FAMINE IN SOMALIA AND THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE: COLLECTIVE FAILURE

by

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"The UN, in terms of its life after the Cold War, is a shambles. If you look at Somalia, what you see is an ill-equipped, ill-informed and uncoordinated response. The UN and the international community should have acted months ago. Lack of attention and lack of planning have already cost thousands of lives."

Nicholas Hinton
Director-General, Save the Children Fund, U.K.
(The Independent, August 8, 1992)

"The UN agencies have no excuses. The dithering in the Security Council need not have stopped them from following the lead of the Red Cross and starting humanitarian work...The money was there, but they chose not to use it. While sitting on their hands in neighboring Kenya, they did not even draw up contingency plans. Six months after the UN Secretary-General ordered the agencies back in, they are still far from a proper operational presence. A 'technical mission' of thirty-one 'experts' recently spent ten days flitting around the country, refusing to consult with the staffs of the voluntary agencies that stayed in Somalia through the worst months of fighting."

Rakiya Omaar
Executive Director, Africa Watch
(The Los Angeles Times, August 26, 1992)

"It's so bad because we've let things simmer without paying proper attention. We've had inexperienced people who don't know what they are seeing, who don't know what the implications are and didn't blow the whistle! Because of the disorganization of the United Nations, less than a third of the food that is needed has been delivered."

Trevor Paige
Country Director (Somalia), UN World Food Programme
(The New York Times, August 16, 1992)

"...we are a year and a half late."

Mohamed Sahnoun, Secretary-General's Special Representative (Somalia)
(The Guardian, September 2, 1992)

"Somalia is the greatest failure of the United Nations in our time."

Aryeh Neier
Executive Director, Human Rights Watch
(The Washington Post, September 21, 1992)
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I. OVERVIEW/SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS:

The Multi-Tiered Failure of Collective Involvement in the Somali Crisis

A useful examination of the international intervention in the current horrific famine and advanced anarchy of Somalia must center around the troubling conclusion that the collective involvement to date has been fatally flawed at multiple levels. First, the direct response to the humanitarian crisis itself, particularly that of United Nations relief agencies, has been so poorly executed as to generate urgent demands for a comprehensive examination of the entire UN relief system with an eye towards drastic reform. Second, the fumbling of the UN relief agencies and the half-hearted response of the major donor governments to the human catastrophe unmasks in startling terms the consequences of delay in constructing the mandates and procedures for intervention in internal conflicts in the post-Cold War era. Mandates and procedures without manifest political will will be of limited value in the abstract, however, and little collective will or leadership has been demonstrated in response to Somalia.

The response of the international community to the Somali tragedy, again especially by the various arms of the United Nations, has been so troubled as to prompt assertions by no less a participant than the UN Secretary-General of a double-standard approach to such crises. The collective involvement has been timid, reluctant and uneven to the point of arousing suspicions of a general dismissal of Africa on the part of the Western powers who may no longer see the continent as relevant to their political and economic strategies. Additionally, the response of the United States Government to the Somali crisis has exposed the ever-more political nature and manipulation of its bilateral emergency humanitarian programs.\(^1\)

It is necessary to comprehend from the beginning that the present violence and chaos of Somalia are as much a consequence of the failure of the international response as a cause, and that various UN agencies and other players are using security issues to shield their faulty performance from scrutiny. The unvarnished history of the UN's role in Somalia is a tragic one of opportunities missed and of strategic and operational blunders not justified by situational realities.

The catastrophe of Somalia today simply cannot be explained or resolved without an acknowledgement that the collective response to the crisis has been -- and continues to be -- an abject failure. We are, after all, looking at the prospects of one third of the Somali people perishing; we are witness already to the death by starvation of over twenty-five percent of all Somali children under five years of age.\(^2\) Television screens and newspapers around the world carry startling images of vast numbers of people dying before our eyes as UN and donor government officials wring hands and offer excuses for previous inaction -- implying that either they had not earlier known about the extreme nature
The situation is one of the near-total destruction of Somalia as a country and a society; the loss of a generation is at hand.

II. THE CRISIS AT HAND: Context and Expectations

A. Historical/Political Background

How did Somalia come to its current unraveling? First, it is necessary to understand that Somalis are not very similar to many of their neighbors -- near or far. Sir Richard Burton described the Somali nomads as "a fierce and turbulent race of republicans" who do not readily submit to anyone's authority. The country has long been molded by political decentralization. The basis for all political and societal structuring is genealogy -- manifested by a complex and rigid clan system that purportedly allows many children to recite the names of ancestors back more than twenty generations.

The Somalis are generally divided between six major clans and innumerable subclans. Traditionally, clan elders settled disputes by agreeing on compensation for slights and intrusions, real and imagined. Such a system worked considerably better for wandering nomads feuding over grazing rights for camels than it now does for hungry, angry young men armed with automatic rifles. This fundamental basis for order in Somali society -- the authority of the clan elders -- has been undermined by the prevalence of modern weapons, Somalia's most significant legacy of superpower involvement during the Cold War era. The restoration of the authority of the elders will be a critical step in a return to normalcy in Somalia.

The relevant historical starting point for comprehending Somalia's current denouement may be in the last decade of the 19th century when the army of Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II soundly defeated the Italians in battle (in 1896) as Italy attempted to expand from its colony in Eritrea to take over Ethiopia itself. Subsequent negotiations led to Great Britain -- Italy's de facto sponsor in the colonization of Africa -- ceding control of the Ogaden to Menelik and the Ethiopian empire. The problem was -- and is -- that the Ogaden is a huge area populated by Somalis, and the decision triggered ongoing tension and bursts of warfare lasting through the present era.

The British subsequently colonized the northern regions of Somalia as Somaliland and the Italians took the southern two-thirds. The Europeans remained in at least nominal control until 1960 when the two colonies were merged into an independent and relatively democratic Somalia.

The fragile but functioning democracy survived for nine years until, in 1969, the Somali army took control after the assassination of the president. The new government, headed by General Mohammed Siad Barre, embarked upon a concerted effort to erode the clan system and diminish the authority of the elders, symbolized by Siad Barre conducting concocted funeral-like ceremonies to mark the burying of the clans.

The new government was instead oriented towards "scientific socialism" -- or at least towards military alliance with the Soviet Union. The president's son-in-law set up a national security service under East German guidance. The huge influx of external weaponry and military advisors -- Soviet bloc at this time -- that was to eventually undermine the Somali nation began.

In 1974, history repeated itself as events unfolding in Ethiopia were again to dramatically affect Somalia. Emperor Haile...
Selassie was deposed that year by army officers frustrated with the stagnation and repression of his latter years on the throne and the emperor’s failure to respond to the famine then gripping the country. The turmoil in Addis Ababa and the intensifying war in Eritrea weakened the Ethiopian grip over the Ogaden. Siad Barre, despite his suppression of the clan system, responded to the agitation of his fellow clansmen and in fact to widespread intense nationalism to renew claims on the region. His moves on the Ogaden enjoyed mass popularity.

An Ogadeni guerrilla campaign to drive the Ethiopian army from the region led, in 1977, to full-scale war between Somalia and Ethiopia just as Addis Ababa’s long-standing relationship with the United States was being ruptured by the Dergue government’s embracing of Marxism. Simultaneously, the Soviets abandoned and betrayed their ally Siad Barre overnight and rushed military advisors and equipment to the (strategically more valuable and newly available) Ethiopians under Mengistu Haile Mariam.

Soviet support enabled Mengistu to crush the Somali invasion of the Ogaden, humiliate Siad Barre and send half a million Ogadeni refugees and guerrillas pouring across the border into Somalia. Many brought with them modern weapons -- the next installment of guns in the rising flood.

The exit of the Soviets from Mogadishu set the stage for the first significant American involvement in Somalia -- initially in the form of a modest amount of defensive weapons to check any potential Ethiopian reprisal across the long border. (U.S. military aid to Somalia would eventually total over $200 million; economic assistance was in the additional hundreds of millions of dollars.)

The Ogaden disaster also unleashed the first wave of serious discontent with the rule of Siad Barre. There was a coup attempt in 1978; its organizers escaped to Addis Ababa from where, with Mengistu’s encouragement, they staged raids across the border. In London, in 1981, a group of exiles formed the Somali National Movement (SNM), which was based on the Isaaq clans of northern Somalia, the former British Somaliland.

Resentment against Siad Barre’s increasingly brutal and discriminatory rule was then building amongst the Isaaq who felt their region was not being given its due in development or education funding by the Mogadishu government. Siad’s perceived support of the Ogadeni refugees’ intrusion on their traditional grazing lands and into their livestock exporting (to the Gulf states) business triggered hostility. The SNM began to raid government facilities, and Siad Barre’s repression of the Isaaqs intensified again, in return.

By 1988, Siad Barre’s fragile grip on the reins of power in Somalia was paralleled by Mengistu’s desperate attempt to keep the upper hand in a series of civil wars that were going badly for him and threatening his bloodthirsty rule in Ethiopia. In that year, the two despots predictably struck a deal to abandon support for insurgent groups using their respective territories for maneuvers against the other’s regimes at home. Fearing forced isolation from the border areas or even expulsion, the SNM entered northern Somalia en masse, engaging and initially overwhelming Siad Barre’s troops.

The retribution was savage. The city of Hargeisa, the regional capital, was literally destroyed, thousands of Isaaq civilians were killed in cold blood and hundreds of thousands (along with the SNM) were sent scurrying into Ethiopia where the UN established a series of deplorable refugee camps. Siad Barre’s air force strafed the fleeing Isaaq, killing many thousands. (It is discouraging to note here that U.S. military aid to Siad Barre continued through June 1988 when Congressional action finally brought American support to this regime to an end.)

The retaliation proved to be Siad Barre’s undoing as the Isaaq example and Siad’s proven weakness encouraged other clans to take up arms to throw off the increasingly lethal dictatorship. The United Somali Congress (USC) came together as a force in the spring of 1989 as the struggle against Siad Barre moved south. Siad controlled only Mogadishu by the end of his tenure, during which he frantically attempted to divide clan against clan. The last three months of his rule, however, saw increasing military and political coordination amongst his many enemies as civilians joined hands with the USC for the final push. Siad Barre desperately launched a massive distribution of weapons and ammunition from his vast arsenals. His power had all but evaporated, however, when Siad turned his army loose on Hawiye sections of the city, destroying much of the infrastructure.
and provoking a violent and deadly uprising in the process.

The destruction of his capital was Siad Barre’s last major installment of terror on the Somali people; he was forced to flee Mogadishu in January of 1991. One million inhabitants also temporarily fled the destruction and violence for the countryside.

The flight of Siad was, however, not the end of the violence and chaos. To the contrary, the situation only deteriorated. In the south, the USC forces split in two. Troops under General Mohamed Farah Aideed set off in pursuit of Siad Barre while others under Ali Mahdi Mohamed, a wealthy Mogadishu businessman, remained in the capital and declared themselves leaders of a new government. In the north, the Issaq clans, responding to Ali Mahdi’s self-appointment as president and his refusal to call a conference on national reconciliation, declared their region, the former British Somaliland, independent – as the Somaliland Republic. The SNM saw another Siad Barre in the making in Ali Mahdi and wanted no part of it. (Siad Barre himself fought on after fleeing Mogadishu, taking advantage of the division between his foes. In April of 1991, his forces advanced to within about twenty miles of the capital. But his efforts faltered, and Siad fled to Nigeria in the summer of 1992; his followers are engaged in skirmishes to the present.)

There has been no functioning government in Somalia since January of 1991 (or earlier, depending upon the definition of functioning government employed). Ali Mahdi’s claims to be president of Somalia are not recognized beyond his own followers – whose control is confined to the northern sections of Mogadishu (now cordoned off from the rest of the city behind a Beirut-style green line). The various clan militia, once united in opposing Siad Barre, turned on one another and effectively divided the country into twelve different zones.

The struggle between Aideed, chairman of the United Somali Congress, and Ali Mahdi intensified during 1991. Relations between the two factions and other groups worsened after a July 1991 Djibouti conference (boycotted by the SNM and repudiated by many others) that was an attempt to agree on temporary governing arrangements. Participants at the conference confirmed the self-appointment of Ali Mahdi as interim head of state – further inflaming the situation because Ali Mahdi was seen primarily as a corrupt beneficiary of Siad Barre’s dictatorship. On November 17, a full-scale civil war erupted. That intense conflict persisted until March 3 of this year when a cease-fire was brokered under the auspices of external players, primarily the UN. The fighting was so severe in Mogadishu that most of the remaining infrastructure of the city was totally destroyed: virtually every building in the central city was ripped apart by artillery shelling and bridges, utility and water lines were blown up. Even underground utility lines were dug up for the copper wiring they contained.

An unparalleled number of guns and advanced weapons flooded into Somalia during this period, some from the soldiers of Mengistu’s crumbling army and others captured from Siad Barre’s forces and arsenals. These weapons facilitated the destruction of Mogadishu and other cities and laid the foundation for the current looting hindering relief operations.

Complementing the 1988-91 struggle to oust Siad Barre and the subsequent civil war between Aideed and Ali Mahdi, a lingering drought drove additional people from their land in a futile search for food and exposing them even more directly to the ongoing violence. Civil war and drought combined to trigger the acute famine now searing the land (though it is certain that drought alone would not have provoked the onset of famine in Somalia).

B. Famine/Violence/Anarchy

It is virtually impossible to quantify the dimensions of the current Somali famine. It has accurately been described as “the greatest humanitarian emergency in the world,” by Andrew Natsios, director of the U.S. Government’s international humanitarian assistance efforts. It does not seem an exaggeration to state that the Somali tragedy is by some measurements worse than the Ethiopian famine of 1984/85 – the universal benchmark for incomprehensible human suffering. One million Ethiopians may have perished during the earlier famine, as may that number (or more) of Somalis now. Ethiopia, however, has seven or eight times the population of Somalia, and the 1984/85 famine was somewhat limited to specific geographic pockets. In contrast, the International Committee of
The Red Cross (ICRC) estimates that ninety-five percent of the people in the country suffer from malnutrition -- and that perhaps seventy percent endure severe malnutrition. It would be virtually impossible to cite comparable figures for any national population in modern times.

The famine in Somalia engulfs vast regions of the country and of course affects Mogadishu (famines seldom reach capital cities). The ICRC estimates that 1.5 million individuals face imminent starvation; three times that many are totally dependent on external food assistance. There are reportedly “500,000 very severely malnourished people in the area bounded by Mogadishu, Baidoa and Kismayu” alone.11 Hundreds of thousands of people have perished from severe malnutrition and its associated diseases year to date. Well over 900,000 Somalis refugees have fled to squalid relief camps in Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti and Yemen and there are another 150,000 Somalis in Saudi Arabia. Internally, untold thousands of Somalis wander with increasing desperation across vast tracks of arid land as rumors of food deliveries (frequently false) spread. For many, of course, it is a journey never completed. In Baidoa and other locations, thousands of silent, gaunt figures slowly await death -- seemingly beyond caring and, in many cases, beyond saving.12

The news media reports daily on the agony and suffering as parents bury children and husbands bury wives lost to starvation.

Relief officials facing the enormous hurdle of moving a minimally required 60,000 metric tons of emergency food rations13 into a country with a destroyed infrastructure and no functioning government confront the most intensive looting ever to plague any relief operation. News stories broadcast details of relief commodities stolen at gunpoint; shots are fired at planes ferrying food; drivers and relief workers have been shot, some fatally, as various militia and less organized bands of hoodlums appropriate relief commodities. The International Committee of the Red Cross has, for the first time in its long history, been forced to employ armed guards to deliver relief. An ICRC expatriate staff member has been killed (contrary to the popular assumption, the only foreign relief worker to lose his life); a high number of Somali relief workers have perished over the past few months.

The food is stolen for a number of reasons, but all are related to the fact that food now serves as the currency of the land. Food equals money and it equals power. Food is stolen for commercial resale by merchants who hoard it to keep the cost high. It is taken by warlords wanting to feed their armies. It is taken by hungry individuals possessing a loaded automatic rifle - and there are lots of hungry individuals with guns.

Food is also being stolen in Somalia as part of a crude but ultimately comprehensible effort on the part of some clans and sub-clans to guarantee their members what is seen as a more fair share of the most urgently required commodity. That is, the chaos and the overall shortage of supplies available to relief groups has resulted in a haphazard and uneven distribution of food amongst clans and part of the looting is in part a violent and dangerous redistribution effort. Some veteran relief workers privately admit that, from a certain perspective, they can understand if not condone some of this forced redistribution.14

Famine wracks huge regions of the country, threatening ever-expanding segments of the population. The anarchy and chaos diminish the prospects of any relief effort, no matter how intense, from being effective in the near-term. Indeed, the suffering is certain to worsen before it lessens. The dislocation of the population accelerates, both internally and across international borders. The prospects of additional relief workers being injured or killed by the violence associated with the delivery of relief commodities will increase before the desired “flooding the country with food”15 approach has the necessary impact. As the physical condition of people continues to deteriorate, so does the fabric of Somali society. The psychological trauma of human deprivation and rule by gun places national reconciliation ever further beyond reach. In a country where not a child has been to school for over two years and the values being most successfully demonstrated are those imposed by brute force, a way out of the nightmare seems ever more elusive.

There are, of course, a high number of Somali doctors, nurses, clan elders and others striving heroically to bring both relief and peace to their country; their efforts are essentially ignored by the news media and in turn by many of the external players using security concerns as cover for inaction.

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This is the situation in Somalia today—a perilous one with few applicable comparisons. And the external response to Somalia’s agony exposes the policies, mechanisms and capability of the United Nations and donor governments being utterly lacking in credibility for the collective intervention mandated by its severity.

C. External Players: Expectations of Involvement

The perpetrators of Somalia’s misery are Somali. The passive accomplices, however, are UN, other multilateral organizations, and major power government officials who have contributed to that misery by neglect, denial, evasion of responsibility and by bungling relief operations and peacemaking initiatives launched without coherent strategy. The sad story of Somalia today is a long saga of missed opportunities to help at least some people avoid the pain and suffering, the death and destruction, and of not moving to reinforce the positive elements within Somali society still functioning. Too many external players in position to influence events in Somalia failed to move to contain the famine before the glare of media attention and public scrutiny forced their hands.

The roots of the problem have to do with both with competence and dedication in delivering relief assistance despite serious barriers and with the broader failure to define modalities of collective intervention in internal chaos.

The level of failure is made more difficult to explain given the current history of external intervention in countering the cycle of famine and mayhem in the Horn of Africa—certainly such considerable involvement as to significantly frame expectations for intervention in Somalia. Famine in the region, as we know, is hardly a new or remote phenomenon. The UN, the United States and the other donors have had intensive experience in overcoming the barriers inherent in providing relief assistance in areas of conflict throughout the region. Cross border feeding operations, moving food across contested lines of control, maneuvering around the barriers erected by various hostile governments and rebel armies have been at the very heart of external interventions in its humanitarian crises.

“Operation Lifeline Sudan” was, of course, the apex of collective, external intervention— an intervention that offered much guidance for the Somali situation.

There is, thus, all too much experience over the past two decades in confronting the massive dislocation of hungry people fleeing drought and/or warfare in the Horn. Untold billions of dollars have been spent on relief programs, since 1984 in particular. Bitter lessons have been learned from the failures and successes in responding to the plight of millions of victims of drought, repression and civil conflict. Invaluable, often painful, experience has been logged by disaster assistance officials, diplomats and politicians struggling to meet the public’s expectations for swift, generous and effective relief for the hungry and displaced. A series of “special representatives” of the UN Secretary-General have acted as powerful coordinators of external relief. (The UN special representatives have, at least in some instances, hammered out delicate agreements with governments and guerrilla groups that served to protect the relief operations not just of the UN but of the other donors.) The investment in various “early warning systems” has been considerable; the general investment in keeping people from going over the edge has been vast.

The lessons learned have been political as well as operational. Recriminations against the slowness of both the UN, the United States Government and the other Western donor governments (not to mention the Ethiopian government) to respond to the early and certain indicators of famine in Ethiopia in 1983/84 led to a discernable determination to avoid repeating that costly error. President Ronald Reagan, in reference to Ethiopia, declared that “a hungry child knows no politics,” expressing the will of the American public that the U.S. respond according to human need, not to the political orientation of governing regimes. Reagan’s statement, however tardy in being applied during the 1984/85 crisis, reverberated in 1987 when Ethiopia was again struck by a drought-triggered food emergency. The United States responded quickly and generously, sparing the UN and other donors, and the emergency was contained; there was no famine. The emotional, somewhat accusatory, confrontation between Congressional and executive branch officials that marked the 1984/85 period was avoided.

Thus it was that when famine began to stalk the people of Somalia in 1990, a number
of major external players had established expectations for their involvements. The United Nations had assumed increasing responsibility over a number of years for coordinating relief assistance for millions of people at risk, primarily from political turmoil, in the region. Such responsibility had by necessity included implementing the diplomatic and political strategies required for the relief to be delivered to and through zones of conflict.

The United States had demonstrated resourcefulness, generosity and determination in getting more assistance to more individuals in the Horn than any other donor. And the U.S. was considered by some to shoulder a particular moral and political responsibility given its long support of the Siad Barre dictatorship and the infusion of American military and economic assistance to Somalia and the arguable contribution of that support to Somalia’s descent into chaos. (The burned and looted remains of the American embassy compound in Mogadishu -- the largest U.S. embassy facility ever erected in Africa -- stands today as a bleak monument to the U.S. role in Somalia during the Siad Barre era.) The United States Government further established expectations by its high profile, energetic and highly successful role in negotiating an end to neighboring Ethiopia’s civil wars and the demise of the Mengistu dictatorship during the spring months of 1991.

Britain and Italy as well were seen to have obligations residual from the colonial era and, especially in the case of Italy, serious business links and ties to Somali political factions.

All of the major donors had, of course, established certain expectations for involvement by their response via the UN Security Council in the Kurdish situation in northern Iraq following Operation Desert Storm and by their concurrent attention to the internal chaos in the fractionizing Yugoslav republics.

Regionally, assumptions for any Organization of African Unity response to Somalia’s deterioration were (and remain) more theoretical, given the OAU’s history on sovereignty and non-interference questions and its crippling institutional weaknesses. But those assumptions had perhaps been boosted slightly by the relative vigor of the current OAU leadership and its stated interest in improving internal conflict resolution mechanisms. Such expanded interest led to an OAU role in negotiating a cease fire in the Rwanda conflict, for example. Whatever might have been expected from either the Arab League or the Organization of the Islamic Conference in response to the Somali crisis, their roles have remained minor, if not abstractions.

But internationally, as famine conditions evolved in Somalia, the expectations of and for external involvement had been clearly laid over most of the preceding decade by a host of players at the diplomatic, political and operational levels and by global events. The extent of the investment of energy and resources into Somalia and the region by the UN, by the United States and by the other major donor governments make the subsequent response considerably more difficult to justify.

III. INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE SOMALI CRISIS

A. The United Nations

A fair and accurate summary of the UN response to the Somalia crisis is a frustrating exercise, in part because that response has been so fractious and uneven and in part because the inescapable conclusions reached about the UN involvement are so troubling. (And of course in drawing useful conclusions, it is necessary to distinguish between meaningful activity and that which is merely a substitute for serious engagement.)

It is fair to conclude, however, that both humanitarian and diplomatic initiatives of the United Nations surrounding Somalia have been gravely inadequate. Its humanitarian operations have been grossly incompetent. Its undisciplined and unfocused approach to peacemaking and national reconciliation in Somalia has at times bordered on the incoherent. The failure on both fronts raises disturbing questions in regards not just to Somalia but as well to institutional capacity. If the system that permitted such a wanting response to the dangers of Somalia is not radically overhauled, then repetition is all but guaranteed.

What, specifically, supports such an assessment of the UN role in Somalia?

Damning assessments of the UN role in Somalia emanate from relief workers directly engaged in the Somali crisis, from professionals...
in the humanitarian assistance community and from the more candid UN officials involve. The words of other well placed and experienced observers and participants from a range of perspectives are no more positive. The pronouncements stem from a series of UN blunders and their basic failure to seriously engage in efforts to deal with the crisis when such engagement might have diffused its intensity.

Most egregiously, the UN has been essentially absent from Somalia.

The UN withdrew from Mogadishu shortly before the flight of Siad Barre, transferring its staff to Nairobi and staying away until August of 1991. A security incident in early September resulted in the re-evacuation of the skeleton staff which had returned three weeks earlier. Increasing international criticism led to UNICEF reestablishing Mogadishu offices in late December, but the UN has continued to suffer from the absence of senior, qualified personnel being present. There has been no overall and consistent coordination of the UN effort in the country by a “special representative” undertaking the role played earlier by Kurt Jansson or Michael Priestley in Ethiopia or the Sudan.21

(Immediate results of the James Jonah visit were that the airport was shut for ten days (blocking the delivery of food) and the neutral position of the Murasade clan was undermined.)

The absence of country expertise directly resulted in the debacle of then-Assistant Secretary-General James Jonah’s January mission to Mogadishu. (Mr. Jonah has subsequently been promoted to an undersecretary position.)

The UN, responding to growing accusations of the neglect of Somalia, began formulating plans for a diplomatic initiative in December of 1991. The International Committee of the Red Cross, in particular, had created a stir by highly unusual public criticisms of the UN’s performance in Somalia.22 Mr. Jonah was dispatched to Mogadishu, apparently to demonstrate UN resolve, on January 3-5. His agenda was to meet with General Aideed and with Ali Mahdi for the purpose of negotiating a cease-fire in the civil war and the safe passage of relief commodities. Two clans neutral in the Aideed/Ali Mahdi clash (the Hawadle and the Murasade) offered to meet Mr. Jonah at the airport, to escort him to both Aideed and Ali Mahdi headquarters and to serve as local peacekeepers. Mr. Jonah, apparently unaware of the existence of neutral elements in Mogadishu, made no arrangements to accept the offer. He then fell into a trap set by General Aideed.

Aideed’s forces shelled the airport to prevent Jonah’s UN plane from landing and had it diverted to an airstrip at Balidogley under his control, where Mr. Jonah was met by the general. Manipulating Mr. Jonah’s itinerary, Aideed then took him on highly visible and extensive tours of territory under his control. When the Jonah party neared the planned point of crossing into Ali Mahdi’s northern section of Mogadishu, an angry Ali Mahdi opened an artillery barrage. Mr. Jonah returned to Nairobi. The next morning, however, he flew to northern Mogadishu to briefly visit Ali Mahdi; he then publicly announced that Ali Mahdi had agreed to UN intervention in the crisis and that General Aideed stood as the obstacle.

Ali Mahdi immediately seconded Mr. Jonah’s comments, seeing them as underscoring the legitimacy of his interim presidency. Aideed predictably became angry and more distrustful - and more violent.

The immediate results of the James Jonah visit were that the airport was shut for ten days (blocking the delivery of food) and the neutral position of the Murasade clan was undermined. The Murasade were soon engaged in the savage fighting. Most significantly, the UN’s particular advantage of being a neutral broker had been severely eroded. The war continued for another two months.

No lessons had apparently been absorbed by the UN hierarchy on the finer points of negotiating in Mogadishu’s internecine battles when their next high profile delegation arrived February 5, this time headed by Special Coordinator Brian Wannop. No clan leaders or elders were invited to discussions with Aideed and Ali Mahdi about proposed peace talks in New York. This lack of perceived standing made it easier for Ali Mahdi to launch attacks.
against the smaller clans, which he did the day after the UN issued invitations to the peace talks.

Yet another James Jonah mission to Mogadishu in February finally led to a tentative agreement for representatives of Aideed and Ali Mahdi to convene under the auspices of the United Nations, the Islamic Conference, the OAU and the Arab League, which they did at UN headquarters on February 12 and 13. Although the New York meetings were characterized by lack of preparation and the naive exclusion of relevant players, the principles of a cease-fire were set out. The Somali parties returned to Mogadishu where the details, such as they were, were hammered out and agreed to by March 3. While there have been violations, the basic cease-fire between Aideed and Ali Mahdi has more or less held since early March.

One of the more ironic aspects of the UN's performance in Somalia is the failure to take advantage of the March cease-fire - a UN-brokered cease-fire that has basically held. This failure rests at the very center of the flawed external involvement in the crisis and mirrors numerous other opportunities missed. Had the opening been seized, it is conceivable the famine would have been less severe and certain the opening be seized, it is conceivable the famine would have been more severe and certain. Instead, the UN's reputation would have been enhanced, not tarnished. It is clear that its effectiveness on the ground could only have improved.

The floundering of the UN's senior diplomats in the field during this period was paralleled by the Security Council's dithering and its relief agencies' squandering of valuable time and opportunities.

The Security Council was receiving and issuing a series of reports and adopting the first in a series of resolutions. The Council's attention to Somalia, however, was notable most for its lack of resolve and lack of consistency with its actions regarding both the Kurdish situation in northern Iraq or the concurrent Yugoslavian crisis. The big power reluctance to focus on Somalia was also notable: Cape Verde had a more ambitious Somali agenda for the Council than did the United States of America.

The Security Council got stuck on a series of points which ultimately led to an exasperated outburst from new the Secretary-General, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who accused the Council of operating on a double standard. The Secretary-General publicly charged that the Council was devoting excessive resources to "the rich man's war" in Yugoslavia at the expense of Somalia. The problem for the Council with his charges were that they were highly accurate and there was no denial available. The embarrassment stemming from the July outburst led directly to the current UN and major donor government mobilization on the Somali famine, including the launching of airlifts and the arrival of peacekeeping forces - some seven months after initial consideration by the Security Council.

UNICEF and the other UN relief agencies were doing no better in the field. Repeated requests to UNICEF from the private relief agencies operating in Mogadishu and elsewhere for medicines and medical supplies went unheeded. Relief commodities were delivered to arbitrary locations without consultation with other agencies, creating false expectations in the process as desperate people gathered to await further deliveries that never materialized.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the traditional coordinator of UN relief and development agencies, meantime left $68 million budgeted for Somalia untapped for some nine months for lack of a signature from the non-existent Somali government. Efforts to obtain a waiver on the signature requirement apparently commenced only after stinging criticism of the UN Somali relief operations from the director of Save the Children Fund (United Kingdom) were reported in the press.

The UNHCR (High Commissioner for Refugees) and the World Food Programme (WFP) were engaged, from January through April, 1992, in a dispute over the particulars of a contract to truck food from the port in Djibouti to camps for Somali refugees in the Hararghe region of Ethiopia, while more than fifty of those refugees were perishing from malnutrition each day.

The UN's endless negotiations with General Aideed and Ali Mahdi during 1992 over the placement of UN peacekeepers to protect relief shipments came at the expense of an immediate opportunity - that of hiring and training some of the militia as police guards, an initiative that potentially would have weakened the position of the two warlords in the process of getting more food moving.

As crisis turned to catastrophe in Soma-
The response of the United States Government to the Somali catastrophe has been schizophrenic. Official U.S. relief agencies and their senior officers have a record of response to the crisis unmatched by UN or other donor government counterparts. Their operational achievements, however, have not been supported with determination or political commitment at higher levels of government.

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While disaster assistance officials were committing significant USG resources to the ICRC and the private relief agencies and pressuring the United Nations to move aggressively in Somalia, the State Department's International Organization Bureau, the U.S. Mission to the UN and the National Security Council were keeping Somalia a low priority on the Security Council agenda and avoiding commitments for multilateral action.

State Department officials indicate that the lack of attention given to the famine in Somalia by Washington (prior to July 1992) stemmed from a lack of media attention (prior to July 1992) and from a system overloaded by concurrent humanitarian crises in Yugoslavia, Iraq and elsewhere (including a non-existent emergency in the former Soviet Union). An anonymous Department source stated that State's Africa Bureau tried but failed to put Somalia on then-Secretary James Baker's agenda and bring the crisis to the attention of the White House. Senior administration officials, the source reasoned, react to headlines and media attention. "There are certain things that are news, others that are not news. For many months, Somalia was not news," the official lamented.

The adoption of a Senate resolution introduced by Senators Paul Simon and Nancy Kassebaum in April which called for "active U.S. initiatives" and encouraging UN and OAU mobilization in response to Somalia was greeted with little interest by the Bush Administration, as had earlier entreaties from within State's Africa Bureau. Indeed, press reports refer to Administration rejection of proposals to put Somalia on the Security Council agenda. The Council did, on January 23, discuss the Somali crisis at the instigation of Cape Verde. The United States delegation, though, insisted upon changing the language of the Cape Verde resolution. The original wording of "to ensure their (the fighting Somali factions) commitment to the cessation of hostilities and promote a cease fire" was altered to "seeking" such a commitment. The signal was clear: the U.S. sought a low level UN investment in the crisis.

Observers from Capitol Hill and within the Administration indicate that at least part of the rationale for not pressuring the UN to do more was a loathing of any potential financial obligations for UN peacekeeping for the U.S., not just for Somalia but for other locations that such a precedent might imply.

Thus, while AID funding was primary in enabling the ICRC to devote an unprecedented fifty percent of its worldwide emergency budget to Somalia, the lack of resolve of the United States in the Security Council contributed to the UN balk ing at both humanitarian and peacekeeping opportunities.

The contradictory response of the U.S. continued until mid-July when media coverage and an emotional cable from the American ambassador in Kenya concerning the famine following a visit to Somali refugee camps were brought to the attention of President George Bush. The president reportedly reacted strongly to the stark reports of hunger and starvation and indicated he "wanted something done."

Something was done, of course, and within a few days the situation was recognized as "the Somalia crisis" by the Departments of State and Defense and the National Security Council. The dramatic U.S. military airlift of...
food commodities into Somalia and northern Kenya was ordered and the U.S. was readying plans for UN resolutions on additional relief and national reconciliation conferences. On August 13, the White House announced that the U.S. would provide air transport for the Pakistani troops who were to be the first contingent of 500 UN peacekeepers in Somalia. (The United States had earlier in the year forced the authorized level of UN peacekeepers for Somalia down to fifty from the proposed 500; the Security Council is currently discussing dispatching up to 3,500 peacekeepers; Ambassador Sahnoun has requested 7,000.)

The deployment of the U.S. military to move relief commodities to hungry Somalis was so rapid as to cause serious concerns among private relief agency workers inside Somalia, who feared increased security threats, and a diplomatic incident with the Kenyan government (the airlift is based in Mombasa), which chose to portray the arrival of the U.S. armed forces as "an invasion." The timing of the announcement -- on the eve of the Republican National Convention and on the heels of the increased press coverage but over six months after the March cease-fire and nine months after relief chief Natsios had described the famine as the world's greatest humanitarian emergency -- was greeted with a high degree of cynicism by many observers.

Regardless of the various motivations that may have spurred the sudden activism, the high profile U.S. attention to the Somalia famine changed the dynamics of the international response. It forced the European and other donor governments to follow suit and embarrassed the UN into taking a more serious approach. Today, the first UN peacekeepers are on the ground and the planes are delivering food (however partial these measures are in resolving the fundamental crisis). The UN has crafted a "next 100 day" strategy that contains some proposals of considerable merit and sophistication. Somalia is on the world's agenda.

The belated mobilization of the United States Government on the Somali crisis illustrates several critical points. Most glaringly, it underscores the highly political nature of U.S. humanitarian assistance programs. At the precise moment the upper echelons of the State Department and the National Security Council were deflecting the pleas for more attention on Somalia, they were busy orchestrating a very high profile and very expensive humanitarian assistance operation in Russia and the other former Soviet republics. From February through June of this year, sums approaching a third of a billion dollars were spent on these "relief" operations. Fortunately for the residents of the former Soviet Union but unfortunately for U.S. credibility, there was no emergency situation present to warrant such an operation. Its objectives were purely political, not humanitarian (especially following sharp criticism of the Administration's stance regarding the former Soviet republics from former President Richard Nixon).

Further, the initial U.S. position in the Security Council underscored a willingness to nakedly calculate political benefits/requirements in relationship to financial costs of multilateral humanitarian operations. Until the Secretary-General's tirade and news media focus forced a change in policy, the U.S. supported minimal UN response to Somalia because no one was challenging such an approach -- despite not because of the conditions on the ground in Somalia. At the time the airlift was announced, conditions were no more or less safe within Somalia than they had been for six months, neither political factors nor logistics had altered, no significant new information had become available. The only difference was that the situation had deteriorated due in large part to inaction on the part of the international community. And... there were more hungry people.

Additionally, the dichotomous U.S. reaction to the Somali famine illuminates the lack of accountability of the U.S. Government's international humanitarian assistance programs -- which of course is precisely the problem at the United Nations as well. Due to weak Congressional oversight and no meaningful input from the private humanitarian community, humanitarian assistance policies and programs are prone to political manipulation by the executive branch. There are no standards, no criteria, no guidelines being violated when huge sums are pumped through "humanitarian" channels for other reasons, such as to the former Soviet republics, at the expense of genuine catastrophes like Somalia.

The response to Somalia of the other traditional Western donor governments basically mirrors that of the United States. The United
Kingdom and Sweden were initially a little more generous than some others. The European Community is active in the emergency airlifts (and many EC governments and Canada were flying in food before the United States). But all of the donors have done too little, too late for too many Somalis and none has particularly demonstrated political will or leadership, replicating the policy -- and moral -- deficit that mars the U.S. record.

C. The OAU, Regional Organizations and the Somali Crisis

However minimal were the expectations or hopes for an effective response to Somalia's agony by the Organization of African Unity, the organization has proven itself to be totally irrelevant as tragedy has unfolded a few hundred miles from its Addis Ababa headquarters. Two years into the turmoil, the OAU has yet to make a significant statement to the international community about humanitarian needs, national reconciliation processes or peacekeeping in Somalia. The OAU Secretary-General has not visited Somalia; no delegation of respected African elders has been dispatched to attempt a dialogue between conflicting factions; no concerted campaign has been launched to place or keep Somalia on the Security Council agenda.

Salim Ahmed Salim, the OAU Secretary-General, issued a press release in mid-December of 1991 condemning the killing of civilians in the Somali civil war and offering his offices to the warring parties for negotiations. The OAU then basically went silent on the subject of Somalia, taking no part in the critical January Security Council deliberations when the United States was acting to limit UN intervention. The OAU was one of the sponsors of the February/March cease-fire talks, but then again went mute.

Through the present, neither the OAU nor the African leaders who comprise the organization have any profile on the Somali crisis. Its principals are not included among the political leaders and public figures who have travelled to Baido, Belet Huen or Mogadishu to register concern and demand a greater response. U.S. Senator Nancy Kassebaum has been to Somalia; the president of Ireland, Mary Robinson, has gone; actress Audrey Hepburn has visited the feeding centers. Not a single OAU representative has followed the lead of French president Francois Mitterand, whose visit to war-torn Bosnia sent such a signal of concern and interest to the victims of that calamity.

State Department officials privately complain of not being able to rouse the OAU or many of its members to issue statements at the United Nations or otherwise join the (belated) attention now given Somalia in New York. Boutros Boutros-Ghali has said much the same, referring to daily telephone calls from European leaders on the Bosnian crisis while the lines from African capitals remain silent.

OAU officials, when pressed on their lack of resolve on Somalia, refer to financial limitations as if money was a prerequisite for political will or expressions of compassion. It may not be realistic to talk of a major African humanitarian assistance program for Somalia; it is not unrealistic, however, to talk of the OAU challenging the conscience of the world as the people of one of its member states expire by the hundreds of thousands.

Those within the UN inclined to avoid any commitment in Somalia predictably have exploited the OAU's position -- or lack of one. Senior officials made statements in television interviews during the Somali civil war period that cited the lack of any OAU action as justification and explanation for the UN's own remote stance (indicating a belief, apparently, that moral leadership requires political pressure).

The only situation in which an African multilateral group has seriously involved itself in any of the continent's civil wars was the ECOWAS/ECOMOG intervention in Liberia -- a situation in which a number of nationals from the intervening states faced death and detention. There is no comparable regional organization in the Horn of Africa, the citizens of no other country are directly affected in Somalia's famine and the OAU, despite the faint indications of a re-thinking of the traditional barriers to "internal interference" has simply not responded to the needs in Somalia. (Exactly how it could be construed that the OAU or its members would be violating Somalia's "sovereignty" in this situation by promoting a national reconciliation process is not clear in any case.)

Indeed, the OAU's most direct addressing of the Somali crisis may be its rejection of a plan for intervening proposed by the Eritreans on the basis of Eritrea's lack of membership in
the OAU. The Eritreans, unlike the OAU, had sent a delegation to Mogadishu during last winter’s warfare.

Neither the Arab League nor the Organization of the Islamic Conference have a record more distinguished than that of the OAU in response to the disintegration of one of their member states.

D. The Non-Governmental Relief Organizations Forced into the Fray

When the final history of the collective response to the Somali crisis is written, the profiles in courage that will emerge are those of the professional staff members of the International Committee of the Red Cross and four private relief agencies which stayed in Somalia during the darkest days of civil war and anarchy to provide hope and comfort to those in need. The four agencies (the International Medical Corps, Save the Children/U.K., Medecins Sans Frontieres, and SOS, an Austrian non-profit) and the ICRC basically assumed the role expected of the United Nations in such situations and in the process saved untold thousands of lives.

Their professionalism in providing relief assistance under the most difficult and complex situations stands in stark contrast to the bungled efforts of the UN agencies. Further, their capacity to perform in such a setting exposes the hollowness (and hypocrisy) of the UN claims that Somalia has simply been too dangerous for their personnel. (As stated above, one expatriate relief worker has been killed in Somalia; a number of peacekeepers, relief workers and journalists have died in Bosnia as part of the multilateral intervention during the same period without eroding the conviction that such intervention was mandatory.)

The ICRC has devoted fifty percent of its entire worldwide emergency budget for the Somali relief effort and has orchestrated mass feeding programs, not a traditional role. It has further set aside its hundred year plus policy of refusing armed escorts. The Red Cross has adapted its posture so radically because to do so has been required in Somalia. It has done what has been necessary and possible within its means to prevent the catastrophe from becoming even worse.

It is not possible in this paper to adequately describe the heroic performance of the ICRC and the private relief agencies. It is obligatory to note, however, that people of conscience around the world are greatly in their debt.

IV. QUESTIONS RAISED, ANSWERS ELUSIVE

The UN as a whole and the Security Council members are now left with examining a number of broad policy issues if the failure and frustration encountered in Somalia and elsewhere are to be understood, their lessons absorbed. A few are referenced below.

First, the question of double-standards has to be probed. The soaring rhetoric employed by Council members and the subsequent mobilization of resources for the Kurds in northern Iraq and the victims of civil strife in the former Yugoslavia stands in startling contrast to Somalia. There is no intent to deny the severity or urgency of either of the other crises in saying that Somalia is simply more extreme if measured in genuine humanitarian terms. The bold and relatively quick collective response to the situation in Kurdistan is well known, and the capacity of the Security Council to construct the authorization for involvement in Iraq's internal affairs for humanitarian reasons is on record. The ongoing response to the crisis in the Balkans involves the deployment of some 13,500 international peacekeepers and the deputization of a former American secretary of state as chief negotiator. Resolutions and authorizations addressing the external intervention in the crisis currently absorb much of the Council's energy.

There are more people at immediate risk in Somalia than in Kurdistan and the Yugoslav cases combined, however, and the lack of a functioning government in Mogadishu expands the rationale for external involvement.

If humanitarian concerns form a legitimate basis for intervention in Iraq and in the former Yugoslavia, they provide ample argument for a more vigorous and determined role in Somalia. If the former cases, however, are not more than exercises in big power political interests being served, then the Security Council must modify its language and the legal basis for such interventions to avoid hypocrisy.

Second, the question of cease-fires be-
The argument can be made that the failure to move on the opportunity to introduce international peacekeepers into Somalia last March has led directly to the current level of violence.

The argument can be made that the failure to move on the opportunity to introduce international peacekeepers into Somalia last March has led directly to the current level of violence -- deemed too dangerous by some for peacekeepers. The lines of conflict are not neatly drawn in this situation. There are a number of self-appointed warlords scrambling for power and position. The bestowing of a veto upon such players simply enhances their arbitrary authority, as the UN has done in the case of General Aideed and Ali Mahdi.

Additionally, the imposition of this criterion illustrates the cost of treating all of Somalia as if the extreme circumstances of Mogadishu were prevalent throughout the country -- which simply has not been the case, but reflects the cost of institutional ignorance of a situation arising from no on-the-ground presence. Opportunities to exploit positives--the relative lack of both violence and the food insecurity in key areas -- that could have served as staging grounds for containing the situation were squandered. Linking initiatives on the humanitarian program front to concurrence to agreements on the positioning of peacekeepers in Somalia has been a major mistake with heavy costs.

Part of the Security Council's examination process must be a focus on the budgetary constraints which hobble its peacekeeping options.

Despite the moral and political imperatives that require determined collective response, the budgetary constraints of the United States Government and the other donor governments facing deficits and recession remain realities. The Secretary-General states in "Agenda for Peace"98 that "the financial foundations of the Organization daily grow weaker, debilitating its political will and practical capacity to undertake new and essential activities." It is obvious that without securing the resources, the UN can be expected to do little and equally obvious that there are likely to be more Somalia-like situations arise. The long neglect of the United Nations by the U.S. and other powers has taken a heavy toll in the professionalism of its agencies. How is that professionalism to be rebuilt without funds? How can members states expect the organization to accept additional responsibilities when they are in arrears? In the Somali case, for example, the evidence is strong that reluctance to face potential assessments was a factor in the United States Government's determination to give the famine low priority; other governments shared the reluctance. How will the gap be filled?

At the same time, however, the UN must rightfully look towards internal reform to recapture both credibility and savings if its budgetary woes are to be seriously addressed. The extent of its ineptitude has been dramatically exposed by the bungled response to Somalia,40 and it is clear that Somalia is but one example of the UN failing to meet its obligations for reasons other than financial constraints. The world public may not be as forgiving as in the past as the shortcomings of the institution are revealed.

The Security Council will need as well to construct guidelines concerning the acceptable safety risks for UN personnel intervening in internal conflict. Much of the UN's problem in operating in Somalia stemmed from its lack of on-the-ground expertise due to the evacuation of its staff and safety was the stated reason for that evacuation. In truth, the UN has operated in more dangerous situations and the risk in Somalia was seemingly an acceptable one -- one accepted by the Red Cross, the small International Medical Corps, Britain's Save the Children Fund and others. The application of the safety question in Somalia strikes many as being disingenuous and comments by Undersecretary Jonah citing the lack of "insurance" for staff as a rationale for not having people in-country underscore the necessity of clear and reasonable guidelines in this area.41

Safety concerns served as an excuse for UN lack of resolve in the Somalia case. That does not imply that safety for staff members is not a legitimate issue that requires exploration and definition.
V. AFTERMATH: NO TIME TO WASTE IN SEEKING REFORMS

By any reasonable standard of judgment, the collective response to the Somali crisis has been a failure -- and a collective one. The cost of the failure has been extremely high. Now, in addition to moving expeditiously on the humanitarian and national reconciliation fronts in Somalia, the international community is left with an examination of what went wrong and what reform measures are to be considered in the aftermath.

A few of the specific issues for the Security Council and the major powers which guide the Council to examine are listed above. These are but some of the troubling questions without immediate answers that stare us in the face as the modalities for collective involvement in internal conflicts are pondered. In addition to modalities and mandates, the UN must as well tackle the issue of the lack of professional capability within its humanitarian agencies. Those who failed so badly in Somalia must answer for those failures if confidence and credibility in the agencies are to be recaptured.

A public airing of all that went wrong with the UN response to Somalia is both warranted and desirable if meaningful reform is to replace floundering and double standard approaches. The United States Government should muster up the fortitude and vision required to see to it that a serious and powerful humanitarian assistance reform commission or task force be impaneled at the United Nations. Concurrently at home, a 'blue ribbon commission' should be convened to review bilateral programs. Both of those bodies should be charged with mapping out a new set of policies to guide programs now venturing into largely uncharted waters.

Ultimately, the most important question is the fundamental one of accountability. To whom are the relief agencies of the United Nations accountable? Who determines when and how the United States Government extends humanitarian assistance in the name of the American public? What is the collective responsibility to people in need who do not merit a special political status or the sustained attention of the media? What is the responsibility if the president is not reached by reports of starving children?

Accountability needs to be established now at the international level and in our bilateral program, which has such disproportionate impact on the efforts of the UN and the other players. Without such accountability, there is no reason to believe that the horrible lessons apparent from the current Somali catastrophe will be absorbed. We will, instead, revisit the same stories of neglect, evasion of responsibility and lack of determination leading to massive suffering in Mozambique, Tajikistan, Zaire or other lands not likely to make a smooth transition in the post-Cold War era.

To fail to act now is a price too high.
Notes


2 An estimate of the relief group Medecins Sans Frontieres/France.


4 See “In the Land of the Living Dead” by Ioan Lewis in The Sunday Times, August 30, 1992.

5 The major Somali clans are the Rahanwein, the Issaq, the Darod, the Dir, the Digil and the Hawiye.

6 See Ioan Lewis, op. cit.

7 According to the Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress.

8 For a critique of an earlier UN failure to meet its obligations to suffering Somalis, see “Hell on Earth: A Trip to Dar Anagi” by Jeffrey Clark in World Refugee Survey, 1992, the U.S. Committee for Refugees, April, 1992.

9 A government recognized by no other to date.

10 Statement of Mr. Andrew Natsios, Assistant Administrator for Food and Humanitarian Assistance, U.S. Agency for International Development, before the House Select Committee on Hunger, January 30, 1992.


12 See “Journey to Hell” by Jeffrey Clark, the U.S. Committee for Refugees, September, 1992.

13 The tonnage of food actually delivered into Somalia has, however, never approached the minimum monthly requirement.

14 In conversations with the author on site in Somalia, August, 1992.

15 Most relief experts concur in stressing the necessity of putting as much food into Somalia through all available channels, including commercial ones, as it takes to diminish its value and the prospects of it being taken at gunpoint.


17 The onset of the 1984/85 famine in Ethiopia was detected and reported from early 1983; many reports from credible observers were largely ignored.

18 The problem with President Reagan’s declaration has been its selective application, even in the Horn of Africa -- a politicizing that distorts the humanitarian assistance efforts of the United States through the present. When those most desperately in need of relief assistance and political protection were the victims of a ruthless and brutal persecution from a government traditionally allied with the U.S., as was the case in the Sudan in 1988/89, the American government failed to register the shrill public protests that characterized its dealings with the neighboring Mengistu regime in 1984 and 1985. When Somalia’s children became hungry, the initial U.S. response was far less vigorous than the concurrent high profile, dramatic response to far less compelling requirements in Russia and the other former Soviet republics. Political calculations, alas, were not to prove irrelevant or even minor considerations as the response to both situations was formulated.


20 The OAU secretariat approached the Global Coalition for Africa in mid-1992 for assistance in considering options for internal conflict resolution mechanisms as it has the U.S. State Department.


24 It seems logical to have included neutral Somali groups and operational units of the UN in the talks; none were invited.


26 As reported to the author during an August 1992 site visit; see “A Journey to Hell,” op. cit.

27 See “UN’s $68m Somali Aid Blunder” by Julie Flint, The Observer, September 6, 1992.

28 See “UN’s Aid Supremo Post Goes to Swede” by Leonard Doyle, The Independent, February 14, 1992, which begins: “A senior Swedish official is to become the new United Nations aid coordinator, taking charge of disaster relief operations worldwide, following the debacle of the slow UN response to the plight of the Kurds last year.”

29 The Agency for International Development’s Humanitarian Assistance Bureau, primarily the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and Food for Peace operations.
AID figures indicate that combined FY 1991 and 1992 relief assistance provided to suffering Somalis totaled some $148 million by the end of August 1992.

Andrew Natsios, AID's humanitarian chief, called for greater UN presence and leadership on the Somali crisis in testimony before the House Select Committee on Hunger on January 30, 1992, as he had earlier.


The analysis is the author’s, who spent seven weeks in the former Soviet Union in early 1992 as head of a humanitarian needs assessment team for the U.S. Government.


See Jane E. Stromseth, op. cit.

See “An Agenda for Peace” by Boutros Boutros-Ghali, United Nations Secretary-General, July, 1992.


See “In Africa, Lost Lives, Lost Dollars: Incompetence, Negligence, Maladministration Among UN Woes” by Keith Richburg, _The Washington Post_, September 21, 1992, in which Mr. Jonah is quoted as saying: “The UN, as it is now, is not structured for emergency situations. How do you cover them (UN staff members) by insurance? It is very difficult to find a credible insurance company to cover them.”