

SOMALIA

The Missed Opportunities

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PREFACE

GIVEN THE importance of the current debate on the effectiveness of international conflict resolution and the role of multilateral organizations, I felt it my duty to describe my experience as the UN special representative in Somalia in 1992. It is my sincere wish that some lessons can be drawn from this limited but significant experience in Somalia, at the very beginning of the UN involvement in that country.

I lived in the Horn of Africa, or more precisely in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for almost a decade, in the late 1960s and early '70s, and I am very attached to the region. I was the deputy secretary-general of the Organization of African Unity, in charge of political affairs, and therefore oversaw some of the conflict situations in the continent and particularly in the Horn. The problems of the subregion were among the most serious issues for the OAU, which was often asked to use its good offices to reduce the prevailing tension between Somalia and its neighbors. Furthermore, the Horn of Africa is often subject to successive and long-lasting droughts that affect deeply the livelihood and the social and political environment of the inhabitants.

When the secretary-general of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, asked me if I would be willing to undertake a fact-finding mission in Somalia in March 1992, I accepted without hesitation. I had already been informed by some friends in the region about the humanitarian tragedy that was unfolding in parts of the country, and I was eager to find out for myself the extent of the tragedy and to assess how the international community should respond.

As our plane landed on a small strip to the north of Mogadishu—the main airport being closed—and as we drove slowly towards the city, I could not believe my eyes. I had visited Somalia before, and what I was seeing now was a total disaster. I describe later in this book some characteristics of this disaster. But here I was, alone, without support staff, and I was being asked to undertake the task of working out a plan whereby the United Nations could facilitate the cessation of hostilities between the Somali factions, promote reconciliation, and provide urgently needed humanitarian assistance.

I reported to the secretary-general about this appalling situation and how we urgently needed to put in place a real rescue operation of a greater magnitude than the one organized at the time of the Ethiopian famine in the early 1980s or in the “Biafran” war in the late ‘60s.

After the Security Council confirmed the appointment of a special representative in April 1992, I officially began my mission as head of the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM). It was still largely a one-person operation. I had to rely on a small staff put at our disposal by UNICEF and shared with the coordinator for humanitarian assistance, David Bassiouny. It took several weeks before the headquarters in New York finally designated Livio Bota, from the UN office in Geneva, and Leonard Kapungu, from the Political Department, to be my assistants, and some more weeks before a support staff could join us.

UNOSOM had in fact taken a real shape only by the time I finally left Somalia, that is, six months after my appointment. But this did not discourage our small team. Relying largely on a few wonderful nongovernmental organizations and on the good relationship we established with the Somali people, we were, I believe, able to create a good, friendly, and warm atmosphere that helped us resolve many intractable issues. The cease-fire was largely respected; the ports and airports of Mogadishu, Kismayu, and elsewhere were opened; and a chain of solidarity with the Somali people began gradually to materialize. I wish we had been allowed to continue . . .

We owe much of this success to the mass media, to which I want to pay a special tribute. Beginning in July, when the security situation had improved, I invited and helped the media, which until then had followed events mostly out of Nairobi, to make their way to several parts of Somalia.

The media reported on the situation with remarkable accuracy and speed, and this media coverage clearly initiated a substantial increase in emergency relief, including a direct airlift operation out of Kenya and Djibouti organized by the United States and other governments. The articles by Jane Perlez, *New York Times* correspondent, played a key role in arousing world attention to the plight of the Somali people. These articles were followed by other television and press reports, including one by *60 Minutes*, for which I was blamed by UN headquarters because of its critical assessment of the UN agencies' role.

I have written this testimony from the viewpoint of someone who believes strongly in intervention through mediation and prevention. Prevention can assume different forms, including pressure and sanctions. We have not yet explored all avenues open to prevention, especially by regional organizations. I have been recently involved in mediation on behalf of the Organization of African Unity to prevent large-scale conflict in the Congo. I believe we have been successful, because the situation is largely stabilized. Elections were held and both the government majority and the opposition are cooperating within the parliament. Problems can still arise, and there might be a need to buttress and consolidate this achievement through a large economic development program. But it is an example of successful preventive diplomacy. It could be done still in Burundi, Zaire, and so on; and it could have been achieved in Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda.

This is my conviction. Conflicts are not necessarily endemic. The ingredients of the crisis, which are often there anyway, gather, however, like clouds before the storm when circumstances dictate for them to do so! We should draw lessons from past experience on how some aggravating factors such as arms supply (for example, in Somalia and Rwanda) and the environment compound and ignite conflicts and wars. If this book can make some contribution to the current debate and help improve policies for the prevention and resolution of conflicts, it will have achieved its aim. It has no other purpose.

A final note. I must express my deepest gratitude to all those who helped me in Somalia and to others who provided their support and encouraged me in my task. I also would like to thank all those at the United States Institute of Peace who provided me with a warm refuge after

Somalia and an atmosphere for reflection and exchange, while I was a visiting distinguished fellow in the Jennings Randolph Program for International Peace at the Institute.

I should add that the preparation of this book was accomplished with the assistance of a number of people, among whom I would like to thank especially Joe Klaitz, Robert Oakley, Dan O'Connor, Dan Snodderly, and Robin Wright.

INTRODUCTION

SINCE THE end of the Second World War the world community has been largely powerless when confronted with local crises. Internal conflicts have usually been perceived as occurring within sovereign states and therefore not warranting outside intervention. Most of the time serious opportunities to mediate and check crises at an early stage have gone unheeded. Occasionally, when crises have reached important dimensions and affected large populations, hasty and ill-prepared emergency relief operations have been put in place while a few timid attempts at reconciliation have been initiated. Even in most of the recent cases, such as Rwanda, Angola, Mozambique, Liberia, Somalia, Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Bosnia, the international community and the United Nations (UN) have begun to take serious initiatives only when large-scale civil wars have engulfed the countries and human tragedies have become overwhelming.

Most of these internal conflicts result from a number of factors, such as the legacy of colonial times, as, for instance, in border issues; the context of the Cold War, in which corrupt or authoritarian rule was tolerated in the name of confronting communism, on the one hand, or capitalism, on the other; and the failure of many of Third World elites to cope with the political, economic, and sociological challenges of the new era. With the end of the Cold War and the proliferation of new challenges—such as the environment—internal conflicts are bound to continue to erupt worldwide for the foreseeable future. Apart from their impact on the local population, such conflicts might present a serious threat to peace and security in entire regions of the world. Therefore, it is important to explore

ways of checking these internal conflicts before they become unmanageable, before their impact on innocent people becomes unbearable, and before they disrupt regional stability. Early intervention, both political and humanitarian, can save hundreds of thousands of lives and avoid a disaster that might affect a whole generation of people in many ways.

The framers of the UN Charter were keen to offer the international community a document that would provide means for peaceful solutions to all disputes, including conflicts within states that could become a threat to international peace and security. Only in exceptional situations does the charter advocate the use of force, and even then it clearly spells out a number of measures—such as imposing economic sanctions—to be taken first.

Article 33 of the charter, which is central to the whole architecture of the document, reflects the framers' preference for peaceful solutions:

The parties to any dispute, the continuance of which is likely to endanger the maintenance of international peace and security, shall, first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice.

The Security Council shall, when it deems necessary, call upon the parties to settle their dispute by such means.

Chapter VIII of the charter, which deals in three long articles with regional arrangements, underlines further that member states should make every effort to achieve peaceful settlement of disputes through regional organizations before referring them to the Security Council. The UN and regional organizations should cooperate to put in place a monitoring system in different regions of the world that can alert UN headquarters to an impending crisis and suggest ways to avert a larger conflict. Preventive action must rely on permanent structures and adequate human resources. Statesmen experienced in brokering peace should be available on short notice to undertake specific mediation operations as special envoys of regional organizations and, when necessary, of the UN.

In addition to the members of the UN, the secretary-general himself is authorized to bring "to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security" (Article 99 of the charter). This authorization has hardly been used by recent secretaries-general. Yet it is clear that by referring to

"any matter" here the drafters of the charter broadened the scope of the secretary-general's mandate to allow him to determine whether and when specific situations warrant the attention of the Security Council and to address such matters to the council. This article implies that the secretary-general is entitled to make the necessary investigations and to assess the means of resolving an issue well before it evolves into a dangerous conflict.

It is my belief that if the international community had intervened earlier and more effectively in Somalia, much of the catastrophe that has unfolded could have been avoided. In theory, there should have been no shortage of actors who could have intervened to mediate the conflicts that engulfed Somalia. Somalia is a member of the League of Arab States, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and the Islamic Conference. During the Carter and Reagan administrations, Somalia was also a close ally of the United States, receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in American economic and military assistance. Somalia also maintained good relations with the former colonial powers Great Britain and Italy, two important members of the European Community. Finally, Somalia was, of course, a member of the UN. Any one of these actors could have offered its services as a mediator or supported the mediation efforts timidly undertaken at various times. Sadly, none of these nations or institutions, all supposedly friends of Somalia and its people, moved seriously to help the country in its hour of need in a timely and efficient way. When the international community finally did begin to intervene in early 1992, hundreds of thousands of lives had already been lost.

In the following pages I will look at the Somali case, which provides specific examples of how the failure of the international community to intervene in different phases of a crisis can be detrimental and lead to further deterioration. I will examine the relationship between intervention and sovereignty—how there is no basic contradiction between the two if certain precautionary measures are taken—and attempt to assess some of the reasons for the failure of the UN to take adequate and timely action to prevent conflict.

