

# Getting engaged?

## the United Nations and Somalia

### a conversation with Charles Petrie

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Charles Petrie is UN Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Somalia

#### Tell us about your personal association with Somalia

I first came to Somalia in 1992 to join the UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM I), the mission headed by Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun, at the time the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG).

I arrived in August before the deployment of UNITAF [the US-led United Task Force that preceded the second UN peacekeeping mission, UNOSOM II] in December 1992. In fact, I had to prepare the groundwork and negotiate the arrival of UNITAF forces in Kismayo in the south of the country, and I discussed their deployment with the local warlords.

After that I became part of the second UN peacekeeping operation (UNOSOM II), which unfortunately became embroiled in conflict with General Farah Aideed at the end of 1993. At that time I headed the Crisis Action Group under US Admiral Jonathan Howe, the new SRSG.

I left Somalia in April 1994. We knew that the mission had failed. Before leaving Somalia I wrote a paper for Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali entitled *The Death of a Noble Call*, arguing that the UN was mistaken in thinking that the Somalis had turned against them. Rather, through its actions the UN had been seen as having taken sides in the clan conflict. By supporting Somali groups against Aideed's Habr Gedir clan in Mogadishu the UN had become what I called 'the 15<sup>th</sup> clan'.

Immediately after Somalia I was instructed to take up a post as the UN Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator in Rwanda. I went with great reluctance. It was April 1994, just as the genocide began. I saw the price that was paid for failure in Somalia. I still believe it was Rwanda that paid the biggest price.

#### What drew you back to Somalia?

There were two main factors. One was the encouragement I received from Ambassador Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, the current SRSG who took up office in September 2007. I knew him from Burundi during the genocide in Rwanda. He is a man of extraordinary courage who had been instrumental in containing violence in Burundi.

By now I had also worked in UN missions in Gaza and Afghanistan where I had seen the challenges and the potential, as well as the missed opportunities, of working with Islamic groups. I see working with different groups and ideologies as one of the greatest challenges facing the UN. I felt I could help to contribute to finding common ground.

#### When you returned to Somalia, in what ways had the situation changed?

What was clear when I returned in November 2008 was that no solution had emerged in the previous 19 years. But there have been some significant changes. The political landscape has become more complicated, no longer just defined by the clans and warlords who were familiar from the past. There are new actors such as religious groups to take into account. The diaspora too is now a political entity. Also a great many intellectuals and prospective leaders have left because of the violence.

In the 1990s Somalia was seen as an international responsibility. But after 19 years of conflict we now have to confront the inability of the Somali leadership to deal with the violence. Now we are all equal in blame that has to be shared between us. Somalis cannot blame the international community. We are all responsible for this problem. A solution has to be found.



Charles Petrie, Abdirahman Raghe (Interpeace), the Hon. Wafula Wamunyinyi (Dept. Head, AMISOM), and Jeremy Brickhill at Accord workshop Nairobi, June 2009. © CR/Cynthia Petrich

**How would you characterize or contrast the role of the UN during UNOSOM and the role that it is playing now?**

The differences are fundamental. UNOSOM was an exceptional mission, a real UN engagement and the first post Cold War UN intervention. However much one can criticize UNOSOM, it was driven by a very genuine desire to solve the problems and help the people of Somalia.

The UN approach is different now. We learnt the lessons of failure. There is not the same steamroller effect. The Somalis themselves will have to lead this and define how the international community should engage. The Somalis need to regain the confidence that something can be done.

The international atmospherics and political dynamics are also different today. It is true that international attention is focused on Somalia again, but partly for negative reasons – the fear of pirates, the threat from terrorists. This presents us with an opportunity.

The negative attention has to be captured and transformed into a positive interest in solving Somalia’s problems. International security interests are there and they need to be channelled in positive ways that will allow Somalia to emerge from the violence. If this fails, the most likely result will be a negative policy of containment of Somalia.

**Compared to the 1990s, how has the nature of UN interventions changed? What are the implications of this for Somalia?**

The UN has gained enormously in its experience of intervention. One could argue that the UN’s impact in Somalia is much more incisive. There is also a growing relationship with regional bodies. The relationship between the UN and the African Union (AU) is new. The concept of a UN supported regional force, as we have in the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) is an interesting and innovative new construct. We are seeing the beginning of a more equal partnership with regional bodies.

Another change from the 1990s is that the Security Council seems rather more hesitant about getting involved. It needs to be drawn in more actively. But there are real opportunities to be seized.

**What is the single most important lesson that the UN can take from its engagement in Somalia over the past 18 years?**

The most important lesson is that the process of recovery must be led by Somalis themselves. What is needed remains the same: a governance entity that can rebuild the country. It is the UN’s role to build the capacity of such an entity. In order to realize the potential that is out there we need to establish confidence between Somalia and the international community. We could do with a more sustained level of international interest. That way the resources needed to build that capacity will be found.

**What are the peacekeepers doing in Somalia?**

The approach being followed is for the forces to secure the ports and airports to facilitate access for goods and humanitarian assistance to the country. Second, to provide security to institutions of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), giving them time and space to get established. Third, to help build security forces. This is the approach that is being pursued.

**What is the UN doing to support AMISOM?**

It is being assisted exactly as if AMISOM were a UN peacekeeping operation. Funding is from assessed contributions. The amount allocated for the first nine months of 2009 is more than \$200 million.

We have established a dedicated support office for AMISOM and we are providing direct logistical support to the mission for housing and such like. The UN is trying to facilitate and encourage additional bilateral capacity and is helping to build the capacity of the police and security forces.

**How do you see the role of international peace support operations in a situation of live conflict – as we see now in Mogadishu?**

The international military intervention is there to provide safe space and time for the government so that it can start to assert itself and start to govern. The international role is also to encourage the government to continue its efforts at outreach.

**This is a fast moving situation. Do you think that the peacekeeping mandates approved by the UNSC have kept pace with events? Are they appropriate?**

AMISOM is operating under a Chapter VII mandate. This is a very broad mandate and suitable for the mission. Their rules of engagement are under constant review by the AU.

I would argue that AMISOM has done well overall. AMISOM peacekeepers have managed to avoid falling into the lethal 'UNOSOM trap' of becoming a belligerent. They have taken casualties and at times they have needed to take a robust stance, for example during fighting with Islamist insurgents in July 2009.

Unfortunately there have been civilian casualties. But AMISOM is working in a very imperfect setting. Given the horrors that have been unleashed it has exercised considerable restraint in the face of violence.

**Do you see the Djibouti process as complete or do you envisage any further UN role in mediation?**

What we want to avoid at all costs is a new process or another conference. We are mid-way through a transition and we are pushing the government, the Somalis themselves, to bring it to a successful conclusion by reaching out to make it more inclusive.

The UN role, especially that of the SRSG, is to facilitate, not to lead. We encourage the Somalis themselves to mediate and we want them to commit to a strategy of outreach. Groups that are outside the process need to be brought in, but we want them to engage in the transition, not to attempt to re-define it. The ultimate opportunity should come at the end of the transition and will provide the political moment for everyone to participate.

**What are your views on entities such as Puntland and Somaliland that have remained outside the formal structures of the TFG?**

This is the next dimension of the Djibouti process. The challenge that Puntland and Somaliland represent are very different and the approach to each one should be different. But steps need to be taken to enable them to feel comfortable with the transition process and to search for common ground. This requires outreach and discussion. But the process established at Djibouti is open enough to allow others to join in and flexible enough to be enlarged so that others can participate.

**Do you see any prospect of helping to bring Al Shabaab or Hisbal Islamiya into a negotiation?**

The principle is that anybody who is willing to negotiate or discuss their differences would be facilitated by the UN. Anyone willing to look for solutions and engage in peaceful

dialogue about fundamental differences should be able to take part. The UN is willing to facilitate.

**Can the UN engage with Islamic groups in Somalia?**

It is a case of seizing the opportunities that present themselves. From my work in Gaza and Afghanistan I know how perceived differences between Islam and the West can affect attempts to provide essential assistance to those in need. It raises doubts and suspicions about what the international community is trying to achieve with its humanitarian assistance.

These problems are mainly in the political sphere and are highlighted, for example, in the work of the UN Security Council. But the UN is not only about the Security Council and politics. The principles embodied in the UN Charter and the work of the agencies concern all populations.

Common ground exists on situations of suffering where the UN and Islamic groups can work together and do work together in Somalia, and have reached understandings on humanitarian need. It is this kind of cooperation that must be fostered and encouraged.

**We have heard a lot about the international responsibility to protect. How do you see this being realized in Somalia today?**

The responsibility to protect (R2P) is groundbreaking in terms of statuting. It brings another dimension to tackling conflict, recognizing warring parties as accountable entities who have responsibilities that they are required to honour. R2P is not just about enforcement and intervention. It has another dimension that involves trying to get all groups to understand their responsibilities. The UN, especially the UN Human Rights office, is seeking ways to create mechanisms through which those responsibilities would be honoured by all parties.

**What is the single most important thing that the international community should do to help Somalia move out of the current crisis?**

The international community must get off the fence and engage. We are mid-transition. This is a Somali process that needs active international support to develop a capacity to govern and build in a sense of responsibility and accountability. The international community has other distractions and is afraid of history. It should not wait, but engage and support the transition now.

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**Interview conducted by Sally Healy.**