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Somalia's Forgotten Graves

The Mass Graves in Hargeisa Must be Preserved



Photo: Somaliland Info

NEWS reports called the April 2007 violence in Mogadishu the worst in Somalia's history. Evidence in Somalia suggests this is not so. Mogadishu's violence — including the mass deaths of civilians and some heavy artillery shelling into residential areas — merely echoes what most have forgotten happened in the northern Somali city of Hargeisa in 1988.

For a lot of Americans, awareness of Somalia and its violent history begins with “Black Hawk Down” and the humanitarian crisis that followed the fall of the Siad Barre regime in the early 1990s. But preceding that period of lawlessness, the Barre regime — Somalia's last recognized government — subjected its citizens in the north to an internationally-recognized, well-documented pattern of human rights abuses, arbitrary detentions and extrajudicial killings. Those abuses reached a violent peak in June 1988, when the civilian population of Hargeisa was decimated by a month of indiscriminate aerial bombardment and artillery shelling. Neighborhoods were leveled, schools and hospitals destroyed. Hundreds, maybe thousands, were killed in the bombing, and hundreds of thousands fled, creating a refugee crisis in Ethiopia. During that same month, hundreds of civilians in

Hargeisa were rounded up and shot, their bodies dumped into mass graves around the city. Human bones from those gravesites are now literally washing away with each seasonal rain, due to a lack of international interest or local funding to build a protective wall.

I traveled to Somalia as *pro bono* co-counsel with the Center for Justice and Accountability in 2007, to collect evidence of the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in and around Hargeisa in the 1980s. Planning to visit and document the mass gravesites, I expected to see mounds of dirt, solemnly marked and reverently kept. But at each site I visited in Hargeisa, the only markers were the memories of those who had miraculously survived and the briar bushes locals dragged over to cover the mounds. Every few days, they repositioned the briars to help protect the sites from animals that might drag away the human remains.

My last stop on my final day in Somalia was the Malko Dur-Duro mass gravesite, located near the former Barre Army regional headquarters and where Somaliland's military now keeps its headquarters. Previously, locals had described to me how the rains washed away layers of dirt

there each year, exposing and sweeping away bones. I had previously interviewed survivors of the mass executions, men who had somehow avoided death when they were lined up with their friends and brothers and shot in tight groups. Despite these descriptions, I was unprepared for what I saw. Exposed human bones littered the ground at Malko Dur-Duro. Spring rains were especially destructive, deeply churning the soil. And without any barriers, walls or markers, people and vehicles often crossed the area. Tire tracks had freshly disturbed the mounds of dirt on the day I visited.

All around me, white bone fragments jutted out of the dusty earth, through the tire tracks and in the gullies left by rainwater. Many of the bones lay loose and apart, unrecognizable at first as human remains. In some places there were so many, and I was so unsure of what I was seeing, that it was hard not to step on the bones before I realized what they were. And then, from 20 feet away, one piece was unmistakable. A human jawbone lay half-covered in the dirt, many of its teeth still intact.

I visited the Malko Dur-Duro site mid-morning on Wednesday, April 25, 2007.

In Mogadishu that day, forces lobbed artillery shells into residential neighborhoods, killing hundreds more civilians and striking the SOS Hospital. By Friday of that week the civilian death toll from the shelling had risen to over 1,000. By all accounts, the violence of those weeks, and since, has driven hundreds of thousands from their homes, creating a new Somali refugee crisis to mirror the one in 1988. In Hargeisa that week, while history repeated itself to the south, I steadied my hand and took a picture of the jawbone. I walked a few more feet and saw two femurs, a collarbone fragment and a spine. Those bones were all gone, washed away, by the next rain.



The lucky ones. Photo: Ian Steele/UNOPS

preservation efforts are limited to moving briar bushes and taking pictures when they can. They hope that soon, before too many bones are lost, an objective international committee will come and properly exhume and document these sites. Recognizing that their own count will be subject to accusations of bias, they wait for some neutral agency to come. They hope only for an accounting before the evidence is gone and everyone forgets.

Meanwhile, it seems that many in the international community have already forgotten what happened in 1988. While they wait in the north of Somalia, hoping for help, just to be able to build a wall and count the bones, the rains come, and the violent cycle repeats itself in the south. ■

If your company is interested in donating time, money or materials to the process of building a protective wall at Malko Dur-Duro, please contact the author at tara.lee@dlapiper.com for referrals to the preservation committee in Hargeisa.

A committee appointed by the self-declared independent Republic of Somaliland works in Hargeisa to preserve the mass gravesites. The U.N. high commissioner for Human Rights has recommended that they try to preserve the sites. But, with no funding their

And Let Us Not Forget Somaliland

Nations building and the Ethiopian consulate, heightening fears and suspending the electoral process for several weeks.

Elections were further delayed as attempts were made to clean-up the voter register. Trust all but disintegrated between the NEC, political parties and contractors. Concerned donors threatened to withdraw funding, and the NEC leveled accusations of contractor-negligence. The climax of the crisis occurred when President Rayale announced that the voter list would be discarded and elections would proceed on September 27, 2009.

Political and civil turmoil spread throughout Somaliland in weeks that followed. The opposition mounted protests in the streets and parliamentary chambers. Stories of mobilizing clan militias raised fears that Somaliland's much-praised stability was edging toward collapse.

However, Somaliland once again averted a return to civil conflict by drawing on its culture of dialogue and reconciliation. Two days before the proposed election date, a Memorandum of Understanding was agreed upon, setting out a new direction for elections and somewhat calming the frenzied political scene. Under its terms, progress has been made. In recent months changes to the NEC leadership and composition have taken place, efforts are still being made to clean up the voter register and news of training and re-engagement with international donors is emerging.

It is yet to be seen whether Somaliland will steer itself out of its current crisis and fully commit to the democratic process it began. While the state's progress strongly contrasts with the insecurity of life in central and southern Somalia, there is a risk that failures are being tolerated because the benefits of Somaliland's peaceful state far outweigh the risk of

slippage into violence and political vacuum.

There are, however, clear positives to be gleaned from the tolerance displayed. In spite of their many disagreements, the characters in Somaliland's political scene appear to have more of a stake in the country's survival than in their own political gains. The dream of an internationally recognized Republic of Somaliland remains the common goal of all parties and an influential factor in the politics of the state.

The turmoil of the past 18 months has risked the peace and progress that Somaliland has worked hard to attain. All stakeholders must now work together to maintain stability through dialogue and continue to work toward resolution of the electoral crisis. It is only through achieving such positives that Somaliland will reach the road to recovery and even recognition. ■

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