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Current Affairs in the Horn of Africa (*Autumn 2020*)

by Run Doon

Regional

Covid-19 in the Somali Horn

The Somali areas in the Horn of Africa continue to show relatively modest infection and death rates from the coronavirus, with the Johns Hopkins University tracker showing 3,275 infections for Somalia (they include Somaliland in these figures) and 95 deaths at the end of August. However, fears persist that the real figures are far higher as testing capacity in the region remains extremely limited. There is one testing laboratory in Somaliland, one in Puntland and one in Mogadishu for Somalia and treatment capacity also remains extremely limited. The fear is that only those with severe symptoms and easy access to a well-resourced health facility are getting tested. The high rate of positive tests suggests this fear may be well-founded.

Nevertheless, there have been a number of initiatives designed to enhance testing and limit the spread of the virus. In March, Chinese billionaire, Jack Ma, donated 20,000 testing kits, 100,000 face masks and 1,000 protective suits to the federal government, and border restrictions and quarantine arrangements were introduced by both Somalia and Somaliland in March. Somaliland also banned qaad sales while Somalia's two-week ban on all flights also severely restricted the import of qaad. Somaliland President Muse Bihi Abdi also pardoned almost 600 prisoners in order to reduce prison overcrowding in an effort to minimise infection.

There was dissatisfaction too, though: protests broke out in April in Mogadishu after a police officer fatally shot a civilian while enforcing coronavirus restrictions.

Somali diaspora communities disproportionately affected by Covid-19

Somali communities, especially those in the diaspora, have been hit hard by the virus. Nur Hassan Hussein, Somalia's Prime Minister between 2007 and 2009, died in early April aged 83, while prominent Somaliland oud-player, 91-year-old Ahmed Ismail Hudeidi, also succumbed in the same month, both in London. In British, Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish cities, studies have shown Somalis to be disproportionately affected in both infection and death statistics, with six of the first 15 Swedish deaths being Somali, while in Norway and Finland, infections amongst Somalis are ten-times higher than their percentage in the respective populations of those countries. A number of studies have connected high infection and mortality rates with poverty and density of habitation.

In Mogadishu's only Covid-19 treatment centre, Martini Hospital, Hirshabelle Regional Justice Minister Khalif Mumin Tohow was the second recorded death in Somalia in April. Tohow himself was a dual Somali-British citizen and had returned from the UK a few weeks before his death.

Heavy rains, floods and locusts

One of the wettest rainy seasons in the region in four decades has caused severe flooding and created the conditions for the continuation of the worst locust infestation in a generation. The Puntland town of Qardho was devastated by flash floods in May which reportedly killed a significant number and swept away most of the buildings in the town. More than 100,000 people in Somali Region of Ethiopia were estimated to have been displaced by the same rains.

In an effort to combat ongoing problems with locust swarms and to build resilience against future occurrences, the World Bank announced a

record US\$500 million package of grants and concessionary loans for the region. The Bank estimates that crop and livestock losses from the plague could amount to US\$8.5 billion without urgent action and even with mitigating measures, they estimate that losses could amount to US\$2.5 billion in the region.

Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab establish Covid-19 treatment centre

In mid-June, al-Shabaab announced that they had opened their own Covid-19 treatment centre in the town of Jilib, Jubaland. The group have made a number of statements urging Somalis to take the virus seriously and are urging those showing symptoms to report to the Jilib centre. A 'Consultative Forum on Jihad in East Africa', organised by al-Shabaab in March, urged Muslims to take steps to protect themselves from infection while later statements have framed the virus as a divine punishment for unbelievers and urging those with symptoms to seek treatment from Islamic doctors.

Two Puntland regional governors killed; Wanlaweyn, Bacadweyn and Baidoa towns attacked

In March, a suicide bomber wearing an explosive vest ran to the car of Nugaal Governor Abdisalan Hassan before detonating his device. The Governor was rushed to hospital in Garoowe but died within an hour of his arrival. Two others were also wounded in the blast. A few weeks later, in May, another suicide attacker used a vehicle-borne device against the car of Mudug Governor Ahmed Musse Nur, killing the Governor and three bodyguards.

In June, the Lower Shabelle town of Wanlaweyn and Bacadweyn in Galmudug were both attacked within 24 hours of each other. In Wanlaweyn, two bombs were detonated in front of the house of a military official, killing four, while in Bacadweyn, three suicide attackers in a vehicle detonated their explosives at a roadblock, killing three soldiers as well as the attackers.

In early July, a remote-controlled explosive device was detonated at a Baidoa restaurant

during the busy breakfast period, killing four.

Mogadishu attacks

Al-Shabaab attacks in Mogadishu continued to occur with some frequency through the period covered by this column, though with varying levels of 'success'. Indeed, the period was bookended by the two most deadly attacks.

In late May, a remotely-triggered roadside bomb was used to target a minibus in Lafoole village, on the road into Mogadishu, killing 10.

Two civilians and the suicide bomber were then killed in an attack on a Turkish military training base in Mogadishu in June. Pretending to be a trainee at the Turkish site, the bomber was nevertheless prevented from entering so detonated his explosives outside. Then, at the start of July, a vehicle-borne suicide attacker detonated his device outside the port area, near the gate of the motor vehicle imports duty office. He sped through one security check, but police then opened fire on him and his vehicle exploded before it reached the gates of the tax authority. While al-Shabaab claimed to have killed two officials, police sources denied that there had been any deaths other than that of the attacker.

About 10 days later, another suicide attack targeted the commander of the Somali Federal Army, failing to kill him but resulting in the death of a civilian. A few weeks after that, though, a suicide attack in August killed eight soldiers when the bomber detonated his vehicle at the gates of the '12th April Army Brigade' base in Mogadishu.

In mid-August, al-Shabaab mounted a complex attack on the prestigious, new Elite Hotel on Mogadishu's beachfront. The hotel is owned by the MP and former Finance Minister, Abdullahi Mohamed Nor and is frequented by government personnel. At least 16 people were killed when attackers first detonated a vehicle bomb at the gates then entered the compound, engaging in a four-hour firefight with security before the attackers were themselves killed and the stand-off ended.

Al-Shabaab fighters attempt escape from Mogadishu central prison

At least 20 people were killed in fighting inside

Mogadishu's central prison, again in August, when al-Shabaab prisoners attacked guards in an apparent attempt to escape. Reports differ as to how they acquired guns, with some sources saying the weapons were smuggled in hidden in food brought by relatives, while others suggested they had killed the guard outside the prison armoury, then raided it. One report suggests that one of the jail-breakers was successful in escaping the compound, killing a Bajaj driver and civilian outside while trying to make good his escape. In the event, the shoot-out continued for a couple of hours until reinforcements had arrived, with all the inmates involved killed in the fighting which ultimately claimed the lives of 15 prisoners and five guards.

As well as the tragic loss of life, the event was a major embarrassment to the authorities as they had beefed up security after another breakout attempt in 2017, selecting prison guards from elite troops.

Somalia

Somalia electoral model agreed (by some) but elections as far off as ever

A major meeting of federal government and regional state leaders was convened in Dhusamareb in August, intended to facilitate agreement on forthcoming elections. The resulting agreement has been dubbed Dhusamareb 3 and was signed by Federal President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo and the Presidents of Galmudug, South West and Hirshabelle Regional States and the Governor of Benadir. The deal confirmed that the National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEC) would oversee multi-party elections using a constituency caucus model. Each regional state is to have four such constituencies, with each constituency having 301 caucus delegates who are charged with voting for representatives for that constituency. Regional parliaments are to elect the upper house of the federal government.

Puntland and Jubaland did not participate and immediately issued their own statement rejecting the deal. Their decision to boycott the process is, of course, highly significant. They remain at odds with the federal government on a number of issues. But the agreement also marks a retreat

from the one-person-one-vote (OPOV) election that has long been promised. In late June, the head of the NIEC, Halima Ismail Ibrahim, announced for the first time that, because of Covid-19, floods, continued insecurity and a lack of supporting electoral legislation, it was too late to organise an OPOV vote. She declared that neither the parliamentary elections scheduled for 27 November 2020, nor the elections needed before the presidential term ends on 8 February 2021 could be held by those dates.

While insecurity, floods, Covid and the lack of electoral law are no doubt real issues, they nevertheless amount to convenient cover for the fact that there is no obvious solution to the deep and now long-standing rifts between key actors, and none more so than between the federal government and those in Puntland and Jubaland.

Halima Ismail argued that electoral preparations would take 13 months, suggesting in July that a vote could thus take place in August 2021. That date is, of course, already slipping and in reality it remains very unclear when or under what system elections might take place. Ismail also proposed a compromise paper-based election in which registration would take place on election day itself. This could be delivered more quickly and at less cost than the agreed US\$70 million biometrically-based system but would require new legislation and was immediately criticised as open to fraud.

The decision by Puntland and Jubaland not to participate also prompted a remarkable tweet from the US Ambassador to Somalia, Donald Yamamoto, stating that "spoilers withholding participation sacrifice democracy for own ambitions". A notably cloth-eared reaction to long-standing grievances.

PM Khayre ousted

On 25 July, the lower house of the federal parliament voted by 170 to 8 that they had no confidence in Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khayre, thus removing him from office. Originally a Norwegian primary school teacher who also worked for the Norwegian Refugee Council, Khayre was then working for UK-based Soma Oil and Gas; a position he resigned to become Prime Minister in March 2017. According to the

Speaker of the House, Mohamed Mursal Abdurahman, the PM's dismissal resulted from his failure to improve security and implement OPOV elections. However, it also represents the culmination of division between the PM and the President and so represents the latest instance of an established rift in Somali federal politics. There have been 10 federal PMs since 2000, and all but two of them were dismissed after deepening conflicts with the President of the day. The Deputy Prime Minister, Mahdi Mohammed Gulaid 'Khadar', stepped in as Acting PM and remains in that role at the time of writing. Mahdi 'Khadar' was previously Legal Advisor to Somaliland's National Electoral Commission.

Ethiopia downs Kenyan aid plane over Bardale

In early May, a Kenyan-registered plane carrying coronavirus-related medical supplies was shot down as it approached to land at Bardale airstrip, west of Baidoa. There was initial confusion as to the cause of the crash, which killed all six of those on board. After six days, Ethiopian sources admitted that a member of their forces had fired on the plane from the airstrip. Eye witnesses described the chartered African Express Airways Embraer 120 aircraft aborting an initial landing attempt because an Ethiopian 'technical' mounted with a Soviet-era Zu anti-aircraft cannon was on the runway. The aircraft circled for a second attempt, expecting the vehicle to move off the runway, but instead the operator opened fire.

The incident happened when all normal flights to Somalia had been banned. The plane in question had a single-day permit to deliver supplies on behalf of the NGO who had hired it. Ethiopian authorities claimed they thought the plane was a suicide attacker as they had not been informed to expect the exceptional flight. It's difficult, however, to imagine why anyone would use an aircraft to attack a remote airstrip with few structures.

Puntland

Iranian crew released by pirates and Panama-registered ship seized

In August, three crew members of the Iranian vessel FV Siraj, who had been held since the ship

was seized in March 2015, were released. Another crew member had been released in 2019 as he was suffering poor health. A Nairobi-based representative of a hostage negotiation organisation and ex-British Army officer, John Steed, was quick to declare this "the end of an era of Somali piracy". Words that perhaps seemed immediately premature when another ship was seized off the Puntland coast on the same day.

The new seizure was a Panama-registered, UAE-owned vessel bound for Mogadishu. However, the following day, Puntland authorities confirmed that it was in fact their forces who had seized the ship. It had apparently developed technical problems and was drifting. Locals had grown suspicious, prompting Puntland authorities to board the ship where they acknowledged that "certain incidents" had occurred. There were reports that the boarding forces had taken weapons from the ship, but two days later it was again en-route to Mogadishu.

Somaliland

Somaliland, Taiwan and China

Somaliland achieved a significant diplomatic milestone when a delegation from Taiwan visited Hargeysa and agreed in July to each establish diplomatic offices in each other's capitals. Somaliland Deputy Foreign Minister, Liban Yusuf Osman, described the agreement as "the first step of diplomatic relations" while Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen commented that the two states were establishing bilateral ties "based on shared values". Taiwanese Foreign Minister, Joseph Wu, noted that the two territories would treat each other as sovereign nations and also noted Taiwan's interest in Somaliland's mineral resources.

The move predictably riled both China and Somalia, with the latter condemning the agreement as a violation of Somalia's territorial integrity. China also responded angrily, denying Taiwan's right to engage in foreign diplomacy.

Nevertheless, Taiwan opened their office in Hargeysa on 17 August, which was immediately attacked by China as "promoting secessionism" and described by Somalia as "Taiwan's reckless

attempts” to violate Somali sovereignty.

Kenyan delegation visits Hargeysa while warming relations between Somaliland and Egypt worry Addis

In July, Kenya also sent a high-level delegation to Hargeysa, led by National Assembly Minority Leader Junet Mohamed. Mohamed has seen his profile in Kenyan politics grow recently and his visit to Somaliland represents a warming of relations between Kenya and Somaliland that parallels a now long-running deterioration in relations between Nairobi and Mogadishu.

In another diplomatic development, an Egyptian delegation also reportedly met with Somaliland President Muse Bihi in August, enquiring about the possibility of establishing an Egyptian military base in the territory. This move alarmed the Ethiopian government, who have a fraught relationship with Cairo essentially around the use of the waters of the Blue Nile. While Egypt has not directly confirmed the talks, the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Dini Mufti nevertheless commented that “Egypt as a sovereign country reserves the right to establish relations with any country. But this should not come at the expense of Ethiopia’s stability”, describing the Egyptian base idea as “a red line for us”.

Some see the Egyptian move as a retaliation also against Mogadishu, who have declared their support for Ethiopia in relation to Nile waters.

National Electoral Commissioners installed, agreement reached on election timetable

Somaliland continues to make progress on preparation for presidential, local government and lower house elections. In late June, the full complement of electoral commissioners were finally sworn in after months of dispute over how this would be achieved. Then on 12 July, the party leaders signed an agreement on the election process, setting the National Electoral Commission (NEC) a two-week deadline to establish a schedule for the polls. A few days prior to this column in late August, the NEC, government and political parties agreed a timeline that commits to holding lower house and

municipal elections in May 2021. The agreement gives the NEC until December 2020 to establish a detailed plan for voter registration and electoral organisation.

While there remain many issues to resolve, recent progress is encouraging.

Somaliland-Somalia talks resume in Djibouti

The Presidents of Somaliland and the Federal Somali Government held landmark talks in Djibouti on 14 June, intended to mark the resumption of talks between the two. The meeting was hosted by Djibouti President Omar Guelleh with the support of Ethiopian PM Abiy Ahmed, who was also present and had brokered a meeting between the two Somali leaders in Addis in February.

US Ambassador Yamamoto and representatives from the EU, AU and IGAD were also present at the talks, which resulted in agreement to establish technical committees to continue discussions.

PM Abiy Ahmed had also tried to engineer a February visit by himself and Somali Federal President Farmaajo to Hargeysa, but that suggestion was ill-considered and foundered on strong opposition within Somaliland.

Sources suggest that further Somalia-Somaliland talks will not take place until 2021.