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The New York Times

AFRICA

A Taste of Hope in Somalia's Battered Capital

MOGADISHU, Somalia — Up until a few weeks ago, all visitors who landed at Aden Abdulle International Airport in Mogadishu were handed a poorly copied, barely readable sheet that asked for name, address — and caliber of weapon.

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No more. Now visitors get a bright yellow welcome card that has no mention of guns and several choices for reason of visit, including a new category: holiday.

Outside, on Mogadishu's streets, the thwat-thwat-thwat hammering sound that rings out in the mornings is not the clatter of machine guns but the sound of actual hammers. Construction is going on everywhere — new hospitals, new homes, new shops, a six-story hotel and even sports bars (albeit serving cappuccino and fruit juice instead of beer). Painters are painting again, and Somali singers just held their first concert in more than two decades at the National Theater, which used to be a weapons depot and then a national toilet. Up next: a televised, countrywide talent show, essentially "Somali Idol."

Mogadishu, Somalia's capital, which had been reduced to rubble during 21 years of civil war, becoming a byword for anarchy, is making a remarkable comeback. The [Shabab](#), the fearsome insurgents who once controlled much of the country, withdrew from the city in August and have been besieged on multiple sides by troops from the [African Union](#), Kenya, Ethiopia and an array of local militias.

Now, one superpower is left in the capital — the African Union, with 10,000 troops (soon to be 17,000), tanks, artillery and armored personnel carriers that constantly chug up and down the street — and the city is enjoying its longest epoch of relative peace since 1991: eight months and counting.

“It’s a rebirth,” grinned Omar Osman, a Somali-American software engineer who worked for Delta Air Lines in Atlanta and just moved back here. “Call it Somalia 2.0.”

Clearly, this city and the rest of Somalia still have a long way to go. A suicide bomber recently struck at the gates of the presidential palace, and a stray mortar shell crashed into a refugee camp, killing six. A few warlords are still lurking around, and clan-based militias have reared their heads in some neighborhoods, a potent reminder of the clan-driven chaos that dominated Mogadishu for so long.

But people here are sensing the moment and seizing it. More than 300,000 residents have come back to the city in the past six months, local aid groups say, and many are cheerfully carting away chunks of rubble and resurrecting their bullet-riddled homes. The economic boom, fueled by an infusion of tens of millions of dollars, much of it from Somalis flocking home from overseas, is spawning thousands of jobs that are beginning to absorb young militiamen eager to get out of the killing business.

Given Mogadishu's importance to the country, it all adds up to a huge opportunity. And though Somalia has self-destructed numerous times before, Augustine Mahiga, the head of the United Nations political office for Somalia, along with so many others here, insisted that this time really is different. Somalia, they contend, is finally turning around.

“For the first time since 1991, Mogadishu is under one authority,” Mr. Mahiga said from a new office that exuded the whiff of fresh paint. “It’s unprecedented.”

All across town, people who have no connection to one another and who come from very different walks of life describe the same new, strange feeling: hope.

The Fishmonger

The room is packed, the flies are swarming, and the floor is sticky with thick, black blood.

“Four million!” shouts Mohammed Sheik Nur Taatey, emphatically waving four stubby fingers. “Give me four million. I won’t take a shilling less.”

This is economics at its most elemental — supply and demand, seller and buyer, Mr. Taatey and the brawny, sweaty, pushy crowd. The arena: Mogadishu's fish market, a long, skinny, seaside building where many thousands of dollars' worth of fish are sold every day.

Mr. Taatey, 38, is a fishmonger, presiding over the day's catch and auctioning it off to wholesale buyers. His personal finances have soared in the past several months, an apt example, especially in this case, that a rising tide lifts all boats.

The surge of people returning to Mogadishu and the opening of new restaurants and hotels have steadily driven up the price of fish, from about 50 cents a pound a few years ago, when Mogadishu was a shellshocked ghost town, to \$2 today.

And the catch is quite good, an upbeat sign for Somalia's reviving seafood industry, which has recently caught the eye of Asian investors. Just the other day, porter after porter stumbled through the fish market's doorway quivering under the weight of 150-pound blue marlins slung across their shoulders.

"Oh, look, shark-fish!" Mr. Taatey shouted out in exuberant, broken English as a team of fishermen dragged in a 400-pound shark. Mr. Taatey promptly sold it for \$600.

A few minutes later, with bricks of Somali shillings in his arms and sweat trickling down his temples, he said, "These are the best times of my life." That day he made \$27.

Born in the old part of town, where the coral block houses lean drunkenly toward the sea, Mr. Taatey had watched in despair as rival militias from clans much bigger than his own leveled Mogadishu after the government collapsed in 1991. Sometimes it was so dangerous to step outside that Mr. Taatey could not sell fish, leaving his family to a single meal a day — a bowl of grael.

But nowadays Mr. Taatey leisurely strolls back to his apartment, in black acid-washed jeans and a short-sleeve hoodie, joining his children for a midday snack of bananas, potatoes, pancakes and soup.

"I feel lucky," Mr. Taatey said with a huge smile, sitting in the middle of what looked like a nursery school class. "I have 14 children. Some people have none."

The Banker

While Mr. Taatey deposits his profits in the bulging pockets of his acid-washed jeans, Liban Egal has another idea: a bank.

While his hometown was drowning in chaos, Mr. Egal, true to Somalis' legendary entrepreneurial spirit, was running a small empire of check-cashing shops and fried chicken restaurants in inner-city Baltimore. Somali traders are celebrated across Africa for their pluck, often the first to set up shop in a slum or a far-off village, and Mr. Egal, who emigrated to the United States in the late 1980s, was clearly part of this tradition.

Now he is opening First Somali Bank, one of the country's first bona fide commercial banks, and he plans to soon branch into high-speed Internet service, solar panels and fish factories.

He says now is the precise time, neither too early nor too late, to invest in Somalia because security has drastically improved but taxes are still low.

"I was rushing to get this in," he said, patting a \$115,000 satellite dish that he paid only \$900 to import. "Things are changing as we speak."

The Somali shilling has been surging in value, from 33,000 shillings to the dollar six months ago to 20,000 today. Real estate prices are skyrocketing because of all the international organizations coming back to Mogadishu after a 20-year hiatus. The famine that swept southern Somalia last year killed tens of thousands of people but also spurred new interest in this country and brought in new players like the Turks, who arrived handing out [food aid](#) and are now doing business. Last month, Turkish Airlines started twice-weekly flights between Istanbul and Mogadishu.

On a recent morning, Mr. Egal, 42, proudly unfurled a new banner only to be scolded by one of his partners that they could not use it in the bank because it had a picture of a camel. Some Islamic scholars say it is forbidden to depict animate objects.

“Damn, man,” Mr. Egal grumbled. “I liked that camel.”

Another issue: the Transitional Federal Government, Somalia’s internationally recognized authority, which is widely viewed as corrupt and weak. Mr. Egal said that when he arrived, officials from the central bank asked him to pay a \$100,000 “registration fee.”

“I said, a hundred thousand dollar, for what?”

He refused and they went away, he said.

When asked about this in an e-mail, Abdirahman Omar Osman, a government spokesman, wrote back saying, “Hahahahaha, this is absolutely not true.”

The spokesman added, “Corruption is the thing of the past.”

The Artist

Abdullah Abdirahman Abdullah Alif, a wiry artist, still gets death threats for the satirical cartoons he pens. Bombs still go off on a weekly basis.

“But at least I have a job,” he says. “The way I see it, we’re in transition,” and he has a 10-foot-long canvas to illustrate the point.

A teenage boy — half flesh, half skeleton — stands in the middle of the painting, one hand clutching a dove, the other a rifle. Behind him are two very different futures: verdant fields, juicy melons and pretty buildings versus flames, graves, vultures and fire.

“We made this real simple,” explained Mr. Alif, with a Business Royal brand cigarette hanging off his lip. “A young boy is the backbone of society and we want young boys to look at this and understand they have a choice right now, death and destruction or peace.”

Mr. Alif, 40, is part of a team of artists who just emerged from years in hiding and have been commissioned, by a Somali nonprofit group, for the respectable wage of \$400 a month to make giant paintings promoting peace. Their work will be displayed on busy street corners, the two-dimensional equivalent of a public service advertisement in a society without many TVs.

During the Shabab years, Mr. Alif had a price on his head for drawings that were deemed un-Islamic. When he finally fled his neighborhood, looters snatched his file cabinets housing all his artwork.

“Twenty-six thousand drawings,” he said. “Gone.”

But his spirits seem buoyed by the artistic revival now under way. A group of musicians gathered for a recent afternoon jam session, the tunes blaring, their heads bobbing. The women were smoking cigarettes and chewing qat. During the Shabab days, they could have been killed for doing that.

“Step by step by step by step,” Mr. Alif smiled.

The Policewoman

So much of Mogadishu’s progress hinges on something basic but elusive: security. That is where Khadija Hajji Diriye comes in.

Solidly constructed from her broad shoulders down to her ankles, Ms. Diriye, 35, struts into the Waberi police station where she works. She grunts hello and a colleague casually hands her an AK-47.

“Once,” she says, the rifle firmly in her hands, her eyes bright like sparks, “the Shabab were just across the street and I was firing away.”

She says she is treated the same as male officers, except for not being allowed to carry a pistol because someone might try to attack her and steal it.

Her station is like a Mogadishu version of “Hill Street Blues.” Veiled women and prayer-capped men (some with daggers tucked in their robes) flow through the gates in a constant stream to take their seats at a big desk and make complaints — spousal abuse, stab wounds, contractual disputes, a missing TV. The officers type up reports with an ancient typewriter and occasionally investigate and make arrests.

Abdi Ismail Samatar, [a Somali-American geography professor](#), said now that Mogadishu’s turnaround has begun, “everything depends on institutions” like the police.

“The private sector can only go so far,” he said. “Now it’s up to the folks on the hill.”

But the folks on the hill — meaning Villa Somalia, the hilltop presidential palace — still seem as dysfunctional as ever. Two men are claiming to be speaker of Parliament, paralyzing all lawmaking, and millions of dollars are missing, a former government official recently revealed. It is no surprise, then, that the most important government employees — i.e., the security forces — often do not get paid. Ms. Diriye is supposed to make \$100 a month, but she says she rarely sees that.

Her living conditions are atrocious. Her husband was murdered several years ago, and she squats with her five children in a crumbling wreck of a house by the sea. Her roof leaks, her mattress is ripped, there is no bathroom and no electricity.

She sticks with the job, she says, because she is patriotic.

“In 1991, when the government collapsed, that was the worst time in my life,” she said. “So how can I leave now? We can smell a government coming.”

The Assassin

Abdul Kader used to hunt police officers like Ms. Diriye, government officials, intellectuals and the occasional religious sheik.

He hardly looks like an assassin, with pudgy cheeks and a little beard struggling to take root on his chin. But he says (and others have confirmed it) that he was part of the Amneeyat, the Shabab's secret police, essentially a hit squad.

"They split us into teams," he explained. "The commander would tell us our target, and we'd watch him for a whole day, morning till night. Sometimes we'd even watch him a whole week. Then we'd make a plan. Then we'd kill him."

Abdul Kader betrays little emotion, neither bravado nor much regret. He said that his weapon of choice was a .30-caliber pistol and that he was involved in more than 50 assassinations.

"I heard many people begging for their lives," he said.

He tries not to think about it.

Abdul Kader (he wanted only his first name to be used, for obvious reasons) joined his first militia about six years ago, when he was 20. With Somalia's economy in ruins, militias and piracy gangs were about the only ones hiring.

He eventually grew numb to taking life, he said, but could see that the Shabab were losing to "the outside forces," the superiorly armed African Union troops who arrived in 2007 and have steadily battered the Shabab until they pulled out of Mogadishu in August, creating this period of relative peace. Though the Shabab still control some territory in southern Somalia and stage bomb attacks in Mogadishu, their power is rapidly fading. Kenyan and Ethiopian forces are overpowering them in the hinterlands, and the African Union is now pushing outward from Mogadishu.

For Abdul Kader, the last straw was when he was assigned to assassinate his cousin, a pro-government militiaman. He wanted to defect, but first had to ask his father's permission. His father said yes, please come home.

This was several months ago, and he is still checking over his shoulder for any signs of his former colleagues. Like many other former militiamen, he seems lost.

"I just want a normal job," he said.

Like what?

He thought for a few seconds and answered, "I'd be happy as a driver."