

## **Kenyan writer ponders whether Somalia is "a failed state"**

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While opening a Somali peace meeting in Mogadishu last Thursday [19 July], Prime Minister Mohamed Gedi departed from the usual cries about a failed state and asked his countrymen to build on the many positives around them.

He said: "As a country, we have been given as many negative tags: A failed state, a terrorist haven and the country that deleted the word peace from the dictionary."

Then he reminded them: "But we know ourselves better. We know the great potential of our people, our great business skills, and our hard work."

If you are a first-time visitor to Mogadishu on an occasional good day when the warring parties in the capital have "declared" cease-fire, you would not find it difficult agreeing with Premier Gedi.

Indeed, you would find it hard to believe all the jazz about Somalia being the world's most dangerous place to live in besides Iraq.

Of course, most buildings in Mogadishu have no roofs courtesy of aerial bombings, and most windows have been shattered by bullets.

But in the absence of chaos on the day of the visit, you would easily be convinced that the battle tell-tale signs are throw-backs from the World War II.

How come? Believe it or not, on a "normal" day, Mogadishu functions better than Nairobi. The telephone system, both fixed and wireless, is unclogged. Traffic flow is smooth and fast. Taps run with clean drinking water, and electricity supply is uninterrupted.

Yes. In an "ordinary" day, communication with the outside world and business transactions are faster in Mogadishu than anything you can dream of in Dar es Salaam or Kampala. And it takes - Telkom Kenya should hear this - only three days to have a fixed line installed in your premises upon application in Somalia.

The situation on the ground in Somalia is best captured in a World Bank report prepared by economists Tatiana Nenova and Tim Harford and released last month.

The report has interesting data on the so called failed state. The population

living on less than a dollar a day in Somalia is 43 per cent compared to the 47 per cent and 45 per cent averages in the Horn of Africa and West Africa, respectively.

Adult literacy in Somalia is at 81 per cent. The averages for the Horn and West Africa are, 35 per cent and 49 per cent respectively.

Telephone lines per million people in the country are 15, but 10 and 9 for the same population in the Horn and West Africa, respectively, while the kilometre tarmac/population ratio is the same for Somalia, the Horn and West Africa.

The World Bank report reckons that despite the war and absence of a central authority in Somalia, entrepreneurs are bridging the gap there by lowering rates of extreme poverty.

Somali entrepreneurs have applied two methods to beat the hurdle of absence of a central authority.

First, they have "imported" governance by relying on foreign institutions to control and regulate vital sectors. That includes airline safety, currency stability, and company law.

In the second tier, they engage the entrenched Somali clan system and other local networks to enforce contract enforcement as well as payment and transmission of funds. For instance, through this system, Somalis scattered all over the world are able to send home a billion dollars every year, funds which reach every remote corner of the country.

Sheer determination by the Somali private sector has buoyed up different sectors to levels not known in the days of Siad Barre.

In 1991, for example, the national airline had just one plane plying one route. Today, there are 15 air companies with 60 aircraft between them, operating on six international routes and over a dozen local destinations.

Somalia now has 112,000 fixed lines from just 17,000 at the time Siad Barre was chased out of town.

All this means that Somalis can really go places if they so wish. But first they have to decide whether they want to live together as a nation. Short of that they can continue squandering the great potential they have and remain the laughing stock of the world. It really is a matter of choice.