

Lessons from the Horn: Why did the UN fail in Somalia?

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The conflict in Somalia stands at an important place in the history of the UN. The end of the Cold War gave the organization the potential for a far greater role in world affairs. However, at this favourable moment the world delivered one of the great peacekeeping failures in history. There are many reasons for the failure of the Somali operation, but there are also lessons that can prove useful in helping future operations be more successful. Applying these lessons will not completely solve the peace enforcement dilemma. What should be taken from this essay is that there were mistakes in Somalia that should not be repeated and if they are not, they provide peace enforcement missions with a greater chance of doing good rather than harm. This paper will demonstrate that while the reality on the ground may have doomed the UN in Somalia before it ever arrived, there are still important lessons to be learned from the experience.

It can be argued that the UN failure in Somalia was assured before any UN personnel began their work. The situation in Somalia was arguably so far beyond repair that the UN could not realistically have been expected to have mustered the kind of forces to create peace in the power vacuum that existed.¹

This is argument is quite convincing. It is crucial to understand just how far the situation in Somalia had deteriorated by the time the UN authorised a mission. By January 1991 Somalia's longtime but now powerless dictator, Siad Barre, was removed from power by clan factions.² In the aftermath of Barre's removal, the clan alliance dissolved and civil war broke out between two factions; the United Somali Congress and the Somali National Alliance. By 1992, 50,000 had died from the violence while

another 300,000 had starved to death³. Somalia had always had food problems, but the conflict put half of the country's 9 million people at risk of starvation. Food became a weapon; with the factions using it as a way of exerting control.⁴

Under circumstances such as these the political realities of the UN system makes it seem unlikely that the UN could have had mission success as it came to be defined by the end of the intervention. If their goal was to solely implement a humanitarian relief mission than perhaps the intervention could have been successful, but as will be demonstrated later, the mandate quickly grew in scope, with negative consequences.⁵

While success in Somalia may have been impossible, that does not mean that the UN is without blame. The UN made errors, some preventable, while others appeared to be a result of the UN structure. Overreliance on the US or slow action by the Security Council are problems that face many peacekeeping/enforcement missions. The main problems that beset any peace enforcement mission, however, are a lack of resource-money, troops, and political backing.⁶

Even if the structure behind the mission is flawed however, recent history shows us that peace enforcement missions will still be attempted (Bosnia, Afghanistan, Kosovo), even if the resources are not always there for the job to be done with a reasonable expectation of success. Thus, since peace enforcement missions will almost certainly continue, we must learn how to do them as well as possible under imperfect circumstances.

A further reason why Somalia may have been lost before the intervention began is the issue of conflict stalemate raised by Eva Bertram. Bertram argues that intervening in a conflict before the belligerents have exhausted their will to continue the fight

¹ Dwight D. Murphy. "The post-Cold War American interventions into Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo." *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*. 25.4 (2000): 489-510.

² Norrie Macqueen. *United Nations peacekeeping in Africa since 1960*. Toronto: Longman, 2002. 202.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Dwight D. Murphy. "The post-Cold War American interventions into Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo."

⁶ Page Fortna. "Peace Enforcement: The United Nations Experience in Congo, Somalia, and Bosnia" Book Review in *Political Science Quarterly*. 117.1 (2002): 163-4.

militarily is a recipe for failure.⁷ She provides the examples of Angola and Western Sahara that were doomed because one of the belligerents did not have the necessary incentive to come to the negotiating table. In the case of Angola the UNITA rebels lost the election and had no incentive to lay down their arms.⁸ In the Western Sahara the Moroccan government had no international pressure to force them to relinquish the territory.⁹ In Somalia, the UN entered the country on humanitarian grounds, but they erred when they attempted a peace enforcement mission without any true agreement to enforce.¹⁰ The only treaty that the mandate was based on was agreements the two faction leaders made in Addis Ababa, but even in this case they were not strictly related to the UN mandate.¹¹ Complicating the matter, the two sides showed no real signs of wanting to end the conflict and seriously go to the negotiating table. This put the UN mission in the impossible position of trying to impose peace on participants that were still intent on fighting.¹²

This attempt to enforce a weak peace agreement is related to another problem with the UN role in Somalia: the lack of clearly defined political goals. Since the military goals were much better defined than the political, the military side was used to direct the political goals.¹³ To illustrate that point consider the way the UN handled disarmament. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's insistence on disarmament either by choice or by military force and his belief that this would lead to better conditions, illustrates the UN's faith in the military to accomplish its goals in that theatre.¹⁴

"A further failure of the Somali mission was the false belief that when faced with a significant number of heavily armed western forces, militias would surrender and submit to UN demands."

Perhaps the largest failure was the missed opportunities for preventative diplomacy. The idea of preventative diplomacy is to prevent a conflict from escalating to the point where a peacekeeping/peace-enforcement mission becomes necessary.¹⁵ After the fall of Siad Barre's government in January 1991, a year passed before the UN intervened.¹⁶ In the beginning however, intervention only consisted of the assignment of various UN officials to the conflict and the creation of an impossible to enforce arms embargo. UNOSOM was not dispatched until a year and a half had passed since Barre's fall.¹⁷ It was not until a full two years after the last government of Somalia collapsed that the UN authorised an intervention under chapter VII.¹⁸ The delay was so long that the Secretary General's special representative, Mohammed Sahnoun, resigned in protest over a lack of UN support and the unacceptable wait for action.¹⁹ His resignation was a setback since he commanded the respect of the Somali clans and was well versed in Somali culture.²⁰ While long waiting periods are common for UN missions²¹, it is nonetheless a significant disadvantage.

One of the major problems with the Somali mission was the overall force composition. Dr. Ali Mazuri argued that the intervening force in Somali should have consisted of troops from other African Nations.²² If that was not possible then it should have been the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) who made the troop commitments. Next to the OIC, the League of Arab States would have been the next viable option, and if all three of those were not possible than a truly

⁷ Eva Bertram. "Reinventing Governments: The Promises and Perils of UN Peacebuilding." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*. 39.3 (1995): 387-418. 405.

⁸ Eva Bertram. "Reinventing Governments: The Promises and Perils of UN Peacebuilding." 412.

⁹ Ibid. 411.

¹⁰ Jane Boulden. *Peace Enforcement: The United Nations Experience in Congo, Somalia, and Bosnia*. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2001.) 68.

¹¹ Ibid. 74.

¹² Adam M. Hussein. *Durable Peace: Challenge for Peacebuilding in Africa*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.) 270.

¹³ Jane Boulden. *Peace Enforcement: The United Nations Experience in Congo, Somalia, and Bosnia*. 74.

¹⁴ Ibid. 74.

¹⁵ Margaret P. Karns & Karen A. Mingst. "The Search for Peace and Security." *International Organizations*. Boulder CA: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 2004. 277-253. 290.

¹⁶ Jane Boulden. *Peace Enforcement: The United Nations Experience in Congo, Somalia, and Bosnia*. 270.

¹⁷ Ibid. 54-5.

¹⁸ Ibid. 57.

¹⁹ Ibid. 53.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The waiting period for Somalia was comparable Bosnia.

²² Adam M. Hussein. *Durable Peace: Challenge for Peacebuilding in Africa*. 253-4.

multinational force comprised of specially selected countries would have been the best to intervene in Somalia.²³

While Mazuri's suggestions may have been correct, assembling such a force would have been a difficult task. It has become a reality of the UN that if it wishes to undertake major operations, the US must play a major role.²⁴

When significant forces were eventually deployed in Somalia under the United Task Force (UNITAF), which took over for the ineffective UNOSOM, it did not resemble any of the force compositions suggested above. It was a force of 37,000 troops with contributions from many developed countries, as well as a major contribution from the United States.²⁵ This overdependence on the US turned out to be a major problem for the Somali operation in the end. Also, the force that intervened in Somalia was not ideal since it lacked significant representation from neighbouring nations. Peacekeepers are better received from a geographically closer nation since they are not viewed as occupiers. This problem was especially evident with Western peacekeepers, which can pose a conflict of interest, especially if they have a colonial history with the country.²⁶

Since the Americans composed such a large portion of the UNITAF Contingent (and since US forces almost never serve under foreign command²⁷), UNITAF was to be a US commanded mission with the UN stamp of approval.²⁸ As a result of this overdependence the UN was forced into a series of compromises and arguments with US leadership

over the Somali mission.²⁹ For example, when the UNITAF mission was established there was disagreement between the US leadership and Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali over the importance of disarmament in the UN mandate.³⁰ The UN wished for disarmament and a cease-fire while the US wanted disarmament to be a secondary objective (as a result of force limitations). In the end, the position of the US was the one that was adopted because, according to Boulden, "the bottom line was that the United States, not the secretary-general, was in charge of the operation"³¹

A further failure of the Somali mission was the false belief that when faced with a significant number of heavily armed western forces, militias would surrender and submit to UN demands.³² History has shown this view to be incorrect in Somalia and as well in other African conflicts. This underestimation of the will of the Somali rebel militias led to the lack of will to engage in direct disarmament, which was instrumental in the overall failure of the Somali operation.³³

In the UNOSOM II command structure, there was major separation of some US forces from the rest of the operation.³⁴ For example in UNOSOM II there were 4,000 American troops under the UNOSOM II umbrella, however there were an additional 17,000 troops who were under direct US command, titled the "United States Joint Task Force in Somalia".³⁵ Besides creating a major split in the mission command structure, this set the precedent for other contingents to take orders from their domestic governments, rather than the UN.³⁶ This occurred when the Italian contingents began direct negotiations with Aidid's forces under orders from Rome, in discordance with UN wishes³⁷.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jane Boulden. *Peace Enforcement: The United Nations Experience in Congo, Somalia, and Bosnia*.

²⁵ Adam M. Hussein. *Durable Peace: Challenge for Peacebuilding in Africa*.

²⁶ For example, Italy contributed forces to the Somali missions despite their position as a former colonial occupier. Their presence would cause problems for the operation.

Norrie Macqueen. *United Nations peacekeeping in Africa since 1960*.

²⁷ Although a small contingent of a few thousand soldiers did serve under UNOSOM II, but they were in a more logistical and support role.

United Nations "Somalia – UNOSOM II Background"

http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/co_mission/unosom2backgr2.html

²⁸ Jane Boulden. *Peace Enforcement: The United Nations Experience in Congo, Somalia, and Bosnia*. 57-8.

²⁹ Ibid. 73.

³⁰ Ibid. 67.

³¹ Ibid. 68.

³² Norrie Macqueen. *United Nations peacekeeping in Africa since 1960*. 208.

³³ Ibid. 209.

³⁴ Jane Boulden. *Peace Enforcement: The United Nations Experience in Congo, Somalia, and Bosnia*. 78.

³⁵ Norrie Macqueen. *United Nations peacekeeping in Africa since 1960*. 213.

³⁶ Ibid. 213.

³⁷ To make matters worse (according to Boutros-Boutros Ghali) it appears that the Italians were talking with Aidid in order to gain further influence over Post-Conflict Somalia.

To further illustrate the problems that permeated the UNITAF and UNOSOM II command structures, we may examine the Olympia Hotel Raid. As a result of the split in command, when the US special forces decided to assault the Olympia Hotel in an attempt to gain information on the location of General Aidid, they did not notify the rest of the UNOSOM II forces of the operation. When the mission began to deteriorate it took a long period of time to mobilize UNOSOM II soldiers, and when they arrived they were not prepared for the level of fighting that they faced.³⁸ The result of this ultimately disastrous mission was the eventual withdrawal of US forces from Somalia (Macqueen 216). In the longer run the Olympia Hotel raid led to the creation of the Dover Criterion, which meant that any humanitarian operation that would lead to the death of 20 (roughly the amount killed in the raid) or more US soldiers was politically infeasible. This criterion was disastrous for future conflicts of the 1990s such as Rwanda or Haiti (Dyer).

A further failure of the UN in Somalia was its eventual loss of impartiality over the course of the conflict. After the June 5 attack, in which 26 Pakistani soldiers were killed in SNA raids involving Pakistani arms inspectors and aid distributors, the UN lost any pretence of evenhandedness (Macqueen 213). After these attacks the UN Security Council unanimously passed resolution 837 which called for "all necessary measures against all those responsible for the armed attacks...including those responsible for publically inciting such attacks... including to secure the investigation of their actions and the arrest and detention for prosecution, trial and punishment;" (Resolution 837). Later, on June 17th Admiral Howe publically named Aidid responsible and proceeded to issue an arrest warrant (Boulden 68).

The events described above essentially made Aidid and the SNA enemies of the UN in Somalia, effectively turning UNOSOM II into one of the belligerents in the conflict (especially in the eyes of

Aidid and the SNA). UNOSOM II³⁹ essentially engaged in war against the SNA, hindering any efforts for the UN to play a credible role in the political process.⁴⁰ This conflict was beyond the ideal scope of peace enforcement, "the moment a peacekeeping force starts killing people, it becomes part of the conflict it is supposed to be controlling, and is therefore a part of the problem".⁴¹

Not only was the loss of impartiality damaging for the reasons listed above, but it also represented a golden opportunity lost. After the attacks, 11 of Somalia's most important clan leaders condemned the attacks against UNOSOM II. Instead of using this political sympathy to their advantage, the UN pressed on with the military offensive in the hopes of capturing General Aidid.⁴² This loss of impartiality was an important mistake for the UN. While it is hard to maintain impartiality in humanitarian conflicts where some belligerents

deserve much more blame than others, setting a single focus upon one group or one person can have very negative consequences for a mission overall.

This lesson was on display in Bosnia

where the UN (in particular the US) focused on the humanitarian aspects of the conflict to stay impartial and avoid being drawn into the conflict.⁴³

"This mandate expansion and troop reduction significantly hampered the UN's ability to successfully accomplish its objectives."

A further problem faced by the UN intervention in Somalia was mandate creep (referring to the UNITAF and UNOSOM II mission, not UNOSOM I). The UN mandate for intervention in Somalia originally called for a humanitarian relief

³⁹ In particular the US contingent, ex: the Olympia Hotel raid Ibid. 70.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 75.

⁴¹ Jonathon Moore. "Deciding Humanitarian Intervention." *Social Research*. 74.1 (2007): 169-202.

⁴² Norrie Macqueen. *United Nations peacekeeping in Africa since 1960*. 214.

⁴³ Although it is arguable that they strayed too far in that direction in Bosnia.

Jane Boulden. *Peace Enforcement: The United Nations Experience in Congo, Somalia, and Bosnia*. 216-7

Ibid. 214-5

³⁸ Jane Boulden. *Peace Enforcement: The United Nations Experience in Congo, Somalia, and Bosnia*. 71

mission, according to President Bush "a 'strictly humanitarian' mission, limited in both scope and duration."⁴⁴ When UNITAF was replaced by UNOSOM II its mandate was broadened to include nation building, with initiatives for disarmament and reconciliation. The US ambassador to the UN Madeline Albright called for "the restoration of an entire country."⁴⁵ The mandate was broadened even further with the implementation of the arrest mandate, which along with the arrest of General Aidid, required the UN to fight his SNA militia.⁴⁶ Despite these new responsibilities, there were no new major troop commitments made to UNOSOM II. In fact, total UN troop levels from UNITAF to UNOSOM II actually declined (38,000 under UNITAF, declining to 28,000 under UNOSOM II⁴⁷) significantly despite a large increase in responsibilities. This mandate expansion and troop reduction significantly hampered the UN's ability to successfully accomplish its objectives.

In the end what should the UN have learned from this experience? Firstly it should have learned that while the US military is extremely valuable for its logistics, air and sea power, the fact that the US government is very casualty adverse when it comes to these types of missions' means that it has limited effectiveness. Countries that are geographically close to the affected state should be used more readily if they are available. In such a situation the US could then provide logistical support if needed. The UN should also have learned the benefits of a clearly defined mandate. The fact that the overall goals of the mission changed so much over the course of the UN involvement was detrimental to the mission. The UN experience in Somalia also lends more credence to Bertram's 'ground truth' argument. The fact that the UN was trying to impose peace upon people who did not want it made for an almost impossible mission. A very important lesson the UN should have learned is the importance of maintaining some semblance of impartiality in a

conflict. The UN should also never again assume that poorly trained militias will collapse in the presence of trained armies; this fatal miscalculation undermined the effort from the beginning. The final lesson for the UN to learn is the benefits of a unified command structure. By having the US outside UN jurisdiction it allowed them to undertake the Olympia Hotel raid without any backup. That was the deathblow to the Somali operation.

In the aftermath of Somalia we have learned that the fundamentals of the UN will generally prevent UN peace enforcement missions from reaching the success they intend. That is not to say they are total failures, as thousands were saved from famine by the UN effort in Somalia. While the fundamentals may be wrong, missions will still be attempted. If the UN learns its lessons in impartiality, command structure, mandate clarity and force composition than it will help future enforcement missions be more successful, although they may never be perfect.

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⁴⁴ Dwight D. Murphy. "The post-Cold War American interventions into Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo."

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Jane Boulden. *Peace Enforcement: The United Nations Experience in Congo, Somalia, and Bosnia*. 75.

⁴⁷ Admittedly there were another 17,000 US troops in addition to the UNOSOM II force, but they were outside UN control (Macqueen 213).