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Current Affairs in the Horn of Africa

by Run Doon

South-Central Somalia

Piracy risks on the rise again?

While data suggests that there has been a drop of some 40% in piracy off the Somali coast since 2011, a number of issues remain. There are over 1,000 Somalis held in prisons around the world, and trials have been protracted, with many yet to face the courts. In some cases, hostages also remain in captivity, with one Thai group having been released in February after being held for five years. In recent months there have been a number of new incidents which have sparked concern that the problem might begin to increase again. Amongst others, Iranian fishing vessels have been targeted, with one seized in September. Against this background, the UN Security Council voted unanimously in November 2015, to extend the resolution authorising the international maritime force patrolling the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden.

In spite of these concerns, international shipping groups, acting under pressure from India, relaxed shipping restrictions aimed at reducing Somali-based piracy. They did this by shrinking the piracy 'High Risk Area' in December, which opened up more direct, and therefore faster, routes into and out of Indian ports. As well as easing trade, the move will make fishing from Indian bases easier, but security groups were quick to warn that it would also make piracy easier. Somali President Hassan Sheikh himself penned an article blaming what he termed "the new pirates" on the rise in illegal fishing, calling for support to his administration to expand Somali capacity to patrol territorial waters against both illegal fishing and pirates.

Iran-Somali relations sour as diplomatic ties cut

Iran took the brunt of a great deal more Somali

anger than that pertaining just to illegal fishing. Two Iranians were arrested in December, accused of attempting to spread Shi'ism. The authorities claimed that they had been organising mass weddings, maintaining that they aimed to "convert many" Somalis to Shi'ism. Somali-Iranian relations suffered a far worse setback a month later though, when Somalia followed the Saudi lead and cut diplomatic ties in January 2016 in the wake of the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

Some cynicism was in evidence when it was revealed that, on the day the decision was announced, the Saudis also confirmed a substantial financial aid package for Somalia.

National consultation on 2016 elections agrees to use 4.5 formula but fails to win over Puntland

Politically, by far the biggest southern Somali debate of the past few months has focused on the nature of the Somali 'elections' that must be held in August 2016 (the Federal Parliament's term in office is set to expire in August, while the President's expires one month later). Having earlier abandoned any suggestion that they might take the form of a full popular vote, debate around the manner in which they should be run was intense. A National Consultative process began with a Mogadishu conference on 19 September, and drew in all of the federal regional states.

Things got off to a rocky start, when Puntland announced, on the day after the start of the conference, that they were pulling out in protest at the presence of Galmudug regional state, with whom they have an ongoing border dispute. However, discussions continued, and in October, the incumbent President, Hassan Sheikh, declared his intention to stand again for the presidency.

With agreement still some way off, two-day regional consultations took place in November.

Mogadishu, Baidoa, Kismayo, Cadaado and Garoowe each hosted a forum of 150 delegates, who were to discuss possible models for elections over the two days of 15 and 16 November. A final decision was then to be made before the end of 2015, by a second plenary meeting of the National Consultation Forum.

Four electoral 'models' were discussed. In the first, representatives were to be selected through a political party process; the second would see selection through regional federal parliaments; the third option was for districts to each nominate a specific number of parliamentarians; and the fourth option was for clan and sub-clan groups to make the nominations according to 4.5 formula for representation.

In the end, it was the existing, and already controversial, 4.5 formula for clan selection that was agreed. Under this system, the four clan groupings of Dir (including Isaaq), Darood, Digil-Rahanweyn and Hawiye would each elect 61 deputies, while a coalition of minority clans, including those identified as Bantu, Barawaani and Bajuni, would elect 31 deputies.

However, that decision was met with disagreement by leaders of the regional states, who favoured one of the options that would have seen selection through their offices rather than those of clan groups. After a series of meetings through the first weeks of January, Puntland and Jubaland remained unhappy with the use of the 4.5 system, and then President Hassan Sheikh walked out of a meeting in Kismaayo when things weren't going his way.

Puntland followed suit a few days later, when their delegation walked out of new talks in Mogadishu on 28 January. The following day, in an effort to appease the two Darood regional states, the Cabinet added a proposal for a new upper house with 54 delegates, to be selected by federal regional governments. The earlier forum-style meetings had been criticised for failing to discuss a selection process for an upper house, but the new proposal has so far failed to sway the Puntland administration. Jubaland, however, indicated in February that they would accept the decision, provided the 4.5 formula "will not be used again in 2020".

Michael Keating replaces Nicholas Kay as UN Envoy

With Nicholas Kay's term as UN Special Envoy to Somalia due to expire at the end of December

2015, Chatham House Associate Director, Michael Keating was announced by Ban Ki-moon on 24 November as Kay's replacement. Keating, who was born in Uganda, had previously served as the UN Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative to Afghanistan and was an advisor to the Secretary-General on Syria.

Kay handed the role over to Keating at a ceremony at Mogadishu's Aden Abdulle International Airport on 31 December, with Keating arriving in Mogadishu to take up his role two weeks later.

Amb Madeira replaces Amb Sidikou as African Union Special Representative

The UN Envoy was not the only high-level representative to see out his term at the end of 2015. African Union Special Representative, Maman Sambo Sidikou also handed over to new Francisco Caetano Jose Madeira of Mozambique on 4 December. Madeira had previously served as AU Special Representative on Counter-Terrorism and had earlier represented Mozambique as ambassador to a number of countries.

Al-Shabaab

Al-Qaeda or ISIS?

Al-Shabaab's fortunes have continued to ebb and flow, as they serially gain and lose towns in the Somali regions. However, throughout the past six months, they have been increasingly riven by bitter debate over whether they should retain their affiliation with a waning al-Qaeda, or shift sides to the more recently flourishing ISIS or Islamic State. Reports circulated in October that a group of foreign fighters had been detained by al-Shabaab leadership for expressing support for ISIS. In November, a senior al-Shabaab leader was reportedly ambushed and killed by other Shabaab militia members in the Middle Juba village of Gududley for having similarly expressed support for ISIS. In the same month, 9 people were reportedly killed in Sakow in clashes between al-Shabaab factions supporting al-Qaeda and those supporting ISIS. Al-Shabaab's core leadership issued a statement in November threatening to 'cut the throat' of any member who defected to ISIS, but that was not enough to prevent Mohamed Kuno, reportedly the mastermind behind the attack on Garissa University, from doing just that a couple of weeks later. At the time of writing, there are clear, armed

factions within al-Shabaab on each side, with no resolution to the dispute in sight.

Ugandan troop executions, ISIS-style

Perhaps in an effort to head off dissatisfaction with the older-style al-Qaeda communications, al-Shabaab's pro-AQ leadership apparently sanctioned release of an ISIS-style video on 10 November showing a September massacre of Ugandan soldiers. In the style of ISIS, the video was designed to shock with its portrayal of graphic brutality. The group claimed to have killed 50 Ugandan troops inside their camp, although the numbers have not been confirmed.

Al-Shabaab continues to mount spectacular attacks

While there has been much talk about al-Shabaab's shrinking territorial base, they remain capable of carrying out large-scale, spectacular attacks, particularly in Mogadishu.

They have continued to target AMISOM bases, though in focused attacks rather than assaults designed to conquer and hold territory. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimates that at least 1,100 AMISOM troops have been killed in Somalia, plus others from Ethiopia prior to the time when they were 'rehabbed' as AMISOM. However, many other estimates are three times that number.

It is in high profile attacks on predominately civilian targets, though, that have become al-Shabaab's trademark since that on Nairobi's Westgate mall. In September, they detonated a car bomb at the gates of Villa Somalia killing at least 10 by-standers and security, and damaging the neighbouring SYL Hotel which had itself been the subject of another attack a few months earlier. About two weeks later, they claimed responsibility for an attack in Mogadishu in which gunmen shot and killed the President's nephew, a health professional, and a lawyer who was accompanying him. That attack seems clearly designed to emphasise their ability to target significant individuals.

At the end of October, they mounted another 'complex' attack, this time on the Hotel Sahafi, in which they used a vehicle loaded with explosives to blast their way into the compound before between five and ten gunmen stormed the premises and engaged in a protracted gun battle

with security and police. In the end, all the attackers plus about 15 civilians were killed, including the hotel owner and a number of other local notables.

The Village Restaurant, which had been attacked before, was again targeted in early January, this time by a suicide bomber concealing his explosive vest under a business suit.

On 21 January, Shabaab mounted another of their spectacular assaults, this time targeting the popular Beach View Restaurant, fronting onto the Lido beach. In common with the Sahafi attack, the attackers blasted their way into the premises with a car bomb, before gunmen entered and held the compound as they fought with security. On this occasion, some 28 people were killed.irate Mogadishu residents staged a large protest against al-Shabaab the following week.

In early February 2016, the group were successful again in proving their ability to evade tight security, this time smuggling a bomb onto a Daallo airlines flight from Mogadishu. Probably intended for a Turkish Airlines flight that was cancelled at the last minute, as the bomber had apparently been booked on that flight, only transferring to Daallo on learning of the cancellation. In that case, only the bomber was killed when he was sucked out of the hole blown in the Airbus A321 plane by his bomb. The crew were able to safely navigate back to Mogadishu and land.

Turkish Airlines had been targeted before, cancelling all flights at one point in December after an unsuccessful al-Shabaab attack on Mogadishu airport.

The Daallo attack was unusual, and thankfully, ultimately unsuccessful in bringing down the plane. However, attacks on hotels and restaurants in Mogadishu have become a regular occurrence. A similar assault to those described was mounted in late February 2016, this time again on the SYL Hotel, and the nearby public garden area. On that occasion, there were about 10 fatalities.

Although most attacks have taken place in Mogadishu, al-Shabaab have been keen to show their ability to strike elsewhere as well. A February 2016 attack in Baidoa followed a very similar pattern to those in Mogadishu. A popular restaurant was targeted, firstly with a vehicle packed with explosives, then by a suicide bomber who joined the fleeing crowds before detonating his vest. Some 37 people were killed in the attack.

While al-Shabaab has suffered significant loss of

territory, they are proving themselves very capable of continuing to mount high-profile attacks, and of doing so with considerable frequency. That tactic has so far proven effective in maintaining a sense of fear amongst many, and not least internationals, belying a deterioration in the terror group's military capacity on the ground.

AMISOM/al-Shabaab revolving door in Marka

Although most of the larger Somali towns are now controlled by AMISOM, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa (ASWJ) or regional state administrations, Marka briefly saw a revolving door arrangement, with al-Shabaab seizing the town from AMISOM and Somali forces on 5 February. Apparently, Somali forces abandoned their posts in the town in protest at the late payment of salaries. In response, AMISOM also vacated the town and al-Shabaab moved in. They organised a large rally for that day, threatening Marka residents with dire consequences should they cooperate with the government or their allies. However, AMISOM troops returned the following day, only to withdraw again in the evening. It was not until 8 February, that they combined with Somali forces to mount a concerted assault on al-Shabaab positions and retook the town, apparently intending to stay.

Media Harassment

Universal TV Mogadishu studio ordered shut; journalists arrested

Imprisonment of journalists and summary closure of media outlets continues to be a hallmark of Somali governments. In October 2015, two journalists from the popular London-based Universal TV channel were arrested for staging a debate on-air between two prominent politicians and the channel's Mogadishu studio was forcibly closed. The agenda for the debate covered the state of Somalia, and included discussion on the long-proposed parliamentary motion to impeach the president.

In line with past practice, the two journalists were released some six days later, with a warning from the Minister of Information to all media outlets to "avoid public incitement".

Puntland TV show cancelled, journalist arrested

The Puntland authorities used similar measures against another London-based TV operator, Somali Channel, in November. Journalist Jama Yusuf Deperani was issued with an order to cease broadcast of his 'hard talk' style show, which focuses primarily on government accountability with a strong anti-corruption line. When Deperani refused to comply, the Information Ministry attempted to force the show off the air; a move that was widely criticised by journalists' associations. When that effort also failed, they arrested Deperani and requested a court order extending his stay in prison to three weeks to "permit further investigation".

National Union of Somali Journalists and the new Press Law

Reflective of the poor relationship between the media and Somali governments, a particularly bitter struggle has been taking place between President Hassan Sheikh's government and the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ). Omar Faruk Osman was elected by NUSOJ members as Secretary-General, but the government was determined to instal their own, more friendly, candidate. At one stage in November, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) weighed in, calling on the Somalia government to recognise Osman's legitimacy as Secretary-General.

Osman had provoked government hostility by leading criticism of the new Press Law, which he condemned as a heavy-handed attempt to regulate the media.

In the event, the government won the day and was able to bend NUSOJ to their will. This has led to the unedifying spectacle of NUSOJ, under new leadership, praising the Press Law which was passed in January 2016, dismissing concerns about the legislation and then endorsing the Attorney-General's decision to close 35 news websites (websites that were, as it happens, largely controlled by none other than erstwhile NUSOJ leader Osman).

Puntland

Al-Shabaab attack Puntland coastal towns

On 13 March, between 300 and 400 al-Shabaab fighters seized five fishing vessels in Harardheere,

with half of the group landing in Garacad town on the Puntland coast the following day. They took control of Garacad without a fight, but this unsurprisingly alarmed both Puntland and southern authorities; the latter fearing additional attacks further south, while Puntland were puzzled as to the purpose of the Garacad attack and mobilised rapidly to repel the invaders. The following day, the remaining 150-200 fighters from Harardheere landed in the Puntland village of Garmaal, to the north of Garacad. At the same time, trucks were reported to have travelled from locations near Garoowe in the direction of Garacad, with government sources speculating that they carried either al-Shabaab personnel or supplies. On 15 March, al-Shabaab forces left Garacad on foot, in a northerly direction, allowing newly arrived Puntland troops to retake the town, again without a fight. Meanwhile, some of the fighters who had taken Garmaal moved, again on foot, in the direction of the inland village of Dangoroyo - possibly the destination to which the group from Garacad were also headed. Meanwhile, on 16 March, the remaining al-Shabaab fighters in Garmaal clashed with Puntland forces.

It is still too early to understand al-Shabaab's intentions, but the incursion is of considerable concern to Puntland, not least because Dangoroyo village is significantly closer to Garoowe than areas al-Shabaab have held to date. Rumours had been rife in early March that Galmudug was about to mount a major offensive on al-Shabaab stronghold, Harardheere. It is therefore possible that the Garacad/Garmaal assaults are designed to carve out new territory in Puntland, or even to link up with existing militia in the Galgala area. However, both tactics seem flawed, as the assaulting forces are effectively isolated in areas within relatively easy striking distance of Puntland troops. No doubt, al-Shabaab intentions will become clearer in the coming days and weeks.

Dismissal of speaker upsets Warsangeli

In October 2015, tensions between the Puntland Speaker and his deputy on one side, and the government and other lawmakers on the other came to a head. About 40 MPs threatened to table a motion of impeachment against the Speaker for what they claimed was a dysfunctional relationship between the Speaker and the government. The Speaker, Said Hassan Shire, instead resigned the day after Parliament opened the session in which the impeachment motion was to be debated.

This upset Shire's Warsangeli clan, who threatened to withdraw clan support from the Puntland government. However, Ahmed Ali Hashi was elected to replace Shire with a handsome majority, and tensions have since dissipated.

Hiraan & Middle Shebelle

With most regions now having formed at least interim administrations, Hiraan and Middle Shebelle remain the laggards. The situation in Hiraan had become extremely difficult as a result of the killing of a UN staff member in November 2015; for which the incumbent governor was held culpable. He was forced to resign when he was flown to Mogadishu for criminal enquiries, and was replaced by a former governor, Yusuf Ahmed Hagar.

Keen to see the completion of the regional state formation process, the Somali President met with elders and politicians in Beledweyne to urge them to agree the terms of the new administration. One of the sticking points is that Hiraan leaders want Beledweyne nominated the capital of a combined Hiraan/Middle Shebelle region, while Middle Shebelle leaders are keen to locate the regional government in Jowhar. Some potential for flexibility seemed to lie in the proposal that the state formation conference be held in one of the two towns, and perhaps the capital might then be the other. By the end of the President's talks, he announced that agreement had indeed been reached along those lines: the conference at least would be held in Jowhar, to start in three weeks time.

However, as the conference drew closer, the Hiraan leadership announced that they would boycott it, accusing President Hassan Sheikh of breaking the promises he had made. By February, the stand-off had not been resolved, although IGAD had weighed in with their own insistence that the conference proceed even without the boycotting delegates.

Galmudug

Ongoing dispute with Puntland

The prolonged and difficult birth of Galmudug regional state also continued to present significant challenges. The regional government had made some progress by November in forming district administrations, though tensions with both Puntland and Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a (ASWJ)

remained significant.

By the end of November, clashes between Puntland troops and those from Galmudug had seen at least 10 people killed, and forced a visit by the Somalia Prime Minister, Omar Abdirashid Sharmarke, to Garoowe. In an attempt to smooth relations with Puntland, he held talks with Puntland President Abdiweli and also with elders in Adaado town, but the Puntland authorities prevented him from travelling to Galkayo, where the clashes had taken place.

However, those efforts did not prove to be sufficient as renewed and heavy fighting broke out on the very day the PM had hoped to visit. More than 20 fighters were reported killed, and according to one UN estimate, 90,000 Galkayo residents fled, leaving the town almost empty. The Somali Interior Minister travelled to the scene of the fighting that evening, at which stage a tense calm prevailed.

With mediation from PM Sharmarke, a ceasefire was hastily arranged, and Puntland President, Abdiweli Gaas, agreed to hold talks with his Galmudug counterpart, Abdikarim Hussein Guleid. Those talks took place on 2 December, and the two sides signed a peace agreement. In accordance with that agreement, forces from each withdrew from the front line a few days later, ending that phase in the conflict. Tensions remain high, though, as the dispute over the northern border of Galmudug - which crosses into Puntland territory - remains unresolved.

ASWJ retake Dhusamareb ... again

Galmudug's disputes are not confined to that with Puntland. Negotiations between Ahlu Sunna Waal Jama'a and Galmudug over power-sharing within the new region ended in failure in late February 2016 and heavy fighting broke out in Dhusamareb a few days later between the two sides. ASWJ had already recaptured and then lost the town in the preceding year, and once again took control as a result of this latest conflict. Along with simmering tensions with Puntland, the Galmudug administration's inability to retain control of one of their most major towns means that, as of March 2016, their regional state formation process remains anything but complete.

Puntland, Somaliland, Khatumo

Tensions also continue to beset the Sool and Cayn/Togdheer areas, to which Somaliland, Puntland and Khatumo all lay claim. In February

and March 2016, Khatumo forces carried out a number of hit and run attacks against Somaliland soldiers. Khatumo President Ali Khalif Guleyr was active throughout that period in the area, trying to promote his call for the Warsangeli clan to unit with the Dhulbahante to form a new federal regional state. His scope of movement is limited by the fact that his forces do not control much actual area in that space, and Somaliland are becoming increasingly adept at spoiling his plans.

Meanwhile, Puntland and Khatumo forces also played a cat and mouse game, with one group's troops vacating a town as the other arrived. The impression is that Puntland is content to leave Khatumo and Somaliland to fight things out for the time being.

At the end of February, Somaliland-aligned Dhulbahante commanders called on Puntland to withdraw their claims. The commanders even threatened to attack Garoowe if Puntland did not desist. The calls were motivated by Puntland's decision to relocate their Garoowe checkpoint to a point significantly further from Garoowe to the west, thus encroaching on territory claimed by Somaliland.

Somaliland

Muse Bihi elected Government presidential candidate and cabinet ministers walk out

The long-standing dispute within Somaliland's ruling Kulmiye party as to who should be selected as their presidential candidate has been reported in this column before. President Silanyo has had a troubled relationship with the party Secretary-General Muse Bihi that dates back to their days in the Somali National Movement (SNM). It therefore took some by surprise when, in October, the President announced his support for Muse as the presidential candidate. In fact, the announcement precipitated an immediate walk out by six senior cabinet ministers, led by Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohamed Bihi Yonis, who himself had declared his interest in the presidential candidacy.

President Silanyo moved quickly to replace his cabinet, and on 10 November, Muse Bihi was duly confirmed in a Kulmiye congress as their candidate.

Voter registration underway

Somaliland's much anticipated voter registration

began on schedule on 16 January in Togdheer Region. The registration process will take place over all six regions of Somaliland, devoting approximately one month to each. The plan is for the first week of registration in each region to see voter registration centres distributed throughout that region, followed by a further seven days in which they will be confined to urban centres. The final two weeks will see registration centres restricted to the main district capitals. In that way, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) hope to provide all who wish to register with the time to do so.

Registration involves a world-first biometric system using iris scanning technology to validate each registrant. Officials argue that the iris scan is both more reliable than fingerprint or facial recognition, and also that it creates smaller data files, and thus is easier to transfer and store.

In spite of difficulties between the Ministry of Interior and the NEC over the process of registration (Ministry officials were keen for their own civil registration to take precedence over voter registration), the process appears to be functioning well.

Voter registration is seen by political parties and civil society alike as an essential precursor to elections themselves, which are due to be held at the end of March 2017.

At the time of writing, the registration process was completed in Togdheer and had moved to Awdal.