

Georgi Kapchits

REPORTS ON SOMALIA (Part I)

By Georgi Kapchits

January 26, 2010

Editor's Note: *This analysis is part one of a four part series from Dr. Kapchits's visit to Somalia, where he served as a translator and consultant for a Russian Television team which has done an in depth report on Somali piracy. WardheerNews is pleased to share Dr. Kapchits's thorough analysis of the situation with its readers. Dr. Kapchits's understanding of Somali culture and language has given him an unparalleled edge on Somali affairs.*

I. The Country of Poets and Pirates:

NARRATOR: The Voice of Russia observer Georgi Kapchits has just returned from Somalia where he served as an interpreter and consultant for a Russian television crew. He visited numerous parts of this formerly integrated country, met with political leaders and cabinet members, as well as fishermen, pirates, city residents and rural villagers. His first report is entitled "The Country of Poets and Pirates."

KAPCHITS: In recent years, the fractured nation-state of Somalia, which occupies a vast territory of the Horn of Africa, has become notorious for the scandalous activities of local pirates who have captured dozens of trade vessels in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean, then received millions of dollars in ransom money to relinquish the cargo ships and their crews. The amounts of money received by such marauders and their collaborators sometimes exceed the annual operating budgets of the current governments of Somaliland, Puntland and a shrunken "Somalia."

I visited the coastal fishing town of Eyl (located 600 kilometers north of Mogadishu) which has been dubbed "pirate headquarters" by the world media. I observed three captured ships in the harbor but could not talk to the pirates. When I offered to visit them by boat, our team leader Vladimir Sinelnikov wryly declined to support my venture, insisting that his studios lacked sufficient ransom money to free us should the pirates "detain" us, and he would never return home to Moscow without me and cameraman Sasha Kublitski!

The Country of Poets and Pirates

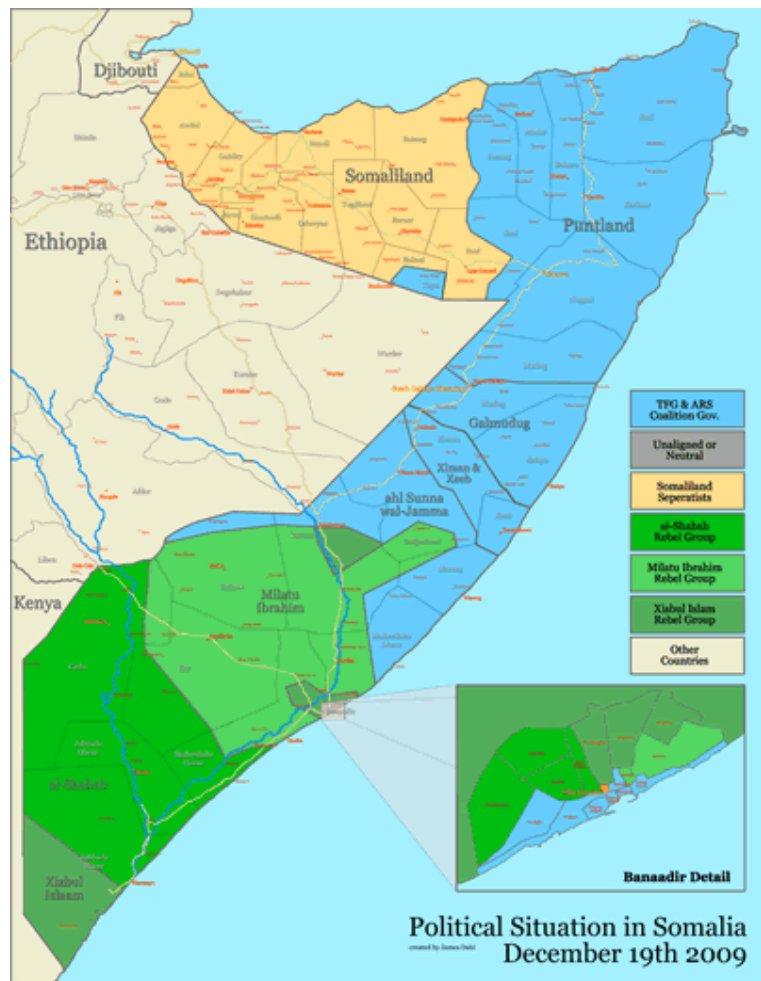
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A few days, however, I saw some alleged pirates shackled in the Bosasso prison on the northern Somali coast within the semi-autonomous state of Puntland. The details of my meetings and overall impressions will be presented in my next reports. But first, permit me to offer a few words about the history of Somalia and its people.

Many scholars believe that Somalia was the legendary country of Punt, which once supplied the court of Egyptian pharaohs with the aromatic gum resins, myrrh and frankincense. In the middle Ages, the Somali language, culture and religion were influenced by the Arabs. By the end of the 19th century the Somali Peninsula was partitioned among France, Britain, Italy and Ethiopia.



In 1960 the British colony in the north and the Italian one in the south acquired independence and merged to form the Somali Republic with Mogadishu as its capital. In October 1969, General Mohammed Siyad Barre took power by overthrowing a corrosive and malfunctioning parliamentary regime, soon proclaimed socialism as Somalia's governing political ideology, and established close relations with the Soviet Union. The years from 1969-1977 are remembered by many Somalis with great nostalgia and considerable fondness. Thousands got an education in the Soviet Union and Soviet experts built dozens of industrial enterprises, schools, hospitals and infrastructure facilities throughout Somalia. During those years, Somalis shared a popular refrain known to all - "either Russian, or rain," whereby the benefits provided by Russians were equated with a gift of heaven.

Somalia is an arid country where rainfall is sparse and falls mainly from April to June. Only the two rivers flowing through its territory – Juba and Webi Shabelle – do not dry up. The neighboring irrigated lands can support settled populations of farmers who grow bananas, cotton, rice and sugar cane. The residents of the coastal areas have traditionally engaged in fishing activities. But nowadays, the fishing sector, like much else in Somalia, is in the economic doldrums.

The majority of Somalis are still pastoralists, raising goats, sheep and some cattle but dromedaries represent the most valuable part of their numerous flocks. They are well tolerated in the heat and for many days can survive without water or food. When a nomadic residence is changed the animals are loaded with a collapsible house and the modest possessions of the family. Camels are packed by women but all other work associated with caring for these animals (including milking) is performed by men. The love that Somalis bestow on camels knows no boundaries. “A camel I a camel and it is exchanged only for a camel,” they say.

A traditional Somali family usually consists of a husband, one or sometimes several wives (the Somalis are Muslims and the Koran allows polygamy) and their children. Several closely related families form a *reer*. A family and a *reer* are the lowest stages of the social organization of the Somali kinship system. Several *reers* which trace their genealogy back to a common ancestor form a *knee*. Several *knees* make up a *bone* and several *bones* a tribe.

The tribe is headed by a chief whose power is absolute. A familiar saying notes, “A straight chief has a straight tribe, a crooked chief has a crooked tribe.” Judging by what has been happening in Somalia over the last eighteen years since the collapse of the Barre regime, hardly any straight chiefs remain there. The highest level of Somali hierarchy is a clan of which the major ones are: Dir, Daarood, Hawiye and Digil-Mirifle. Every Somali knows exactly the place he occupies in the clan and sub-clan structure and, when referring to himself, first tells his name and that of his father and grandfather, and then informs the listener of the knee, the bone and the tribe to which he belongs.

Tribal divisions and clan rivalries, which often appear stronger than the common language, culture and religion of the Somalis, destroyed their statehood. It happened in 1991, when the regime of Mohammed Siyad Barre collapsed under the blows of the clan

oriented opposition forces. But the "first alarm bell" rang out in 1977 when the country having reinforced its military muscles decided to annex the contested Ogaden – a Somali-inhabited vast area that had been claimed by neighboring Ethiopia for over 50 years. Followed a crushing military defeat by the Ethiopian army, supported by Cuban troops, the ruling circles of Somalia blamed the Soviet Union, which had not supported their military adventure. The USSR Embassy in Mogadishu was destroyed and Soviet diplomats and experts were expelled from the country in October 1977.

The word "Ogaden" was first taken to a Russian ear by poet Nikolai Gumilev. In 1913 he visited the Somali peninsula with an ethnographic expedition. What he saw there left him with an uneasy impression. He wrote:

*No people in Africa are more formidable than the Somalis
No land in Africa is less cheerless than their land.*

However, the country through which Gumilev travelled was not inhabited only by warriors because as early as 1854 the famous British orientalist Richard Burton reported from his travels there that "the country teems with poets." Perhaps Gumilev also recognized this vital cultural characteristic of the Somalis, because some stanzas in his "Peninsula" book are written with the use of alliteration, which forms the basis of Somali poetry:

*So many whites were pierced by a spear
Near its sandy wells – in the darkness.
So that Ogadeen could praise their exploits
with the voices of hungry hyenas.*

One of the country's most revered poets was the leader of a Somali national liberation movement in the first decades of the 20th century, Sayid Mohammed Abdille Hassan. The British called him "Mad Mullah" for his inflexible fighting spirit and the fierce tenacity with which his movement resisted colonialist armies. These same traits of resilience and bravery are shared by many contemporary Somalis who have, of necessity, been educated in and graduated from the severe "survival school" that forms the sparsely watered spaces and scorching stony plains of their country.

To be continued

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