**Q&A: Somalia's conflict**

*Background*

Somalia received its independence in 1960, previously consisting of a British protectorate and an Italian colony. As a result of its arbitrary boundaries, Somalia’s development has been hindered by territorial claims the nation has to parts of Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti.

Somalia has been without an effective government since 1991 when the former president, Siad Barre, was overthrown by opposing clans. Somalia is divided into clans, with each ruling a different area of the country. Unfortunately, the clans have not promoted unity in Somalia, and their actions have caused increased violence and distrust between the opposing clans.

In August of 1998, a Somali-based al Qaeda group killed 224 people in twin American embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Prior to the 9/11 attacks, Somalia was ranked by the United States directly behind Afghanistan as a major threat to security, but was shoved aside after the United States pursued involvement in Iraq. In 2004, Somalia’s president, Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, was appointed by parliament to lead the transitional government, but he has had little success in uniting the country. In 2006, the rise of Islamists forced the transitional government to take action, leading to continued fighting, famine, and disease. In 2009, Sheik Sharif Sheik Ahmed was made president of Somalia but has done little to nothing to end the conflict, with al-Shabab still controlling most to all of the country. In 2012, a constitution was agreed upon by the six major leaders of the country- the president, prime minister, parliamentary speaker, two regional presidents, and a leader of a Sufi (major clan) militia. The hope is that this constitution will lead to stability in the country but there are many barriers to this happening.

One of the biggest problems is that Somalia has had many different clans and groups controlling different areas of the country, with no real national unity. This leads to little services and lots of fighting between the different groups. On top of this, the country has been experiencing, since 2011, the largest famine that has been seen in the region in years caused by lack of food supply, drought, and conflict not allowing for international aid. Four million people are in need of food in Somalia with 750,000 at risk of death from the famine.

*Who are the al-Shabab insurgents?*

The group, whose name means The Youth, emerged from the remnants of the Union of Islamic Courts, which had managed to consolidate control of much of Somalia until Ethiopian forces, supported by the US, invaded in 2006. It has imposed strict Islamic law, or Sharia, based on the Saudi Wahhabi school of Islam in areas it controls. Some women have been stoned to death for adultery - including a girl who said she had been raped. Thieves and drug dealers face having their hands amputated. And in some areas, they have banned people from watching football [soccer] or Western films. But such punishments have not been universally applied - the group comprises many different factions and local leaders have a lot of leeway.

*What is the government doing?*

Surviving but not much more. President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed is a former Islamist fighter. It was hoped that naming him president in 2009, along with the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces would take the sting out of the Islamists but they just labeled him a foreign puppet and carried on fighting. In fact, his government would have been toppled long ago were it not for the support of troops from Uganda and Burundi in an African Union peacekeeping force. Overall, Somalia is split into different areas of semi-autonomous control, with little hope that the proposed constitution could bring together.

*What is life like for ordinary people?*

Awful. After two decades of conflict, Somalia is the country most affected by the region's worst drought in 60 years. Many thousands of people have fled the country looking for aid but millions remain at home. Al-Shabab has imposed severe restrictions on aid workers in the areas it controls and as a result, some of these have been declared famine zones. Even in the capital, the constant possibility of an al-Shabab attack hampers the aid operation. But faced with drought - and after al-Shabab said it was withdrawing its forces from the capital in August 2011 - many have now returned to the war zone in the hope of getting some food aid. The constant fighting and lack of any effective government has also led many young Somali men to become pirates. They say this is the only way they can earn enough money to support themselves and their family.

*What can be done?*

Basically, until some kind of authority is established across the country, Somalia will be a disaster zone, where armed groups from Islamists to pirates can set up base with without being arrested and it will be difficult to help civilians caught up in natural catastrophes like drought. But the outside world cannot impose such a government and there is little sign that the many different Somali factions will ever agree on sharing power. However, the neighboring territory of Somaliland, which broke away from the lawless south in 1991, has shown that Somalis can live in peace. It even organizes elections in which the incumbent accepts defeat and leaves office - still relatively rare in Africa.

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*Who are the al-Shabab insurgents?* And *Al-Shabab at a glance*

1. Where they are from
2. What is Sharia Law:
3. How big are they:

*What is the government doing?*

1. Who is the president? What is he doing?
2. What role doe the African Union have in Somalia?
3. What role does the US have in Somalia?
4. What is the biggest problem about unity?

*What is life like for ordinary people?*

1. Why is life awful (give 3 reasons)?
2. What are the causes of the pirates?
3. What is surprising about life in Somalia? Why?

*What can be done?*

1. What solutions are offered?
2. What is different about Somaliland?

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