

The Country That Is Not

Battling the Odds: Somaliland Still Denied Recognition

It has all the trappings of a country - a government and parliament, army, courts, elections, passports, and a currency - but it doesn't feature on any map other than as a terra incognita marked by a speculative broken line. However, this geographic entity has been in existence since 1991, yet the wider world stoically denies its existence.

Somaliland seceded from greater Somalia in 1991 after that country's dictator Mohamed Siad Barre, a major general who seized power in a 1969 coup, responded to local unrest by unleashing his army on the region and dismantling the economic and political power base of the Isaaq clan which had dominated the area since Medieval times.

Somaliland was bombed into oblivion and its people strafed at will by the Somali Air Force, equipped with British-made ground-attack fighter planes piloted by ex-South African and ex-Rhodesian mercenary pilots who were hired at \$2,000 per sortie. The aerial campaign entered the history books as the Isaaq Genocide and cost the lives of an estimated 200,000 people. It also reduced ninety percent of the regional capital Hargeisa to rubble.

It was all for nought. With unrest mounting throughout the country, and his military foray into neighbouring Ogaden rebuffed by Ethiopia, General Barre lost control of events, saw his irredentist dream of a Greater Somalia go up in smoke, and had to flee for his life.

Cash-Filled Army Tank

In January 1991, the general escaped Mogadishu in an army tank, filled with dollars and gold looted from the central bank. Pointing the turret towards Kenya he reached the border and was granted political asylum. An attempt, a few months later, to retake power failed. His welcome in Kenya now worn out, the deposed strongman sought refuge in Nigeria where he died of a heart attack in early 1995.

In the chaos following the fall of the general and his regime, Somaliland seized its chance and proclaimed independence. The idea of a sovereign Somaliland wasn't all that far-fetched. In fact, the country had enjoyed a full five days of independence between the end of the British Protectorate of Somaliland and its union with the Trust Territory of Somaliland (a former Italian possession) in the newly formed Somali Republic.

During that five-day interlude some 35 states recognised Somaliland's sovereignty. However, after 1991, the country has had no such luck - and that is sad. 'The country that is not' remains the only one in the Horn of Africa with a stable and functioning government. The region is amongst the most volatile in the world with Somalia a failed state terrorised by jihadists; Eritrea strangled by a savage dictatorship; Sudan ravaged by war; and Ethiopia embroiled in civil strife.

By comparison, Somaliland is an oasis of peace, if not prosperity. Its development is being throttled by a lack of diplomatic recognition. Only the Republic of China (Taiwan) and Ethiopia maintain missions in Hargeisa whilst a few other countries such as the United Kingdom, Djibouti, and Turkey installed 'offices' which they are careful not describe as diplomatic posts.

Though its democracy may not meet the highest standards and its human rights record features a few minor blemishes, Somaliland boasts the best public governance by far in the region. The country's economy relies mainly on agriculture. The export of livestock is its biggest source of foreign exchange. Exports of live sheep, camels, and cattle are mostly destined for neighbouring Djibouti and Ethiopia, but a few shipments make it as far as the United Arab Emirates.

Working Wonders on a Dime

For a non-existent country, Somaliland is working wonders. Though its GDP amounts to little more than \$1,050 per capita (nominal) - roughly on par with Chad and Rwanda - the country is surprisingly well organised with a fairly solid transport and telecoms infrastructure and reasonable food security. The main impediment to Somaliland's development is the reluctance of the world to recognise its existence.

Somaliland politics are also remarkably stable. It transitioned to a multipart democracy in 2002 and is ranked 'partly free' by Freedom House, the US-based non-profit that since 1941 monitors freedom, or lack thereof, around the world. Against the odds, the country has managed to keep the extremist elements and religious zealots at bay that elsewhere in the region wreak havoc. It did so by incorporating customary laws and traditions into a modern state structure that allows for the representation of all clans through clean elections in a legislative system both viable and robust.

Crossing a few borders southward is South Sudan, independent since 2011 and the world's newest state. Western development agencies quite literally tripped over themselves to help turn South Sudan into a resounding success with the wherewithal provided by oil money and generous donations.

However, that did not quite work out as planned with South Sudan presently suffering the seven plagues all at once, including famine, drought, and pestilence affecting two-thirds of its nine million inhabitants. Now that the development agencies have departed, dejected and disillusioned, the country stands in desperate need of food aid.

Whilst the world was showering cash and expertise on South Sudan, little Somaliland plugged on tenaciously without any discernible outside assistance or support - keeping the peace and offering its people reasonably secure lives. The injustice inflicted on Somaliland by the indifference of the world is almost maddening.

Abandoned by African Union

To assign blame for this iniquity, point the finger at the African Union, enthroned in nearby Addis Ababa. This collective of self-aggrandising diplomats - mostly recipients of favours granted by rulers slightly less virtuous than advertised - recently celebrated its accession to the G20 which it has been allowed to join as a minor symbolic partner after much lobbying.

The African Union (AU) is the successor to the Organisation of African Union, founded in 1963 with the mission to achieve greater unity amongst the countries and peoples of the continent. More than half a century later, it still remains impossible to travel overland from the Cape to Cairo or from Lagos to Mombassa.

The AU doggedly refuses to engage with Somaliland, and insists on excluding the country from international affairs, because it is driven by fear. Within Africa's borders drawn up by the colonial powers - often just straight lines on a map - many countries harbour sizeable minorities that may also aspire to independence. Granting such a status to Somaliland, so it is feared, would only serve to rekindle those sentiments and perhaps open a veritable Pandora's box of trouble.

Whilst the AU may have a point there, keeping Somaliland perpetually locked in a netherworld is no solution either. The level of fright prevalent in the AU came recently to light when it urged 'restraint' after the government of landlocked Ethiopia negotiated a deal with Somaliland to lease a twenty-kilometre strip of land along the coast for a period of fifty years.

Ethiopia became the world's most populous landlocked country after its coastal province Eritrea seceded and declared its independence in 1993 following a war that had lasted some thirty years. Though Ethiopia was initially granted access to Eritrean ports, that deal fell through after both

countries went to war in 1998 for reasons almost lost to history (a few disputed patches of desert sand).

Mogadishu Objects

In Somaliland, Ethiopia plans to build a new deep water port and naval base facing the Gulf of Aden and link this newfound outlet by rail and road to its hinterland. As was to be expected, the Somali government in Mogadishu balked at the plan, appealed to the African Union, and vowed to 'defend its territory'.

This is the same government that cannot offer security in its own capital city, is unable to keep Islamic State at bay, and does not possess a mandate derived from election. The last multiparty election in Somalia was celebrated in 1969, a single day before the army seized power and dissolved parliament.

For the government of Somaliland the deal with Ethiopia offers a window on the wider world as it recognises Hargeisa's de facto control over its territory and adds a new route to markets beyond. Meanwhile, at the seat of the AU in Addis Ababa, delegates from Somalia and Ethiopia met for a 'meaningful dialogue' - one taking again place over the heads of those most directly affected by the outcome.

Outside Africa, most countries display a similar reluctance to get involved and wait for the African Union to make the first move. Whilst in 2005 an AU fact-finding mission recommended that the bloc should find 'a special method' for dealing with Somaliland, nothing has happened since. That mission also concluded that the status of the country was 'not linked' to the opening of a Pandora's box in Africa.

A 2003 legal opinion drawn up by the South African Department of Foreign Affairs found that Somaliland 'undeniably' qualified for statehood and that it is 'incumbent' on the international community to recognise its sovereignty.

The opinion concluded: "The interest of world peace and stability require that, where possible, the division or fragmentation of existing states should be managed peacefully and by negotiation. But where this is not possible, as is the case with Somalia, international law accepts that the interests of justice may prevail over the principle of territorial integrity."

Yet again nothing moved at the African Union where kicking the can far down the road has become the preferred response whenever the Somaliland issue comes up.

Some problems facing unrecognised territories

Excluded from United Nations Membership

Citizens unable to obtain travel documents

Country cannot obtain top-level internet domain

Country cannot obtain international dialling code

Country is denied access to financial services

Government cannot issue debt instruments

No membership of IATA, no national airline

Restricted cooperation on law enforcement

Limited availability of development aid

Difficulty in procuring imports

No international recognition of documents and licenses

