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Somalia (1988 -)

Somalia, in the horn of Africa, has been embroiled in violent conflict for nearly two decades. Hundreds of thousands of Somalis have died in the fighting and from war-related hunger and disease. Many Somalis are nomadic pastoralists, identifying more with their clan and sub-clans than with any government. Somalia became an independent nation in 1960, merging the erstwhile British Somaliland in the north and Italian Somaliland in the south. In 1991 the north declared an independent Somaliland, but this breakaway state has not won international recognition.

In 1969, after nine years of a weak civilian rule, Siad Barre took power in a military coup. He declared Somalia a "socialist" state and nationalized key sectors of the economy. Nevertheless, he received financial backing from the United States government, which saw him as a cold-war ally. As the economy grew increasingly dependent on foreign aid, Barre used it to isolate and seize territory from rival clans. By the late 1980s, the clans had begun to fight back, forming militias to loot aid and destroy government development projects.

The militias ousted Barre in 1991, and a power struggle between rival clan leaders ensued. The militia known as the United Somali Congress (USC) declared Ali Mahdi president of Somalia. Rival warlord Mohamed Farah Aydiid split from the USC to create the Somali National Alliance (SNA). Fighting among these groups and forces of the previous Barre regime precipitated a widespread famine, as the militias practiced scorched earth tactics, ruining crops and displacing hundreds of thousands of people. Some aid groups called for international intervention to support deliveries of food aid.

In 1992, the UN created a peacekeeping force called UNOSOM to restore order in the capital, Mogadishu, and safeguard relief supplies. The United States contributed to the effort with a force called UNITAF. Both UNOSOM and UNITAF achieved initial acceptance by the warlords, but Aydiid withdrew his support after clashes between his forces and Barre's troops, and the fighting escalated. UNOSOM and UNITAF troops began taking casualties. UNITAF withdrew in 1994, and UNOSOM followed suit in 1995.

The country was left in chaos. In the late 1990s, Aydiid's son Hussein (who became the leader of the SNA when his father was killed in 1996) and Ali Mahdi conducted peace talks. Several agreements were reached and accepted by as many as 26 parties, but none of them held. After the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001, the U.S. government declared Somalia a haven for terrorists and froze the assets of Somali institutions. In mid-2006, militia forces under the banner of the Union of Islamic Courts won control of Mogadishu and much of the south. They entered into peace talks with a transitional government that had been formed in exile in Kenya in two years earlier, but by the end of the year fighting intensified with Ethiopian forces intervening on behalf of the transitional government.

Print Resources

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Maren, Michael (1997) *The Road to Hell*. New York: Free Press.

Peterson, Scott (2000) *Me Against My Brother*. New York: Routledge.

Online Resources

BBC News. *Country Profile: Somalia*.

Reuters Alertnet. *Country Profile: Somalia*.

Global Security. *Somalia Civil War*.

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, IRIN News. *Somalia*.

Timeline

1981 - Somali National Movement (SNM) founded to oppose the Siad Barre regime

1988 - SNM leaves Ethiopian bases; SNM and Barre's troops clash in the north

1989 - United Somali Congress (USC) forms

1990 - USC nears Mogadishu; most aid workers leave Somalia

1991 - Barre forced out of Mogadishu; USC's Ali Mahdi named president; Aydiid splits from USC, creates Somali National Alliance (SNA); Somaliland declares independence; Ali Mahdi and Aydiid clash in Mogadishu; Barre claims south

1992 - Ali Mahdi and Aydiid sign peace agreement; famine conditions worsen; UNOSOM lands with 500 peacekeepers; UNITAF lands with 30,000 US troops

1993 - warlords agree to disarm; Barre's forces enter UNITAF area, Aydiid rejects UNITAF; nation building UNOSOM II approved; UNITAF and UNOSOM take casualties; UNITAF begins withdrawal

1994 - UNITAF withdrawal complete; UNOSOM begins withdrawal; fighting continues

1995 - Barre dies; UNOSOM withdrawal complete; fighting continues

1997 - Aydiid killed; his son Hussein takes his position

1997 - Hussein Aydiid and Ali Mahdi sign agreement with 26 parties in Cairo

2000 - negotiations create transitional government; ignored by many warlords

2001 - fighting between transitional government and Aydiid; US freezes assets

2004 - warlords sign but later reject agreement

2006 - Union of Islamic Courts wins control of Mogadishu and the south; Ethiopian forces intervene on behalf of the transitional government