

Sadia Ali Aden

Human Rights Advocate & Freelance Writer

Thursday June 17, 2010

Congress of the United States

Committee on Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee

On Africa and Global Health

The Humanitarian Crisis in Somalia and the Impact on women and children

Chairman Payne, ranking member Smith and the distinguished members of this committee- thank you for holding this very important hearing that sheds light on Somalia's humanitarian catastrophe and the impact on women and children. Mr. Chairman, I am honored to be given the opportunity to come and speak today on a subject that is dear to my heart- the suffering of Somali women and children.

Mr. Chairman, with your permission, I would like to ask that my full testimony be submitted into the record.

Introduction:

Protracted wars, civil or otherwise, victimizes predominantly women and children; and nowhere is this fact more pronounced than in Somalia. Whether in refugee camps, or in the streets and neighborhoods of Mogadishu, the grim images of women and children in profound state of anguish; vulnerable human beings tormented by the endless inter-Somali, inter-clan, inter-warlords, inter-sectarian strife for power and domination. But their stories are never the dominant narrative of the consequence of that long conflict.

Since the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, Somali women have played pivotal roles at the most dire period of their country's history; especially in the social and economic sectors of the society. Women played active role in maintaining the integrity, values and structure of the Somali family and community. While by and large men fought in the offence or the defense of senseless clan warfare, Somali women became the bread winners of the society, thus reaffirming their profound resilience and selfless capacity.

Humanitarian Crisis:

Today, because of insecurity created by the conflict between warring forces such as Al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam militia on one hand, and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), African Union forces (AMISOM), and Ahlul Sunnah wal Jama'ah on the other, hundreds of thousands of Somalis, particularly women, children and elderly are forced to flee their homes and thus become internally displaced persons. This on again, off again

massive security related displacement of civilian population has become the predictable nightmare resulting from each time that the insurgents and government clash.

Today, Somalia remains as one of the worst humanitarian catastrophes in the world, with nearly 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). These IDPs are lacking water, shelter and food. Mostly clustering in makeshift refugee camps outside Mogadishu, these IDPs might not have food for days because of the insecurity. Sadly, through these dire conditions, women give birth to children and raise them under such uncertainties. In Afgooye alone, 30kms south of Mogadishu, there are about 400,000 IDPs. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, one quarter of the refugees around Afgooye are younger than the age of five.

Refugees:

Hundreds of thousands more people of mostly women, children and elderly ended up in refugee camps in neighboring countries. Camps such as Dadaab which was originally built for 90,000 refugees is now overfilled with 280,000 refugees, thus making it the world's largest refugee camp. It goes without saying that scarcity of basic health and human services became a way of life.

According to Refugee International, these refugees are in four main asylum countries—Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Yemen. Some of these refugees have lived in exile for over 18 years. As Somalis continue to flee the violence in ever growing numbers, they often join other Somali refugees in urban centers across the East Africa and throughout the Gulf.

Starvation:

Moreover, there are nearly 3.5 million civilians out of a total population of about 8 million are on the verge of starvation and their daily survival is dependent on aid coming from the international donor countries. And, whenever fightings intensifies, the flow of essential foods to the affected population stops; sometimes for months as in early 2010 when the World Food Programme (WFP) decided to suspend its delivery and distribution of emergency food in south and central Somalia.

Health:

Past two decades, armed conflicts between rival groups, recurring draughts, and the absence of public infrastructure have led to famine, diseases, and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. The United States Agency of International Development's (USAID) June 1, 2009 report shows that of 3.5 million are in need of humanitarian aid, 650,000 are children under the age of five, with over 8% of the population is suffering from acute malnutrition, placing the suffering more than the 1% of the global threshold for emergency food crisis.

Children are also increasingly being denied access to education as a result of school closures due to fighting, especially in Mogadishu. Of those in need of urgent humanitarian assistance, 75% are located in central and southern Somalia, with a maternal mortality ratio of 1,044 per 100,000 live births placing Somali women among the most high-risk groups in the world. Hemorrhage, prolonged and obstructed labor, and infections are the major causes of death at childbirth. Mortality among the children under 5 is staggering 142/1,000 (2007) compared to the world 68/1,000.

Heroes under the radar

Hawa Abdi Hospital, Located at Afgoye corridor at KM 21 is founded and managed by Dr. Hawa Abdi.

- IDPs at Dr. Hawa Abdi camp are 72000 people (18,000 families)
 - 43% Children; 32% women; 16% Elderly; 9% men
 - Daily patient visits: are more than 980 (580 children; 320 women; 80 men)
 - 5 doctors, 60 nurses, 160 healthcare personal (28 nurses were trained before the collapse 1991)
 - **Medication:** MSF (Doctors without borders) provides medication for the children with a great care and quality and Dr. Hawa Abdi (hospital) provides medications for women, elderly and men, providing of course as much as she can with the limited medical supplies received from sponsors.
-
- **Sponsors:** individual, Somalia Diaspora community and at times the Italian embassy

Human rights abuses by warring groups in Somalia

Though my testimony today focuses on a specific population of the vulnerable groups, under the recently ended Ethiopian occupation and continued civil strife, the entire Somali population has profoundly suffered. Civilians have been subjected to harassments, kidnappings, unlawful detentions, rape, torture and death.

Child soldiers:

Mr. Chairman, one of the sad outcomes of the protracted Somali conflict is the brutal exploitation of children as child soldiers. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Elman Human Rights as well as media groups such as the New York Times have all presented reports and articles attesting that militant insurgents such as Al-Shabab and the TFG have routinely recruited under age children as soldiers.

On June 13, 2010, Jeffrey Gettleman filed a story on New York Times on child soldiers. In it he documented children that he claims to work for the TFG. According to the United Nations, Somalia's government is one of the "most persistent violators". Though the TFG

has adamantly denied the charges of recruiting child soldiers, there is enough evidence to indicate that there are children claiming their loyalties to all warring groups.

For the past two decades, Somali children endured harsh conditions. Children in Somalia grew up with violence, anarchy and devastation. While their case is hardly a hopeless case, they are in desperate need for recreation programs to occupy them away from violence, educational programs to teach them productive skills.

A Senseless game of Tit for Tat:

Perhaps one of the most brutal momentum is the deadly game of tit for tat that is periodically initiated by Al-Shabab to lure AMISOM, and therefore the TFG, into firing mortars into the highly populated area where Al-Shabab tactically fires from.

This reckless action and reaction only endangers and kills more innocent people, causes the displacement of more people, and strengthens Al-Shabaab's position and improves their recruitment.

Unconfirmed reports indicate that the AMISOM troops have created closed prison in their compound which violates the mandate of its troops. Therefore, checks and balance system must be put in place to prevent abuse of the civilians and protect the rule of law for all.

Toxic Dumping and Illegal Fishing:

A number of experts, environmentalists, media groups, and indeed human rights organizations have published a number of reports and articles to register their concerns and sound the alarm on a disaster in the making in Indian Ocean. As various hazardous industrial chemical and nuclear waste was being dumped in the Somali waters during the past two decades of anarchy and the subsequent apathy of the international community.

Mr. Chairman, There is a ticking environmental bomb beneath the Indian Ocean that, were something to go wrong, could potentially cause or exceed the damages being caused by the current massive BP oil leak. Random damages to the countless barrels dumped in the Somali waters is not farfetched, as storms and rust, among other causes, could damage those barrels. Furthermore, Mr. Chairman, the illegal hyper-fishing still continues. This practice has put certain Somali fishing communities in economic dire straights that caused some of them to resort to piracy- an enterprise that initially started as a protection of national waters and evolved to become an international criminal enterprise. It goes without saying that these illegal activities would not only affect the human rights of innocent Somalis as it, among other things, denies them their right to life, food, health and safe environment, but also security as these kinds of actions worsens the conflict.

Nick Nuttall, a spokesman for the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), told Voice of America that for the past 15 years or so, European companies and others have

used Somalia as a dumping ground for a wide array of nuclear and hazardous wastes. "There are reports from villagers of a wide range of medical problems like mouth bleeds, abdominal hemorrhages, unusual skin disorders and breathing difficulties," Nuttall said.

Recommendations:

1. Help provide adequate access to humanitarian assistance.
2. Support the formalization of the US Somali relationship. [It is encouraging to know that Somalia has appointed a Special Envoy to United States and that President Obama is considering to appoint a US Special Envoy to Somalia]
3. Provide incentive for disarmament, especially the children
4. Help provide programs for rehabilitation, education and skill training
5. Help sustain the TFG to become a strong and functioning government that is able to holistically address the humanitarian, political and security crisis of the country
6. Firmly press the TFG to genuinely engage in reconciliation with opposition groups
7. Engage and empower the Somali Diaspora. This block offers untapped influence and the will to fix their homeland of origin
8. Pass laws that prevent any and all American companies to partake in the illegal hyper-fishing and toxic waste dumping. [Despite the 150 warships deployed by the international community, piracy continues to flourish and the only way to reduce and eliminate is law and order to take place inside Somalia]
9. Provide support to individual and centers that are devoted to helping people and producing tangible results.

I thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak regarding this life and death issue and I thank you on behalf of the many whose lives you your action will touch. I look forward to your questions and I hope I can shed additional light on this issue.