



OPINION

In the international effort to assist Somalia's reconstruction, the focus of aid should be on the rural, pastoral sector, not on the cities

Roots of Somalia's Crisis

By Bruce Byers

THE belief that the vast human tragedy in Somalia will finally end now that American troops are restoring order and speeding the delivery of relief supplies assumes that political anarchy and clan feuding are the cause of the violence and starvation there.

This assumption may be correct, but shortsighted. A long-term view is that the crisis is caused, not by a temporary breakdown of Somali political institutions, but by a century of economic "development" that was disastrous for Somalia, both ecologically and socially.

Unsustainable "development" began in Somalia at the end of the last century, when Great Britain and Italy imposed colonial economic systems on the traditional nomadic herding culture. The British redesigned the pastoral subsistence economy to produce a surplus of livestock for export to the port of Aden. This commercialization of the pastoral economy expanded during the colonial era, and still more after Somalia became independent in 1960. Since 1955 exports of sheep, goats, and cattle have increased at least tenfold, and of camels twentyfold. Livestock now account for about three-fourths of the country's export earnings. This production of a surplus of animals has led to overgrazing, soil erosion, and degradation of Somalia's range lands.

After Somalia became independent, well-meaning international development aid paid for the drilling of wells in the arid range lands. This frequently induced nomads to settle around the wells, which in turn led to local overgrazing and desertification. Such "development" showed little or no understanding of the ecological sophistication of traditional pastoralism.

Ethiopian expansionism also changed nomadic life for Somalis. Between 1887 and 1904 the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik conquered the Somali-inhabited

Ogaden region. With the concurrence of the British and Italians, national borders were drawn up, splitting the ecologically and ethnically uniform region between Ethiopia and what later became Somalia. The result is an unnatural border that has restricted the traditional migrations of Somali herders to this seasonally lush region.

The settling of nomads increased population growth in Somalia. One demographic study found annual population growth rates of 1.7 percent among nomads, 2.2 percent among settled people, and 4.9 percent among city dwellers. The country's overall population growth rate is now about 3 percent a year. At this rate, the current population of

warlords as a way of competing in a scramble for diminishing ecological resources.

Unsustainable "development" has exhausted the ecological and social resilience of Somali society. Clan-based political institutions may have been suitable for governing the relations between pastoralists in a sparsely settled land, but they seem to be incapable of governing well, now that the ecological setting in which they evolved has been so radically changed by the imposition of an export-oriented economy, dramatic population growth, environmental degradation, and a flood of modern weapons.

Sending troops to restore "order" to Somali politics will not be enough. The lawless gangs must be controlled and the clan fighting must stop, of course. But the way to address the root causes of the tragedy is to assist Somalia in healing its land, curbing the growth of its population, restoring its pastoral economy, and meeting the needs of its own people first. In the international effort to assist Somalia's reconstruction that will hopefully follow the initial effort to restore political order, the temptation to make Somalia's cities and agricultural sector the focus of aid must be resisted. The focus should be on the rural, pastoral sector.

It may take another century to heal the human-human and human-land conflicts and restore an ecologically sustainable balance between the people and the natural environment. This will require a long-term vision, not "band-aid" solutions. Ecologically and socially unsustainable economic "development" will eventually cause conflict in any country. We must understand the casual links between unsustainable development, environmental degradation, and conflict and devote substantial resources to promoting environmentally and socially sustainable development both at home and abroad.

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about 7 million people will double in less than 25 years.

The current Somali conflict is also a legacy of the cold war. Because of its strategic location near the oilfields of the Middle East, both superpowers formed military alliances with governments in the Horn of Africa, and poured weapons into the region for almost four decades.

Rapidly growing populations of settled pastoralists and their growing herds have placed unprecedented stress on Somalia's natural environment. According to reports by the US Agency for International Development and the World Conservation Union (IUCN), this has led to overgrazing, soil erosion, desertification, and excessive fuel wood cutting that is destroying the remnants of Somalia's originally scarce woodlands. This ecological stress in turn fuels conflict between pastoralists over grazing rights and access to water sources for herds, and between farmers and pastoralists along Somalia's rivers. It reduces people's ability to cope with drought, and increases migration to cities. In general it reduces options for rural people and increases support for local