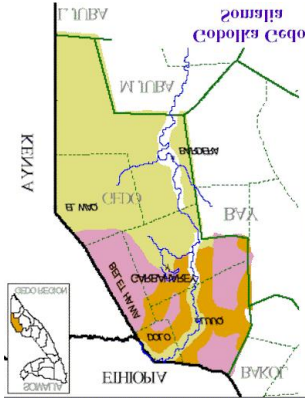


Abdi G. Mohamed

A GLIMMER OF HOPE ON THE HORIZON FOR GEDO RESIDENTS

**"WAY XUSUUSAN YIHIIN DADKA XEEBTA DEGAA
IN GUMASI XUNYEE WAA INAY XOR NOQDAAN"**



***world would be inhabitable.
ols, hospitals and other social amenities would not be
would be no economic development i.e. industrial, agricultural,
family bondage, which is the core of a nation, will be non- –
ers have only been accepted as refugees because they lack
and, fearing persecution, but not because they have financial
education, health care etc.***

The Elephant-shaped Region

GEDO PEACE PROCESS

GEDO, *the elephant-shaped region*, is situated in the far Southwest part of Somalia. It is the second largest of Somalia's 18 provinces and has an area of 43000 square Km. In terms of population, although no official census has been carried out since the collapse of the Somali Central Government, rough estimate place its population at between 380,000 - 400,000 people (UNDP rough estimate). But, because of the civil war and related causes, more than 200,000 former Gedo residents are reported to have fled the region to neighbouring countries and beyond since 1991. The region borders Ethiopia to the North and Kenya to the West and, therefore it is the only region that has 2 international borders with two of the three neighbouring States that have a population of more than 100 Million. This gives the region a comparative advantage over others to serve as Somalia's trade route to African continent and particularly the frontline states in today's globalized economy. But, to explore this untapped potential, Gedo needs 450 Km of asphalt road through the region and to borders of the two above-mentioned countries.

Likewise, Gedo has a distinction of being one of the most densely populated regions with animals in Somalia. So are the agricultural resources and fertile land. Of the seven districts in the region, rivers and valleys traverse six of them. Thus, approximately, 65%-70% of its population is engaged in livestock rearing and agriculture. Based on its livestock and agricultural potentialities and resources, the region has the capacity to produce 30% -50% of the essential crops, vegetables and fruits needed in the entire country. In addition, according to geological sources, Gedo is blessed with the various and numerous precious stones and minerals. Moreover, the future production of Somalia's electrical power supply from Gedo is also a definite asset of the region. Despite all these great potentials, it is one of the least developed regions in Somalia. There are no asphalt roads or airports, and no significant social or economic infrastructure.

THE EFFECT OF THE CIVIL WAR

Before the civil war, Gedo was known to be one of the most peaceful regions in Somalia spanning over centuries. However, after the collapse of the state, the region experienced several major offensive attacks perpetrated by USC 1991-1992, which claimed many lives and destroyed most of the little infrastructure the region had. Later, the effects of the civil war, inter-sub-clan conflicts and widespread human rights violation continued and prevailed throughout the region and particularly in the northern districts. Violent clashes and frequent fighting between various clan-based armed militias recklessly caused by irresponsible and narrow-minded leadership devastated the region. Moreover, the instability and the hostile environment spearheaded by ruthless self-interest groups and the so-called warlords brought about acrimony between people that have lived together as brothers, sisters and relatives in Gedo region for centuries. Confidence and loyalties within community have been replaced with mistrust and hatred. Subsequently, the people's unity and cohesiveness have been shattered. As a result, the continuous escalation of tensions and confrontations with no logical reasoning set a breeding ground for anarchy, lawlessness and prevalence of violence.

The situation further worsened, as the mainstream society, i.e. elders, traditional leaders and intellectuals, were unable to effectively engage in a constructive dialogue in bringing the situation under control. Thus, community organizations and structures were impaired and traditional conflict resolving mechanisms were weakened. Social confidence is damaged, and hence, the communities have become very susceptible to any rumourmongering.

Imported ideas and influence from outside of the region have also contributed much towards the plight of the region and, the situation perfectly fits the description of the typical Somalia known to the world today that has been under shear tentacles of warlords for more than 14 years.

In this scenario, victims are mostly the vulnerable groups (women, children, elderly etc). Women in particular are targeted and sometimes killed in cold blood. They are frequently offended, abused and indecently mistreated. Not surprisingly, this situation made their livelihoods almost impossible. As a result, many of Gedo residents lost hope and abandoned their properties, their businesses and their belongings, fleeing for their lives and

pouring across to the Kenyan side of the border in panic, in confusion and in pandemonium, where there are no proper refugee camps. Neighbours, close relatives, old time friends, classmates and co-workers have been physically separated against their will. This has also affected the social and economic activities in general resulting in cropping up of myriad of complex emergencies.

FREQUENT INSECURITY IN GEDO

The conflict in Gedo has its roots in the collapse of the state of Somalia. But, the situation got worse from 1996 to the recent months during which political conflicts and the fighting of opposing forces have broken out frequently in the region and impacted negatively on the local people. It is estimated that nearly **1000 people were killed during those armed conflicts**. All these conflicts were not decisive, as none of the warring factions was able to impose its will on others. Furthermore, none of the factions or the warlords perpetrating these conflicts had an agenda beyond the ambition of controlling the trade routes. So it is a situation in which the clans are experiencing a war of attrition, which evades all attempted solutions. Most of the other development actors in the region are only confined to emergency relief activities. To this day, Humanitarian ECHO flights are banned to operate in Gedo

Although tremendous local peace making efforts have been made and peace conferences have been convened since the onset of the conflict by the communities in the region, and although those past efforts remedied the situation to some extent, slowing down and changing the nature and the intensity of violence, they did not produce conclusive results to help cease hostility in the whole region. Major peace conferences were held in El-Adde twice (1998), Garbaharrey, Bardera, Balad-Hawo, Dolo, Dhamaso and elsewhere in the region.

ETHIOPIA BROKERED PEACE INITIATIVES (fragile accord)

Ethiopia is one of the stakeholders in the region, especially in the border area with respect to the stability and the security settlement, consequently Ethiopian officials tried to broker a peace deal between the warring factions through imposed mechanism. The initiatives are always isolated from one another. And, the seven districts do not have inter-relation. Mostly, the traditional elders who represent the civil society have not been involved in the process and therefore lacked the clan legitimacy and respect.

Currently, there is no active fighting in progress but, the danger of potential conflicts remain high as a powder keg and may explode anytime, unless adequate attention is given sooner rather than later.

A GLIMMER OF HOPE

After almost a decade of hostilities, mistrust and fear amongst the residents of Gedo Region, we finally sense a changing attitude and strengthening trend toward the need for stability and calmness. Peace initiatives are echoed in different parts of the region and within the communities abroad. People realized the insanity suffered by others for long time and emphasized the imperativeness for change to promote a sustainable peace and stability in the region.

In fact, the absence of so-called faction leaders (warring factions) helped this situation tremendously, enabling the elders and the intellectuals in the region coupled with the inputs of the Diaspora community to exchange ideas in search for better conditions in the region. Thanks to the Nairobi Reconciliation Conference that kept them busy for more than two years. Slogans for peace dominated the daily discussions on the streets of major towns and villages as well as the rural areas of the region. *“Peaceful settlement, peace building, lasting peace and stability, peaceful culture, peace cultivation, peaceful mentality”* and many other phrases related to the peace are among the social anthems in the region.

With the current situation in mind, and taking advantage of the opportunity presented, local Non-profit Organizations (S.A.D.O.) and CANOUSOM FOUNDATION, with the help of prominent peace activists succeeded in obtaining funds from Canadian Funding for Local initiative in Nairobi, a subsidiary local office of Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for sponsoring comprehensive and broad-based peace building program in Gedo Region.

This comprehensive peace process has a participatory nature with the concept of broad-based and inclusive initiative, which will be implemented in all the districts of the region. All various segments of the society are empowered and encouraged to actively participate in the process. Traditional leaders, women, youth, sports teams, business people and the intellectuals are taking their prominent roles in this initiative. The objective of these activities is to reclaim the region's status of being the most peaceful region in Somalia.

Participation of Decision-making

The right of the ordinary citizens, the main stream society, to participate in the decision making process is crucial for sustainable peace and stability. This is simply one of the lessons learned

Participation ensures ownership;

Ownership ensures sustainability;

Sustainability ensures solidarity;

Solidarity ensures development.

Development ensures peace and prosperity

CONCLUSION

We acknowledge all the previous efforts made by the various bodies that have sacrificed their precious time, efforts and resources and sometimes risked their lives, in trying to find a lasting peace in Gedo region. Special thanks go to the neighbouring governments, Ethiopia and Kenya, Gedo traditional elders, communities' abroad, not forgetting the prominent peace activists i.e. **the Ugas, Sh. Hassan Iftin, Sh. Ahmed Mohamed "Hadle", Sh. Mohamud Sh. A/Lahi, Mohamed Hassan Yarow, Sh. Mohamed Jama Yare, Abdille A. Ibrahim "Salbay,** and other traditional leaders and most of all the populace of Gedo.

Special thanks, with gratitude and honour also go to Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for its role and contribution in sponsoring comprehensive and broad-based peace building program in Gedo region. We appreciate both their financial, material and moral contribution.

We also recognize the efforts of the various Non-profit Organizations e.g. S.A.D.O and CANOUSOM foundation for having helped obtain funding from Canadian Funding for Local Initiatives in Nairobi.

Finally, we hereby appeal for renewed efforts and unwavering commitment from the above-mentioned organizations, communities, and other peace loving institutions, corporates and individuals to further continue their support and their contribution towards the success of the peace process in Gedo, particularly from the Diaspora community in the provision of financial, material and moral support in our quest to achieving lasting peace in Gedo region. Only then shall we be able to think about health care, education and human, social, and economic development for the war-torn society. Only then shall we be able to form the structure and the institutions of the provincial administration and, only shall we be able to cooperate and work hand in hand with other sister regions and neighbours, with the view of building peaceful and prosperous regional state government "**THE VALLEY STATE**"

Although a great progress has been made thus far about the peace process in Gedo, still there is a long to go to make sure that comprehensive peace, security and stability is achieved, which is a part of the overall peace and reconciliation process for Somalia .

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Humbly yours
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