

GAO

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SOMALIA

Observations Regarding the Northern Conflict and Resulting Conditions





United States
General Accounting Office
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National Security and
International Affairs Division

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May 4, 1989

The Honorable Dante B. Fascell
Chairman, Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

The Honorable Howard Wolpe
Chairman, Subcommittee on Africa
Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

The Honorable Sam Gejdenson
House of Representatives

In response to your requests, we are examining the U.S. role in assisting Somalia in light of recent reports of increased human rights violations in the northern part of the country. As part of our review, we visited Somalia and Ethiopia between February 25 and March 10, 1989. In Ethiopia we interviewed 60 Issak refugees. You requested that we provide an interim report on our observations regarding the conflict in northern Somalia and the resulting conditions. We plan to issue a report that addresses all of the objectives of the review after our work is fully completed. Our objectives, scope, and methodology are discussed in appendix II.

In this report we focus on the causes for the flight of Issak refugees to Ethiopia and the conditions for their return to Somalia, the extent of destruction that occurred in the northern city of Hargeisa, the use of U.S. assistance during the conflict, and the role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in distributing U.S. assistance and its reaction to the arming of Ogadeni refugees.¹ In addition, we have provided information on the Somali government's response to the conflict.

Background

Somalia is strategically located on the east coast of Africa and, along with Ethiopia and Djibouti, is often referred to as the Horn of Africa. Since a 1969 coup, President Siad Barre has ruled Somalia with the

¹The Ogaden is a territory in Ethiopia to which Somalia has made irredentist claims. It is populated largely by ethnic Somalis. During the 1977-78 Ogaden War, Ethiopia retook the Ogaden, and Somalia became the host to over 800,000 refugees who fled the territory. Over the years, voluntary repatriation has reduced the refugee population by more than half. This group of people is referred to as Ogadeni refugees throughout the report.

strong support of the military. Those viewed as opponents of the government have been subjected to arrest and imprisonment and on occasion to torture and execution. In the mid-1980s, the State Department and various human rights groups reported increased human rights abuses by the Somali government against civilians, particularly the civilian population in the north.

For years, the more affluent and independent Issak clan (the largest clan in northern Somalia) has been the target of a wide range of abuses by the government, due in part to its support for the anti-regime Somali National Movement (SNM). The abuses have ranged from imprisonment and detainment without charge or trial to summary executions of suspected SNM members and sympathizers. Many civilians were forced to make payments to gain their release from jail.

In late May 1988, the SNM, in retaliation against the government for these abuses, launched attacks on government officials in the northern cities of Hargeisa and Burao. The Somali army reportedly responded to the SNM attacks in May 1988 with extreme force, inflicting heavy civilian casualties and damage to Hargeisa and Burao. As a result, 350,000 Issaks fled to Ethiopia, and others fled to neighboring countries and other parts of Somalia. Also during the conflict, Ogadenis fought against the SNM alongside the Somali army. Some Ogadeni refugees, who were settled in camps on Issak land after their unsuccessful attempt to reclaim the Ogaden desert in 1978, were armed, thereby becoming party to the conflict and ineligible for continued international assistance under U.N. rules.

Results in Brief

- Of the Issak refugees we interviewed in Ethiopia, a majority said that their homes had been destroyed and family members killed by government forces during the conflict between May and June 1988. It is not likely that the Issak refugees will return until they are confident it is safe to do so. Most of those we interviewed indicated that the military would have to be removed from northern Somalia before the area would be secure.
- Most of Hargeisa, the second largest city in Somalia, was destroyed or damaged during the conflict from artillery and aerial shelling. Basic infrastructure, such as electricity and water, is still inoperable. Although the Somali government has not begun repairs in the cities, government officials are actively soliciting donors for reconstruction assistance.

- A shipment of U.S. arms and ammunition, which had been authorized more than 18 months prior to the conflict, arrived in late June 1988 and was used by the government during the conflict. The shipment, valued at about \$1.4 million, was distributed to Somali troops in the northern region.
- Following the outbreak of fighting in May 1988, the UNHCR was unable to restore monitoring over the distribution of food commodities. The UNHCR has continued to distribute food aid,² albeit with reduced frequency and quantities, to all refugee camps in the north even though, in July 1988, UNHCR and others noted that some of the Ogadeni refugees were armed. In February 1989, the UNHCR reached an agreement with the Somali government on disarming the refugees and began the process of relocating the Ogadeni refugees from the conflict area.

Prelude to the Conflict

The refugees from northern Somalia that we interviewed in Ethiopia recounted stories of harassment by the army—looting, jailing, beating, and rape—dating back to 1982. While the refugees could not point to specific events that led to a government crackdown on the Issak community, the majority of the refugees interviewed furnished detailed accounts of abuses that they or their immediate families had experienced at the hands of the Somali army. Many of the Issak refugees we interviewed who had worked as merchants or professionals and were therefore more prosperous than other Somalis said that they were frequent victims of human rights abuses. Many of them said that the Somali army had jailed them and that beatings of the men and rape of the women were common occurrences. Families of the detainees were forced to pay for their release. In none of these cases had the army brought charges against the detainees. Merchants complained that soldiers helped themselves to their shops' wares and cash. Confiscation of goats, sheep, and other domestic livestock was also a common occurrence.

Many of the Issak refugees we interviewed also mentioned the radicalization of the student community around 1984 and the brutal response of the army to students' periodic demonstrations. According to the refugees, government harassment intensified in 1985, reaching its apex in 1987 when the army instituted a dusk-to-dawn curfew.

²UNHCR halted food deliveries to Ogadeni refugees for a short period, preceding an agreement with the government of Somalia to resolve the armed Ogadeni refugee situation.

Conclusion of Peace Accord With Ethiopia

On April 3, 1988, the governments of Ethiopia and Somalia concluded a peace accord that resulted in, among other things, troops being withdrawn from the borders, cessation of assistance for each other's rebels, prisoners of war exchanged, and diplomatic relations resumed. The peace accord was designed to ease relations between Somalia and Ethiopia and promote economic development by redirecting resources. Some observers believe it exacerbated the conflict. With peace between the countries, the Issak community saw little hope of removing Ogadeni refugees from its territory. Furthermore, the demilitarization of the borders enabled the SNM to infiltrate Somalia unimpeded.

Somali National Movement

The SNM, which had its base of operations in Ethiopia, started fighting against the government's mistreatment of the Issak community in the early 1980s. However, the SNM's political agenda remains unclear. Some observers believe that the SNM wants increased autonomy for the northern Issak clan; others believe that it simply wants President Siad Barre out of power.

None of the Issak refugees we interviewed said that they had direct contact with the SNM prior to the fighting in 1988, and only a few actually knew SNM members. Many of the refugees from Burao knew of SNM attacks on military outposts but generally were not aware of its activities. These refugees stated, however, that the army's response to these attacks was one of swift and brutal retribution against the entire Issak community. The Burao refugees stated that the government shut off utilities, randomly beat Issak clansmen, and jailed and sometimes executed those who the army believed to be SNM members or who were suspected of supporting the SNM.

The Conflict

The SNM launched armed attacks in northern Somalia in late May 1988, assassinating government officials and suspected opponents. The SNM had control of the northern town of Burao until Somali forces retook it on May 30 and forced the SNM to evacuate the city. The SNM attacked Hargeisa on May 31, which it controlled until July 13 when the Somali military recaptured the city. A map in appendix I shows the locations of these towns, the Ogadeni refugee camps in Somalia, and the Issak refugee camps in Ethiopia.

Also during this period, the SNM attacked several Ogadeni refugee camps, which forced the inhabitants of one refugee camp to flee farther north. For more than 10 years, the Issaks and Ogadeni refugees have

been competing for the same scarce agricultural and grazing land. During this period, the government has not reached a durable solution to the Ogadeni refugee situation, such as repatriating the refugees to Ethiopia or settling them permanently. The presence of armed Ogadeni refugees on the Issaks' land has added to the tension in the region.

During the relatively short period of conventional warfare (May 27 to July 13), the SNM succeeded in attracting a significant number of supporters and sympathizers, making it more difficult for the government to retake Hargeisa. Although the Somali army used its regular forces during the conflict, a bulk of the fighting force consisted of Ogadenis.

The Somali military resorted to using artillery and aerial shelling in heavily populated urban centers in its effort to retake Burao and Hargeisa. A majority of the refugees we interviewed stated that their homes were destroyed by shelling despite the absence of SNM combatants from their neighborhoods. They also reported that Somali aircraft bombed several settlements inside Ethiopia, south of Harshin, in mid-July.

The refugees stated that they were caught by surprise by the scope and intensity of the fighting in both Hargeisa and Burao. Although a majority of them stated that SNM forces were never in their neighborhoods during the battle, those refugees who saw SNM forces in their neighborhoods during the fighting supported the SNM combatants with food, water, and shelter.

The refugees told similar stories of bombings, strafings, and artillery shelling in both cities and, in Burao, the use of armored tanks. The majority saw their houses either damaged or destroyed by the shelling. Many reported seeing members of their families killed in the barrage. A few of the refugees were quite specific in their recollections; they mentioned that the military aircraft would start shelling at 8 a.m. and stop at 5 p.m.

Flight to Ethiopia

The Issak refugees began evacuating the cities of Hargeisa and Burao by the end of the first week of fighting (early June), and it appears that the evacuation was completed by the end of the month. UNHCR estimates the refugee population at 350,000.

The refugees reported remaining in Hargeisa and Burao until the last possible moment and then fleeing in a panic with only those possessions

they could carry on their backs. The refugees gathered by the thousands on the outskirts of the cities, assembling their families and relatives. A number of the refugees we interviewed indicated that, while gathering their families and deciding what course to follow, they were strafed by Somali military aircraft.

Breaking into smaller groups of 300 to 500 the refugees began a 10- to 40-day trek to Ethiopia. Shortly after they reached the outskirts of the cities, the refugee columns were stopped by the Somali army, which had formed a ring around the cities. Refugees reported that at military checkpoints and ambushes, they were robbed and men suspected of being SNM members were summarily executed. The refugees from Hargeisa and Burao said they walked by night and hid by day to avoid aircraft strafing, carrying what remained of their belongings with them.

The Fighting Continues

The SNM has prevented stabilization of the northern region as fighting continues. Transportation through the region is risky and is usually accomplished in convoys with the assistance of armed escorts. The Somali army has retained effective control of Hargeisa and Burao, while the SNM operates freely throughout the countryside.

The SNM has continued its attacks on Ogadeni refugees. During our visit to Somalia in early March 1989, 11 Ogadeni refugees (5 men, 3 women, 3 children) were killed and 16 were wounded during an SNM attack on a truck carrying Ogadeni refugees. We were told that incidents of this type were characteristic of an emerging SNM pattern of terrorizing the Ogadeni refugees to force their removal from traditional Issak territory.

Conditions in Hargeisa

Hargeisa, the second largest city in Somalia, has suffered extensive damage from artillery and aerial shelling. The most extensive damage appeared to be in the residential areas where the concentration of civilians was highest, in the marketplace, and in public buildings in the downtown area. During a tour of the city, we noted that whole sections of residential areas were still full of rubble and debris. The U.S. Embassy estimated that 70 percent of the city has been damaged or destroyed. Our rough visual inspection confirms this estimate.

Much of Hargeisa appears to be a "ghost town," and many homes and buildings are virtually empty. Extensive looting has taken place even though the military has controlled the city since late July 1988. We were told that private property was taken from homes by the military in

Hargeisa. Homes are devoid of doors, window frames, appliances, clothes, and furniture. The looting has resulted in the opening of what are called "Hargeisa markets" throughout the region, including Mogadishu and Ethiopia, where former residents have spotted their possessions. One observer remarked that Hargeisa is being dismantled piece by piece. We were told that long lines of trucks heavily laden with Hargeisa goods could be seen leaving the city, heading south towards Mogadishu after the heavy fighting had stopped.

The Governor of Hargeisa estimates the present population to be around 70,000, down from a pre-conflict population figure of 370,000. However, the current residents of Hargeisa are not believed to be the former Issak residents. Observers believe that Hargeisa is now composed largely of dependents of the military, which has a substantial, visible presence in Hargeisa, a significant number of Ogadeni refugees, and squatters who are using the properties of those who fled.

Presently, Hargeisa is without electricity and a functioning water system. The water system's pumping station (installed and operated by the Chinese) is out of commission. Spare parts are nonexistent, and the Chinese refuse to send technicians due to the insecure environment still existing in Hargeisa and its surroundings. One of the Chinese crew members was killed during the fighting.

There are no indications that the Somali government has taken any steps to restore services or to clean the city of debris. However, Somali government officials are actively soliciting multilateral and bilateral donors for reconstruction assistance.

U.S. Assistance Provided During the Conflict

Starting in August 1988, the U.S. government responded to the emergency with \$1.9 million in disaster assistance to help the victims of the conflict. This assistance included \$1 million for a field hospital unit and \$350,000 for food for displaced persons and refugees. In March 1989, the Agency for International Development's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance approved an additional \$630,000 for 10 tanker trucks to supplement Hargeisa's water supply system.

As part of the administration's ongoing military assistance program, \$1.4 million worth of small arms and ammunition was provided to the government of Somalia during the height of the conflict. Since July 1988, the administration has voluntarily limited the military assistance

program to nonlethal items, including spare parts for previously supplied weapons.

U.S.-Donated Hospital Unit

The most expensive item of emergency assistance was the \$1 million disaster hospital unit, which was set up in Berbera. The hospital unit was donated from the Defense Department's Humanitarian Affairs Office to assist the victims of the conflict. The government of Somalia provided the building, and the Defense Department provided the medicines, medical equipment, cots, linens, and basic hospital supplies. The hospital is located in Berbera because it was considered a secure area to which supplies and patients could be quickly transported, if necessary. More serious injuries are treated at Somalia's main hospital in Mogadishu. During our visit to the hospital, we noted that the hospital was providing assistance to military personnel, Ogadeni refugees, and local townspeople.

Emergency Relief Assistance

In addition to the hospital, other U.S. support included plastic sheeting, blankets, vegetable oil, wheat, and sugar for displaced persons and Ogadeni refugees. All of this assistance is distributed through the Somali government and is intended for the displaced population in Somalia.

Detailed information about displaced persons who are to receive this assistance, such as location and estimated population, was unavailable. U.S. Embassy officials estimated that 10,000 former residents of Hargeisa and Burao now live in northwest Somalia. Another large population of displaced persons is believed to be living with relatives throughout Somalia. As indicated earlier, approximately 350,000 Issaks are currently residing in refugee camps inside Ethiopia.

Lethal Assistance

Lethal U.S. military assistance consisting of 1,200 M16 automatic rifles and 2 million rounds of M16 ammunition, plus 300,000 rounds of 30 caliber and 500,000 rounds of 50 caliber ammunition, valued at about \$1.4 million, was shipped on June 9, 1988, with approval of the Departments of State and Defense, to the Somali army under the Foreign Military Sales program. The shipment, initially authorized in November 1986, was repeatedly delayed due to the reluctance of carriers to transport small quantities of low density ammunition to Somalia. It finally arrived on June 28 at the port of Berbera and was used by the government at a critical point in the conflict. From Berbera, the city of Hargeisa is typically less than a 3-hour trip by car. The fighting was

heaviest in this relatively small area. During this period, the Somali government supplied arms to an undetermined number of refugees to fight the SNM insurgents in the north. A senior Somali military official confirmed that the U.S. equipment was distributed to troops in the north and was used during the conflict.

U.N. Response to the Emergency

The UNHCR assistance program in northwest Somalia was seriously disrupted following the outbreak of the conflict. When the fighting broke out in late May, the UNHCR initially halted deliveries of food in northern Somalia but resumed them on a reduced scale by the end of June. The United States contributes about 40 percent of the food aid through the World Food Program, which is distributed by the UNHCR. U.S. assistance amounted to about \$18 million in 1988.

The fighting caused severe damage to UNHCR's operation. Trucks, trailers, commodities, office equipment, and buildings worth about \$10 million were destroyed or confiscated by the Somali military and the SNM.

UNHCR continued food shipments based on humanitarian concerns. However, the UNHCR was unable to effectively monitor the distribution of commodities largely due to the security situation in the north. Officials in charge of food distribution and other observers stated that some food was misappropriated by Ogadeni refugees and diverted by the Somali military. In addition, as a result of the reduced number of trucks available for deliveries, some food spoiled at the Berbera port.

Armed Ogadeni Refugees Ruled Ineligible for U.N. Assistance

A triangle section encompassing Berbera, Hargeisa, and Burao (see map, app. I) formed the area where the heaviest concentration of fighting occurred. Within this area and to the northwest, the UNHCR managed 14 Ogadeni refugee camps. In July 1988, UNHCR and others noticed that some of the refugees at six³ of the 14 refugee camps in Somalia were carrying arms. The government of Somalia told the UNHCR that the refugees were armed for their own protection. While acknowledging that Ogadeni refugees and refugee camps had been attacked by the SNM and lives had been lost, the UNHCR believed that the Ogadeni refugees had become a party to the conflict and thus were ineligible to receive international humanitarian assistance.

³The six armed refugee camps are Gallikar, Bihin, Adi Addeys, Dam, Sabad, and Arabsiyo.

U.N. and Somali Government Agreement

On October 5, 1988, and again on December 23, 1988, the UNHCR wrote the government of Somalia to express serious concerns about the lack of monitoring over the use of humanitarian assistance and about the arming of the refugees. Considering UNHCR's strictly humanitarian and nonpolitical mandate, the High Commissioner noted that in these circumstances it could continue to assist only those refugees who had not taken part in the conflict. (UNHCR estimated that population to be 140,000.) For humanitarian reasons, however, relief assistance continued at the original planning levels of 370,000 refugees, albeit with reduced quantities and frequency, until an agreement could be reached between the Somali government and UNHCR.

It was not until February 23, 1989, after the UNHCR had halted deliveries of food assistance in northern Somalia, that the government of Somalia and the UNHCR reached an agreement in principle to resolve the armed Ogadeni refugee situation. The government of Somalia and the UNHCR agreed to (1) remove refugees from the six armed camps to locations in Boorama in northwest Somalia, (2) require the Somali government to disarm the Ogadeni refugees of weapons acquired during the disturbance, and (3) re-register them in the northwest camps. UNHCR agreed to resume food deliveries to all camps for a period of 3 months. The agreement also mentioned that emphasis would be placed on voluntary repatriation.

In March 1989, the process of re-registering and removing the refugees from the conflict zone began. Plans were underway to move refugees from two of the six camps near Berbera to an existing camp, Darbi Hore, located near Boorama. The population of Darbi Hor is estimated to be between 10,000 and 12,000, which is considerably less than its full capacity of 36,000. Merging the refugee settlements should be possible, since the total camp population to be moved is estimated to be around 12,000.

The United Nations will not likely provide assistance to help rebuild the cities in the north until (1) the security conditions are adequate for international representatives to monitor the program and (2) a screening process is established to certify that the persons living in these cities are former residents. A rebuilding program without resettlement controls could result in former residents being replaced by people in the area who have been friendly to the government during the conflict and could hinder the return of former residents.

Issak Refugee Repatriation Unlikely

The Issak refugees we interviewed in Ethiopia expressed a clear reluctance to return to Somalia in the near future. The majority indicated that a precondition for their return would be the removal of the army from northern Somalia. A smaller number of respondents stated that they would accept SNM assurances that it was safe to return. Most refugees expressed their willingness to stay in the camps, despite the harsh conditions, for the indefinite future. Indeed, many of the refugees expect to remain in Ethiopia for several years. The refugees exhibited alarm when questioned about returning home; fear remains the single largest factor in their decision to stay.

We saw no evidence that any repatriation had started. All the respondents indicated that they knew of no one who had returned to Burao or Hargeisa. Both the UNHCR and Ethiopian staff confirmed that repatriation had not begun. The only movement to northern Somalia, apart from SNM members returning from visiting relatives in the camps and smugglers, was from women trying to retrieve belongings left behind.

We also noticed that the camps were virtually devoid of young men, especially Daror, Rabasso, and Kam Abokar. Many of the respondents indicated that most of the men had returned to Somalia to join the SNM in the fight. The interviewees also indicated that a majority of the young men immediately took up arms with the SNM when the refugees were assembling outside of Hargeisa and Burao for the trek to Ethiopia. The SNM is very popular among the camp population. The respondents stated that they trust the SNM. It appears that most of the information within the camps on the status of the war originates with the SNM and works its way through "the grapevine." When asked if government assurances of safety and gestures of goodwill (such as cross-border food or water deliveries) would convince the Issak population that it is safe to return, the universal response was incredulity. The refugees emphasized that President Siad Barre could not be trusted and that any cosmetic steps at rapprochement were meaningless in light of the trauma they had endured.

Somali Government's Response to the Conflict

During meetings with high level Somali officials, the U.S. Ambassador has continually urged the government to undertake political reforms and seek reconciliation in the north. At the time of our visit, the Somali government had announced several measures that it planned to take in this regard; however, only limited steps had been taken toward reconciliation.

As of March 1989, the Somali government had provided amnesty to those involved in the northern conflict and had released some 300 of an estimated 1,000 political prisoners.⁴ Of the released prisoners, many were among the most prominent, as identified by some members of Congress and the National Academy of Sciences. The other prisoners, however, have not yet been affected by the President's amnesty.

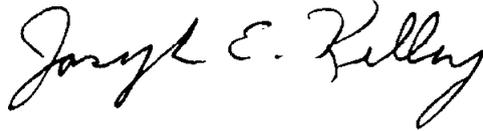
In August 1988, the President appointed a committee to investigate the problems in the northern region, probe its causes, and find peaceful solutions. In December 1988, the committee released its report, which recommended, among other things, that the government undertake a major, organized, and concerted reconstruction program for the war-torn north with the help of friendly donors; allow regions and localities a greater voice and role in local government; release from detention all persons arrested with or without formal charges in connection with the northern insurgency; and restore constitutional guarantees against arbitrary arrest and unlimited detention by state security forces.

On March 6, 1989, the government announced the formation of a three-person committee, composed of government officials, to deal with the problems in the northern region. This includes rehabilitating the destroyed properties "caused by the bandits," restoring security and stability, revitalizing livestock export, and opening a dialogue with intellectuals, elders, and religious leaders in these areas at an opportune moment. The committee has implied powers, including authority over army commanders in the region. Some observers have criticized the committee's membership as being too closely aligned with the government. In addition, implementing these measures will likely be a slow process.

As requested by your office, we did not obtain agency comments on this report. Unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from its issue date. At that time we will send copies to interested congressional committees, the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the Director, Agency for International Development. Copies will be made available to other interested parties on request.

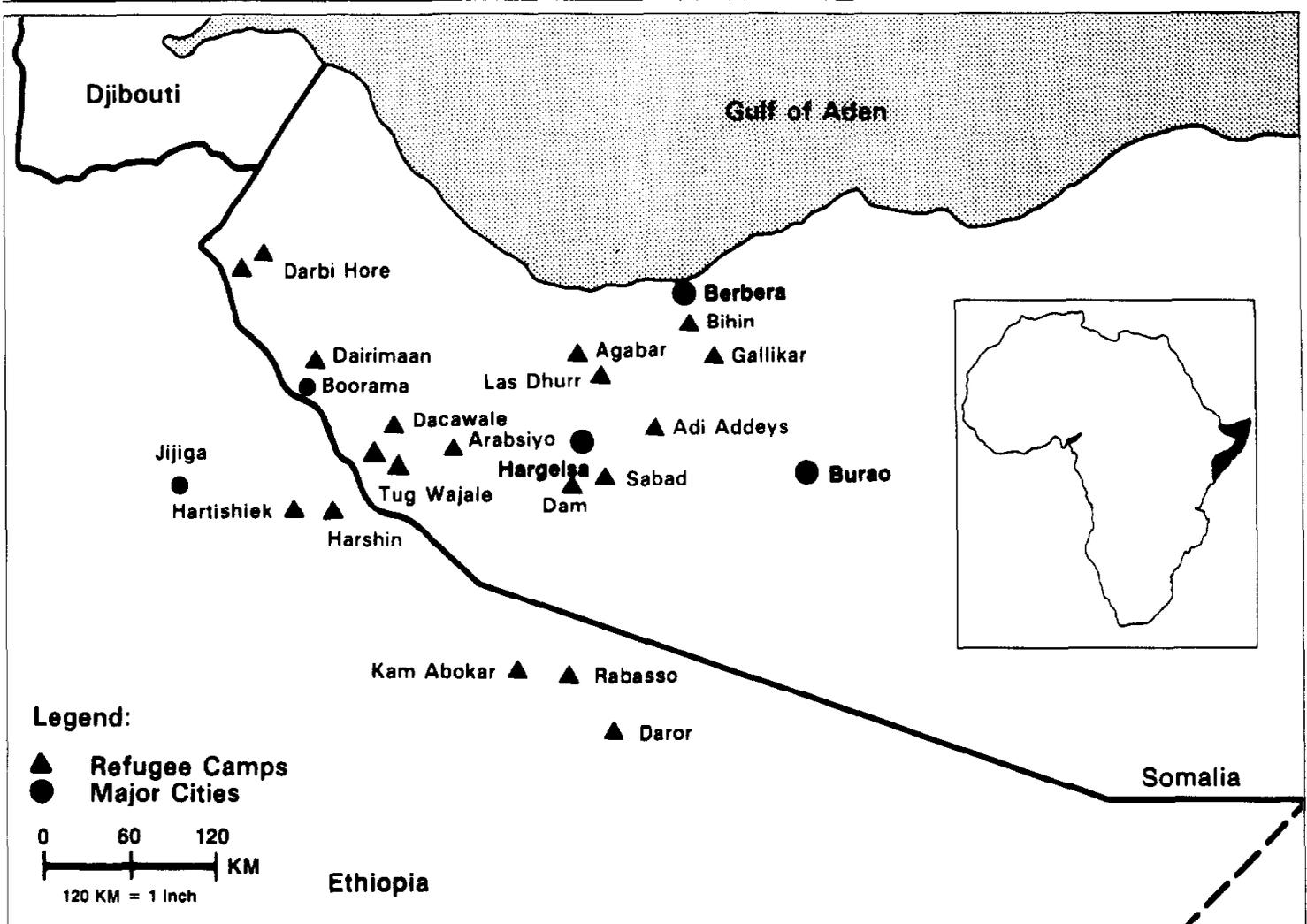
⁴The figure of 1,000 political prisoners being detained in Somalia is the estimate used by human rights organizations following the situation in Somalia.

GAO staff members who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph E. Kelley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "J" and "K".

Joseph E. Kelley
Director, Security and
International Relations Issues

Map Showing Ogadeni Refugee Camps in Somalia and Issak Refugee Camps in Ethiopia



Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This interim report focuses on some of the consequences of the conflict in Somalia: specifically, the causes for the flight of refugees from Somalia, the extent of destruction that occurred in Hargeisa, the use of U.S. assistance during the conflict, and the role of the UNHCR in distributing U.S. assistance and its reaction to the arming of Ogadeni refugees. In addition, we attempted to determine under what conditions the Somali refugees would return to their homes. We will address all of the objectives of the review in a later report.

In Somalia, we met with U.S. government officials, high-level current and former Somali ministry officials, and informed Somalis to discuss the situation in Somalia. We interviewed staff of UNHCR, the World Food Program, the National Refugee Commission, and private voluntary organizations. We also visited Mogadishu and the military facilities at Berbera and toured Hargeisa to assess the extent of destruction.

In Ethiopia, we interviewed 60 refugees residing at all five refugee camps of Hartishiek, Harshin, Daror, Rabasso, and Kam Abokar. These camps are located along the Ethiopia-Somalia border. At each camp we interviewed approximately 12 randomly selected heads of household in hour-long sessions. Forty-two of the respondents were former residents of Hargeisa, 16 were residents of Burao, and 2 were residents of Shiekh (a village 40 miles northwest of Burao). In addition, at each of the camps we held discussions with UNHCR expatriates and Ethiopian staff, refugee committee officials, and bilateral donor and private voluntary organization relief workers.

Our work was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards between September 1988 and March 1989.

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