BRIEFINGS

Withering of the Clans

Following the persistent and grim television pictures of starvation in Somalia, the industrialised world has rediscovered its charitable soul. The United Nations, the European Community, the US and the other developed nations have decided to provide relief assistance before the entire Somali community perishes. Australia has offered $3.5 million towards the effort. Some critics have understandably blamed the international community for acting too late.

The Somali tragedy has been apparent for several years, but the UN and the developed world did not pay much attention to it. Earlier in 1992 the UN was involved in a ceasefire arranged between the warring Somali factions. UN secretary-general Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who has a longstanding interest in the Horn of Africa, despatched UN assistant secretary-general James Jonah to Somalia in January to try to persuade the warring factions to negotiate. In the same month the UN Security Council approved a resolution imposing an arms embargo on Somalia and calling on the combatants to permit humanitarian assistance to reach those most in need.

The warring factions did in fact accept a ceasefire in New York in February, but they immediately flouted it—as they had done other ceasefires. Prophetically James Jonah warned the various factions of the United Somali Congress (USC) in early March that the international community had tired of their ceasefire violations, and that Somalia might be abandoned altogether. By the end of March the Somali tragedy had been put on the backburner by the UN—largely because the permanent members of the UN Security Council (and especially the US, UK and France) were more interested in the equally serious crisis in the Balkans.

It has been estimated that between November 1991 and August 1992 more than 100,000 Somalis lost their lives either in the civil war or through starvation. If the international community had intervened nine months earlier many lives would have been saved and some major problems would have been alleviated. The trouble with the current gesture is not just that it is too late; it is also too little, and fails to address the root of the problem.

The UN has decided to send 500 troops to escort food convoys in the capital Mogadishu, where at least 200 people die of starvation every day. But even James Jonah admits that such a force is too small to be of any use outside Mogadishu. If the UN were serious about sending food to the starving people outside Mogadishu it would send not less than 15,000 troops to escort food trucks through the anarchic conditions of Somalia.

However, starvation in Somalia is just one symptom of the tragedy. In fact, it is a consequence of the civil war, and the civil war itself is a result of clan feuds and power struggles. For generations the single most important factor in Somali society has been the clan. Although all Somalis belong to one ethnic group and enjoy a sense of common identity based on a shared culture, clan loyalty often undermines the sense of shared nationhood. It was clan feuds which brought down the government of former dictator General Mohammed Siad Barre in January 1991. The octogenarian Barre, who had ruled Somalia with an iron fist since coming to power in 1969, had sought to transform Somali nationalism from its old segmentary state to a modern 'organic' mode.

Cultural Studies:

Pluralism and Theory

10-13 December 1992
University of Melbourne

The inaugural conference of the Interdepartmental Programme in Cultural Studies of the University of Melbourne will focus on the theme of cultural pluralism and the role of theory in negotiating issues of cultural difference, identity and inequality in both national and transnational contexts.

International speakers will include:
Andrew Ross (Princeton), Hazel Carby (Yale),
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National speakers will include:
Ien Ang, Chris Atmore, David Bennett, Kevin Carmody,
Dipesh Chakrabarty, Stuart Cunningham, Sue Davies,
Simon During, David Goodman, Garey Foley, John Frow,
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Steve Mickler, Meaghan Morris, Zoe Sofoulis, Graeme Turner,
Deb Verhoeven, Paul Walton, Ken Wark.

For details of the programme and registration, write to:
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the process he banned clanism, and in
the early 70s prohibited any reference
to clans. He adopted the doctrine of
'scientific socialism' in an effort to
unite the nation, but in practice
lineage has continued to determine
the course of Somalia's political
development.

Clan and lineage affiliations are also
vital in obtaining jobs, services and
favours. Somalia's social and
economic development, as well as
political organisation, has traditionally
stemmed from lineage systems
based on one or other of the six major
clan families—Darod, Digil, Dir,
Hawiye, Issaq and Rahawein. The six
family groups are further split into
small clans and lineages; the Hawiye
clan, for instance, has six sub-clans,
two of which are sharply divided.

The carnage, chaos and sheer mad-
ness of the past few years stems from
this structure of Somali society. By the
time Barre was toppled in January
1991 the country had been sliding
toward anarchy for more than three
years. Barre had maintained a
centralised and authoritarian regime
that had literally ruined the country.
The economy was in a shambles, poli-
tical institutions had collapsed,
corruption was rampant, morale in
the civil and armed forces was low
and clanism was very strong. The
situation was so appalling that few
people had any illusions that Barre's
fall from grace would bring an imme-
diate end to the suffering or restore
normal services.

Moreover the resistance groups op-
posed to Barre's rule mirrored the
anarchic condition of the regime,
thereby ensuring that the post-Barre
era would be chaotic. The main resis-
tance forces were again based on
clan; the Somali National Movement
(SNM), established in 1981 by the
Issaq of northern Somalia; the United
Somali Congress (USC), formed in
1989 by the Hawiye of central
Somalia; and the Somali Patriotic
Movement (SPM), created in 1988 by
the Ogadenis. Increasingly every
public issue in Somalia came to be
defined in terms of lineage and clan. It
was therefore hardly surprising that
when Barre was toppled by the USC
in January 1991 the country was
plunged into even deeper problems.

After Barre's fall the fighting escalated
and many Somalis fled, seeking
asylum in neighbouring Dijboui,
Ethiopia and Keyna. Barre's success-
sor, Ali Mahdi Mohammed, sup-
ported by the local wing of the USC,
had no resources with which to estab-
lish a functioning government. He did
not even control the capital for more
than a few months. At present there is
no effective government in
Mogadishu, as President Mahdi con-
trols only the northern part of the capi-
tal. In the confusion which followed
the overthrow of the Barre regime
government offices and foreign em-
bassies were looted, hospitals and
schools were ravaged and water and
power supply in Mogadishu were dis-
rupted.

Since 1990 Somalia has been ungov-
ernable. The overthrow of Barre was
delayed until January 1991 simply be-
cause alliances between power-seek-
ing clan leaders could not endure.
Somalia's relative stability in the 70s
and early 80s depended on Barre's
skilful manipulation of domestic
politics. He maintained power by
regularly suppressing critics and
detaining opponents, by playing on
clan interests and rivalries and, oc-
casionally, by buying out opposition
groups with cash. However by the late
1980s his military muscle had been
weakened by inter-clan rivalries. It
had also become increasingly obvious
that he had neither the skill to
manipulate sectional interests nor the
vision to lead the country quickly out
of its political and economic crises.

Clan rivalry intensified in the late
1980s because of government corrup-
tion and the increasing economic
malaise throughout the country. And
corruption was rampant because state structures in Somalia were undeveloped and extremely weak. There were no democratic institutions, and there was no accountability on the part of political leaders. Somalia’s economic problems were aggravated by Barre’s misguided macroeconomic policies, by a lack of technical expertise, and by poor project selection and implementation. The foreign aid Somalia received was not invested in profitable ventures, and by the late 1980s the Somali economy had almost ground to a halt.

To make a bad situation worse, by the late 1980s Somalia had been deserted by all its friends and neglected by all but one of the Western powers. Washington terminated aid to Somalia in the wake of human rights violations in 1989. By 1990 Italy was the only Western power working with Somalia in the hope of containing the civil war, reforming the political system and putting the economy on a sound footing. It failed, largely because of Somalia’s complex political problems, rampant corruption, and of course the feuding clans.

Barre’s defeat in January 1991 accelerated the disintegration of Somalia. First, the anti-Barre opposition had only their interest in the defeat of Barre in common; other than that they hated each other almost as much as they did Barre. Second, when Barre was overthrown power was immediately assumed by the Hawiye, a clan that played virtually no role in the anti-Barre struggle until a few months before his fall. Third, President Mahdi was appointed by the USC without consulting the other groups. Since the overthrow of Barre there have been several clan-based civil wars in Somalia, and given the fragmentation of society it has been hard to gauge the direction of the fighting. Among the warring guerrilla groups now are Barre’s own forces, which regrouped in southern Somalia and have been trying to topple the Mahdi regime. This is implausible, yet they are still capable of making life hard for the new government.

Around Mogadishu the USC has been fighting on several fronts—including against its own breakaway groups. On another front, the USC has had to deal with dissatisfaction from the SPM and other political groups which have been dissatisfied with the post-Barre power-sharing arrangement.

After taking power Mahdi had proposed a ‘conference of national reconciliation’, but other groups refused to attend. The conference was finally convened in June and July 1991, but the various political groups were still so divided that it was hard to see how they would coordinate their programs.

Mediation efforts in Somalia have failed for several reasons: the various clans and sub-clans still hate each other vehemently; the clan leaders or warlords have virtually no legitimacy and can be abandoned by their supporters at any time; and the number of clan militias keeps rising. Somalia’s inter- and intra-clan rivalry can be resolved only when clan leaders or warlords agree to unite and persuade their supporters to do the same. But without tangible political and economic rewards to show for years of fighting, the warlords have been unable to persuade their fighters to put down arms. In his heyday Barre succeeded in bribing clan leaders with political office and economic rewards, but the country is now so poor and disorganised that such rewards are no longer tenable. In the long term only strong state structures, efficient and accountable government and appropriate macroeconomic policies will save Somalia.

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Jaywalking

It was a momentous event in radio journalism. Brett Whiteley had been dead for less than a day and the JJJ reporter was hot on the case. Interviewing a gallery owner she got to the point: “Just how influential was he?”

That’s rather typical of JJJ: in pursuit of shoe-ornothing a perceived point of cultural interest into terms acceptable to their idea of a youthful point of view, JJJ boil Whiteley down to how much you should care he’s dead. It’s the sort of thing you’re likely to find every day on the station: perhaps well-meaning, but often just crass. As Australia’s one and only ‘Youth Network’ (though Sydney and Melbourne both have male youth-oriented, commercially successful MMMs) the station inhabits a curious place in radio. Milder ‘intellectual’, it’s designed for the 15-24 age group, the inheritors of a strange white liberal middle-class suburban landscape which can only be populated by the sort of ‘typical’ families of ABC dramas and sitcoms.

This is a far cry from the assumed JJJ audience of the 70s and early 80s: coffee/beer/coffee-skulling, trendy-haired, casually-university-attending, t-shirt-wearing, already-been-overseas-once-and-hope-to-go-again-next-year music fans.

One might argue that it’s better to cater for the odd suburban teen reject here and there as a Youth Network than to wallow in the Golden Oldies of the New Wave for the sake of an ageing band of ‘Jays’ lovers. Yet JJJ doesn’t have many listeners these days anyway, probably because it doesn’t play the music that the majority of kids really enjoy—it brings too much of its aged knowledge of what’s gone before. Aussie MOR rocker Rick Price, for instance, is hardly likely to get a look in on JJJ because he’s not a 30 year-old’s idea of what a 15 year-old should like.