

Internally displaced Somalis face uncertain future after years of state collapse

Executive summary

An enormous task confronts the new President of Somalia, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, if he is to restore security and a functioning government after 13 years of total state collapse. Despite rising expectations in the new government, Somalis continue to flee warfare, which has lasted for over a decade, claimed up to half a million lives and left the country with some of the lowest development indicators in the world. The north-western region has declared itself independent since 1991 and various autonomous administrations have since mushroomed. An estimated 370,000-400,000 people remain internally displaced, more than five per cent of the population. Despite a ceasefire agreed in October 2002, fighting continues intermittently. The security situation is so volatile that President Abdullahi Yusuf, elected in October 2004, cannot work from his own capital and has remained in exile in Kenya. The violence has forced tens of thousands of people to flee their homes again and prevented cultivation in 2004, mainly in the regions of Mogadishu, Gedo, Juba, Shabelle and Galgadud. In addition, some regions are suffering from the worst and longest drought ever experienced since 1974, often with irreversible effects.

The fragmentation of the state has its roots in a military coup in 1969, led by Mohamed Siad Barre; he installed a dictatorial regime, whose divide-and-rule policy succeeded in polarising grievances into clan-based wars and eventually splintered its own support-base. Barre was overthrown in 1991, but the loose anti-government coalition quickly fell apart and proved incapable of changing pre-established war patterns. Since the early 1990s, various warlords have fought to establish hegemony over Somalia's most fertile lands – between the Juba and the Shabelle rivers – and

key ports such as Mogadishu. These fertile regions were traditionally inhabited by minorities who today account for most of the displaced population.

Control over power and resources, notably land, has been the main driving force behind conflict in Somalia. The ethnic map of some areas was redrawn by strong clan militias who dispossessed farmers of valuable and fertile riverine lands in the south. The legitimate inhabitants were killed, evicted or conscripted as forced labour on the lands they once owned. Unless property issues are carefully addressed in the process of peace-building and reconstruction, patterns of illegal occupation will be consolidated and the return of displaced people will be seriously undermined.

Internally displaced people (IDPs) in Somalia are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable as they have lost all their assets and are subject to multiple human rights violations. They do not enjoy protection through clan affiliation; in some parts of the country the de facto authorities do not protect them and often divert humanitarian assistance. Most displaced from southern minority groups continue to suffer political and economic discrimination. Often they are denied access to the most basic services such as water, latrines and education. Women and girls are at risk of being raped by armed men when collecting water or firewood and their makeshift huts offer no protection from assailants.

In the insalubrious urban slums where they flee, they receive little or no assistance and most survive through casual work and begging. Income is barely sufficient for one meal a day, resulting in high malnutrition and mortality rates. Paradoxically, the largest IDP population lives in the country's most dangerous place, Mogadishu, where they are often forced to flee militia clashes and are exploited and abused by the gunmen who control their camps. These "gatekeepers" extort aid rations or money from IDPs and force them to work or evict them when they cannot pay.

In Somaliland, the self-proclaimed Republic in the north-west, displaced people are at risk of deportation from an October 2003 decree. Following a series of killings of foreign aid workers, authorities vowed to expel all "illegal immigrants" who were not of Somaliland origin. Since late 2003, the IDPs have lived in fear of being returned to the conflict-ridden south. In response, local ministries with UN support are planning a registration campaign which is hoped to raise awareness of and ensure respect for the rights of IDPs.

Somaliland, which proclaimed its independence from Somalia in 1991 but has not yet gained international recognition, has been the most successful in establishing peace and moving towards reconstruction. However, authorities there are unlikely to be willing to integrate IDPs locally unless substantial international support is forthcoming. It had to absorb over half a million returning refugees in the past decade with very little external support and is seriously short of water and most basic services.

The new Somali government has a huge task ahead, particularly with regard to sustaining reconciliation and reconstruction throughout the country; demobilising and reintegrating about 55,000 militiamen; controlling weapons; forming a police and military force; re-building a functioning judicial system and establishing mechanisms to share internal revenues, among others. The new President has also asked the African Union to deploy 20,000 peacekeeping troops to consolidate the repeatedly violated 2002 ceasefire.

In addition, the President – and former leader of the self-declared autonomous region of Puntland in the north-east since 1998 – has yet another conflict to manage. Soon after he was sworn in an unconfirmed number of people were killed in clashes over the contested status of the Sool and Sanaag regions. These regions fall within the boundaries of former British Somaliland, but are claimed by Puntland as part of its territory on the basis of clan-affiliation.

Consolidating a functional government and restoring peace and security in a country largely controlled by warlords and free-lance gunmen will surely take time. As long as insecurity prevails, IDPs face an uncertain future and foreign assistance will remain inadequate. However, assistance to communities in existing pockets of security is possible and should be encouraged. Local efforts by civil society, elders and businessmen interested in establishing a more peaceful and secure environment deserve particular support. Unless international financial support for peace and reconstruction is raised drastically, the chances for IDPs to return to their homes and reintegrate will remain illusory.

Key recommendations

To the new government and local authorities of Somalia:

Once the new Federal Somali Government is operational and

exerting authority, it should:

- Abide by their commitments and national obligations towards ensuring adequate protection and assistance of all citizens, including internally displaced people
- provide particular protection to displaced women and IDPs from minority groups not belonging to the clan system or seeking refuge far away from their clan-home area, who are particularly exposed to serious human rights abuses
- establish a functioning judicial system to protect the rights and freedoms of the Somali citizens, including the different minority groups, ethnicities, gender, and clans
- develop strategies for, and implement, the demobilisation and reintegration of militias in order to restore security and create conditions conducive to the return of IDPs
- develop a national strategy for the return and reintegration of IDPs, which should be based on a needs assessment determining the preferred durable solution of the displaced

To the government, local authorities, the UN and donor countries:

- address the complex issue of property restitution to IDPs, to avoid the consolidation of the illegal occupation of land, create conditions for sustainable return, and revive the agricultural sector ensuring food self-reliance

To the UN and donor countries

- contribute to the creation of conditions conducive to return and reintegration, including by
- increasing support to communities in stable and secure areas of the country
- decentralising aid flows to local authorities showing commitment to good governance, as well as to grassroots organisations
- identifying civil society actors including elders, members of local business communities, who have an interest in work for a more peaceful and secure environment and supporting their efforts as way to promote peace, stability and reconstruction

- provide financial assistance, capacity-building and training to local human rights, humanitarian and development organisations
- significantly raise development assistance to facilitate the integration of the 800,000 returning refugees in Somaliland in order to ease social tensions
- ensure that assistance actually reaches IDPs in Somaliland by designing projects which positively discriminate displaced people from south and central Somalia who are often denied access to their rights and to the most basic services
- ensure that projects be designed and implemented on the basis of needs assessments and sound socio-cultural and economic analysis in order to provide IDPs with adequate assistance
- mainstream protection throughout assistance and development activities targeted at IDPs

To the Somaliland authorities and the UN

- implement the planned registration of IDPs as a step towards recognising them as uprooted people in need of assistance and having the right to stay or return when conditions have improved in their areas of origin
- train and sensitize authorities about IDPs' rights and their responsibility towards the displaced
- train and properly inform IDPs about the registration so that they can be fully involved in the process