

## Review

# Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia in 2006: Motives and lessons learned

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Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia in late 2006 may go down in history as one of the most daring if not imprudent strategic decision any African government has made on its neighbor. Ethiopia's actions to invade Somalia gets more perplexing, considering it seemed unprovoked and should have been more circumspective given Ethiopia's own history as a victim of unprovoked invasion by Italy and its myriad internal economic challenges. Even if Ethiopia's goal of going into Somalia had been purely humanitarian, the nearly two decades of instability there and the history of irredentism and distrust between the two countries should have given Ethiopia pause to be prudent. Although not without precedent, it is still unusual for one African country to invade another country on the scale Ethiopia did and fight a war that was guaranteed to be bloody. Self-defense, which Ethiopia claims as reason for its military action, raises doubt and compels an examination of the real motives for its actions in Somalia. This study explores what these motives could have been. Using historical evidence and those from contemporary sources, the study catalogs the violence that followed the invasion and how Ethiopia's action aggravated Somalia's endemic social and political ills. Ethiopia's actions in Somalia could not have accomplished their objectives given the fact Somalia has plunged deeper into anarchy since the invading troops left its soil. It has also been costly both to the invader and the invaded. Other African countries can learn an invaluable lesson from Ethiopia's experience not to start an audacious incursion into foreign territory without an unimpeachable reason.

**Key words:** Ogaden war, the Derg, Islamists, refugees, Horn of Africa, piracy, pan-Somalism.

## INTRODUCTION

In October 26, 2008; Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the main opposition, the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS), completed a peace agreement that called for the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces. The agreement was supposed to go into effect on November 5, when Ethiopian troops would begin withdrawing from certain parts of Somalia ("Government, Opposition Alliance", 2008). On November 27, the Ethiopian government, probably recognizing that this agreement sabotaged its country's mission, announced in Addis Ababa that Ethiopian forces would withdraw by the end of 2008. Ethiopian troops leaving only after a two-year sojourn in Somalia, however, did not put to rest the perplexing questions arising from Ethiopia's decision to invade its neighbor, especially when Ethiopia's stated objective for taking that action seemed perverse. Besides, Ethiopia's internal problems which include a scotched-earth war with Eritrea and a fragile climate that pushes millions of farmers to the brink every

year should have made the government more cautious in embarking on a mission of war in a foreign country.

This study offers probable reasons why Ethiopia invaded Somalia by analyzing three questions concerning the motives that could have prompted the government to undertake such an audacious action. First, did Ethiopia invade Somalia to bolster its own security? Second, was the invasion a heartfelt attempt by Ethiopia to help Somalia to overcome the anarchical and humanitarian crises that have encumbered Somalia for nearly two decades? Finally, was Ethiopia simply doing the bidding of the United States, its benefactor, which since the 9-11 terrorist attack, had been apprehensive of Islamic militants gaining a foothold in the Horn of Africa, one of the most heavily trafficked sea-lanes to the Middle East? In addressing these questions, this study is drawn to look at the relationship that has existed between Somalia and Ethiopia in the past hundred years or so. This relationship has been filled with resentment, suspicion and even

occasional mutualism.

Border incursions between one African country and another are not new even though they are infrequent; considering the misunderstanding that exists among several countries about the exact location of their border. A clash when it occurs, not surprisingly, has usually been about one country seeking to gain an unequivocal edge in its claim to territory which it believes had been lost through encroachment. A handful of such clashes that have occurred in recent history such as the nondescript conflict in Northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), have been motivated by irredentism when Tutsi and Hutu militias on the other side of the border in Rwanda and Burundi have meddled in DRC's affairs. In the 1970s and 1980s, Libyan troops often clashed with Chadian troops over the "Aouzou strip," a land that straddles their common border and is reputedly rich in uranium. From the early 1990s security forces from Nigeria and Cameroon clashed regularly over Bakassi, a triangular-shaped land wedged between the two countries, until the International Court of Justice ruled in 2002 to award ownership to Cameroon. The most brazen invasion by one African country of another, however, was King Hassan of Morocco ordering the take-over of the Western Sahara in the "Green March" of 1975, in which 350,000 civilians crossed the border shortly after Spain had announced plans to leave the colony (Pazzani, 1994).

### **AN UNEASY TANGLED PAST**

Ethiopia and Somalia share a history defined simultaneously by shared and contrasting ethnic, economic and political circumstances. According to the World Development Report (WDR, 2008), since 2000, Ethiopia has enjoyed unprecedented economic growth, which averaged 11% yearly from 2004 to 2008. Somalia, on the other hand has had a slight annual economic growth restricted by instability and war, even though the World Bank reported a growth rate of 2.9% in 2007. With a population of 72.6 million (2006), Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa. Somalia has a population of only 8 million. Although Ethiopia is one of the Africa's oldest nations, it is also one of the poorest with a reported per capita income of \$200 in 2006, well below the \$840 which was the World Bank's per capita estimate for sub-Saharan Africa. The two countries also share a conflictual political history, which has remained virile by each side's claim to the Ogaden, which is the territory that straddles their border.

The Ogaden is a vast, ill-defined region occupied by Somali nomads extending southeast from Ethiopia's Southern highlands. The confusion over the precise location of the border between Ethiopia and the former Italian possessions in Somalia dates from the colonial times. Under Emperor Menelik, Ethiopia entered the

Somali region in the late 1890s, basing his action on old claims of Ethiopian sovereignty (Turner, 1993). This placed the British Protectorate authority in an awkward position, since Great Britain had signed treaties with Somali clan members for protection (Lewis, 1965). From the mid 1930s, Ethiopia was governed by Emperor Haile Sellassie I until his overthrow in 1974 in a military coup. According to Schraeder (2005), the future basis for some degree of pan-Somali nationalism emerging was provided by the temporary unification of significant portions of Somali-inhabited territory by Italians, adding Ethiopia's Ogaden region to Italian Somaliland after occupying Ethiopia in 1935. In the 1940s, Italy again added the conquered British Somaliland territory to Ethiopia.

When Britain reoccupied the territory in 1941, it placed all the Somali occupied territory in the Horn, except Djibouti, under one unified administration. In 1945, Haile Sellassie, fearing the possibility of British support for a separate Somali state that would include the Ogaden, claimed Italian Somaliland as a "lost state." When the British evacuated the Ogaden in 1948, Ethiopia officially took over running the largest city in the Ogaden. Great Britain which governed British Somaliland tried to resolve the dispute between Somalia and Ethiopia over the Ogaden and the Haud, a region that extends southeast from Ethiopia's Southern highlands. Somalia, on her part, refused to recognize any pre 1960 treaties defining the Somali-Ethiopia border, resulting in military incidents only a few months into Somalia's independence. Post independence politics in Somalia, predictably, centered on pan-Somalism, which translated to unifying all areas populated by Somalis into one country. The national flag, which displayed five stars, had points representing those areas claimed as part of the Somali nation, including the Ogaden, Djibouti and the Northern frontier district in Kenya (Rinehart, 1982).

Incidents between Ethiopia and Somalia across their common border deteriorated in 1960 and at first were confined to minor clashes arising from such mundane sources as smuggling, livestock rustling, or tax collecting rather than from irredentist agitation. Brown (1961) characterizes the Ethiopian-Somaliland border dispute as a "volcano", however, for being dormant for long periods, nevertheless still active and always likely to erupt. The problem arose, as Brown saw it, from several Somalis, ethnically related to the inhabitants of Somalia, living in parts of the Ethiopian territory known as the Ogaden. Somali ambition not only looked to the possibility of a reacquisition of the grazing lands of the Haud, but also to uniting all Somali peoples under one flag and within one territorial unit. In February 1964, however, a serious armed conflict erupted along the entire Somali-Ethiopian border and Ethiopian war planes conducted raids well within Somalia (Reinhart, 1982). While the Somali government sought to gain support for pan-Somalism within a broader context of pan-Africanism, Ethiopia consistently opposed the union of the Somali territories

and favored instead a federation with her. More important, that about three-quarter million Somalis still lived in the Haud and Ogaden, regions which were governed by Ethiopia, did not forebode amicable relations between Ethiopia and Somalia (Lewis, 1963).

## **BARRE, MENGISTU AND MENAWI**

Siad Barre's rule which lasted from 1969 to 1991 was authoritarian (Ghalib, 1997; Ali, 2007). From the early years of his rule to 1977, he adopted scientific socialism on Marxist-Leninist lines which soured relations with the United States. The Soviet Union gave the Somali military weapons and technical support until Siad Barre ended the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. In turning to the Soviet Union, Barre was simply reaffirming the important strategic breakthrough Moscow had achieved in 1963 when the Republic of Somalia announced that it would accept a \$30 million military aid offer from the Soviet Union (Lefebvre, 1998). In a dramatic turnabout, however, Somalia turned to the United States in 1977 and quickly received military support. Internally, however, Barre was intolerant and tightened his repression of broad-based national opposition groups. The division between government and the opposition became stark following the abortive Ogaden invasion, the aftermath of which provoked human rights violations, political repression and discrimination against certain groups. According to Sorensen (1995), government repression reinvigorated clan divisions and made several opposition groups such as the Somali Salvation Front, Somali Salvation Democratic Front and the United Somali Congress to form. Militants consisting of ragtag armies of groups and clans waged an intense war against Siad Barre that eventually overthrew his government. These groups under the umbrella of the United Somali Congress formed a provisional government after Barre's overthrow. Long before Barre's government fell, however, Somalia's civil society including the armed forces, the police force, the People's Militia, government ministries, the People's Assembly and schools and health institutions had stopped functioning (Metz, 1993).

In January 1974, opposition to Haile Sellassie had reached its peak and the military moved in to depose and arrest him. According to Tiruneh (1993), the main actors of the popular uprising included not only the armed forces but teachers, students, trade unions and civil servants. Without these groups collaborating, he argues, the armed forces would have found it difficult to put up a successful resistance against Haile Sellassie's government. In June 1974 the Derg (Dergue), made up of young military officers, was formed. The Derg transformed Ethiopia's stultifying social system by removing the old political and social structures rather than changing them (Schwab, 1985). The military rulers set up a socialist state based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism led by the Workers' Party of Ethiopia. The early optimism Ethiopians had about

about the Derg soon became a nightmare, however, as it became increasingly bloody, arresting and murdering opponents of the revolution (Henze, 2000). In May 1991, Mengistu's regime was overthrown by a coalition of forces led by Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Front (EPRDF) (Ofcansky and Berry, 1991). The EPRDF under Zeles Menawi has kept an iron grip over Ethiopia. This feat was performed by the EPRDF capitalizing on its commanding position to consolidate power in the early years after the overthrow of Mengistu Haile Mariam. According to Lyons (1996), one strategy the EPRDF adopted at the National Conference that drew the Transitional Charter was to reach beyond its original base by inviting disparate political groups. The EPRDF, however, kept participation, the agenda and therefore the eventual outcome firmly under its careful control.

## **SEEKING ETHIOPIA'S SECURITY**

### **The Ogaden War and its aftermath**

In answering whether Ethiopia invaded Somalia to guarantee its own security, it is fair to admit that leaders of the two countries, especially since Somalia's independence, have kept a topsy-turvy relationship marked by skirmishes and wars. When Somalia got independence in 1960, it directed its internal security concern to preventing Ethiopia from dominating affairs in the Horn of Africa. The boldest step Somalia took to challenge Ethiopia's dominance in the Horn so far was to support insurgents planning to withdraw from Ethiopia. This insurgency led to the Ogaden War that lasted from 1977 to 1978. The government of Somalia was trying to take advantage of the turmoil in Ethiopia caused by the overthrow of Haile Sellassie and the bloodletting the Derg was perpetrating on opponents of the revolution. The Somali government threw its support behind the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), which was a pro-Somali liberation group in the Ogaden, planning to withdraw. The initial support the Barre government gave the WSLF was covert and when Ethiopia accused President Barre of interference, he replied that only "volunteers" had been given leave from the army to fight. By September 1977, however, regular Somali troops' involvement in the conflict could no longer be disguised, as they had pushed some 700 kilometers into Ethiopian territory and captured a provincial capital (Tiruneh, 1993). By the end of 1977, Somali forces had captured 60% of the Ogaden (Ofcansky, 1992). Ethiopia blames the Ogaden war on Somalia's irredentism, a wish by Siad Barre to annex the Ogaden area of Ethiopia (Turner, 1993).

Desperate for help, Mengistu Haile Mariam, the leader of the Derg, turned to the Soviet Union which obliged by providing military supplies and advisers, as the Soviets simultaneously cut off supplies for the Somali army. This triggered what Lewis calls a "seismic shift in superpower alignments in the Horn of Africa" (1989: 575), as Cuba

sent troops to help the Ethiopian army. On his part, Siad Barre turned to the United States and friendly Arab countries for economic and military help. Nevertheless, the WSLF with its Somali military support was defeated in 1978 and Siad Barre forbade the WSLF from using Somali territory to attack Ethiopia. In retaliation for Somalia's misdeeds, Ethiopia in the early 1980s provided sanctuary and support for the Somali National Movement (SNM), which was a dissident group formed by Isaaq exiles in London to overthrow the Barre's government. Discontented the President had not represented their interests, the Isaaq conducted guerrilla raids against Somali government-held territory from Dira Dawa, Ethiopia. President Barre responded by launching a military campaign to the north against the Isaaq.

After the fall of Siad Barre in 1991, the United Somali Congress (USC), one of the rebelling factions competing for control, became dominant. Competition and alliances between groups such as the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) and Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM) eventually resulted in the collapse of the USC leadership. The political vacuum created led to the resurgence of clan identities which has always been an integral part of Somali culture. Conflicting ambitions among clan leaders was largely responsible for the civil war and the social and political instability that defined the lives of Somalis in the 1990s. According to Adam (1999), differences between United Somali Council (USC) leaders Ali Mahdi of the Agbal clan and General Mohamed Farah Aidid of the Habar Gedir clan, were the most notable. When Ali Mahdi declared himself "interim president," Aidid's faction of the USC rejected that claim. The rift among clans widened as they fought for control of various towns. By 1992 Somalia had collapsed as a state caused largely by dispute among clans. Hunger, famine and deaths ravaged the country. According to Metz (1993), living standards worsening rapidly in Somalia, was caused not only by civil war but the drought in central and southern Somalia that left hundreds of thousands starving. By August 1992, Somali refugees that had settled in neighboring countries were estimated at 500,000 in Ethiopia, 300,000 in Kenya, 65,000 in Yemen, 15,000 in Djibouti and about 100,000 in Europe. United Nations peacekeepers sent to Somalia were met by warlords that resented their presence, resulting in deadly assaults on them. Out of humanitarian concern, however, United States marines were sent to Somalia to bolster the United Nations peacekeepers. Deadly assaults on United States troops caused their withdrawal in 1993.

### Islamic courts

Ethiopia's apprehension about Islamic courts' growing influence in Somalia might have precipitated its military action. The militias fighting in Mogadishu work under Islamic courts system which flourished in early 1990

when the rebels fighting Siad Barre set up those courts instead of a national police force. Anderson (1977) admitted that Sharia law had reined supreme in the Muslim world for several decades even though since 1960, there had been a slow and cautious relaxation of its exclusive sway. In Somalia, for example, the passage of a Family Law in 1975 reformed Islamic law. The law resulted in significant changes in the legal position of women such as the right to inherit property equal to that of males, sharing the expenses of a matrimonial home and supporting children. Besteman (1999) credits the success of Islamic courts in Somalia to the Islamic faith being one of the horizontal identities that cuts across clan lines. In the 1990s, the Islamic courts focused on reducing petty crimes such as theft and banditry and resolved local disputes as the courts influence grew among clan leaders. Ethiopia fearing the growing influence of these courts tried to meddle in Somalia's affairs in the 1990s, when government forces repeatedly clashed with Islamic backed militias. In 1999, factional leaders in Somalia lodged a complaint with the Security Council over a border incursion by Ethiopian forces. According to Somali sources, heavily armed Ethiopian troops entered towns along the border and allegedly took over local administration and detained officials in the towns ("Somalia Protests Ethiopian", 1999). The two Somali leaders at the time, Ali Mahdi and Hussein Aideed, issued a joint statement calling on both the Security Council and the Organization of African Unity (AU) to intervene to end Ethiopia's aggression.

In 2000, several Islamic courts formed Somalia's Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) to consolidate resources and power based on Islamic doctrine rather than within clan lines. However, the Islamic Courts' role in running Somalia met with mixed reaction. They were able to bring a likeness of law and order to a disorderly country by setting up schools and arbitrating internal disputes and dramatically reducing violence in areas under their control. A profile of the courts in 2006 showed eleven autonomous courts in Mogadishu alone whose roles included approving transactions such as buying houses and cars, overseeing weddings and divorces and expanding their authority across most of the capital while staying out of politics ("Somali's Islamic Courts", 2006). The factions that make up the Islamic Courts are distinguished by their interpretation of Islamic Sharia law, with the most conservative interpreting the law exactly to the letter. A militant group, al-Shabab, for example, which controls Southern Somalia, has been authoritarian and unaccountable, as opposed to Islamists who control the capital. Al-Shabab caused the stoning death of a 13-year old woman who allegedly committed adultery. The woman's aunt told reporters the teenager had in fact been raped by three armed men ("Somalis Grow Fearful", 2008). Human rights activists have protested other types of extreme punishment that Islamists have imposed such as stoning suspected homosexuals. The Islamic Courts'

ascendancy in Mogadishu and the region around it raised concern in the United States about a future Somalia government being unduly swayed by those courts. The 9-11 attacks in the United States aggravated another fear that Somalia would soon become a haven for terrorists. The United States, in fact, had linked one court, the Al Itihad al Islami, with an estimated membership of 50,000 - 60,000, to the Al Qaeda terrorist network. The Ethiopian government also actively supported the overthrow of Al Itihad, fearing that importing radical Islamists into restive Somalia would also risk security in Ethiopia (Le Sage, 2001).

In 2004, a regional body called the Inter-Governmental Authority on Trade and Development (IGAD) comprising Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia set up the Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) to restore peace and order. In August 2004 a transitional government called the Transitional Federal Institutions (TFI) was formed following settlement among several factions. The TFI included a transitional parliament, the Transitional Federal Assembly, a transitional president, a prime minister and a cabinet known as the Council of Ministers. In October 2004, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed was elected the Transitional Federal President of Somalia. Selecting Abdullahi Ahmed seemed a vindication for Ethiopia's covert involvement in Somalia, since the Ethiopian government considered him an ally. Backed by the African Union and the United Nations Security Council, the Transitional Federal Government was given the international recognition the Islamic Courts lacked.<sup>1</sup> The TFG's support, however, was confined to Southern Somalia. Despite the threat of sectarianism, Islamic militants were unified by their singular goal of undermining the legitimacy of the TFG. Until he was forced to resign in December 2008, after conceding that Islamist insurgents had overtaken much of the country and that he had been unable to unify the unendingly fragmented Somali nation, Yusuf Ahmed's presidential authority had repeatedly been undermined by the Islamist groups.

It came as no surprise, therefore, that the Ethiopian parliament passed a resolution in November 2006 to allow the government "to take all necessary steps to ward off attacks by the Islamic Council in Somalia." This was a euphemism for Ethiopian forces to cross the border into Somalia, which they subsequently did in December 2006. Mogadishu quickly fell and the Islamic militants were dislodged. At their peak, Ethiopian troops numbered 3,000. The TFG also raised its own force that fought alongside the Ethiopian troops. The Ethiopians initially stated that they would stay in Ethiopia only for a few weeks, but the war became protracted and stretched for two years. The Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) mobilized an opposition made up of clan militias and other insurgent groups that were united in their common goal of defeating the invading Ethiopian troops. It was not until Mogadishu fell into the hands of Ethiopian forces in

January 2008, the TFG President, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, set foot there. It was a symbolic victory not only for the TFG, but also Ethiopia, for achieving its short-term diplomatic and strategic objective of installing a government that it believed would be deferential. In mid 2008 the Ethiopian government announced that it would leave Somalia by the end of the year.

## AN ACT OF HUMANITARIANISM

The flow of refugees to and from Ethiopia and Somalia has highlighted the history of warfare and doubt about human existence the two countries share. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2000) Report in 2006 credits the large refugee movement in the Horn of Africa in the late 1970s and early 1980s to war and famine. Many Ethiopians, including Eritreans-who used to be Ethiopian nationals-sought refuge in Sudan, Somalia and Djibouti. At the same time, many Sudanese and Somalis also sought refuge in Ethiopia. The defeat of Somali-backed forces in the Ogaden War led to hundreds of thousands of ethnic Somalis in Ethiopia's Ogaden, fearing reprisals for their involvement in the violence, fleeing to Somalia. Another 45,000 went to Djibouti.<sup>2</sup> As security in Somalia worsened in 1991 following the fall of Siad Barre, Somali refugees poured into Ethiopia, compelling the UNHCR to open several camps along their common border. When the internal conditions in Somalia worsened again in 2001, another wave of refugees crossed into Ethiopia. The UNHCR set up eight camps to hold more than 200,000 refugees. Even though the UNHCR had an active repatriation program, many Somali refugees continued to live in Ethiopia ("Ethiopia: Second of Eight", 2001).

When Ethiopia invaded Somalia in 2006, Somali refugees poured into Ethiopia. The first group of 4,000 that arrived in the Feferi Ber camp in Ethiopia in early 2007, was given a rousing welcome by Ethiopians and immediately granted refugee status by the UNHCR and the Ethiopian government. From April 2006 to July 2007, an estimated 23,000 Somali refugees crossed the border into Ethiopia with thousands more Somalis remaining in remote, difficult-to-reach border areas ("UNHCR Start", 2007). An UNHCR account of Somali refugees from 1996 to 2005 shows a grim statistic about the plight of Somali civilians who have borne the brunt of endless conflict in their country. Because eastern Somalia is almost flanked by Kenya and Ethiopia, most Somali refugees by default, choose Ethiopia or Kenya as their preferred destination. By December 2008, the UNHCR reported some 230,000 Somalis living in rows of emergency tents in Dadaab, Kenya, described as one of the world's oldest, largest and most congested refugee sites. Resources in overcrowded camps have been stretched dangerously thin ("Somali Refugees Suffer", 2009). Even though the Kenyan government closed its border with Somalia in

early 2007 to stem the flow of refugees, they continued to pour in. This prompted security forces in Kenya to forcibly repatriate some of these refugees even though the authorities in Kenya denied the allegation.

### DOING AMERICA'S BIDDING

When Haile Sellassie ruled, Ethiopia's relations with the United States were cordial but not excessively active (Lefebvre, 1998). The relations took a dramatic turn for the worse, however, after the fall of Haile Sellassie and during the reign of the Marxist-Leninist Derg which inextricably aligned itself with the Soviet Union. America's relations with Ethiopia have experienced resurgence, however, since the overthrow of Mengistu's government in 1991 and the ascendancy of the Ethiopia's People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In 2001 the importance of improved relations between Ethiopia and the United States was underscored when Islamic jihadists bombed the World Trade Center. The United States considers Ethiopia a pro-Christian nation and by inference, its government being disinclined to show any leaning to sponsor international terrorism of the kind some Islamic countries would do.<sup>3</sup> Ethiopia's neighbors of Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, Egypt and the autonomous regions of Puntland and Somaliland being Islamic, also gives added poignancy to the friendship the United States intends to keep with Ethiopia. United States and Ethiopia's security concerns in the Horn have become intertwined by their common suspicion of Islamist-backed militias gaining ascendancy in war-torn Somalia. If those fears came about, that would mean the United States keeping around-the-clock vigilance to prevent militants infiltrating its military base in Djibouti and Ethiopia also policing its long border with Somalia. On the other hand if Ethiopia could help stabilize the quagmire in Somalia by crushing the Islamists and helping to install a government it could trust, Ethiopia and the United States could reap a big peace dividend.

George Bush, the former United States President and Condoleezza Rice, the Secretary of State, refused to admit to United States involvement in Ethiopia's invasion, even though the invasion carried an imprint of the United States. The strategic benefit the invasion promised, it seemed, was Ethiopia scoring a decisive victory against insurgents when they looked most vulnerable. Somalia might not be able to raise an army to repel an invasion when the country had not had an effective central government for fifteen years. This imperativeness of defeating Somalia through armed conflict must have been strong among Ethiopian government officials and military planners. These officials should have known, however, that if Ethiopia invaded Somalia, even for humanitarian reasons, it would still leave a deep wound in the minds of the Somalis for some time. The United States shadowy but overbearing presence over Ethiopia

in its decision to invade Somalia could not be discounted. The common security interests the United States and Ethiopia shared in the Horn, probably short-circuited any thoughtful analysis of the ramifications on politics and security arising from Ethiopian troops crossing the border. While top officials of the Bush administration discreetly avoided volunteering information that would have suggested United States complicity in Ethiopia's invasion, lower administration officials, on the other hand were not so careful. A US State Department spokesperson stated rather paternalistically: "Ethiopia's attack is a response to aggression by Islamists and an attempt to stem the flow of outside arms shipments to them. Washington is also concerned about reports the Islamists were using soldiers and abusing Ethiopian prisoners of war" ("US Backs Ethiopia", 2006).

Observers critical to the invasion have not been so complimentary. Prendergast and Thomas-Jensen (2007) claim recent US policy in the Horn of Africa including Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Uganda have worsened security in the region. Stemming the spread of terrorism and extremist ideologies has become such an overwhelming strategic objective for Washington that it has overshadowed US efforts to resolve conflicts and promote good governance. An Ethiopian-born freelance journalist, Tesfamariam (2007) criticized her country's government. "The mercenary Meles Zenawi was willing to offer Ethiopian forces to carry out Washington's agenda for Somalia. The end justifies the means, especially when it is Ethiopian lives that have to be sacrificed."

Since World War II, the United States has shown a long-standing interest in the Horn of Africa especially about its relations with Ethiopia, the most populous country in the region. In 1953, when neither Somalia nor Djibouti were independent, the United States signed a mutual-defense treaty with Ethiopia which laid the basis for modernizing the Ethiopian military, maintaining Ethiopia's internal security, its self-defense and permitting the United States to participate in the defense of the area (Schwab, 1985). Today, the United States keeps a permanent military base in Djibouti which shares a border with Somalia. Before Ethiopia's invasion, the United States had been supporting clan-based militias opposed to the Islamist-led government. Crushing Islamic terrorists in Somalia from where they could launch attacks on American soldiers seemed a sound decision of preemption. In 2001, President Bush took a sweeping, although largely symbolic action against Somalia through the U.S. Patriot Act, when it listed unregulated money transfer agencies in Somalia as funding terrorism. In November 2001, President Bush announced the U.S. had moved to block the assets of 62 organizations and individuals associated with "two investment and money moving networks of terror-al Barakaat and Al Taqwa." According to the President, these two financial networks, which are tied to Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, were raising money for terror ("Terrorist Financial Network Fact Sheet".

2001).

Diplomatically and logistically, the benefit the United States would get by using Ethiopian troops as proxy to fight a war in Somalia seemed to outweigh the cost of the United States doing the invasion itself or doing nothing. Because the United States image had been battered by invading Iraq, it could ill-afford to open another avenue for criticism by invading a poor African country. Besides, the United States military had been stretched thin by its operations in Iraq and Afghanistan to send additional troops to the Horn. Ethiopia, on the other hand could invade Somalia for a cause or no cause at all and relatively cheaply. To compensate Ethiopia for its effort, the United States provided military and economic help and continues to do so. Such help is not new, however, since the United States has been a long-time benefactor of Ethiopia even in the early 1960s when Emperor Haile Sellassie kept a positive but lukewarm friendship with the United States. The most significant economic help the United States gave Ethiopia, however, came in the mid-1980s when that country suffered one of the worst droughts in history. Through the African Famine Relief Act, the United States Congress granted assistance to Ethiopia and other nations in crisis.<sup>4</sup>

### **Assistance and complicity**

In August 2007, the United States announced that it was providing \$19 million in emergency aid for Ethiopia's volatile Ogaden region. Most of the aid was intended to provide food relief through the United Nations World Food Program. Famine hit Ethiopia in 2008 as it had in the past three decades. In August, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) announced that it was hastening shipping 24,000 metric tons of food aid for the millions of people in need of relief.<sup>5</sup> In October 2007, President Bush requested \$1.5 million in military aid to Ethiopia for fiscal year 2008, of which \$600,000 would be directed toward military education and training. Less than one month after Ethiopian troops went into Somalia, the United States quietly poured weapons and military advisers into Ethiopia. By January 2007, there were about 100 of these advisers ("U.S. Support Key", 2007). The United States also increased its military operations in Somalia and subsumed those operations under the mayhem Ethiopia's invasion was causing. The Ethiopian government allowed the American military to wage a secret campaign to capture or kill top leaders of Al Qaeda in the Horn of Africa from its territory, including the use of an airstrip in Eastern Ethiopia to mount air strikes against Islamic militants in Somalia ("U.S. Used Base in Ethiopia", 2008). An American destroyer, at least once, fired its guns at a piece of territory near the Somali coastline on several foreign Islamist fighters. One of such targets was a 35-year old citizen of the Comoro Islands, Fazul Abdullah

Muhammad, said to be head of Al Qaeda in East Africa ("An Unusual Hunt", 2007). The United States launched several aerial assaults in towns in Somalia mainly targeted at Islamic militants causing heavy collateral damage from civilian deaths. In one of such raids, three US AC-130 aircraft bombarded the house of a terrorist leader in the central Somali town of Dusamareeb killing several civilians ("The Death Toll", 2008).

Despite the Ethiopian government's notorious human rights record, the United States has largely avoided criticizing the government. In 2007, however, the House of Representatives tried to break this aloofness through the Ethiopian Democracy and Accountability Act (H.R. 2003). The bill never became law because the Senate never approved it, although its purpose was to put the Ethiopian government on notice that American aid would be barred unless it accepted outside groups monitoring and fostered an independent judiciary and media. Even if the bill had passed, its impact on the Ethiopian government's behavior would have been minimal, since it exempted counterterrorism and peacekeeping operations from any funding limits. President Bush's request of \$654 million for health and economic aid for Ethiopia for fiscal 2007 was also exempted.<sup>6</sup> What triggered this uneasiness about Ethiopia from some congressional members was the government's crackdown on mass protests following the disputed elections of 2005 in which nearly 200 people were killed. The EPRDF charged and jailed many newly elected opposition members of parliament. The Ethiopian government, quite naturally, criticized H.R. 2003, citing it as "a threat to regional stability and would create fresh obstacles to Ethiopia's bold effort toward comprehensive democratic reforms" ("Ethiopia Angry", 2007).

### **DISCUSSION: THE COST OF ETHIOPIA'S INVASION**

Even if Ethiopia invaded Somalia for the sole purpose of helping the war-torn country to sort out its chaotic security situation, it quickly became obvious that military action would be far costlier than the perceived humanitarian benefits. One of the most objective assessments of the war has been its cost in dollar amounts to Ethiopia. Ethiopia, it seems, absorbed the cost of the military operation in Somalia well. As Table 2 shows Ethiopia's military spending in 2006 and 2007 in local currency, the birr, increased only slightly over expenditures from 2001. In constant United States dollars, however, military expenditure decreased. Data on Ethiopia's military spending was only available until 2007, the first full year of Somalia's invasion. The finance minister of Ethiopia, however, was quoted as announcing plans to increase his country's military budget by \$50 million to \$400 million for 2008 ("Famine-hit Ethiopia", 2008). It is reasonable to assume the United States might have underwritten a large part of the cost of the invasion. Besides, Ethiopia

**Table 1.** Refugees and asylum-seekers from Somalia - Main countries of asylum.

<b>Refugee population, end of year- Main countries of asylum (main countries in 2005)</b>										
<b>Asylum country</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>
Kenya	171,347	174,119	164,657	141,088	137,376	144,349	155,767	154,272	153,627	150,459
Yemen	43,871	37,439	57,426	55,186	56,524	67,485	80,763	59,246	63,511	78,582
United Kingdom	14,768	16,706	19,156	18,266	26,891	31,366	34,131	36,106	36,700	36,319
United States	18,201	22,613	24,419	27,874	34,005	33,750	28,693	25,421	31,110	34,207
Ethiopia	287,761	249,235	195,345	180,862	121,096	67,129	37,532	28,276	16,470	15,901
Other	101,037	107,982	96,956	101,337	99,763	96,055	95,430	99,015	87,896	80,085
<b>Total</b>	<b>636,985</b>	<b>608,094</b>	<b>557,959</b>	<b>524,613</b>	<b>475,655</b>	<b>440,134</b>	<b>432,316</b>	<b>402,336</b>	<b>389,314</b>	<b>395,553</b>

Source: UNHCR Statistical Yearbook, 2005.

**Table 2.** Military expenditure of Ethiopia.

<b>In local currency ( m.birr )</b>														
Year	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Value	1,273	1,618	[1,625]	[1,095]	[716]	[819]	813	754	803	1,512	3,263	5,589	5,075	2,959
<b>In constant ( 2005 ) US\$ m.</b>														
Year	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Value	420	495	[473]	[235]	[139]	[153]	141	119	134	246	518	822	741	471
<b>As percentage of gross domestic product</b>														
Year	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Value	8.1	9.6	[8.5]	[5.3]	[2.7]	[2.9]	2.4	2	1.8	3.4	6.7	10.7	9.6	4.7

**Table 2.** Contd.

<b>In local currency ( m.birr )</b>						
Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Value	2,476	2,397	2,686	2,965	3,005	3,250
<b>In constant ( 2005 ) US\$ m.</b>						
Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Value	387	319	346	342	263	242
<b>As percentage of gross domestic product</b>						
Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Value	3.6	2.9	2.8	2.6	2.1	

[ ] = SIPRI estimate.

Source: SIPRI Yearbook, 2008. Stockholm, Sweden.

has not released the number of troop casualties it suffered although the number could have been high, judging by the wantonness of the attacks they suffered from the insurgents.

The cost of the war could also be counted in terms of the number of Somalis displaced and the trouble Ethiopia had to go through to give them shelter. By late 2008, the total number of refugees in Ethiopia needing humanita-

rian support was 1.4 million, with 600,000 in the Ogaden. Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia equally has been marked by high civilian deaths. Ethiopian forces pushed through Somalia almost uncontested as the Islamists who had taken over nearly the whole country scuttled to take cover. Ethiopian forces, aided by government forces, quickly took over control of Mogadishu and Baidoa, the major cities. The triumphant return of interim President

Yusuf to Mogadishu in December 2008 was reminiscent of President Bush's "victory accomplished" declaration in Iraq. As the Islamic insurgents regrouped, however, they defiantly announced they would never succumb and began to launch daring attacks at the flank of Ethiopian forces, including head-on suicide attacks. The Islamists launched several attacks at the central market in Mogadishu and planted roadside bombs that claimed several civilian casualties. As the resistance stiffened, Ethiopian forces became equally indiscriminate in their attacks. One of such attacks was the heavy bombardment that residents of Mogadishu suffered in nine days of fighting in April 2007. It was reported the assault killed several hundred people, many of whom were civilians harmed by indiscriminate shelling that destroyed homes and shops and forced several thousands to flee the city as the violence spread to peaceful parts of town. In another round of fighting one month earlier, more than 1,000 people were killed ("Thousands Flee", 2007). A joint government and Ethiopian soldiers shot more than 40 civilians after they dismounted them from civilian buses. After the troops pulled up the civilian buses, they ordered the passengers to drop down from the buses where some were handcuffed and shot dead while others were shot dead in the buses. Dozens were also wounded ("Ethiopian, Somali Soldiers Kill", 2008).

When Ethiopian forces engaged insurgents outside the prying lenses of international observers, especially in the Ogaden region where hostilities had persisted for years, the outcome was brutal. This happened in one battle in eastern Somalia where the Ethiopian army subjected civilians to executions, torture and rape. Widespread violence was part of a vicious counterinsurgency campaign Ethiopia launched. According to Human Rights Watch, research carried out between September and December 2007, which was supplemented by satellite imagery, confirmed burned villages. But in chilling accounts, witnesses described nightly beatings with gun barrels, public executions and the burning of entire villages. Ethiopian forces also stepped up the forced recruitment of local militia forces, many of whom were sent to fight without military training, resulting in large casualty rates ("Army Commits Executions", 2008). Doctors without Borders (Medicines Sans Frontiers, MSF) reported a similar incident in the Ogaden region in 2007, when after violence and displacement by Ethiopian forces; they denied MSF access to the region, despite a great humanitarian need. Ironically, MSF had earlier in June, signed an agreement with the Government of Ethiopia to work in the Somali region and had conducted several assessments of the humanitarian needs in the area when it was forced to evacuate its teams for security reasons ("MSF Denied Access", 2007). From late 2006, Ethiopian forces and the interim Somali government increased security cooperation. The Ethiopians become the major benefactors of the Somalis by providing ammunition and training for Somali forces fighting for the interim government.

The atrocities that both sides in the conflict were willing to commit got progressively worse as the fighting intensified. Amnesty International accused Ethiopian forces of senselessly killing civilians, committing rape, torture, arbitrary detentions and disappearances. The Ethiopian government dismissed the report as unbalanced and "categorically wrong" ("Somalia Forces", 2008). Islamist insurgents also committed their share of atrocities despite repeated denials, especially by planting roadside bombs and mortar attacks intended for Ethiopian troops, but which invariably killed innocent civilians. One example of such indiscriminate acts was 20 women who lost their lives by a bomb planted by the side of the road while taking part in food-for-work street-cleaning program. Forty other bystanders were injured. The following day, 10 people were also killed when a mortar shell landed on a home in Mogadishu. The top United Nations humanitarian official expressed his growing alarm at the continuing abuses and civilian casualties in the conflict and reminded all parties to the conflict that they had a duty under international law to protect civilians ("Top UN Relief Official", 2008).

Ethiopia's invasion has worsened other ills endemic in Somali society such as the number of people crossing the sea to Yemen to seek better life. Although the UNHCR statistics shows Yemen as the third most preferred place for Somali refugees for taking in more than one-half million (Table 1), what the statistic does not show is the several hundred other Somalis who did not survive the dangerous journey in rickety boats. Anecdotal accounts show the number may be high. Another unanticipated side-effect from the escalation of violence following Ethiopia's invasion, has been the rise in piracy around the Horn. Although piracy has been an age-old tradition among Somali fishermen, it increased exponentially in 2008. With a coastline of 1,800 miles, it is nearly impossible to track down pirates who make a windfall by demanding ransom from international shippers. Being close to the Red Sea, one of the most strategic shipping lanes in the world, the international community believes that Somalia's coastal waters must be safe. One report states that more than 75 shipping vessels were attacked in 2008. The pirates use fast moving boats to pull alongside large ships, seize the crew and demand a ransom of \$1 or \$2 million or even more. In this lawless nation, piracy has become profitable with a reported total ransom figure of \$50 million in 2008 ("Somali Pirates", 2008). In June 2008, the UN Security Council unanimously voted to allow countries with strong naval fleets to send warships into Somalia's territorial waters to engage the pirates.

## Conclusion

When Ethiopian troops finally pulled out in January 2009, politics in Somalia improved briefly. The beleaguered

Somalia parliament, which had been expanded to accommodate different factions, elected a new President, Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, who also appointed a new Prime Minister. The major cities of Mogadishu and Baidoa, however, are controlled by Islamist militants and warlords who pose a security threat by their continued daily shelling, including vicious assaults on African Union soldiers. One of such attacks in February 2009 killed 11 peacekeepers from Burundi. Peace may yet return to Somalia, but Ethiopia's invasion has pushed its prospect farther by poisoning the thin confidence that exists among militias and clans.

Going to Somalia has also taught Ethiopia a harsh lesson of the adverse consequences of any country, no matter how well-equipped and confident its military, may suffer when it mobilizes troops to fight a war with dubious objectives. Ethiopia's invasion could have been a calculated attempt by the Menawi government to divert attention from the deplorable human rights and living conditions in Ethiopia. At the same time, it might have inexorably drawn every action of the Ethiopian government to scrutiny from the international community. In 2007, Reporters without Borders criticized the Ethiopian government for its approach to press freedom as journalists were harassed and imprisoned. In July 2007, the Ethiopian government announced the death penalty for 38 people found guilty for election protests in 2005. The 38 who were members of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) were accused by prosecutors for offenses that included "outrage against the constitution and for the leader and four others, inciting, organizing and leading armed rebellion" (Ethiopia Death Call", 2007).

Ethiopia has not been able to solve its enduring drought problem. In May 2008, the United Nations reported some 3.2 million people there being in urgent need of food, a number that had gone up from 2.2 million in April. Humanitarian agencies said the shortfall in food aid was \$147 million ("Ethiopia: At Least 3 Million", 2008). The United States Agency for International Development planned to deliver 95,000 tonnes of food to the Horn of Africa. Having fanned the flame of war by invading Somalia, Ethiopia unintentionally shook the uneasy peace that exists with Eritrea. Eritrea poses a much greater threat to Ethiopia than Somalia. Knox Chitiyo, a specialist on Africa at the Royal United Service Institute in London, was quoted as saying that: The government (Ethiopia) now has daggers pointing at it from all directions.... It is facing a multifront war with no prospect of a military victory" ("Ethiopia in Somalia", 2007). Since Ethiopia's official departure from Somalia, Eritrea has discreetly stepped in as a major backer of Islamists, especially Al Shabaab, by sending money and foreign fighters. The Islamists have been making steady gains against the Transitional Government, prompting Ethiopian forces to cross the border into Somalia on a few occasions. If Ethiopia went to Somalia to help the Somali extricate themselves from political disorder and economic misery,

many Somalis were disdainful of Ethiopia's move, especially coming from a neighbor they distrust that took it upon itself to interfere blatantly in their affairs. Jubilant crowds cheered as Ethiopian troops abandoned their positions late 2008, sometimes under sniper fire. If on the other hand Ethiopia invaded Somalia to flex its military muscle at its long-time rival, it was Ethiopia that unwittingly had its ego bruised. It did not win the war; neither did it secure the peace. Somali Islamist resisters have claimed victory even as factionalism continues to tear their country apart. The motive or motives that inspired the Ethiopian government to decide to invade its neighbor seem befuddling. No matter what it was, however, crossing the border was a needless meddling in the affairs of a troubled country. Several months since Ethiopia's withdrawal, Somalia society remains fractious and the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate. Ethiopia continues to bear the load of hosting Somali refugees. Ethiopia's invasion seems an unmitigated waste and one can only hope that African governments would learn a lesson from it before any flippantly decides to copy Ethiopia's example to invade its neighbor.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In December 2006 Security Council Resolution partially lifted the UN arms embargo on Somalia. The Resolution authorized the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) and African Union member States to deploy a regional intervention force to protect Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and to arm and train the FFG security forces. Security Council Resolution 1725. July 13, 2006.

<sup>2</sup>According to the UNHCR, its relations with the Somali government were strained by a numbers game. Initially, the Somali government claimed that there were 500,000 refugees in the country, while UNHCR estimated that there were only 80,000. After a second influx of refugees in 1981, the Somali government figure rose to 2 million, while UNHCR estimated the number to be between 450,000- and 620,000. UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees, 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup>Ethiopia's country profile put the number of Muslims between 45-50% of the population and Orthodox Christians at 35-40%. See *Global Studies: Africa, Ethiopia, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition*. F. Jeffress Ramsay (Ed.) Sluice Dock: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill, 2008.109-112.

<sup>4</sup>The United States had provided \$200 million in aid to Ethiopian famine victims since October 1984. The money included 415,000 tons of food, of which 180,000 tons had been delivered, as well as blankets, medicine, internal Transport, housing supplies, etc. "U. S. Will Give Development Aid to Ethiopia," *New York Times*, May 9, 1985.

<sup>5</sup>According to the USAID's Office of Food for Peace, there were plans to provide 1 million metric tons of food, valued at \$857 million, to Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and

Djibouti in response to drought affecting the Horn of Africa. "Ethiopia: USAID Expedites Emergency Food Aid," AllAfrica.com, August 20, 2008. Available on the web at <http://affafrica.com/stories/printable/200808220262>

<sup>6</sup>The Ethiopia Democracy and Accountability Act was H.R. 2003 and passed in the U.S. House of Representatives on October 2, 2007. The Act demanded among others: the release of all political prisoners and a fair and speedy trial for those held in detention.

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