

Somalia: **Pushing Humanitarianism into the Post-Pollyannaish Era, & Applying Previous Lessons Learned Today**



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Abstract

The drought, subsequent famine, and brutal civil war that took place in Somalia during the early 1990's ultimately led to an intervention that ended in defeat for the United States and the United Nations. This setback played a major role in transitioning humanitarianism into the post-Pollyannaish era, and a review of these events reveal three major lessons that should have been learned. These include the importance of gaining a full understanding of the context of the humanitarian crises before acting, using adequate force when intervening in humanitarian crises where conflict is present, and implementing sustainable institutions after intervening in a situation where governmental structures are non-existent or have been destroyed. To determine if humanitarian actors have heeded these lessons, we can look right back to Somalia's recent famine that once again lands in the midst of a fierce civil war and a government lacking substantial power to act in the face of either crisis. By viewing the humanitarian intervention and response within relation to the lessons learned from the prior crisis, it is evident that the actors involved have properly noted the lessons learned and factored them into their response.

(Key Words: Somalia, United States, United Nations, Post-Pollyannaish Era, Drought, Famine, Al-Shabaab, Transitional Federal Government)

¹ Photo Credit: <http://withfriendship.com/images/b/9103/Black-Hawk-Down-film-picture.jpg>

Abbreviations

AMISOM = African Mission in Somalia

MSF = Médecins Sans Frontières

RPG = Rocket propelled grenade

TFG = Transitional Federal Government

UNOSOM I = United Nations Operation in Somalia I

UNOSOM II = United Nations Operation in Somalia II

US = United States

Overview:

Recurring droughts and incessant conflict have historically plagued Somalia. These two factors along with environmental degradation, deep clan divisions, and misguided international actors attempting to “fix” Somalia, have contributed to immense humanitarian needs within the country. One of the earlier instances of international action in the face of a Somali crisis came in the early 1990’s. The significance and lasting effects of this action cannot be underestimated, and this briefing paper will attempt to provide a background of the Somali situation that led up to the 1993 intervention and capture how the events that unfolded have provided valuable lessons that are being followed today in Somalia and in other humanitarian emergencies.

Leading Up to the Early ‘90’s:

Beginning in 1969, less than a decade after Somalia’s independence from Britain and Italy, Siad Barre ruled Somalia with a strong arm that to some extent held clan divisions and numerous warlords in check. That all changed in January of 1991 when Barre was finally overthrown by rivals that had increased their attacks against his government in the years leading up to that point (Kaplan, 146). After Barre’s demise, the state found itself in the midst of an intense struggle for power that featured the prominent clans and warlords that had previously been held at bay. In this context of brutal civil war, a devastating famine began to take hold, and by 1993 it was estimated that 300,000 Somalis had died due to the combined effects of the war and famine (Ayittey).

As a result of very direct and vivid media coverage of this crisis, the world decided that something had to be done to help the victims (Lewis, 1). Unfortunately, the media used to win the support of Western citizens focused on the starvation that was caused by the drought hitting the Horn of Africa but failed to mention the high levels of violence and insecurity that plagued Somalia and had helped raise the status of the drought to the level of famine. So while the United States and other Western powers were concentrating on the war in Yugoslavia, a mission developed to assist the starving Somalis in part because of the public outcry (Lewis, 1). High-level missions to aid Somalia came fast and hard under many titles including: Unified Task Force (UNITAF), United Nations Operation in Somalia I (UNOSOM I), United Nations Operation in Somalia II (UNOSOM II), and Operation Restore Hope (Somalia: UNOSOMI). For all intents-and-purposes these combined efforts all failed. An estimated 100,000 lives were saved through these efforts (Clarke & Herbst, Conclusion), but as it has already been mentioned, over 300,000 Somalis died from the combined effects of the drought and famine, and there were other pivotal failures that added to the devastating death toll.

The climax of the “relief” effort was the infamous Battle of Mogadishu, which inspired the book, and subsequent Hollywood movie, “Black Hawk Down” by Mark Bowden. This event closely relates to Peter Redfield’s work on the impossibility of neutrality (Bornstein & Redfield, 53-70). Humanitarians often say they value the lives of everyone equally, but when faced with the reality of that statement, learn that in actuality they do not. The media, which had pulled westerners into Somalia, now also served to pull them back out. While the lives of hundreds of thousands of Somalis were ended, the death of 18 American troops in the Battle of Mogadishu was all it took for Americans to stop caring about the dire situation in Somalia. The images of US military personnel being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu jaded American sentiment and pushed the humanitarian spirit into the post-Pollyannaish era. No longer would humanitarians automatically assume they could help with every need in the world. This idealistic

approach took a back seat to a more realistic approach that requires more consideration and analysis before acting on the part of humanitarians.

A Deeper Look at the Faults of the Early '90's:

An Economy Based on Aid

The complete collapse of the government also caused a collapse in the Somali economy. The absence of a functioning economy continued until the arrival of international aid. At that point, clan militias and warlords began stealing much of the aid that was delivered, and that aid would then be sold to merchants who would sell it to citizens. Through this process, an economy was reborn with the food aid that was intended to be distributed to those in desperate need. The clan militia and warlords used the money gained to purchase weapons, the merchants used it to sustain their livelihoods, and the citizens (that could afford it and thus not those who truly needed it) were able to eat (Clarke & Herbst, Mission Expansion).

In 1992, the United States had seen enough plundering of aid and decided to send in a mission to stop it. With 30,000 troops, an effect of the Powell Doctrine, they were effective in rapidly halting the theft of the food aid. This also had the effect of interrupting the political economy in Somalia without previously considering effective means to create or restore another, more legitimate, system. Beyond that, one of the fatal flaws of the mission was failing to disarm the militias and warlords at a time when they had sufficient capability to do so (Clarke & Herbst, Ambivalence Kills).

Lack of a Plan, Coordination, and Political Will

Thinking that the battle had been won and that order was restored to the humanitarian setting in Somalia, the United States diminished the size of their force in Somalia to 1,200 (Clarke & Herbst, Disarmament). At this point, the clever militias and observant warlords reappeared. The most dominant player in the game was Mohamed Farrah Aidid (Bowden, 3), and in June of 1993, Aidid's fighters ambushed and killed 24 Pakistani soldiers who were in Somalia serving with the United Nations (Clarke & Herbst, Working With the Warlords). This

atrocities opened the eyes of the United States to their error in failing to carry out a disarmament process earlier.² This can be seen by their newfound resolve to right their previous wrongs and begin demobilizing militias and warlords, especially Aidid's, after the Pakistani troops were killed. This resolve ultimately led to a mission on October 3, 1993 to capture a group of Aidid's key personnel. Much can be said about the events that followed. Proper planning was not conducted, over-confidence blinded reality, and contingency plans were not in place in the event that something went wrong. To summarize, a mission expected to be routine quickly became disastrous. 18 US soldiers ended up dying as a result of the mission and this led to disturbing images being broadcast to the United States, which included the body of a US soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu (Bowden). This debacle led to the United States laying low in Mogadishu until March 31, 1994, which President Bill Clinton had set as a deadline for their withdrawal. After their departure, the United Nations took control of the mission in Somalia (Clarke & Herbst, United Nations Building). This was a task they were not prepared to handle, and the United States had not done an effective job of giving them any assistance or training before departing. In March of 1995, the United Nations also withdrew from Somalia (United Nations Completed Peacekeeping Operations). Both the United States and United Nations had been thoroughly humiliated in Somalia. Both had major faults exposed, and neither wanted to think about Somalia for quite some time. In fact, the devastating events in Somalia for both forces are often attributed to the unwillingness of the United States and United Nations to readily jump in and try to prevent the genocide that occurred in Rwanda in 1994. As we can see, the events that played out in Somalia, despite saving 100,000 lives, had far reaching effects in the world at large, not just Somalia.

Lessons Learned:

² It is important to understand that at this point, the United States had taken a leadership role in Somalia. The United Nations and other actors were present, but the United States was leading the efforts.

The lessons learned from this experience are substantial. To simplify the overarching lessons to be taken away from this event, we must put it in context. First of all, the humanitarian situation in Somalia involved the following:

- *A natural disaster in the form of an intense drought*
- *An ongoing civil war*
- *No political force or structure*

Drought: The drought hit the entire Horn of Africa. Other countries such as Ethiopia, Sudan, and Eritrea all suffered from the drought, but Somalia suffered to a greater degree (National Geographic). The drought in Somalia quickly turned into a famine, which supports the claim that all famines are political.

Conflict: A fierce debate rages on about the ability of peacekeepers to deploy into areas where there is no peace to keep. This was certainly the case in Somalia during the early 1990's, and it can be seen by the blatant murders of the 24 Pakistani troops affiliated with the United Nations Peacekeeping mission (Clarke & Herbst, Working With the Warlords).

Governance: There was no peace to keep because there was no political authority whatsoever in Somalia at that time to provide stability, security, or a centralized point for coordination. Every actor was on their own to proceed as they saw proper. This can be seen through the United States coming in and taking control of the situation because they felt they were best able to address the needs. These insights lead to three lessons learned during the Somali experience:

- *A full understanding of the context of the humanitarian crises is required before acting.*
- *Adequate force must be used when intervening in a humanitarian crisis where conflict is ongoing, as without security no improvements can be sustained.*
- *In a crisis where governmental structures are destroyed or non-existent, proper measures must be implemented to ensure that sustainable institutions will be in place to coordinate aid as it is delivered.*

Have the Lessons Been Learned?:

Today's Context in Somalia

To fully analyze if the lessons that should have been learned from the humanitarian intervention in the early 1990's have in fact been heeded there is no better place to look than

present-day Somalia. It has been 20 years since the failed missions in Somalia, but the context is surprisingly similar. A drought hit the Horn of Africa in 2010 and while other countries were able to weather the storm, Somalia quickly devolved into a famine and crisis situation (UN Declares Famine). The media, to draw attention to the situation in Somalia, utilized similar headlines and photos, and while the West was hesitant to respond initially, in the end they decided they had to. Clan divides are still an ever-present concern. A new, more formidable, enemy, Al-Shabaab, has replaced Aidid. Since 2004, there has been a Transitional Federal Government (TFG) where no government existed before, but it should be considered weak at best. Only since the later portion of 2011 can they lay claim to controlling more than a few blocks of Mogadishu, and even though the territory they claim to have control of has expanded, it is surely not secure. It is useful to look at a comparison of the two periods by using the framework created by Peter Hoffman and Thomas Weiss (Hoffman and Weiss, 18).

Somalia's Wars: Then and Now

	Early 1990's	Early 2010's
Locus	Mogadishu, Southern Somalia	Mogadishu, Southern Somalia, Dadaab
Agents	United States and United Nations <i>Versus</i> Warlords and clan militias	AMISOM, TFG, United Nations, Kenya, Ethiopia and United States <i>Versus</i> Al-Shabaab
Economies	Food Aid	Foreign financing, port fees, extortion, food aid
Targets and Victims	United States and United Nations Troops	TFG, Foreign Troops, Civilians
Technologies	AK 47's, and RPG's	AK 47's, RPG's, and bombs
Media	Slow but effective coverage	Slow coverage that eventually inspired action

A Review Vis-à-Vis Prior Lessons Learned

This time around the actors that decided to help Somalis in need did take a realistic view of the situation before acting. The threat of Al-Shabaab played heavily into the planning and mission of both large and small actors. The African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the United

States, Ethiopia, Kenya, and the United Nations have been involved in an attempt to eliminate Al-Shabaab. While their mission has not eradicated Al-Shabaab completely, they have hindered the group's ability to disrupt security beyond their strongholds. With Al-Shabaab on their heels, some space for humanitarians to operate has opened. Medicines Sans Frontieres (MSF), which normally refuses to supply armed guards to their convoys so as not to affect their appearance of neo-neutrality, properly assessed the situation and provided armed guards in Somalia (Maulia). The proper assessment, by most actors, of the difficult situation vis-à-vis security, has allowed more effective humanitarian assistance to take place this time around.

While the lack of security was properly assessed, the proper use of force was still necessary to ensure the humanitarian space. AMISOM has been involved in the combat against Al-Shabaab since 2007. They began slowly, but their position has improved dramatically. The number of troops supported has increased, their tactics have improved, and their training has improved (Mugisha, 26). These factors along with more recent support of Kenyan, Djiboutian, and Ethiopian troops, and American drones has proven to be an overwhelming force against Al-Shabaab fighters who continue to lose ground in the battle for Somalia. Without this overwhelming force and continued support by all actors involved, the outcome would likely be the same as it was in the early 1990's. With the political will from multiple nations coordinating their efforts through the AMISOM mission, real hope for sustained improvements can be reasonably expected.

At the same time that the civil war is taking place, the United Nations and United States are working hard to help the TFG transition into a true government. Recent events such as the United Nations opening a political office in Mogadishu (Somalia: UN Envoy) show that political space may be opening as well. Advancement in this arena is essential if another lapse into famine and further conflict are to be avoided. Establishing a government, police force, and a tax generating system will provide stability, security, and economic revitalization, and these three

factors weigh heavily in the formula for Somalia's success in pulling itself out of the mire they have been in for over two decades now.

Conclusion:

The events that occurred in Somalia during the early 1990's exposed many weaknesses in the humanitarian enterprise. The United States and the United Nations both withdrew from the situation as quietly as possible after their defeat. Because they left the country without having solved any of the root causes of the conflict or Somalia's inability to address those causes itself, the country has remained in a state of anarchy until today.

Although it is coming 20 years later, we are fortunate to see that the issues exposed in the previous attempt to assist Somalia have been addressed. World powers and the United Nations have properly assessed the situation in Somalia before acting. By doing so, they have proven to realize that we are now operating in the Post-Pollyannaish era. Also, since Somalia is still a conflict zone, the actors involved in the most recent humanitarian intervention have provided sufficient force to ensure that humanitarian space is available. Finally, in an effort to provide Somalia with sustainable solutions to their longstanding dilemmas, real thought and effort are being expended in the TFG. By expanding their capacity to effectively govern the state, real changes can occur. So while Somalia may not yet be in an ideal situation, it is clear that past failures have provided valuable lessons that current actors have gleaned from.

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