

## **Reconciliation is as elusive as ever; Somalia**

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Faltering peace moves in Somalia

A chance of a proper peace any time soon looks slim

AN ATTEMPT at national reconciliation finally sputtered into life this week in Somalia's battered capital, Mogadishu. Insecurity had delayed proceedings several times before. The place is as dangerous as ever, but the transitional government sounds more determined. Somalia's internationally recognised but hitherto ineffective president, Abdullahi Yusuf, declared that "not even a nuclear bomb" would distract Somalia's tribal elders from their task of finding a way forward. But few people are betting on success.

Indeed, after opening speeches on July 15th, work was promptly adjourned; the organisers said they needed to wait for more participants. But mortars landing around the bullet-riddled garage serving as a conference hall did not help. An insurgency led by the Shabab ("young men"), a hardened jihadist remnant of the militias loyal to the Islamic Courts Union that briefly ran most of Somalia until it was overthrown by an Ethiopian-led force earlier this year, says it will kill anyone who takes part. Somalia's authorities, backed by Ethiopian troops, have sealed off large parts of the city.

Tribal elders have chattered their way through dozens of reconciliation meetings since Somalia's central government collapsed in 1991. This time there may be a slightly better chance of groping towards a peace deal leading to elections proposed for 2009, especially if the elders can agree on some relatively simple issues, such as policing, taxation and schools, among other things.

The Shabab know their cause will be in jeopardy if they cannot scotch this latest attempt at reconciliation. Al-Qaeda, which is devoting a lot of rhetoric and resources to turning the Horn of Africa into a new battleground, is equally keen to prevent it from getting anywhere. Much will depend on whether Mr Yusuf and his prime minister, Mohammed Ghedi, can be persuaded to invite moderate Islamists and elders from the Hawiye clan, which predominates in Mogadishu and has been broadly hostile to the government.

In its confusion and scope, there are similarities between what is being tried in Somalia and the setting up of the loya jirga ("grand assembly") to

draft a new constitution in late 2003 in Afghanistan. The difference is that rich and powerful countries have promised virtually nothing towards rescuing Somalia--and Mogadishu is far more dangerous than Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, was three years ago, particularly for foreigners. Moreover, elsewhere in north-east Africa the mayhem in the Sudanese region of Darfur has grabbed far more attention in international forums.

The African Union, too, has failed to address Somalia effectively. Only Uganda has so far sent peacekeepers, while other African countries make increasingly feeble excuses for their refusal to help out. Diplomats whose governments have been paying for Somalia's reconciliation conference are unlikely to attend, for fear of being blown up or shot.

Meanwhile, many Somalis are dying of diseases worsened by malnutrition and drowning in overloaded smugglers' boats in large numbers as they seek a better life elsewhere. The economy is still a wreck. In recent weeks Somali businessmen have been flying back to the safety of Nairobi, the capital of neighbouring Kenya, along with their money. Mogadishu's big Bakara market has been closed for days; when it is open, grenades and gunfire take the fun out of shopping. And as the reconciliation conference fails to take off in earnest, the danger grows that Mogadishu will soon slide back into anarchy.

GRAPHIC: Come back tomorrow, maybe