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CONFLICT IN THE OGA DEN AND ITS REGIONAL DIMENSION

A Horn of Africa Group¹ Seminar Report

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On 31 August, the Horn of Africa Group held a one-day seminar at Chatham House on the Ogaden Conflict and its regional dimension. The conference brought together a cross section of academic and media specialists, people from the region, NGO and humanitarian practitioners and policy makers on the Horn of Africa. The aim was to share information about the humanitarian situation and to reach a better grasp of the conflict and its dynamics to help inform regional strategies to end conflict.

¹ The Horn of Africa Group is a collaboration between four London based institutions: Chatham House, the Royal African Society, the Rift Valley Institute and the Centre for African Studies at London University.

“The people in the villages are suffering. They know that what is happening to them links up with other conflicts in the region and with wider global issues like the war on terrorism. But do the politicians in the region and the international community know or care what is happening in the villages?” A quote from the seminar.

During the last six months, low-key unrest in Ethiopia’s Ogaden region has escalated beyond all recognition. The first signal was a major Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) attack on a Chinese oil exploration site last April in which 74 people were killed. Since then there have been reports of major counter-insurgency operations in the region, accompanied by the imposition of a trade blockade and allegations, denied by the government, of the abuse of food aid. In July, the ICRC was accused of giving assistance to terrorists and was required to stop their relief operation. NGOs continue to report difficulty gaining access. Amidst fears of a growing humanitarian crisis, the Ethiopian government has dismissed NGO concerns as political statements. This week a UN fact-finding mission is visiting the Ogaden region in the hope of establishing the facts about the humanitarian situation.

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The following is a highly condensed synthesis of the meeting, which was held under the Chatham House Rule. It provides a short assessment of the humanitarian, political (local and regional) and economic situation in the Ogaden followed by a set of policy relevant conclusions in each of these areas.

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THE OGADEN: BASIC FACTS

The name Ogaden belongs to the largest Somali sub-clan living in the Somali region, the Ogaadeen, of Ethiopia. Historically, the Somali-inhabited area of Ethiopia has been known as the Ogaden region. It also gave its name to the war between Ethiopia and Somalia in 1977/78. After 1991 it became the Somali Regional State, also known as Region 5.

The population size is highly disputed, with allegations that the 1994 census findings were reduced from as much as 9.2 or 7.5 million to 3.4 million. The number of districts has risen steadily and had reached 52 by the end of 2005. The regional boundary between the Somali region and Oromiya was not settled up to 2003 when referenda to determine the boundaries at district (Woreda) and local (kebele) levels .

There has been no official strategic level dialogue between the Ogaden National Liberation Front and the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) since the ONLF left the regional government in 1994. There are few Somalis in senior positions in the Federal government of Ethiopia.

I THE HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

The facts around food security and human rights are contested and framed, too narrowly, for political ends – Are people being killed or not? Are people dying of starvation or not?

This is the territory of humanitarianism as an instrument of warfare, where rumours are political weapons. At times there may be more activity on websites than in the Ogaden.

The key issue at present is the trade blockade, which was imposed in May 2007 following a sharp escalation in ONLF attacks. Trade is the lifeblood of the population – no trade, no livelihood. Its impact is most severe in a specific area corresponding to the

Ogaadeen clan area. But the trade clampdown affects everyone – pastoralists cannot live off their animals and have to trade to survive.

The districts affected by the blockade are Degahbur, Korahe, Warder, Fig and Gode, with a (1994) population of about 1.4 million. In the affected areas, food prices have doubled and livestock prices have fallen (approximately halved), the effective cost of obtaining food therefore increased by 400%, if there is a market for livestock and foodstuffs. Vulnerable householders have to sell their assets to cope with the situation, lessening their ability to cope with any future economic shocks. Sugar prices are now falling, which suggests some easing of the situation. But information is hard to come by. It was not possible to access some districts during food security surveys. MSF-Holland was denied access to Warder.

Lack of humanitarian access to Region 5 is not new, but it has gotten much worse lately. The absence of humanitarian space is not just the government's fault. NGOs have made mistakes, the ONLF has been hostile at times and Islamic militants distrust the activities of Western aid agencies. For the two main protagonists - the government and the ONLF - politics matter more than people. Both sides reject the concept of neutrality. They both use and abuse food aid. They both know about the strategic value of information, including information about human rights abuse. The ONLF (like other insurgent groups) has its eyes on strategic NGO assets and their insurgency has blocked development in the areas they control.

Shutting down trade will create dependence on food aid. The amounts entering the region so far are much too small for the affected population. Some preferential lifting of the blockade may now be occurring, with access under military escort for favoured commercial traders bringing goods, including foodstuffs, into the area. But the all important export of livestock, on which the pastoralists depend, has yet to be restored. The new business operations engaged in the transport of food can expect to profit from the humanitarian crisis (in the short term) and may attempt to displace Somali traders in longer term.

II THE POLITICAL SITUATION

A The EPRDF and bad governance in Region 5

Ethnic federalism, designed for the empowerment of Ethiopia's peripheral nationalities, could go full circle to become a tool of colonial divide and rule.

There is a real sense of political exclusion in Region 5 – the centre and its overriding security agenda are back in charge.

The heightened tension between Government and military against the ONLF dates from the attack in April on the Chinese oil exploration company. The EPRDF approach to Region 5 is dominated by security considerations to the exclusion of all else. Military authorities exert strong influence on aspects of regional government: all local committees include an ENDF presence.

Government action is construed as a policy of collective clan punishment against certain Ogaadeen clans. Although the Somali regional government has Ogaadeen clan members, including in key positions, there is still a sense that it is dominated by the interests of other (non Ogadeni) clans. These are favoured allies and have condoned the federal action. The blockade is also a counter-insurgency measure since the ONLF was taxing traders in the areas where it is strong and the government sought to cut it off from its material support base.

The situation is worst for Ogaadeenis, but the rest of the population is also affected. They do not condone what is happening. The current problems come on the back of a long record of misrule in the Region 5, affecting all Ethiopian Somalis. The autonomy that Region 5 should enjoy under the Ethiopian federal system has not been honoured. There is an absence of genuine local political organisations and regional officials are handpicked, upwardly accountable and unable to speak out. State institutions are weak and ineffectual if they exist at all. Parliamentarians have been arrested and civil servants arbitrarily dismissed. Funds have been embezzled. The security forces are irresponsible and unaccountable and the abuse of human rights has been aided by ignorance of the people, expulsion of critics and weak judicial institutions. Starvation has been used as a punishment.

Nonetheless, it was possible to argue that state structures had penetrated Region 5 more than they did under previous Ethiopian governments. Woreda level budgets represent an injection of capital. Fighting over this among the new regional elites has helped to produce instability. Civil service dismissals could be seen as resource conflict. Seen in the longer term, this may represent an attempt by the Ethiopian authorities to reclaim Region 5, incorporate it more fully into the state and create a tax base there.

B The ONLF

Established in 1984, the ONLF had its roots in the Ogaadeen diaspora in Somalia, the Middle East and Western countries. The ONLF headed the Somali regional government from 1991 to 1994, in the initial years in alliance with the WSLF. It was forced out of regional office by EPRDF after it requested the holding of a referendum on self-determination/secession in 1994. The nature and extent of the support base of the ONLF is a subject of some controversy. Non-Ogaadeeni sources claim that the organisation has a strong association with certain Ogaadeen sub-clans, notably the Rer Abdille. But Ogaadeeni sources dispute this, claiming that ONLF support is not confined to this group and the current crackdown has affected many other Ogaadeen sub-clans. They note that the leadership of the ONLF has always included a variety of Ogaadeen sub-clans. Numbers matter in the ethnic federal system, and the region's non-Ogaadeen clans contest the Ogaadeen claim to represent the majority in Region 5. Ogaadeeni clans just as strongly refute charges of hegemonic tendencies. Current pressures have increased infighting among Ogaadeen clans and the ONLF leadership is itself divided.

Eritrea has taken a close interest in the ONLF since 1998, providing support and training. This has weakened earlier Islamist tendencies in the organisation and has resulted in an uneasy relationship between the ONLF and Islamist groups operating in the region. In the current phase, most of the victims of the conflict are Ogaadeen citizens rather than Ethiopian soldiers or ONLF fighters.

The political aspects of the conflict are not new, but the problem was ignored and allowed to fester. Negotiations between EPRDF and Ogadeni elders in 2005 were not encouraged or supported by any external stakeholders.

C Political effects of the counter-insurgency

The methods of counter-insurgency are losing hearts and minds and fuelling the ONLF.

In the Ogaden, as in Somalia, the Ethiopian government uses the clan system but is demonstrating a lack of grasp over how Somali society works. More than mistreating particular clans, they risk building a powerful (and interconnected) opposition that could go far beyond the confines of Region 5.

The counter-insurgency methods are disproportionate and include collective punishment, divide and rule, use of food as a weapon and displacement as a tool of war. All this is explained as a necessity of counter-terrorism. The methods are the same as those being used in Mogadishu since the Ethiopian invasion of December 2006. Ethiopian Somalis feel they are being treated as foreigners and see themselves being at the bottom of the ethnic pile. They are treated with distrust and also distrust each other.

Ethiopian action is leading to a revival of Somali national sentiment and a sense of a common destiny that cuts across the clan divide. There are similar problems arising in other parts of the Ethiopian periphery - links are reviving between the peripheral liberation fronts.

D Regional Factors

In the minds of the EPRDF, all rebel roads lead to Asmara.

Eritrea is a major factor. Whether or not they were involved in the attack in Deghabur the belief that they were became, for Ethiopia, a justification for war. Eritrean support for OLF and ONLF goes back some time, predating their support for the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) in Somalia. In late 2006 they had 200-250 military advisers with the UIC, south of Galkayo. These were mostly withdrawn in early December 2006 in anticipation of Ethiopian attack. The 2,000 Eritreans cited in the UN Sanctions Monitoring report of November 2006 were Eritrean trained ONLF forces in Eritrean style military dress. They went into the Ogaden before the fall of the UIC and now form the backbone of the ONLF forces.

*The Ethiopian invasion of **Somalia** has cast a shadow over the Ogaden*

For Ethiopian Somalis, the EPRDF's move into Somalia has roused suspicion about Ethiopia's intentions in the wider region. That is not to say that there is any continuity with 1977 irredentism - Ogaadeenis are not tools of Somalia or others. But there is now potential for a wider alignment against the Ethiopian government of Somali clans inside and outside Ethiopia. Similarly, Islamist militants from Somalia could become more involved or their methods could be copied.

US and Ethiopia are allies but they might not be fighting the same war

Misrule in Region 5 is supported by the rhetoric of the **US war on terrorism**. Local perceptions of the US military presence in the region seem to support this idea. In reality, the US's counter-terrorism interest is in dealing with international terrorists rather than getting embroiled in regional challenges to EPRDF rule. Ethiopian tactics in Region 5 have not been helpful for winning hearts and minds to underpin counter-terrorism efforts and US forces have been excluded from some districts.

III THE ECONOMIC SITUATION

Region 5 is an integral part of a "Greater Somalia" economy

The pastoral economy has been doing well in recent years, with good pasture and large animal stocks. Pastoralism is a vulnerable livelihood, but it is viable. Traders are key in the livelihoods chain. They operate through informal (clan-based) networks using long established historical routes. The largest markets are in the Arab Gulf states.

Somali traders are used to managing risk. But the blockade takes uncertainty to impossible levels. Poor governance leads to multiple, arbitrary and unpredictable taxation arrangements that hinder the development of trade. Region 5 lacks an appropriate legal framework for trade operations, so any trade can be called contraband. This level of unpredictability in such a crucial area of economic activity is another aspect

of misrule in Region 5. Letters of Credit are officially requested, but are not affordable for most of the small scale traders and businessmen who are involved in this sector.

New players are starting to break into the trade and transport sector via the food aid business. Non-Somali truckers are appearing on the Deghaber-to-Jigjiga road. They have military escorts but profits go to private hands, cutting out Somali traders.

CONCLUSIONS

I Humanitarian

On the trade blockade and the politics of food aid

- The trade blockade needs to be lifted. Trade is crucial to local livelihoods. Selling livestock is how people live in this region. An extended blockade will do enormous economic harm.
- The food aid bandwagon can be avoided – through opening trade. Food aid is rarely appropriate for pastoralists and has often been abused in the region.
- The credibility of the UN assessment mission depends on it gaining access to the area affected by the blockade and having independence and political space to undertake its investigation. It should acknowledge any limitations it confronts and use the findings of existing studies to bolster its evidence. It should not shrink from making recommendations concerning the trade blockade.
- International attention needs to be maintained to avoid the situation worsening (possible parallel with Darfur)
- A minimum objective should be a return to the limited humanitarian access that existed earlier this year.

II Political

Ethiopian government and the ONLF

- First point – the situation can go on and will do unless efforts are made now
- Need for a bridge between ONLF and EPRDF. External stakeholders should focus on finding a way for talks to take place.
- ONLF and EPRDF should both be prevailed upon to uphold human rights
- Federal government is failing in its constitutional responsibilities: should there be a *technical* constitutional review to assess how to make it work better in the periphery?
- ONLF should close the gap between their diaspora leaders and people on the ground

External factors

- A durable political solution will have to be a regional solution – it should involve **IGAD and the AU**.
- **Eritrea** is deeply involved in the problem so the best thing is to include them in looking for a solution.
- **Somalia** casts the longest shadow, generating distrust over EPRDF intentions. Efforts should be made to insulate the two conflicts to avert risk that other parts of the Ogaden clan family might get involved and also Islamists from Somalia.
- **US** desire to provide large amounts of food aid as a form of support to ENDF operations in region is unlikely to be helpful. US regional role – another long shadow, special forces in Gode and Jigjiga
- **China** could be urged to play their part. They are heavily involved in oil exploration, close to the Ethiopian government, and have an interest in peace in the region.

III Economic

- Lifting the trade blockade is a top priority and could be a strong political negotiation tool for the EPRDF.

