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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN SOMALIA

ISSUE

The human rights situation in Somalia remains grim. To a large degree it is "unaccountable" because of the absence of a civil authority capable of either enforcing the rule of law or being held responsible for not doing so. Gangs and warlords continue to kill almost at will; thousands remain on the verge of starvation. The UN Security Council peace-making initiative through the Unified Task Force is at last providing the security for NGO delivery of basic humanitarian aid. But it will be some time before the situation stabilizes sufficiently for the emergence of tolerance and respect for basic rights. As the Unified Force hands over to a reconstituted UNOSOM, and UN efforts at rebuilding civil authority proceed, it will be important to develop political structures which reflect the perceived needs and desires of the Somali population as a whole, and provide the confidence, stability and mutual respect essential for an acceptable culture of human rights.

BACKGROUND

The UN estimates that one million Somalis have fled war and famine in their country, including a large proportion of the administrative and intellectual elite. Most have sought refuge in neighbouring African countries or have emigrated. Of the remaining six million people, between one to two million still suffer from starvation or starvation-related diseases and will require several months to reconstitute their physical health.

Although crop returns will improve in the current season, agricultural production in 1993 will still not be sufficient to meet the needs of the Somali population. Agricultural supplies, most notably seeds and some equipment, may not be available in sufficient quantities to ensure a successful harvest in 1993. The UN 100 day action plan has received encouraging international support. But longer-term rehabilitation assistance will be required if Somalis are to be assured of the basic right to life.

Equally distressing and difficult to put right is the pervasive culture of violence, the cheapness of life and the disregard of dignity of any sort, but particularly of women, which has accompanied the collapse of civil structure and the rise of warlords and gangs of armed thugs. Only careful negotiation and rebuilding of broadly acceptable civil and political structures can bring the stability and confidence essential to underpin tolerance and a respect for even the most basic of rights. The UN-sponsored preparatory conference of Somali faction leaders 4/5 January in Addis Ababa will provide a bellwether of the task ahead. The reconstituted mandate and structure of UNOSOM following the hand over of the Unified Task Force, and the subsequent ability of the UN to help Somalis develop acceptable, functioning government and police forces, will be key to success.

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