

Commentary

African Union & Somaliland Time to affirm 'Africa's best-kept secret'?

By Iqbal Jhazbhay

If African countries are intent on hearing the guns in the Horn of Africa fall forever silent – it will require level-headedness coupled with clarity in dealing with the subtle challenges that come with peace.

Under focus is the reasonably peaceful, yet unrecognized country in the Horn of Africa, Somaliland: "Africa's Best-Kept Secret."

Writes one of the Horn's most famous sons, Nuruddin Farah, in 'Secrets': "no secret is forever a secret – it has to be known by someone who places a value on it..."

For a myriad of reasons, it is time for African states to step up to the platform and actively push, through quiet or public diplomacy, for the recognition of a continental success story.

A country whose achievements, scholars assert, "constitute one of the few pieces of genuinely good news in the troubled Horn of Africa." (Professors Hussein Adam and Ken Menkhaus)

The African Union Commission and select progressive African leaders are of those who "places a value" on Somaliland. So should other African states and institutions. Somaliland has recently applied for AU membership.

Hope is on the horizon, fuelled by clear thinking. A recent 2005 African Union Fact-Finding report on Somaliland recommended some clear steps towards resolving the African diplomatic impasse in dealing with Somaliland.

Somaliland's success over the past 15 years (1991-2006) in state building, democratisation and economic recovery, coupled with its homegrown disarmament and demobilisation, has attracted the AU's attention.

Among the findings of the AU were that "going by the clear presentation and articulate demands of the authorities and people of Somaliland concerning their political, social and economic history, Somaliland has been made a 'pariah region' by default. The Union established in 1960 brought enormous injustice and suffering to the people of the region."

It ends with a recommendation: "Objectively viewed, the case should not be linked to the notion of 'opening a Pandora's box.' As such, the AU should find a special method of dealing with this outstanding case."

African Union and Cynics

Not everyone would agree with the AU's report conclusions.

A number of key African countries are advocating what they would term, albeit incorrectly, as 'unity.' That Somaliland re-joins Somalia.

These uninformed perspectives are held arguably due to sheer ignorance, stupefied indifference, or a lethal combination of both.

Fortunately, what we have at ready disposal is the benefit of hindsight – the reality of history, and the facts.

The well-known pan-Somali "unity" nationalist vision to bring all the Somali territories together

under one flag created mayhem in the Horn. Ethiopia found itself in 1977 at war with the expansionist "unity" project of Somali dictator Siad Barre. This "sacred unity" vision saw the decline of Somalia from then on.

Facts: Failed African unions, Somalia & Somaliland

Our urgent task is to spell out the links and facts obliterated by the passage of time. Like this one the AU report pointedly refers to:

"The fact that the 'union between Somaliland and Somalia was never ratified' and also malfunctioned when it went into action from 1960 to 1990, makes Somaliland's search for recognition historically unique and self-justified in African political history."

Somaliland's fight for recognition is also not without historical precedent. In this respect, African policy makers have a short memory. Many African countries went into a union and subsequently abandoned it. Egypt – Syria (1958-61), Mali – Senegal (1960), Senegal – Gambia (1982-89), are just some of the former derelict unions in Africa.

Other lesser-known cases such as Rwanda – Burundi (1962), Cape Verde – Guinea-Bissau (1975), are lost in the milky haze of diplomatic amnesia.

Those who would see Somalia and Somaliland "united" will argue the recognition of Somaliland will only further fragment the region. That the recognition of Somaliland will render the very term "African Union" a misnomer. That the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia offers hope for change.

Unfortunately, the reality does not speak to this. The country continues to spiral further into a decades-old state of anarchy.

It would be worth looking at when the Horn of Africa makes news. Reporting on last month's abduction of a group of Yemeni fishermen by Somali pirates, CNN.com reported: "Somalia's coastal waters have become among the world's most dangerous in the 14 years the country has lacked a central government."

Comparisons, however, are not helpful – and they are beside the point.

The point is that the facts at our disposal, and most analysis of the geo-politics of the region point to the reality that Somalia, "in the best-case scenario with its new Transitional Federal Government would be very minimalist in scope and capacity, and most of Somalia would remain a de facto zone of state collapse for the short term."

Despite this, key African states say, "Give them a chance."

The response is simple – we have. Fifteen years later, fourteen peace conferences, five transitional governments and the world's most expensive peace-keeping mission UNISOM, have not yielded any worthy results.

Eritrea & Sudan: Diplomacy or the military option

African states need a clear-minded approach. It will be a depressing day when clear thinking is silenced for the alternative of war between Somaliland and Somalia in order to settle this matter militarily.

One's memory is jogged by the case of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Eritrean fighters doggedly fought Ethiopia for 30 years, from 1961 to 1991. Finally, the military option decided on the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia. Sadly, the UN and the former OAU were silent glazed-eyed witnesses to this carnage.

We all recall that Sudan has experienced 50 years of an on and off vile war since its independence and represents Africa's longest running conflict.

Somaliland voluntarily joined Somalia after receiving its independence in 1960. In 1991, after a tragic union with Somalia, Somaliland opted to return to its original British Protectorate boundaries.

Somaliland's leaders have defiantly proclaimed that it rather go to war than join Somalia and give up its hard earned independence.

Visits to the UN-verified mass graves in Somaliland's capital Hargeisa bring back the horrifying memories of the recent Rwanda genocide. Somalilanders recount with a passion and level of forensic detail that reveals that this is still an open wound of the 1988 injustice of Somalia's military, led by dictator Siad Barre.

As history is the reminder, injustices and grudges which are not addressed acquire a momentum all their own, shuddering across continents until they erupt in a thunderous roar.

As Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi recently affirmed, history and reality has showed us that it is better to carry a separate passport with its inconveniences rather than go to war with Eritrea. The Prime Minister was responding to the cry of some Ethiopians who have relatives in Eritrea and are required now to have a passport on entering independent Eritrea.

Sudan, South Africa, Somaliland & the Horn

South Africa has a diplomatic vanguard role to play in the Horn of Africa, along with a number of key African states, because of its stated policy of 'commitment to promoting the peaceful resolution of conflicts and to encourage post-conflict reconstruction and development,' and as Chair of the African Union Committee on Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Sudan.

In addition, South African government International law advisers have concluded that Somaliland does have a strong legal case.

It's the only unsettled political case in Africa where a country is being shaped on its original colonial boundaries (excluding Western Sahara).

It is worth mentioning that this is entirely consistent with



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the AU's charter, which alludes to colonial boundaries achieved upon independence.

The crucial question then, is do African countries have the political will to advance this AU Fact-Finding report on Somaliland by suggesting a follow-up process?

The AU has the political will: its time to translate this into action.

The non-recognition of Somaliland also impacts negatively on that country's ability to sustain itself.

The AU report further observed: "The lack of recognition ties the hands of the authorities and people of Somaliland as they cannot effectively and sustainably transact with the outside to pursue the reconstruction and development goals."

Africa's Future: Clear Action or Floppiness?

Africa's profile has never been better. Today, 40 percent of African states have elected democracies. Continental growth in 2004 was 5.1% and is estimated at 5% in 2005 and 4.7% in 2006, the most favourable performance for many years.

South Africa's economy, the largest in Africa, expanded by 4.9% in 2005 up a bit from the 4.5% in 2004. Internationally, Africa's profile has never been higher on the global agenda.

In 2005, South African President Thabo Mbeki, in a letter to Somaliland President Kahin, suggested that the AU lead on the matter of Somaliland. Today, the AU has done so, and now the ball is in the court of African countries to mobilize towards a follow-up on the AU's report on Somaliland in the larger interests of the subtle challengers of peace in the Horn of Africa.

Will Africa opt for clear thinking, good policy or flaccidity for the long military option? Africa cannot afford, by ignorance and bad policy, to undermine its flagship NEPAD programme, which aims to promote stability and peace.

One remembers the words of the poet Khalil Gibran: 'when one of you falls down, he falls for those behind him, a caution against the stumbling stone.'

The stark reminders of conflicts past and present on the continent serve as that caution. What we have seen with countries like Eritrea and Sudan.

Then, like now, should a prospect for stability exist as in Somaliland, it should and must

be supported. And not risk yet another African nation become a 'stumbling stone.'

Clear thinking prevailed in the Sudan to suggest the possible option of a self-determination referendum for South Sudan in 2011, in the larger interests of a peace deal.

War and inept policy can and should be defeated. The old cliché about the dangers of forgetting history's mistakes holds truer today than ever.

AU & Supporting Clear Thinking

We all need to mobilize in support of the African Union Commission's worthy efforts for peace and stability. The AU's recent fact-finding visit to Somaliland, as well as its opening of an office in Somalia's Jowhar city are moments of cosmic clarity and calls for applause.

It indeed affirms the AU's plans to be on the ground, although the choice of the city of Jowhar remains controversial amongst Somalis.

There is hope – and it should be grasped with both hands.

Unclear African policy-making cannot be allowed to undermine Africa's development nor bungle when dealing with the subtle challenges of peace in the Horn of Africa.

Obviously, the 'small' conflict of Somaliland and Somalia left to fester long enough, will have an uncanny way of bringing down regions and empires. This serious and lethal issue merits careful and clear thinking for a better Africa.

We owe it to ourselves, and future generations, to think clearly and act for a better Africa. The AU Commission report on Somaliland has shown the way ahead. Established facts and history speak for themselves. African diplomats cannot be flaccid and wait for another 15 years in the calculus of continental interests and stability.

Are African policy makers and institutions willing to listen and act? The time has come for affirmation of success. That is the least we can do for an African Renaissance. •

Iqbal Jhazbhay teaches at the University of South Africa, serves on the ANC's Commission of Religious Affairs, is director on the board of the Institute for Global Dialogue and facilitates South Africa - Horn of Africa relations.