

Regional engagement in Somalia



African peacekeepers in Mogadishu, November 24, 2009
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a conversation with HE Engineer Mahboub M. Maalim

HE Engineer Mahboub M. Maalim is Executive Secretary of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD)

Before taking up office, had you ever been personally affected by or professionally involved in efforts to resolve conflict in Somalia?

I come from the Garissa District of northern Kenya so I am very much aware of the wider impact of the Somali conflict. My home district of Lagdera is where the highest population of refugees in Kenya is stationed. Currently there are 350,000 refugees there, possibly one of the largest refugee concentrations in the world. You can imagine the local impact of this in terms of depleted resources and perpetual tensions between the refugees and the people. So I have certainly felt the affects at a personal level.

Professionally I had also been involved. I worked for the Arid Lands Resource Management Project as their Coordinator in Wajir in northern Kenya where we were involved in conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives with the local community. While this was internal to Kenya it is was clear that the conflict in Somalia had a great deal of bearing on these issues.

How would you describe the impact of the Somali situation on IGAD?

IGAD has a broad-based mandate. Peace and security is only part of that mandate, which also includes food security, infrastructure development and a host of other issues to promote regional economic integration.

Yet we have found that peace and security has been the overwhelming pre-occupation, absorbing so much of the organization's time and resources. It has been a major distraction from the broader regional economic and development strategies we would like to focus on. Since I took up office in 2008 I have been fully engaged in conflict amelioration pertaining to the Somali conflict, often at the expense of other very important organizational goals.

What about the impact of IGAD on the situation in Somalia? How would you respond to criticisms by Somalis that divisions among IGAD countries help to fuel the conflict in Somalia?

On the contrary, IGAD has been a key stabilizing factor in the Somali conflict, and remains key to the very existence of Somalia. IGAD is the one organization that has never abandoned Somalia. It is mainly thanks to IGAD's efforts that everyone else in the international community is also involved.

IGAD member states decided it was time to intervene after the thirteenth reconciliation attempt had failed. That first attempt produced a tangible outcome in the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). IGAD has definitely not had a negative impact on the situation in Somalia. Indeed it is a good thing that IGAD was there for Somalia.

Does IGAD have an overall peace and security strategy for the region? What are its main features?

We have been working on IGAD's peace and security strategy and it has reached an advanced stage of preparation. The draft strategy is completed and will be presented for adoption at the ordinary IGAD Council of Ministers' meeting scheduled for October 2009. So it is ready, subject to approval. The strategy covers all aspects and facets of conflict resolution and peacebuilding and includes proposals on organizational structure. It includes all the things that have been going on already such as mediation issues and standby forces that now need to be operationalized.

Does this mean that IGAD will be doing more rather than less on peace and security in future?

We definitely will not be able to ignore any future needs for interventions on peace and security in the region. But as part of our ongoing revitalization, we are trying to do as well on economic development and integration as we are doing on peace and security.

What would you say are the main reasons why Somalia has gone on for so long without being able to establish a government?

This is a good question, but I think the Somali people are best placed to say why. It is really a question for Somalis to ponder why this situation has gone on for so long. It is their issue. I believe that if the Somali people agreed once and for all that they wanted this to end, I am sure it would.

What is IGAD's position on Somaliland's claim to independence?

The issue has not been on the table during my time in office. We are working on the principle of one Somali nation.

Do you think that some form of forceful intervention could help to create stability in Somalia?

Yes, I do. But by forceful intervention I do not mean more outside firepower. What is needed is more direct support to the government of Somalia so it can maintain a standing force of its own and establish a police force to bring about law and order. That is the kind of force that could make a difference.

If such support were available, Somalis would be able to set their own priorities for dealing with insurgents and bringing about stability. It is their country; they know the terrain and the issues. They are better placed than anyone else to find ways to tackle the problems, including that of piracy.

IGAD has been deeply involved in reconciliation efforts in Somalia since 2002. What do you see as its main achievements?

The main achievement has been the establishment of the TFG. This provided the legitimate stop point for the international community to rally around. Establishing a government has been IGAD's main achievement and this is the right entry point for wider international involvement.

Concerning the IGAD-led Somali National Reconciliation Conference, many analysts say that the reason the TFG is so weak is because the people involved in the peace conference were unrepresentative and lacked legitimacy. Do you agree with this assessment?

I don't agree. This question of legitimacy and representation is highly subjective. To use a scientific analogy, if we liken democracy to a spring, it is like asking for a point in time in the entire elasticity of a spring. Even in mature democracies it is simply not possible to pinpoint where legitimacy occurs.

Since legitimacy is in the eye of the beholder we need to establish who is asking the question and why. Those who question the legitimacy of the TFG are people in the diaspora, often members of the former regime or their senior civil servants, who could not stoop so low as to come and join the discussion. It is their doubts that are not legitimate. The process itself was legitimate enough to produce a government as a stop point and starting point.

How does IGAD maintain its neutrality when there are conflicting regional interests at work in Somalia?

Regional interests operate at a point beyond national interests. They exist at a point that is reached naturally when national interests have been exhausted and can become equipped for a broader regional purpose. That point in time is a break point in diplomacy, when one is forced to put national interests aside in pursuit of regional interests. Thereafter, member states can reach consensus very quickly.

Is reaching that consensus easier to do since Eritrea has excluded itself from the organization?

Eritrea has, as you correctly put it, excluded itself from the organization. Even now Eritrea is a member of IGAD. It has not withdrawn but suspended its membership. This is a matter of Eritreans' national interest on which they are not ready to take the regional view. But they still have the opportunity.

How does the relationship between IGAD and the African Union (AU) work in relation to Somalia?

The AU is our continent's premier organization. We are building blocks for the AU, one of the eight regional economic communities. For me, we are all one thing and our work is complementary. For example, the AU peacekeeping force (the AU Mission in Somalia – AMISOM) comes under the auspices of the AU but operates with the full support of IGAD member states and the rest of the African continent.

IGAD makes its own decisions, at the highest level, and issues these in the form of communiqués. It is normal practice for decisions on security matters to be taken to the AU's Peace and Security Council, which then adopts this stand. This is the diplomatic chain that we follow. Also, certain matters, such as those for discussion by the UN Security Council, are required to go through the AU. In general, the AU looks to the regional organizations to take the lead on issues within their particular area.

Does IGAD try to involve countries outside the immediate region, eg in the Arab world, in the reconciliation process in Somalia? What role can these other countries play?

Yes. Agencies like the Arab League are very close collaborators. A representative of the Arab League attends most of our ministerial level meetings on the conflict in Somalia. Therefore, both as an organization and as member states the Arab League is very supportive of IGAD and AU efforts.

The Arab League also has an important role to play itself. The best thing it could do now for Somalia is to expedite all the support it can directly to the TFG. We need it to back up the efforts of IGAD and the AU to strengthen the government institutions and help it stand on its own feet. As long as it is weak and not standing on its own feet it cannot be effective.

What would be the most useful role that the UN and the international community could play in Somalia?

There's no question that the international community has been very helpful and has made a very substantial contribution over the last 18 or 19 years amounting to billions of dollars and euros. But if you really examine the impact of the interventions so far you'll find a lot of gaps. If these had been targeted properly earlier on we would not be where we are now.

Our delivery mechanisms for assistance have not been well thought through. There has been a lot of help but with far too

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many different offices and agencies involved. That is why I am making a very strong case for help to go directly to the TFG.

Would that extend to international humanitarian assistance?

I'd like to see a much more country-based approach to humanitarian action. It is important that those on the frontline, those involved in food distribution and such like, are based in the community. Community level organizations should take the lead – it is their show – and then the warring parties will see less of the 'foreign' element.

There are many successful examples of local agencies leading humanitarian efforts with international backing. The government also has to own the process and, while it lacks the capacity to receive all the assistance itself, it should be involved in approving and establishing the mechanisms for a community-led approach.

How do you see the way forward? Are there innovative approaches that IGAD and the international community could try in order to assist Somalis to move out of the current crisis?

IGAD member states are strongly engaged, exemplified by the fact that this year alone we have held four extraordinary council of ministers meetings on the Somali issue. They are getting more proactive and are now quantifying what they are doing to support the TFG.

The main thing for the international community to do is to take heart and stay on. It is not time to despair when one last step could take us to the goal we have strived so hard to achieve. We need the international community to give timely support to African initiatives.

IGAD, the AU and the international community need to work in a synchronized fashion in order to achieve results. What has been embarked upon in Somalia can only be sustained by the efforts of the entire African continent and the international community working together.

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Interview conducted by Sally Healy.