



Report of ISS International Conference “Unpacking the Somali Conflict”

Pretoria, Wednesday, 21 January 2009

This international conference, organized by the African Security Analysis Programme, brought together several of the foremost Somali and international analysts and conflict resolution practitioners that have worked towards finding an effective solution to the conflict in Somalia. The main objective was to shed light on the shifting complexities of the crisis, the future challenges facing the Transitional Federal Government, the African Union and the international community, and to provide a new perspective of the conflict that would allow for the discussion of alternative peace and conflict resolution paradigms.

Session I “The Somali Conflict in Perspective”

The first panel “The Somali Conflict in Perspective” dealt with several of the factors contributing to the escalation of the crisis, as well as dispelling some of the misconceptions surrounding the conflict in Somalia. The motivations behind the involvement of regional and international actors were highlighted in terms of national security concerns and foreign policy objectives. The point was raised that the new U.S. Administration would continue to privilege relations with Ethiopia while attempting to not be perceived as being ‘soft’ on terrorism. However, for there to be a solution to this conflict, any process has to be Somali-driven rather than having externally imposed templates on state-building and reconciliation. The point was made that there is a false choice regarding the international community of whether or not to get involved in Somalia when the attention should be focused on how the international community can create political space and how it can engage more surgically.

In this context it was noted that since 1995 Somalia has had governance, even if without government, through customary law, Sharia courts, and other forms of traditional authority. One explanation of why Somalia has lacked a de facto State is that Somalis fear the revival of a central government because of the possibility of

one interest group instrumentalizing it against another. The role and effectiveness of the African Union peacekeeping force (AMISOM) was also discussed.

The panel was moderated by Ms. Paula Roque (ISS) and had as speakers Ms. Sally Healy, OBE (Chatham House), Dr. Ken Menkhaus (Davidson University), Mr. Jabril Ibrahim Abdulle (Centre for Research and Dialogue, Somalia), and Mr. Henri Boshoff (ISS)

Session II “Dynamics and Issues of the Current Crisis”

The second session “ Dynamics and Issues of the Current Crisis” highlighted several of the fundamental aspects that are not being properly considered in attempts to stabilize Somalia like the issue of impunity and the humanitarian crisis. In order for security to be reestablished in the country the best long-term solution will be the establishment of an effective security sector based on the rule of law as part of a more sustained political development strategy. It was also highlighted that by continuing to avoid incorporating the Islamist forces into the Djibouti peace agreement the whole process will lack the buy-in of fundamental groups in Somali that represent significant portions of the population. One pattern that has emerged is that after each peace agreement in Somalia fighting has worsened with the shifting of alliances and the fragmentation of interest groups. In contrast, the events in Somaliland and Puntland, that are preparing for elections or have undergone recent polls, were also discussed.

The panel was moderated by Mr. Graham Maitland (Department of Foreign Affairs, South Africa) and had as speakers Mr. Jeremy Brickhill (Security Analyst), Mr. Raghe Abdurahman (Interpeace), Dr. Abdulahi Osman (University of Georgia), Dr. Pat Johnson (Interpeace), and Mr. Richard Cornwell (ISS).

Session III “ Challenges and Prospects for Achieving Peace”

The last panel “ Challenges and Prospects for Achieving Peace” dealt with the need to devise strategies to contain radicalization, the role played by the Diaspora, and that signs of a sectarian conflict are emerging. The view that radicalism and jihadism will only be defeated ideologically and not militarily was expressed.

Lessons from Somaliland’s success in consolidating peace and managing to have an effective government showed that the process had at its foundation several Somaliland-wide large multi-clan peace conferences dealing with, among others, constitutional issues, land rights and restitution of property and establishing systems of security. This process succeeded because it was designed, mediated, managed and financed by Somalis where the leadership was locally selected and respected.

The panel was moderated by Prof. Maxi Schoeman (University of Pretoria) and had as speakers Prof. Iqbal Jhazbhay (UNISA), Mr. Mark Bradbury (Rift Valley Institute), Mr. Nuur Mohamud Sheekh (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre), and Mr. Rashid Abdi (International Crisis Group).