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

by Run Doon

Regional

Djibouti-Somalia-Kenya fibre optic cable installed

A 5,000km submarine fibre optic cable has now been installed, linking to Djibouti City, Bosaaso, Mogadishu and Mombasa. The cable is due to go live in the coming months once tests have been completed. The 30 Terabit/second cable is expected to substantially boost local internet connection speeds, with a future extension to Dar es Salaam also mooted. The initiative is a joint venture involving Djibouti Telecom, Somtel, Telkom Kenya and international undersea cable specialist, SubCom.

COVID-19 cases in Somalia

The global COVID-19 pandemic has been mercifully slow to establish itself in most parts of Africa, including the Somali Horn, with only a single case confirmed in Somalia at the time of writing. However, the inadequacy of health facilities across the region mean the risks if it does start spreading are enormous. Meanwhile with very limited testing capacity, it is quite possible that such a spread might begin barely noticed, complicating efforts to control it. The problem is particularly severe in camps for displaced communities, where sanitation is poor and social distancing an impossibility.

Locust swarms wreak crop havoc

Locust swarms in early 2020 created devastation for farmers, with initial breeding spreading from Gulf nations and Pakistan across the Indian Ocean to East Africa. Those first swarms settled to lay eggs, which hatch after a few weeks, creating new and larger infestations that could continue for several months, with some estimates suggesting the swarm could multiply to 500 times its current size by June, extending the infestation to Uganda and South Sudan.

According to the FAO, the current infestation is known as an ‘upsurge’, affecting a whole region. The last major upsurge was in 2003-5. If the upsurge expands, defying efforts at containment and expanding for more than a year, it would be classed as a ‘plague’. There have been six locust plagues since 1900. Already, the current upsurge has been assessed by the FAO as causing the worst damage in Somalia and Ethiopia in 25 years and in Kenya for 70 years.

The regional locust infestation is the latest in a series of climate-related crises, with prolonged drought followed by the wettest rainy season in years. Experts warn that the current upsurge must be brought under control by the end of March 2020, or the locusts will undergo a further cycle of breeding in time to consume vast quantities of crops through the growing season.

Kenya

Kenya-Somalia relations deteriorate (then improve?)

The Somali Federal Government has had a difficult relationship with Nairobi in recent years, with disputes over maritime borders and measures to restrict al-Shabaab activities. Significant additional stress arose in November as a result of an intrusion of Somali forces into Kenya’s Mandera County; a boil-over of fighting between Jubaland and Federal forces that started in Bulla Hawa, in Somalia’s Gedo region. Bulla Hawa adjoins Mandera town, with the two separated by the Kenya-Somalia border, so when fighting between the two Somali groups spilled over the border, Kenya objected strongly. One person died and others were injured in the fighting.

That situation had already been complicated by a visit by 11 Kenyan MPs to Mogadishu just 24 hours earlier to discuss cross-border relations.

The MPs, all representing northeastern Kenyan constituencies (Mandera, Wajir and Garissa), bypassed formal Kenyan diplomatic channels, causing a political crisis in Nairobi. The MPs were expected to return to Wilson Airport, where Kenyan police awaited their arrival, but instead they flew into Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. They were later interviewed by police, but no further action has been taken against them.

In February 2020, the Somalia Ambassador to the UN further enraged their neighbour when he accused Kenya of being “a destabilising force” in Somalia; a view that was strongly rejected by Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta. The Federal government accuse the Kenyan government of siding with Jubaland, and lending military support to their forces through Kenyan Defence Force operations.

Tensions were eased somewhat in March when President Farmaajo rang his counterpart, President Kenyatta, to discuss the relationship. Two days later, President Farmaajo met Kenyan Interior Minister, Fred Matiang’i, in Mogadishu. Matiang’i had been despatched to Somalia by President Kenyatta in an effort to patch up the relationship. Significant differences, however, remain, with the maritime border dispute between the two countries due to be heard at the International Court of Justice in June.

Al-Shabaab overwhelm US Manda Bay airfield

In January 2020, al-Shabaab fighters mounted a major attack on the US Manda Bay airfield, killing three US personnel, destroying two aircraft and seizing the base for several hours. Al-Shabaab claimed to have killed 17 US personnel and nine Kenyan soldiers, but these figures could not be verified. The attackers were driven out of the base, with five killed, after a lengthy fight involving US and Kenyan troops from the neighbouring Camp Simba army base. This attack marked the first time US forces had been targeted by al-Shabaab in Kenya, and represented a significant expansion in the scope of their activities.

US forces retaliated for this attack just over a fortnight later, launching their own air strike on al-Shabaab targets in southern Juba, killing senior

al-Shabaab figure, Bashir Mohamed Mohamoud. Rumour suggests that Bashir had earlier been fired from the Shabaab command structure as a result of his involvement in planning the late-December attack in Mogadishu that killed 81 people (see below).

Al-Shabaab target teachers, police

Several Kenyan police officers were killed in October by an al-Shabaab improvised device in Garissa County, near the Somalia border. A Kenyan police source said that “about 10 officers” had been killed.

The group has also targeted teachers in schools in northeastern Kenya, prompting the government to close schools, leading to an exodus of teachers from the area. In January, al-Shabaab fighters attacked a school in Kamuthe, Garissa County, killing three teachers and destroying a telco mast. That attack came only a few days after another on a rural boarding school in the Dadaab area of Garissa in which a teacher and three students were killed.

Somalia

Federal elections scheduled but difficulties ahead

A key piece of legislation was passed in February laying the foundation for a popular vote in Somalia. However, most commentators still consider such a vote unlikely; expecting instead a compromise arrangement that builds on the electoral process that was used in 2017.

The new legislation enshrines a 30% quota for women, and moves away from the 4.5 clan formula for representation, making provision instead for a one-person-one-vote poll.

However, conflict with al-Shabaab and a lack of federal control over large areas, coupled with disputes described below between the federal government and Jubaland and Galmudug make it difficult to imagine how the planned election could take place as scheduled before the end of 2020. Puntland too remains suspicious of federal plans, and while not formally boycotting the planned election, they have refused to cooperate with the National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEC), forcing them to close their

offices in the territory.

Somalia ratifies AU Convention on the protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs)

In late November 2019, Somali Federal President Mohamed Abdullaahi 'Farmaajo' signed the AU Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, after it had been approved in a near-unanimous vote in Parliament. Better known as the Kampala Convention, the document commits signatories to taking specific actions to protect the rights of IDPs and is the world's only legally-binding regional instrument to do so. Somalia became the 30th African state to ratify the agreement, confirming their accession to the convention at a deposition ceremony held at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa in March 2020. Somalia has the fourth largest IDP population in the world, with a total of 2.6 million; 1 million of whom live in Mogadishu.

Flooding displaces many in Central Somalia

Heavy rains in late October and November caused the Shabelle River to burst its banks, with Beledweyne the locality worst hit. Beledweyne hospital was inundated and had to be shut. By mid-November, some 370,000 people had been displaced according to UN estimates. President Farmaajo visited the town, calling for more aid and declaring the situation "beyond our capacity". Somali civil society organisations estimated that the floods had left millions without access to basic foodstuffs.

Attacks on US and European targets

In late September, al-Shabaab fighters attacked Baledogle Airfield, used by US forces to launch drone attacks and also for training of Somali troops. Al-Shabaab claimed to have successfully stormed the base, though US sources denied they had breached the perimeter. The attack adopted a familiar pattern, with a car bomb firstly driven into the main gate, followed by gunmen who attempted to shoot their way into the base. It was unclear if there were fatalities on either side, though US sources claimed that retaliatory airstrikes they conducted on al-Shabaab positions

had claimed the lives of 10 fighters.

About the same time as the Baledogle attack, an Italian convoy was targeted in Mogadishu. A vehicle-borne device was detonated when it was driven into a convoy carrying Italian military advisors who were attending a high-level conference in the city. Initial local reports claimed "there are casualties", though the Italian and EU authorities denied that any of the Italian personnel had been injured.

US airstrikes continue to target al-Shabaab

In retaliation for a major attack in Mogadishu in late December, which killed 81 people (see below), the US military conducted three airstrikes targeting al-Shabaab positions in the areas of Qunyo Barrow and Caliyow Barrow, which they claimed killed four.

Another US air strike near the town of Janaale in March 2020 was subject to contradictory reports. US sources claimed to have killed five al-Shabaab fighters, but local residents asserted that a local minibus had been struck en-route to Mogadishu, killing civilians, including a 70-year-old man and a 13-year-old boy. Local reports were later corroborated by a Federal MP, with photos of a blood-stained and badly mangled vehicle seeming to support local reports.

Reports indicate that US forces carried out 63 air strikes in 2019; a significant increase on the 47 of 2018.

Somali journalists 'under siege'

According to a new Amnesty International report, published in February 2020, the Somalia Federal Government has increasingly been targeting journalists in an effort to restrict the flow of critical reporting. They note that at least eight journalists have been killed since President Farmaajo's arrival in office in 2017 in targeted assassinations by al-Shabaab or other militia groups, which is a longstanding threat for those working in Somalia's media. However, a rising trend lies in the increasing numbers arrested, beaten or shot at by government personnel. 2019 saw between 38 and 53 journalists arrested in Somalia, at least double the number arrested in previous years, and a number of social media

sites were forcibly shut down by federal authorities. The Amnesty report further documents unprecedented levels of beatings and harassment of journalists by the authorities, and accuses them of consistently failing to investigate killings.

Jubaland

Somali National Army, Jubaland forces clash

Fierce fighting broke out in early March between Somali National Army (SNA) forces and those loyal to the Jubaland administration. The fighting centred on the border town of Bulla Hawa in Somalia, forcing many to flee across the border into Mandera town.

The fighting was the culmination of growing tensions between the Federal government and Jubaland administration which saw President Farmaajo deploy 700 SNA troops to Bulla Hawa town in February in an effort to bring Gedo under federal control. That move exacerbated existing tensions, with Jubaland President Ahmed Madoobe describing it as “naked aggression” on the part of the Federal government.

Federal moves are seen by some as an effort by President Farmaajo to shore up his position before scheduled Somalia elections. That logic holds that he wants to be able to show that he has secured significant territory for the Federal Government, with many seeing SNA incursion into Dhusamareb in Galmudug in February as part of the same strategy (see below).

Regional Security Minister arrested by Federal government, then escapes

At the end of August 2019, Jubaland’s Security Minister, Abdirashid Hassan Abdinur ‘Janan’ was arrested by federal authorities in Mogadishu. He had been the focus of accusations of serious human rights abuses in Gedo region for some years, so his arrest was welcomed by many, including the international organisation Human Rights Watch (HRW). He was accused by HRW and by the UN-mandated Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group of being “on the balance of probabilities, responsible for the killing of four prisoners” in a Dollow detention centre as well as

other abuses, including illegal transportation of prisoners to Ethiopia.

A Mogadishu court originally issued a warrant for his arrest in 2015, before his elevation to Jubaland Security Minister. However, his seniority and closeness to Jubaland President Madoobe, along with support from Ethiopia and Kenya, meant the warrant was not acted on for some four years.

However, on 28 January, he escaped from detention, fleeing first to Kismayo and then to Kenya. He has now returned to Somalia, where his forces were involved in the March fighting in Gedo between Jubaland and Federal troops (see above).

Galmudug

Somali National Army attempts to eject ASWJ from Dhusamareb

In an apparent attempt to oust rival militia group, Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama’a from their stronghold in Dhusamareb, the Somali National Army launched a fierce attack on the town in late February. The military incursion saw fierce fighting in the town centre, with at least eleven people killed. Fighting later spread to Guriel town, some 60km away. ASWJ has established themselves as staunch opposition to al-Shabaab, but are also frequently at odds with the Federal Government.

As with the Gedo conflict in Jubaland, this Dhusamareb attack is being linked to President Farmaajo’s bid to win a new term in Somalia elections.

Mogadishu

Al Shabaab in Mogadishu and Afgooye

Gunmen from al-Shabaab again attacked the SYL Hotel on 11 December. Initially mistaken by security guards as police officers, five attackers opened fire, forcing their way into the hotel compound and holding it for seven hours before all the attackers were killed. Three civilians and two members of the Somali security forces also lost their lives in the attack. The same hotel was an al-Shabaab target in February 2016, when nine people were killed and the hotel badly damaged.

About a fortnight later, a huge car bomb was

detonated at an intersection in south-western Mogadishu, killing 81 people, including 16 students from Benadir University, whose minibus was passing the intersection. The attackers targeted the intersection because a checkpoint there had caused a bottleneck of traffic, allowing them to maximise casualties. Initially, no-one claimed responsibility and the Somali intelligence service (NISA) declared that it been “planned by a foreign country”. After a couple of days, al-Shabaab did claim responsibility, maintaining that they had targeted a group of Turkish engineers, two of whom had been killed. In a highly unusual move, the group apologised for killing Muslim civilians, and it has since emerged that the attack caused a split within the group. Senior leader Bashir Mohamed Mahamoud, who planned the attack and was killed in March in a US air strike (see above), was reportedly fired from senior command by al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Diriye for continuing to target civilians. Bashir Mohamed was on the US most-wanted list, with US authorities offering a US\$5 million reward since 2010 for information on his whereabouts.

Another vehicle-borne bomb was detonated in early January at a checkpoint close to the Federal Parliament, killing four people, while on 18 January, a further car bomb attack again targeted Turkish engineers and also claimed four lives. That last attack occurred near Afgooye and was also confirmed by al-Shabaab. The engineers were working on the Afgooye-Mogadishu road development, and had been eating lunch with Somali colleagues when the explosive-laden car was driven into their midst.

Somaliland

Agreement, disagreement over National Electoral Commission (NEC)

A protracted dispute over how to proceed with long-overdue elections for the House of Representatives as well as local council officials have seen some progress, but remain mired in controversy. Initially the dispute centred on the incumbent NEC Commissioners, who were seen by the largest opposition party, Waddani, as being too close to the Somaliland government. That Commission’s term expired in November 2019,

and there were hopes a new Commission could be appointed that would satisfy all sides. However, extended wrangling over the composition of the new NEC ended in stalemate, leading Waddani to refuse to allow their candidate to be sworn in.

After lengthy negotiations, the government and two opposition parties agreed to reinstate the old Commission. However, President Musse Bixi then struck a problem in that most of the new commissioners had by then been sworn in, and constitutional protections prohibit the President from dismissing legally installed commissioners. The President then called for the Commissioners to resign voluntarily, which they refused to do.

Eventually, an agreement in part brokered by members of the international community agreed that the new NEC would remain in place, but would work with a Technical Elections Management Unit (TEMU), which was to be composed of all the members of the last NEC, with the addition of a few coopted members. It was to be the TEMU that would run the election, with the NEC providing an oversight function.

All parties agreed to this arrangement, with further negotiation leading to a Waddani decision in March to allow their Commissioner to formally join the NEC.

This opens the way for preparations for local and parliamentary elections to proceed to the next step, with key decisions, including on seat allocation still to come. The upper house, or Guurti, had earlier determined that elections would be delayed until 2022 and 2023, but the latest agreement makes it possible that elections will be held earlier; conceivably as early as this year.