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Current Affairs in the Horn of Africa (*Autumn 2017*)

by Run Doon

Drought

Insufficient rain sees drought conditions persist

After the El Niño-related failure of rains throughout many Somali areas and beyond in 2016, hopes were high that the *gu* rains between April and June 2017 would see more favourable conditions. However, while rain did come to many areas, it was insufficient to ward off further crisis, with Health Cluster Somalia estimating at the start of August, that only 35% of water resources had been replenished.

Before the start of the rains, humanitarian agencies warned that over 6 million Somalis faced severe food insecurity and a significant risk of famine, and with the poor *gu* rains it seems certain that what relief was afforded by the rain will be short-lived.

1.1 million people are estimated to have been displaced, with many having lost their livestock to the drought. Repeated poor rains have created a compounding crisis, as people are weakened by drought and food shortages, thus making them vulnerable to disease, and without livestock, also deprived of the means to make a livelihood once drought conditions end.

The UN has described the combined drought and food insecure situation in Somalia/Somaliland, north-eastern Nigeria, South Sudan and Yemen as the largest humanitarian disaster in 70 years.

Cholera and measles outbreaks affect drought-hit communities

In February 2017, the UN World Health Organization noted a sharp rise in cholera cases in south central areas and in Puntland, with a federal oral vaccination programme launched in March. In spite of efforts to contain it, the outbreak continued to spread through the following months, with over 60,000 cases reported between January and the end of July, across 15 regions in Somalia and Somaliland, and including 820 fatalities. Bay region in Somalia and Togdheer in Somaliland saw the highest numbers of cases.

By the time of this column, the outbreak was reported to be slowing, though 5.5 million people were estimated to remain at risk in Somaliland and Somalia.

Compounding the cholera outbreak, there was also a serious problem with measles, which had infected 14,000 people by the end of July.

This year's cholera outbreak follows another significant, if slightly less extensive, outbreak in 2016. In both cases, drought conditions created the foundation for the spread of the disease, with renewed drought this year compounding health problems for large parts of the Somali population.

Clashes over drought aid distribution

Some fourteen people were killed and more than 20 were injured when fighting erupted at a drought relief centre in Baidoa in June. Somali soldiers triggered the clash when they were seen attempting to steal sacks of food. Other soldiers assigned to guard the supplies attempted to prevent the theft and a gunfight broke out. Most of those killed or injured were civilians, present at the centre to collect relief supplies.

Book fairs again held in Hargeisa, Mogadishu and Garowe

The 10th annual Hargeysa International Book Fair took place over six days in late July. As well as marking a decade of operation, this year's event was the first to be held in Hargeisa's new Cultural Centre, and again attracted some 10,000 participants.

Both Mogadishu and Garowe also hosted their own book fairs; in each case, the third event of its type, with the Garowe fair taking place in the week prior to the Hargeysa one. Garowe was again a success, attracting about 2,000 people, while the Mogadishu event took place over three days in mid-September.

Al-Shabaab

Mogadishu attacks continue

Al-Shabaab has continued to hold the capacity to mount attacks in Mogadishu and in other cities in Somalia.

The first major attack in the capital after the election of the new president saw a car bomb exploded on 19 February in a market in Wadajir area, with the loss of at least 34 lives, and injuries sustained by more than 50. In April, a car bomb was exploded at lunchtime outside a popular Mogadishu café, killing seven and wounding at least eight others, and a few weeks later, another suicide car bomb was detonated outside a coffee shop in the main street of Maka al-Mukarama, killing five and wounding 20.

The Ramadan month of June saw a series of attacks. Gunmen stormed the Pizza House restaurant in the middle of the month after another vehicle-borne suicide bomber had first breached the security barrier of the adjacent Posh Hotel. They held the restaurant premises overnight, killing staff and patrons in the process, before being overwhelmed by security forces early the following morning. 31 people, including the five attackers, were killed.

Only five days later, another suicide vehicle bomb, this time disguised as a milk-delivery van, was used to attack the district headquarters in Wadajir. 15 people were killed, and two days after that, an attack on the Waberi district police station in central Mogadishu killed four more, again using a suicide car bomb.

The same police station was apparently targeted again at the end of July, when six were killed, again in a suicide car bombing, this time when the bomber detonated his explosives while caught in a traffic jam near the police station. The congestion was itself caused by a security check further along the road.

Somali and AMISOM convoys targeted near Baidoa and in Lower Shabelle

An attack on 23 July targeted a convoy of Somali forces just outside Baidoa town, with a roadside bomb used to kill four soldiers. A week later, a major ambush targeted an AMISOM convoy in Bulamareer district, in Golweyn village, about 140km from Mogadishu. In that latter attack, between 23 and 39 AMISOM troops and one Somali soldier were killed. A roadside bomb had been used in the same area to target a public bus in April, killing 14.

Mukhtar Robow surrenders to

Somali Federal Government

On 13 August, reports emerged that one of the founders of al-Shabaab, Mukhtar Robow, had surrendered to Somali federal forces. He was reportedly transported from a bush area in Bakool to Mogadishu.

Robow had split with the al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane in 2013, before Godane was killed in a US airstrike the following year. Godane's death did not signal a reconciliation, though, and Robow has remained in hiding in south-west Somalia with a small band of loyal militia ever since. Reports indicate that Robow had been in talks with the Somali Federal Government for some months, with his final decision to defect prompted by the June 2017 removal of a US bounty for his capture. In the days prior to his surrender, Robow's militia had apparently clashed with al-Shabaab forces, losing 19 people in fierce fighting.

Robow is the only living founder of al-Shabaab, so his surrender is significant, in spite of his 2013 departure from the group.

Severed cable causes three-week internet outage

Somalia's internet services were down for some three weeks in July after a ship accidentally cut the fibre optic cable that runs off the Somali coast. All mobile and fixed-line internet services in the south of the country were affected, with only satellite connections continuing to operate.

The economic cost of the outage was estimated to run to about US\$10 million a day. The ship that was thought to have cut the cable was impounded by Somali authorities, who say they will sue the owners for compensation.

South-Central Somalia

Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmaajo' elected President

On 8th February, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed 'Farmaajo' was elected President of the Federal Government of Somalia, beating incumbent Hassan Sheikh Mohamud.

Voting took place within Mogadishu's Aden Adde International Airport area, having been relocated to that site after a series of security-related delays. All flights into and out of Mogadishu were cancelled for

the duration of the vote, and participants were prevented from carrying mobile phones or cash in excess of \$200 into the venue. Al-Shabaab nevertheless managed to fire mortar rounds which landed near the airport the night before the vote, but voting itself proceeded peacefully.

Although 23 people, including a single woman, had declared their intention to stand, only four candidates eventually did so: two former Prime Ministers (Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke and the eventual victor, Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmaajo'), and two former or incumbent presidents (Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and Hassan Sheikh). The 275-member lower house and 54-member upper chamber of Parliament took part in the vote.

Incumbent President Hassan Sheikh topped the first round, but the scheduled three rounds of voting were not required. Instead, the lowest polling individuals withdrew in each of the first two rounds, with Farmaajo pulling ahead of his main rival in the second, prompting Hassan Sheikh to concede defeat.

The elections were marred by accusations of corruption, with some sources claiming that votes were being bought from parliamentarians for as much as US\$30,000 each.

One-person, one-vote elections are scheduled to take place in 2020, though much remains to be done if security and state legitimacy are to be improved to the point that that can occur.

Minister killed in inter-governmental shoot-out

In a bizarre Mogadishu shoot-out, the security detail of the federal Auditor-General, Nur Jimaale Farah, shot and killed Abbas Abdullahi 'Siraji', the Minister for Public Works and Reconstruction. Unusually, Siraji was driving his own bullet-proof car, following behind the Auditor-General's vehicle. The Auditor-General's guards apparently mistook the minister for an aspiring assailant, and opened fire on his vehicle.

Siraji was apparently accompanied in his car by another minister, who survived the gun fire, although several of Siraji's bodyguards were apparently injured.

Siraji was seen by many as a role model, being young for a minister, and having grown up in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya.

Two of the Auditor-General's bodyguards have been arrested, along with one of Siraji's.

Puntland

Piracy again on the rise?

On 13 March, a UAE-owned ship was seized by a group of Somali pirates close to the northern Puntland coastal town of Aluula. This was the first time a ship had been seized by Somali attackers since late 2012, and when an Indian ship was seized near Socotra island two weeks later, and then a third Tuvalu-registered ship on 9 April, there were fears of a sudden resurgence in piracy.

Members of Puntland's elite Maritime Police Force attempted to storm the UAE-registered ship, which had been carrying oil from Djibouti to Mogadishu. Although the police attack was unsuccessful, the pirates released the ship and crew unharmed later the same day, when they learned that the ship had been leased to Somali business people. Pirates have long avoided placing themselves offside with Somali business interests.

In the second attack near Socotra, the vessel was seized and held for several days before Somali security forces attacked the ship and freed it and two of the 10 hostages. The remaining eight were reportedly taken to Hobyo town, where they were held, with their abductors demanding that Somalis held in Indian prisons on piracy charges be released. These remaining hostages were freed a few days later by Somali security forces.

The third hijacked vessel was also freed, along with all hostages, by a combined Indian, Pakistani and Chinese naval force.

An Iranian fishing vessel was also seized off the coast near Hobyo on 23 May, with little information available on the fate of the crew. Reports suggested that pirates intended to use the boat as a 'mothership' to support future attacks.

Somali, Ethiopian refugees killed while attempting to cross from Boosaaso to Yemen

In August 2017, reports emerged of about 50 refugees, mostly Somalis and Ethiopians, drowning after people-smugglers forced all 120 people on board into the sea to avoid arrest by maritime authorities. The boat was travelling from the Puntland port of Boosaaso to Shabwa, Yemen. Officials from the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) found 29 bodies buried by survivors in shallow graves on a Yemeni beach, with most of the victims being teenage boys.

The Boosaaso-Yemen sea crossing remains popular with young people (about 67% of them men, and mostly young) attempting to reach western countries to claim refugee status or asylum. The IOM Head of Mission in Yemen noted that his organisation had identified 117,000 refugees who had entered Yemen in 2016, with a further 55,000 having arrived between January and April 2017. These huge numbers must surely be added to by the many thousands more who will have evaded detection.

Practices such as that reported here, in which smugglers force refugees into the sea when they fear capture, have occurred periodically, while the conflict in Yemen is also proving dangerous for those following that route. In March this year, the Somali government accused Saudi forces of killing 42 Somali refugees in the same area when they attacked a boat with a helicopter gunship, apparently under the mistaken impression that the vessel was somehow associated with a Houthi rebel group.

ISIS and al-Shabaab claim attacks in Puntland

The rivalry between Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Shabaab has continued to affect Puntland over the past six months, with affiliates of both groups claiming to have mounted deadly attacks in an apparent quest by each to prove themselves more effective than the other.

In February, a lone gunman attacked a hotel in the port city of Boosaaso, killing several hotel staff before being fatally shot himself. Then, in April, a suicide bomber detonated his device when he was stopped at a police checkpoint, apparently before reaching his target – again, a hotel in Boosaaso. Although the bomb was detonated prematurely, the attack still killed a police officer and four civilians. Both of those attacks were claimed by ISIS.

Al-Shabaab fighters based in the Galgaala area also conducted successful attacks. In April, a roadside bomb was used to attack a military convoy just south of Boosaaso, killing at least six Puntland soldiers and wounding another eight.

In June, al-Shabaab fighters from the same area mounted the most audacious and deadly attack in Puntland's history, when they launched an offensive on the Puntland Af-Urur military base in the Galgaala hills.

The groundwork for the attack seems to have been laid in an earlier attack on the same base. In that instance, in January 2017, the attack was repulsed by

Puntland soldiers, who captured a large number of al-Shabaab personnel. Some 30 of those captured were then embedded with the Puntland forces in Af-Urur after undergoing an integration programme. However, it seems that at least some retained their loyalty to the militants. When, on 8 June, between 150 and 200 al-Shabaab fighters attacked the base again, it appears they received support from their colleagues inside, enabling them to infiltrate the defences more easily than would otherwise have been possible.

The attack followed a similar pattern to that employed often in Mogadishu, with a vehicle-borne suicide bomber first breaching the main defences, followed by an attack by gunmen. The firefight lasted two hours, in which at least 48, and possibly as many as 61 Puntland soldiers were killed, including the base commander. Puntland troops were forced to retreat to nearby Armo village, with al-Shabaab in pursuit. Militants looted the base, seizing weapons and destroying what they couldn't carry, before attacking the village and slaughtering about 20 civilians. They then retreated with hostages and seized equipment, at which point Puntland forces returned to the base and set about burying the dead and restoring defences.

The attack probably resulted in the greatest loss of life in a single assault in Puntland since its formation in 1998.

Somali states split by Gulf crisis

The crisis that erupted in early June, when the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt and Saudi Arabia cut ties with Qatar, has embroiled Somali stakeholders as well. Initially, Somaliland attracted attention when it became clear that Qatar Airways was diverting planes through that territory's air-space in order to avoid areas now closed to Qatari interests.

Somalia had, in January 2016, cut ties with Iran, thus securing a US\$50 million pledge from Riyadh for aid. They have also consistently supported the Saudi-led coalition engaged in military action in Yemen. However, relations between the two have deteriorated in the course of the current Gulf dispute.

With Somaliland having signed substantial deals with the UAE, they quickly succumbed to pressure to ban Qatar Airways overflights, and have allied themselves firmly with the Saudi/UAE group. However, Somalia was angered by Somaliland's commercial and military arrangements with Dubai, and has continued to allow Qatari access to airspace, thus far resisting attempts to persuade them to take a stronger anti-Qatari line. The new Somalia President, Farmaajo, also has close ties with Qatar-based al-Jazeera through his Chief of Staff and received some support from Qatar for his presidential campaign

(although they officially backed his rival Hassan Sheikh).

Puntland announced on 16 August that they are also siding with the Saudi/UAE group, citing 'strategic interests' in common with those two powers, and urging the Mogadishu government to follow suit. Both Puntland and Jubaland receive significant aid from the UAE, and the South West State is in the process of agreeing a deal to redevelop Baraawe port, meaning that Mogadishu will almost certainly come under increasing pressure from federal member states to also withdraw their cooperation from Qatar.

Somaliland

Somaliland, Khaatumo agreement reached

In mid-June, Somaliland signed a milestone agreement with the Khaatumo leader, Ali Khalif Galayr. The agreement confirms the support of Ali Khalif for the end of hostilities between Somaliland and Khaatumo in the eastern areas of Sool and Ayn (Buuhoodle).

Ali Khalif does not have the full support of his Dhulbahante clan, some of whom continue to insist that they are working towards the formation of a regional state that is separate from Somaliland, and remains a party of federal Somalia.

However, the agreement is a significant one for both Somaliland and for Ali Khalif's supporters in Khaatumo. It means that a more significant proportion of the Dhulbahante clan have declared their willingness to work with the Somaliland authorities as a part of Somaliland than has been the case since the early days of Somaliland's formation in 1991.

Voter registration completed; stage set for November presidential election

Somaliland's voter registration process was drawing to a close at the time of writing, with distribution of voter cards in the last remaining areas of Sool and Sanaag. This final stage of card distribution is scheduled to conclude on 8 September, after which a final and detailed voter register will be released.

The total number of voters registered before card distribution was just over 870,000, although there has been some concern at the number of cards not being collected. Two of the three registered political parties were also censured by the National Electoral Commission for illegal campaigning and other

infringements, while there have been some accusations that voter cards are being bought by party affiliates.

However, by and large, the registration process has proceeded relatively smoothly, albeit with some delay caused by the drought situation.

Once the full voter register has been released (expected at the end of September or start of October), preparations for the presidential election, scheduled for 13 November, will start in earnest.

Election Observation Mission for November election to be funded by UK

The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office has confirmed funding for an international Election Observation Mission (EOM), to be organised by University College London (UCL), and led by Dr Michael Walls.

That mission seeks to coordinate a group of about 60 observers from a range of countries, both in the region and from Europe, the US and beyond, to observe the November poll. The EOM will work with domestic observers and other international groups, reporting back to the National Electoral Commission immediately after the election.

Speaker of Somaliland's lower house resigns; new Speaker elected

The Speaker of Somaliland's House of Representatives, Abdirahman Abdullahi 'Erro', resigned on 2 August in order to focus his attentions on the presidential contest, in which he is the selected candidate for Waddani, the larger of the two opposition parties.

Erro's resignation triggered a battle between aspiring successors, with two candidates – Bashe Mohamed Farah of the ruling Kulmiye party, and Abdirahman Mohamed 'Talyanale' of Waddani – looking set to secure almost equal numbers of votes from MPs when the election took place on 6 August. In the event, Bashe Mohamed was declared the victor, with 39 votes against Talyanale's 38 votes.

Talyanale refused to accept that result, declaring himself the winner, and scuffles broke out in the chamber. Once order was restored, a number of MPs were arrested, and Talyanale took his case to the Constitutional Court. However, the court ruled that the case did not warrant a judicial decision, and returned the issue to the Lower House, declaring that

MPs were legally required to decide the victor, thus effectively dismissing the case.

Kenya

Dadaab closure blocked by High Court

Last year, the Kenyan government issued a decree that the Dadaab refugee camp was to be closed and its inhabitants forcibly repatriated to Somalia. However, in February, Kenya's High Court ruled that the measure would be "tantamount to an act of group persecution", and was therefore illegal. The government vowed to appeal the ruling, but the recent Kenyan election has distracted attention, and the fate of the camp remains unclear.