

A world map with the United States highlighted in orange and Somalia highlighted in green. The title 'UNITED STATES IN SOMALIA: AN AUTOPSY' is written in red, and 'By Yesh Khanna' is written in black.

UNITED STATES IN SOMALIA: AN AUTOPSY

By Yesh Khanna

Background

During the Cold War, the Horn of Africa region served as a battleground for proxy warfare between the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and KGB, the foreign intelligence agency of the Soviet Union. Ethiopia was heavily backed by the CIA, whereas the KGB backed Siad Barre's authoritarian regime in Somalia. In 1977, Somalia and Ethiopia went to war against each other for control over the Ogaden region. This war turned out to be a disaster for Somalia, and Barre became more repressive, leading to anti-government protests and Barre fleeing Somalia in 1991. The immediate aftermath of this was the resurgence of clan violence which resulted in the collapse of whatever was left of the Somali government; this further led the country into economic chaos. The warlords, who headed these clans, found the perfect weapon to inflict damage upon one another: food. As Dr. Richard W. Stewart writes in his brochure *The United States Army in Somalia, 1992-1994*: "as Somalia lapsed into sectarian and ethnic warfare, regional warlords drew upon clan loyalty to establish independent power bases. This situation led to a struggle over food supplies with each clan raiding the storehouses and depots of the others. Coupled with a drought, these actions brought famine to hundreds of thousands of the nation's poor." As a result, around a million Somalis started to flee to the neighboring urban areas where various non-governmental organizations were providing humanitarian assistance; additionally, around another one million Somalis were forced into exile.

Being Loud Enough for Washington

The plight of the Somali people was brought before the international community by the joint efforts of actress Audrey Hepburn and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Around the same time, in 1992, many people in the Bush administration strongly believed that there was an immediate need for some form of intervention in Somalia, whereas some people were unsure and somewhat skeptical of the potential results of deploying such a large-scale mission. Andrew Natsios, the assistant administrator of the U.S. Agency for International

Development (USAID), was one of the first people to raise the issue with Congress; however, no heed was paid to his concerns. This initial dismissive approach was seen in various levels of government. As Lofland writes in *Somalia: US intervention and operation restore hope*, "At the time of the Somalia crisis, my boss Herman Cohen was the assistant Secretary of State for African affairs, and I can tell you it was hard to get the Secretary and the department as a whole to focus on the tragedy. After all, Somalia was just not as important to United States national interests as it once was. We fought tooth and nail to gain the attention of Secretary of State James Baker III, but with no success." It wasn't until Smith Hempstone, Jr., the American ambassador to Kenya, sent a cable stating that more than a quarter of all the children under the age of five were dead in Somalia, did President Bush start taking the issue with utmost seriousness. By the summer of 1992, Congress had become more active about the situation, especially after the International Red Cross declared that more than a third of the Somali population was at imminent risk of death by starvation. Senators Nancy Kassebaum, who had visited Somalia in July of that year, and Paul Simon sponsored resolutions that called for immediate action in Somalia.

How Far Are We Willing to Go?

The Pentagon, however, wasn't much in favor of deploying US forces in Somalia. This was mainly due to the fact that the US military was already occupied in various kinds of missions throughout the world – Iraq, Haiti, and Guantanamo Bay – and at home dealing with the destruction caused by Hurricane Andrew. Another reason for the skepticism was the bitter experience in Beirut where 241 marines died. Lofland writes "The Pentagon's reluctance was echoed by Stephen J. Hadley, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy. He warned that the US forces would become involved in an endless guerrilla war. Another concern of the Pentagon regarding humanitarian missions was not just the confusion of roles but that the small size of the relief missions would not give troops an overwhelming advantage of forces."

In April 1992, the U.N. invoked U.N. Security Council Resolution 751 and launched the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM), which consisted of around 50 people with the primary objective of distributing food supplies. However, UNOSOM didn't see much success primarily due to the fact that the situation on the ground in Somalia was highly violent and volatile. The relief effort was hampered by continued fighting and insecurity. The Security Council decided to deploy some 3,000 additional troops to protect humanitarian aid in August. But the situation continued to worsen, with aid workers under attack as famine threatened 1.5 million people. In November 1992, UN Secretary-General Boutros Ghali proposed some solutions to the problem, one of which being that the U.N. Security Council could authorize a group of countries to carry out a country-wide "enforcement operation." The United States led this coalition, called the United Task Force (UNITAF), and launched Operation Restore Hope on December 9, 1992. The main objectives of UNITAF in the operation were creating and maintaining a safe zone for humanitarian operations such as famine relief, medical care, and providing refugees with safe passage.

Black Hawk Down!

In the meantime, violence against the peacekeeping forces kept on intensifying. The main perpetrators of this violence were the forces of Mohamed Farrah Hassan Aideed, a local warlord. On August 22, 1993, the new Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin, directed the deployment of a joint special-operations task force (JSOTF) to Somalia in response to attacks made by Aideed supporters upon American and UNOSOM forces and installations. The JSOTF, named Task Force Ranger (TFR), had the mission of capturing Aideed and his key lieutenants. On October 3 1993, American forces launched Operation Gothic Serpent to capture Aideed's two top lieutenants: Omar Salad Elmi, the Somali National Alliance Foreign Minister, and Mohamed Hassan Awale, Aideed's top political adviser from the Black Sea slum district. Although the primary objective was achieved, a mob started to form up around the target building and soon enough a Black Hawk air support helicopter was shot down by a rocket-propelled grenade. The TFR quickly tried to reach the crash site while sustaining enemy fire. Meanwhile, another Black Hawk got shot down. Two delta force operatives volunteered to secure the second crash site until reinforcements arrived, but were killed in action and the pilot was taken hostage by Somali forces. In order to break the deadlock by Aideed's forces, a multinational convoy was sent out that eventually brought back the TFR. All in all, 18 US soldiers lost their lives, with 73 more wounded and one captured. The Malaysians lost one soldier and saw seven of their own wounded, while the Pakistanis had two wounded and one deceased. The Somalis, meanwhile, saw the loss of around 300 lives, and an estimated 800 more were wounded.

What Can We Learn from Somalia?

The chain of events that unfolded as a result of US intervention in Somalia gives us many key takeaways, both for America's role as a peacekeeper and a military power. As a peacekeeper, it is imperative to establish and maintain proper communication between all the involved parties. The US communicated effectively with the warlords – a key reason for the success of Operation Restore Hope – but failed to establish a similar line of communication for the overtaking UN forces. Another takeaway was to invest more time and effort to ensure the long-term stability of the region as opposed to conducting "in-and-out" missions. Finally, and most importantly, even with peacekeeping as the primary objective, a state should always be prepared for the possibility of loss of life. As a military power, one of the most important lessons the US can take away is the fact that having superior technological capabilities doesn't necessarily mean an easy victory; in Somalia, even though the American forces had advanced surveillance technology, they couldn't pick up the signals from the low-level technology used by the Somalis. Another key takeaway is the importance of human intelligence and human terrain. In Somalia, there was a clear lack of reliable intelligence, mainly due to the fact that it was high in racial heterogeneity – using an agent outside his own clan territory rendered him suspect, and using an agent from within his own clan risked disinformation.

Conclusion

To conclude, in 1991, Somalia was in a state of extreme instability and was ruled by warlords who used food and hunger as their main weapons. Soon enough, it suffered a widespread famine and various relief agencies set up their camps to help people. Shortly after that, the international community turned their attention towards Somalia and the pressure to act started to mount on the Bush administration. Various institutions played key roles in bringing the White House to act on the issue. By April 1992, the UN had already launched a relief mission called United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNISOM), but it didn't see much success. Meanwhile, the Bush administration agreed to step into the situation and in August 1992, President Bush announced Operation Restore Hope. Although successful, the mission was endangered by the forces of Mohamed Farrah Hassan Aideed, a local warlord. In October 1993, US forces launched Operation Gothic Serpent to capture Aideed's two top lieutenants, which resulted in heavy friendly casualties and the Black Hawk Down incident. The intervention in Somalia gave away many lessons that the US can learn from and work around in future interventions like establishing clear communications and planning long-term missions as opposed to "in-and-out" missions. ■

