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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN SOMALIA

ISSUE

The human rights situation in Somalia, while improved since last year, remains wholly unacceptable.

BACKGROUND

The famine conditions that precipitated international intervention were dealt with decisively, and for several months there was relative calm throughout the countryside. The United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) has set up several regional and district councils, yet there is no functioning national civil authority in Somalia. Abuses of human rights by gangs and factions remain largely unaccountable. The defensive posture and possible change of mandate of UNOSOM mean there could even be a resumption of full-scale civil war. When the USA removes its remaining forces by 31 March 1994, the sustainability of the operation will be uncertain.

As the government collapsed and the war-induced famine unfolded, armed gangs in Somalia obstructed the international aid effort and prevented food from reaching many of those in need. Because of this intolerable situation, the UN Security Council in its Resolution 794 of December 3, 1992, approved the use of all necessary means by UN member states to provide a secure environment for humanitarian relief operations in Somalia. The USA-led Unified Task Force (UNITAF) worked to establish public order, and safeguarded humanitarian aid flow such that hundreds of thousands of Somalis were saved from starvation. The second phase of UNOSOM, initiated this summer, took over from UNITAF in pursuit of the interdependent goals of security, humanitarian relief and political reconciliation.

The scope of the emergency is difficult to quantify. Some one million Somalis fled their country due to the civil-strife and humanitarian catastrophe, and at least 300,000 have died since the beginning of the emergency. Perhaps as many as 800,000 Somali refugees are at present in neighbouring countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Yemen, and many have taken refuge in other countries such as Canada. Many refugees have returned home, and large numbers are displaced within Somalia. Inter-clan rivalries have retarded the process of resettlement.

With no legislature, judiciary or legitimate structure of public authority, guarantees of political liberty, press freedom, fair trials or virtually any other fundamental human right do not exist in Somalia. Detention without charge is commonplace. Intimidation, extortion and summary execution are the standard fare of many political factions. The status of women, which had advanced very slightly under Siad Barre, has reverted to traditional second-class standing. If Islamic fundamentalism were to take root in Somalia, it might bring more comprehensive restrictions on the rights and freedoms of Somali women. Discrimination

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