meanwhile, DP World CEO Sultan Ahmed Bin Sulayem ruffled Somalia's feathers when he described Somaliland as "an independent country free to enter into such agreements without the blessings of Mogadishu". DP World have vowed to ignore the Mogadishu decision in relation to both port redevelopment deals.

The Federal Government of Somalia have appealed to the Arab League to confirm the annulment of the agreements.

Somalia-Somaliland Relations

President Farmaajo, Puntland, Somaliland and Tukaraq

Federal President Farmaajo undertook a long-planned visit to Puntland, arriving in Garoowe on Sunday 7 January. Set for important talks with Puntland President Abdiweli Gaas, President Farmaajo had also indicated his interest in visiting the village of Tukaraq, which is situated in an area of Sool claimed by both Puntland and Somaliland.

In an effort to forestall that visit, which would have been politically embarrassing, Somaliland forces arrived in large numbers on 8 January, wresting control of the town from Puntland troops.

Noting Somaliland's claim to the colonial-era territory of the British Somaliland Protectorate, President Muse Bihi declared the seizure of the town "legitimate and irreversible". Puntland President Abdiweli, on the other hand, vowed that Somaliland "would pay a heavy price".

For a brief period, there seemed to be a real possibility that serious conflict might erupt, though in the end, Puntland opted to avoid an immediate escalation. At the time of writing, Somaliland remains in control of Tukaraq.

Talks to resume ... then cancelled

With talks between Somaliland and Somalia scheduled to resume in Djibouti, the Foreign Ministers of each government met in Addis Ababa at the start of February to discuss the terms of the intended meeting.

Ten days later, Somaliland confirmed that the Swiss government would play a facilitatory role in the talks, and expectations were high that the formal phase would start imminently. However, the Federal Parliament's decision to reject the ports deals with DP World, prompted a declaration from Somaliland that the talks were to be postponed for a month.

It is unclear what the next steps will be or when they will occur.

Air traffic control dispute deepens

Since 1992, Somali airspace has been controlled by the UN operating out of Kenya. However, at a meeting in Montreal in September 2017, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) reached agreement with the Aviation Minister for Somalia, that control of Somali airspace would be transferred to the Federal government. On 28 December, President Farmaajo inaugurated a new control centre at Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport, declaring that all Somali airspace would thenceforth be controlled from that location.

That declaration has predictably angered the Somaliland authorities, who argue that it effectively reneges on an agreement reached in 2013 in Istanbul that Somali airspace would be jointly controlled from a control centre in Hargeisa. Somaliland also feel it undermines the work of a joint technical committee involving both Somalia and Somaliland, established in October 2017 to consider the issue of air traffic control.

Somaliland

Presidential election sees Musse Bihi win contested vote

Somaliland went to the polls on 13 November 2017 to elect a new president, as the incumbent, President Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud 'Silanyo' was standing down. Three parties contested the election, with the Kulmiye governing party candidate, Muse Bihi, and Abdirahman 'Irro' of Waddani, the largest opposition party, both confident of victory.

In the event, a peaceful and well-run election was marred by post-election violence, as Waddani supporters contested an unexpectedly convincing win for Kulmiye.

The contest reopened grievances reminiscent of those that led to conflict in 1994, which worried many in Somaliland. Vigorous and protracted mediation

efforts did eventually lead to Waddani's acceptance of the outcome "for the good of Somaliland", while the party maintained their position that the result was incorrect. However, the new president, who was formally inaugurated on 13 December, must seek to reconcile a society that is deeply divided along clan lines.

Somaliland representative to the AU resigns

On 9 March, Somaliland's Special Representative to the African Union, Adam Musa Jibril, resigned his position, declaring himself unhappy with Somaliland's foreign policy strategy, and complaining that he had not been provided with sufficient resources to make progress in his job.

Somaliland passes first rape law

Early in 2018, the Somaliland House of Representatives passed legislation criminalising rape and other forms of gender-based violence. The new law, which is still to be confirmed by the Guurti (upper house), establishes procedures for prosecution and sets out penalties. It is the first piece of legislation passed in Somaliland's history that deals explicitly with sexual and gender-based violence.

Poet arrested for unionist sedition

Somaliland poet, Naema Qorane, has fallen foul of the government's concern with preventing 'anti-national activity'. She was arrested on 27 January, on her return from speaking at TEDx Mogadishu, where she was vocal in her support for a united Somalia.

Long-known for her sentiments on that subject, Naema is charged with spreading 'unpatriotic propaganda', and she could be jailed for up to eight years.

Human rights advocates in Somaliland have called for her release, describing her arrest as heavy-handed and "oppressive".

Somaliland arrests tortoise smugglers

Eight men and a young boy were arrested in Somaliland in February, and six large tortoises rescued. The Somaliland Environment Minister, Shukri Haji Ismaacil 'Bandaare' said that the tortoises had been captured for sale to people outside Somaliland, though she acknowledged that her government had failed to identify or arrest any prospective buyers. She noted that "there are people

in the world who eat tortoises, frogs and snakes”, who the poachers believed would pay high prices for large specimens.

The Minister confirmed that the tortoises are now being held in her Ministry, where they are being cared for.

Other Somali territories have also experienced tortoise smuggling, with several Federal Regional States issuing a warning a few weeks before the Somaliland arrests that the practice is illegal.