

Somalia — The land of chaos and confusion

THE chaos that has presently gripped Somalia is not a new phenomenon. Its roots go much deeper. In fact, the menace of factionalism and gang warfare has engulfed Somalia ever since Europe imposed its world order after the First World War, and divided it into five parts. The Western part was ceded to Ethiopia under whose control it is even today. The other part was annexed by Kenya. The third section under France later became Djibouti. The two remaining parts under Italy and Britain — Somalia and British Somaliland — were united in 1960 to be named as the Somali Democratic Republic. On October 21, 1969, the late General Muhammad Siyad Barre seized power in a coup after the assassination of President Abdel — Rashid Ali Shermarke. He, then, sowed the seeds of violence, ruled the country with an iron hand and remained glued to power for 21 years. He could do so by an interplay of Cold War politics, first as a Soviet and then as the US protege. He cleverly played off one clan against another. Then his atrocious rule ended on Jan 27, 1990, and it was followed by a 12-year civil war which pushed the country further on the perilous course of self-destruction.

The cycle of violence and chaos that has gripped the Somali society since General Barre's overthrow was, in fact, due to lack of vision of the heavily armed factions and the absence of a well-thought out programme. The Somali factions that had united together against Barre, soon fell out with one another once Barre became a part of history. Their senseless conflict ended up in the collapse of state and its institutions.

With the absence of security and stability from the Somalian landscape, the country suffered a severe setback. As a result of this internecine civil war, thousands got killed;

hundreds of thousands were wounded and maimed, and half a million were driven into exile. The country was then plunged into famine, ending up in total chaos, which invited foreign intervention under UN supervision. In view of security fragmentation, public leaders could not arrest the rapid process of decline. The ulema and the tribal leaders could not get along well with each other, as the warring parties were determined to tear apart the country's edifice.

General Farah Aydeed, leader of the Somali National Alliance (SNA), headed a self-proclaimed government in 1990 in Mogadishu, southern district of the capital. He was taken as the implacable opponent of the US-led intervention force, on which he headed untold humiliation. The other leader, Mulin Ibrahim Egal, formed his own breakaway Republic of Somaliland. He, too, openly declared his intention of having the reconciliation process.

The government of Ali Mahdi Mohamed, which had obtained the support of all the Somali factions at a meeting in Djibouti in 1991, however, met strongest opposition from General Aydeed. General Aydeed's military campaign battered the ruined capital, but could not displace Ali Mahdi from more than half of it. Aydeed, however, succeeded in becoming the main payer. He gained political and military control of the residual Somalia, but was bitterly opposed to any peace initiative.

ACCORDING to a report carried in Impact International, (3/97) after the withdrawal of the US led international intervention force and the UN's decision to call off his arrest, General Aydeed proclaimed himself as "President of the Republic of Somalia". To legitimise his rule, he got together the feuding factions at a conference on June 15, 1995 and then called

upon the international community to recognise his "new government". He described this as a "national unity government" of broad representation. Then to consolidate his power, Aydeed set up various checkpoints, put his own militia in the Somali army barracks and gave his men special army uniform and levied taxes etc.

In his attempt to implement his programme, he, then, visited the city of Baidoa, which he had seized. After directing operations from there, between September 17,

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1995 and April 7, 1996, he returned to Mogadishu. In a pitched battle with the forces of Usman Al, Hasan Ato and his ally, Ali Mahdi, in southwest Mogadishu, Aydeed was mortally wounded on June 23, 1996, and then died in early August.

In Somalia, Aydeed is known for fanning flames of an interminable clan warfare. Many Somalis hold him responsible for spreading terror and misery. Others regard him as one deeply motivated by the love of power and prestige. He is also accused of frustrating all international efforts of securing peace and national consensus. He, however, had enjoyed the loyalty of his clan supporters.

The news of General Aydeed's death aroused mixed reactions. His allies and supporters were totally dejected. It was indeed a bitter experience for them that they had to bury him in an isolated

burial site, and take measures to stop his enemies from exhuming his body.

The political groups viewed Aydeed's death as an opportunity to turn over a new leaf. Ali Mahdi and Osman Ato declared a unilateral ceasefire. The expectations were that a national conference, representing major political parties would meet to end the fighting and form a national unity government. The US and international organisations, too, called for an end to blood-letting and to hold talks for national reconciliation.

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Strangely, neither the presidential council nor the council of ministers was consulted in the appointment of Aydeed's successor. On the other hand, this decision was taken by the Habr clan comprising 60 members. On August 4, 1996, they approved the appointment of Husan's Aydeed to succeed his father as leader of the clan and president of the SNA. The continuation of the Aydeed government was also endorsed, whose role was to import legitimacy of the decision of the clan.

Varying interpretations have been made of Hussain's appointment. They range from it being an indication of the Gidir clan's determination to continue the policies of General Aydeed. It was, indeed, an act of revenge against those who were behind the death. It seems clear that the Habr Gidir's choice was motivated by the need to protect it

self for dissension and splits. Internal unity was essential for its dominance over its rivals.

INTERESTINGLY, Husain's appointment left the Somalis with the stark option of either accepting the Habr Gidir's clan's leadership or be doomed to continuing clan warfare. The Habr Gidir who had strengthened their position further by seizing the most fertile lands were enjoying a relatively high standard of living, while the vast majority of the Somalis were facing poverty and deprivation.

Here people ask if Husain would be able to realise the objectives of his clan and pursue his father's policies. There is much speculation and doubt of his ability to do that. He lacks the experience and skill of Aydeed senior, who had fought on three fronts simultaneously. The general was engaged in relentless struggle to curb his opponents, within his own clan, who had challenged his policies and authority. He was also engaged in a bitter campaign against other clans. Above all, he was set against the international community.

In view of this, Husain has to be extremely vigilant against clans that might be tempted to strike a blow on Habr Gidir's predominant position. Since Husain is not competent enough to fight on all three fronts, he is likely to bring about certain changes in his father's programme. However, he would need to move with great care so that he refuses to play in the hands of those who might wish to replace him. His plans might become more evident once he rids himself of the potential challenges in his midst. Husain Aydeed may eventually adopt a less confrontational stance towards the international community.

Husain has had talks with leaders of Rahnaween tribes of Bai province, large areas of whose lands was captured by Farah Aydeed. The talks reportedly focussed on seek-

ing an agreement to ensure withdrawal of Aydeed's forces. Similarly, negotiations were reportedly going on with forces of Osman Alo.

Perhaps the most significant of all was his meeting with General Muhammad Nur Jalal, a sworn enemy of his father. Jalal advised Husain Aydeed to halt military operations and end the conflict through dialogue, allow relief agencies to work in his areas, make genuine compromises to bring about national reconciliation provided the other parties also made similar concessions. This development is interpreted by some as a call to relinquish the clan leadership and participate in national reconciliation conferences.

It may be premature to speculate what Husain's plans would be, for he does not seem to have yet spelt out his policies. He seems to have adopted a dual policy that is tough and consistent with his father's recklessness but which does not ostracise the US and international relief agencies.

His minister of Foreign Affairs, General Muhammad Jari Ghalib, condemned the Security, and warned it of severe consequences, should it intervene in Somalia's internal affairs.

In spite of the Somali delegation's reported unprecedented flexibility towards the idea of fresh reconciliation efforts, highlevel informal consultation meetings between factional leaders and representatives of Inter-Governmental Authority on Development in Sodera, Ethiopia, discord prevailed. Husain's Habr Gidir calmly boycotted the talks attended by 26 others.

While the talks were still in progress, Husain Aydeed was locked in the fiercest fighting since the death of General Aydeed with three of his bitterest opponents. What lies ahead for Husain Aydeed is anybody's guess!

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