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## Current Affairs in the Horn of Africa (*Autumn 2018 - Spring 2019*)

by Run Doon

### *President Farmaajo enjoys warming relations with Ethiopia, Eritrea; worrying Somaliland*

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's reforms have continued to include initiatives designed to promote greater cooperation and integration in the Horn of Africa. On 5 September 2018, the first tripartite summit involving the leaders of Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia was held in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, at which they agreed to establish a high-level committee charged with continuing this rapprochement. Two months later, the three leaders met again in the Ethiopian city of Bahir Dar, specifically affirming a joint commitment to uphold "the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Somalia as well as ... the federal government". Unsurprisingly that declaration and the warming relationship between Mogadishu and Addis Ababa has particularly alarmed the Somaliland government.

In December, Somali Federal President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed 'Farmaajo' welcomed Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki to Mogadishu for formal talks at which the pair agreed, after fifteen years of hostility, to restore diplomatic relations between their countries.

All has not gone smoothly for the Somali President, though. On 9 December, 92 federal Somali MPs tabled a motion of impeachment against President Farmaajo, accusing him of agreeing 'secret' commercial deals with Ethiopia. Fourteen MPs withdrew their support for the motion a few days later, saying that they had not actually signed the letter, and after a few weeks of wrangling, the Parliament announced that the motion had been dropped.

The diplomatic initiative continued though, and President Farmaajo again travelled to Addis Ababa in February 2019 to take part in the 32nd

African Union summit, then meeting PM Abiy Ahmed on 5 March for further talks in Addis Ababa covering, according to the Ethiopian government, "regional peace and security and economic integration".

Meanwhile, a planned February visit to Addis by Somaliland President Musse Bihi, which was rumoured to have been scheduled to include talks between Farmaajo and Musse Bihi, failed to eventuate.

### *Inter-ethnic violence forces Somalis to flee to Kenya, Somalia*

Some of the bold reform programme of Ethiopian PM Abiy Ahmed has coincided with renewed conflict between ethnic groups in the country. This saw a significant fresh outbreak of violence between Oromo and Somali groups in December 2018, with numerous fatalities reported and many fleeing the conflict to camps in Kenya and Somalia.

### *Anti-FGM laws tightened; first convictions in UK, Australia*

Recent moves in a number of countries to tighten laws against FGM (female genital mutilation) are starting to result in convictions. Early 2019 saw the first such successful prosecutions in UK and Australian courts. While the British case involved a Ugandan mother and Ghanaian father, regarding a procedure that was performed at their home in London, the Australian trial related to a Somali family from Queensland, who travelled to Somalia for the procedure. The Somali mother of two girls was convicted of taking her two daughters to Somalia in 2015 in order to have them cut, with the family group returning to Queensland seven months later. The authorities were tipped off by a relative, resulting in the trial almost four years after the event.

## *Somalia oil conference in London draws critics, support*

A major event, entitled *Somalia Oil and Gas Conference*, was held at the plush Claridges Hotel in London in February 2019. Somali Federal Petroleum Minister, Abdirashid Mohamed Ahmed, attended the conference, which was organised to present seismic surveys as well as the regulatory framework that would be applied to future exploration. With many of Somalia's likely reserves situated off-shore and in disputed areas, condemnation was quick and came from a variety of groups, who each complained that the federal government lacked the legitimacy to grant concessions in many of the areas covered by the surveys.

The Senate, the upper house of the Somali parliament, declared the conference 'unconstitutional', as they noted that Parliament had yet to pass legislation governing exploration and extraction of oil and gas reserves. The Petroleum Minister rejected these objections, noting that the conference was not a bidding round. However, critics noted that the Anglo-Somali company, Soma Oil and Gas Holdings, which is chaired by the British Conservative party politician, Michael Howard, had paid some US\$600,000 in 2015 to protect their rights, while in 2018, the federal government had announced the opening of bidding on 206 offshore blocks while representatives were attending another oil conference in South Africa.

Soma Oil had themselves been subject to criminal investigation in the UK over allegedly corrupt practices. The investigation was dropped in 2016, though the British Serious Fraud Office, who had mounted the enquiry, noted that they believed there to be 'reasonable grounds' to suspect that serious offences had been committed. The decision not to take further action was based on their determination that insufficient evidence was available to secure a conviction.

## *Mogadishu*

### *UN Special Rep to Somalia takes up position, then expelled by federal government*

Nicholas Haysom, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Somalia, has had a difficult first six months since assuming his position on 1 October 2018. Explaining the decision to expel the Special Representative from Somalia on 1 January 2019, Somali Federal Foreign Minister, Ahmed Isse Awad, complained that Haysom had made a sequence of missteps, culminating in a letter he sent to the federal Security Minister, asking that he explain the measures taken by federal forces to avoid civilian casualties at the time of the arrest of former al-Shabaab deputy leader, Mukhtar Robow, shortly after he had been banned from running in October regional elections. Twelve people, including a local MP, died in the fighting that accompanied Robow's arrest.

Haysom's letter was seen as an attempt to demand that a federal minister account for their actions to the UN SRSG, suggesting that it is the UN that ultimately runs the country, thus compromising Somalia's sovereignty.

Haysom's predecessors, Nicholas Kay and Michael Keating, were also frequently targeted by critics, complaining that they had taken inappropriately partisan positions on issues of the day. Indeed, Haysom himself received support from community leaders in Baidoa, who themselves objected to Robow's arrest. The expulsion of Haysom received considerable support from Somalis across a wide base, though, as the often fractious relationship between the UN and federal and regional authorities have fostered a general view that foreign intervention has long stymied efforts to rebuild Somali institutions.

In spite of vigorous efforts from international diplomats, including the cancellation of a planned February visit to Mogadishu by the UK Defence Secretary, and calls to the Federal President from the UN Secretary-General himself, the dispute had not been resolved at the time of writing.

## *Sahan Research banned from operating in Somalia*

Prominent Somali-focused think tank, Sahan Research, has been banned from operating in Somalia by the Federal Ministry of Internal Security, after Sahan director, Matt Bryden, accused the Federal Government of interfering in the affairs of Federal Regional States. Local partners of Sahan were threatened with ‘stern legal action’ if they retained any links to the organisation, with the Ministry citing security concerns for their action.

Bryden’s Sahan Research and the International Crisis Group were both also attacked on social media by supporters of the Federal President after each had criticised the arrest of Mukhtar Robow along lines similar to that of UN Special Representative Haysom. That expulsion, along with the measures taken against Sahan, perhaps suggest a highly unusual concerted and organised attempt by the Federal leadership to quell dissent amongst foreign critics.

## *US re-establishes permanent diplomatic mission in Mogadishu*

For the first time since they departed hastily in January 1991, the US have opened a permanent diplomatic mission in Mogadishu. This follows their 2013 decision to recognise the Federal Government, with the mission to be led by current US Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. The mission does not hold the status of embassy.

## *AMISOM enquiry after soldiers kill civilians*

Four Burundian members of the AMISOM force were accused of having ‘arbitrarily shot’ four men who witnessed the moment the AMISOM convoy detonated an improvised explosive device in north Mogadishu. After an outcry in the city, AMISOM announced that they would open a ‘full-scale investigation’ of the incident, with Amnesty International calling for the process to be ‘thorough and impartial’.

## *Al-Shabaab*

### *Attack on DusitD2 hotel complex in Nairobi*

On 15 January 2019, four al-Shabaab fighters attacked the DusitD2 hotel complex off Riverside Drive in Nairobi. The attack followed a similar modus operandi to that of the 2013 attack on the Westgate mall, with four or five attackers entering the complex and killing as many as possible. In the DusitD2 case, a suicide bomber first detonated his device outside a restaurant, before his colleagues entered the compound, attacking vehicles and people with hand grenades and gunfire. The attack had apparently been quelled after a few hours, but renewed explosions and gunfire were heard in the early hours of the following day as attackers resumed their assault, which was finally ended by security forces by about 10am on 16 January.

In all, 21 people were killed, plus the attackers. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility, maintaining that the attack was in response to US President Donald Trump’s declaration in December 2017 that the US embassy to Israel would be relocated to Jerusalem.

As well as marking a shift in justification to an international Islamic cause, the attack marked the first time that a majority of the attackers were Kenyan nationals, including the suicide bomber. In the past, al-Shabaab attacks in Kenya have been presented as foreign attacks on Kenyan soil, met with reprisals by Kenyan forces in Somalia. The shift represented by the DusitD2 attack presents the Kenyan government with a very different problem.

At least eleven Kenyans were arrested by the anti-terrorism police on charges relating to the attack, including permitting attackers to change money without identification and to register a vehicle, but nine were later released, highlighting the challenge that lies ahead if the involvement of Kenyans in future attacks is to be prevented. In a further measure to address the problem, the Kenyan government announced at the end of January that private security guards responsible for public spaces and shopping malls would be given firearms training and guns.

## *More Mogadishu attacks*

Al-Shabaab has continued over the past six months to demonstrate an ability to mount attacks in Mogadishu, with authorities regularly opting to execute those they arrest in connection. One such execution was carried out on the man accused of planning the huge blast that killed 582 people in October 2017. The execution by firing squad was timed to coincide with an event marking the anniversary of that attack.

39 people were killed in an attack on Friday 9 November in a complex attack on the Sahafi Hotel and the Criminal Investigation Department, when two car bombs were first detonated, followed by an assault on the hotel compound by a group of gunmen. A third bomb in a tuk-tuk was also exploded as part of the attack in a busy street. The gunmen were killed in a firefight with security personnel before they had gained access to the compound, but the severity of the attack was nevertheless sufficient to result in significant casualties.

Little over a month later, some 20 were killed when two car bombs were detonated near Villa Somalia. The fatalities included a prominent journalist and three staff members from London-based Universal TV, as well as several soldiers.

That attack took place one day before the execution of a man convicted of organising three attacks in 2017 which had killed 26 people; one of those was on a hotel; another next to the Ministry of Sport; and the third near a popular Italian restaurant.

A mortar attack on the compound at Mogadishu airport on 19 January - coincidentally just hours before the expulsion of the UN Special Representative - resulted in several injuries to UN staff.

An attack in early February on Hamarweyne shopping mall also killed at least 11 people and coincided with an al-Shabaab assassination in Boosaaso.

A further attack on 28 February took place on the main Mogadishu thoroughfare, Maka al-Mukarama, at a business centre containing a hotel and shops. A suicide bomber detonated his vehicle bomb, killing five people, while a second

attack close to the same location, saw some 25 killed amidst fierce fighting. On that occasion, the target was the Maka al-Mukarama Hotel, which has been hit several times before, notably in 2015. Of the fatalities, two were reported to be security personnel, with the remainder civilians.

## *Attacks elsewhere in Somalia*

The number of attacks by al-Shabaab outside Mogadishu were fewer in the period than in the past, with significant attacks mounted in October 2018 in Baidoa and in November in Galkayo.

The Baidoa attack involved two suicide bombers, who each detonated their devices in the town; one in Beder restaurant and the other in Bilan Hotel in mid-October. Both premises were popular with officials and local civilians, with 16 fatalities resulting from the dual attack. Bilan Hotel is owned by a local politician who had declared his candidacy for the regional presidency in November elections.

In Galkayo, 15 people were killed on 26 November when al-Shabaab fighters attacked a Sufi centre run by controversial cleric Sheikh Abdiweli Ali 'Yare'. The attackers detonated a car bomb in order to force entry to the compound, shooting people once inside. The cleric was amongst those killed in the attack. He was despised by al-Shabaab because he had successfully grown the popularity of his centre, attracting hundreds of young people to Sufi ceremonies involving music and dancing.

## *US airstrikes continue apace in response to attacks*

The US response to continued al-Shabaab attacks has seen a continuation of the escalated level of airstrikes that has been a hallmark of the Trump administration's Somali policy. Official US statements indicate that they carried out 48 attacks in Somalia in 2018, killing 330 al-Shabaab fighters, while they carried out ten attacks in the first five weeks of 2019 alone.

As a result of the Trump administration's expansion of Somali operations, there are also an estimated 500 US forces operating in Somalia.

US spokespeople routinely claim that no civilians have been killed in these raids, but these claims

are hotly contested by many Somalis, and civilian casualties of US strikes are often cited as a potent recruitment tool for al-Shabaab.

## ***South West State***

### *Regional elections held in Baidoa, South West State*

The South West State Parliament elected the Federal Government's favoured candidate, Abdiasis Hassan Mohamed, as President on 19 December 2018.

These were the elections Mukhtar Robow had declared he would stand in before his controversial arrest, and many locals continue to feel aggrieved as a result. The new president faces a significant challenge if he is to win popular local support for his presidency. In the politically charged atmosphere following Robow's arrest, the election was seen as a test of the federal government's ability to impose their will on a regional state, so the success of their preferred candidate is seen, so far, as a significant victory but critics complain that the arrest and election has tainted federal legitimacy.

## ***Puntland***

### *Al-Shabaab attack Boosaaso*

On 4 February al-Shabaab fighters assassinated the manager of Boosaaso port in an attack almost simultaneous with another in Mogadishu, targeting Hamarweyne shopping mall. The manager, a Maltese citizen, was an employee of UAE-owned P&O Ports, who have taken over operation of the port facility as a result of a US\$336 million deal struck in 2017. Strangely, al-Shabaab's claim of responsibility maintained that the killing had been carried out because the manager was in Somalia 'illegally'. One of the two attackers, who were disguised as fishermen, was killed by a security guard but the other escaped and was apparently arrested later.

### *New Puntland President elected*

Former Federal Minister of Planning, Saed Abdullahi Deni, was elected Puntland President in early January 2019, winning 35 of 66 votes in the last round of voting. Puntland

parliamentarians are responsible for electing the president, with candidates in this contest including the incumbent, Abdiweli Mohamed 'Gaas' and Deni's main challenger, former Puntland intelligence head, General Asad Osman Abdullahi. In the event, Abdiweli Gaas was eliminated in the first round, gaining only eight votes, while General Asad remained in the race until the final round, missing out to Deni by five votes.

New President Deni was sworn into office on 8 January, and his inauguration ceremony took place on 26 January. He faces a stiff challenge if he is to repair the relationship with Mogadishu and with his neighbours in Somaliland.

### *Rape cases spark public outrage*

Two cases of gang rape, one resulting in the murder of a twelve year old girl, have caused widespread outrage in Puntland and beyond. Both occurred in Galkayo; the first was a gang rape that took place on Sunday 24 February and resulted in a trial and death sentence for the five teenage perpetrators, with the trial concluding mere hours before the second case occurred.

The second involved the gang rape and murder of a young girl who was abducted from a Galkayo market, and whose body was dumped near her home on Monday 25 February. Four men were convicted of this rape and murder in Garoowe and were again sentenced to death

These shocking events generated public demonstrations and an outpouring of anger on social media. Puntland was lauded in 2016 for passing landmark legislation on sexual violence. An earlier landmark case in 2017, when the legislation was in place, saw five men, who raped a teenage girl then posted video of the attack on social media, sentenced to a public flogging and a maximum of ten years in jail.

## ***Somaliland***

### *Eastern areas again face drought, food crisis*

Somaliland has again experienced significantly lower rainfall than needed, with estimates suggesting that Sanaag and Sool, which are hardest hit, have received only between 25% and

50% of average rainfall. More than half the populations of all of Somaliland's regions are officially categorised as 'stressed' in terms of food security, and that rate increases to 67% and 71% respectively in Sanaag and Sool. Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rates, the official means of assessing severe need, exceed 15% of the populations in both regions.

Little rain is expected imminently, so a severe humanitarian crisis is likely. The best hope is that the *gu* rains start promptly in April and bring sufficient relief.

### *Work to start on Berbera-Wajaale road upgrade*

5 March saw the launch of a US\$400 million road project designed to significantly upgrade the road between Berbera and Tog Wajaale on the Ethiopian border. This long-anticipated project is essential if increased capacity in Berbera Port is to translate into greater freight transit through to Ethiopia.

Somaliland President Musse Bihi Abdi was joined by senior Ethiopian officials to launch the redevelopment, which is being financed by the Abi Dhabi Fund for Development.

### *Poet arrested for criticising police abuse, corruption*

Poet Abdirahman Abees was arrested on 12 January for reciting poetry in a Hargeisa hotel, which was critical of abuse and corruption in the Somaliland police. Abees had himself witnessed the abuses he referred to in a Hargeisa police station, and called for reform.

Poets are widely respected, and it used to be highly unusual for them to be arrested for tackling social issues. There was consequently much criticism of the government in this case. Abees was found not guilty of any crime by the Hargeisa Regional Court, who ordered his immediate release on 25 February.

The female poet Nacima Qorane was also controversially arrested in 2018 for reciting poetry calling for the reunification of Somaliland and Somalia. She was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison, but was then pardoned by the Somaliland president.

### *Expected postponement of March election confirmed*

Widely anticipated postponement of lower house and local council elections, scheduled for March 2019, was confirmed late November, with the upper house (*Guurti*) later announcing an extension of the relevant terms, and the National Electoral Commission (NEC) confirming a new election date in December 2019.

Already, though, the NEC have indicated that any slippage in passing the necessary legislation enabling the election from the deadline of February would result in further postponement of the election itself beyond December. With legislation not confirmed by March, and significant disagreements remaining over seat allocation, it seems clear that the December date will indeed also be missed. That leaves Somaliland in a difficult position. Limited elections scheduled for Somalia in 2020 will absorb all available donor funds, and make it difficult for Somaliland to organise their own popular vote in the same year. That suggests that a longer delay might be necessary.

### *Intra-clan conflict in Sool claims lives*

A worsening conflict between sub-clan groups in Sool Region claimed more than 40 lives in October 2018, with the village of Dhumay worst affected.