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Transcript

Somalia at a Crossroads and the Duty of the International Community

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President of the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (2009-)

8 March 2010

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HE Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed:

I am sure there have been many discussions about Somalia, both here and elsewhere the purpose was for all of us to participate in finding a solution for these problems, as you have seen in the title of this speech, 'Somalia at a crossroads and the role of the international community' to get past this problem.

If I may go back a little, you know the Somali government collapsed in 1991. And it was easy to predict what was coming in the years before that. I'm sorry that both the Somali people and the international community did not take steps to prevent that. I'm also sorry that all the efforts that were made since were not successful.

The time at which the Somali state collapsed was a difficult time and the relationship that Somalia had with other parts of the world was not stable; there were not governments that were interested in helping Somalia get past a difficult state. The way the Somali government was destroyed was telling because all the groups that were fighting the Somali government were based on tribal affiliations and they were all interested in taking power.

But there was no political programme between these organisations geared towards making change in the country. The solution was only war, there was no attempt to find mediation between those groups and the government that existed at the time and come to a common ground. The Somali people, who are tribal people, their experience was with a government that was limited and the way these armed struggles started and many other reasons all made the problems in the country prolonged.

In 2000, there was a great effort to find a transitional government to get us to elections. It was the first hope in the Somali people and in the international community that success is coming but unfortunately that also failed. All the efforts since then continued, but they were all geared towards building a transitional government without much thought being put into how to implement that. There was not much attention paid to the reconstruction of national institutions and the constitutional entities of that structure.

So this resulted in creating an administration and leaving it there where it was built. Unfortunately at that time, the world came to know of the ideology of al Qaeda, which was coming from Afghanistan. And it was possible for them to bring that ideology to Somalia - it was possible for them to succeed. The Somali people, who are 100 per cent Muslim, have historically not experienced religious violence. They are a people for whom religion is sacred.

The solution to the Somali problem and the reconciliation was based on religious tenets and was helped by religious scholars. Both the Somali people and the international community did not pay attention to this problem until much later. And to get a clear understanding of the nature of this problem took a very long time.

To find a solution to a problem, you must know its root causes and until this problem becomes international and affects everybody, be they Muslim or people of other faiths... if I may stop there. Islam is a religion of peace. Islam is a religion that unites people. A religion that permits different beliefs. I want to take a verse from the Quran that says 'there is no compulsion in religion'.

I want to take an example from the life of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and the companions of the Prophet, where there was co-existence between Arabs who were disbelievers, Jews, and Christians and others. And the first Muslim government that was created in Medina was participated by all of these groups. The Muslims did not transgress in that time on the people of other faiths.

Furthermore, the religion of Islam considers those people who have religious books as closer to them, Christians and Jews. The Quran calls the Christians and Jews the 'People of the Book'. It is also evident in Islamic religion that the interaction and inter-marrying and co-existence of People of the Book and Muslims is a tenet. This good understanding of Islam can be interpreted by people who have knowledge.

The responsibility of the implementation of Islamic principles is the responsibility of the government, with the exception of the belief that persons have and the ritual worship that a person is responsible for. Beyond that, people and groups are not allowed to implement the laws of Islam. So to get organisations that are not government, that are not responsible, that don't have sufficient knowledge of Islam and say they will implement the religion but their real purpose is to reach particular goals that they have - this is something that is damaging to Muslims. It gives a bad and erroneous picture of Islam.

Therefore, in Somalia since there was no government controlling the land at that time, these names came forth, the likes of al Shabaab, who clearly declared that they have a relationship with al Qaeda. So you can understand that these groups are making a great effort, but on the other side there is no countering effort.

The situation in Somalia that resulted from the collapse of the central government and the lack of enthusiasm for finding a Somali government gave

an opportunity to these different groups that we mention. The danger they pose is not limited to Somalia, but it is evident today that this danger can reach different people, anybody.

The lack of government resulted in a generation that did not find education, that did not find employment, that did not find a way to learn the good traditions and customs of the Somali people. The hunger, poverty and refugees all had an impact on the new generation that grew up since, as you know. In the absence of the responsibility of a government, many young people were neglected who should have been on the path to a good and bright future.

If I look on the other side, the way the Somali society is made up, where people say they are tribes. It is true, there are tribes in Somalia, but that is not a big problem in the Somali context. They used to co-exist, these tribes, without a government and they used to find ways of solving their problems. That did not stop them from building their government in modern times. But over the last 18 years, tribalism was used to wrong others, to achieve certain goals.

In the history of Somalia this was the most difficult time that the Somali people went through. It has displaced the good customs of the Somali people and the many ways that the Somali people used to solve their problems among each other and the relationship that they used to have based on mutual respect to each other. These problems created a concern on the part of the Somali people, wherever they are, that this is an unacceptable condition.

So the opportunity that we have today, is that the Somali people are making an effort to get past this difficulty and the only way to get past this difficulty is to strengthen the government. The different experiments at the different times can help us understand that the only way to solve this problem is to find a government and to strengthen its institutions, be they the legislative or executive, be they the justice system or administration, public services. And to address this new ideology that is misrepresenting the religion of Islam, and the Somali people are convinced that this does not represent their religion.

It is evident in the Quran that there are many verses that talk about peace and co-existence between Muslims and the greatest prize that a Muslim is given on the day of judgement is peace. I want to take the verse where Allah takes the people into paradise while at peace, it means 'enter paradise peacefully'. So we understand from this that the reward in the hereafter for

good work is peace. And the best thing in this life is also peace. It is not permitted for a Muslim to transgress another, be they Muslim or not Muslim.

To turn this thing upside down puts everybody in danger, and to deal with this requires a plan and a lot of effort. The first piece is for the Muslim scholars who understand the religion to explain the religion well and fully, and for the security institutions to find an effective way of dealing with this dangerous trend, and for the entire international community to take part in saving the world from these dangerous groups.

I want to particularly point out here an issue that has to do with suicide. You do not find any Islamic literature that supports suicide, in fact it is forbidden. The Prophet, peace be upon him, told us that if a person commits suicide he will be punished in the hereafter on the grounds that they killed themselves. So it is unfortunate for the Islamic religion, whose books are among us, people who have particular goals will take it and tell a lie about Islam and put suspicion between the people who believe in Islam and the people of other faiths.

When I go back to Somalia in particular, it needs, as we have mentioned, for the government to be helped so that the government can do its part in solving the problem. It needs the support of the international community. There are large governments, the likes of Pakistan and others who are struggling with these groups. So to take a small country like Somalia and ask it to deal with the problem on its own will have an impact on the responsibility of the international community.

The people and the government of Somalia who are prepared to do something about this are the first who should participate in this, who should implement this and return the peace and law and order in the country so that we can reach the progress that we envision.

As you know, the problem is not only extremists and terrorists. We have also the added issue of piracy. It is a known fact that these two groups have a direct relationship. Similarly, both groups are a danger to the country of Somalia, the region and the world. And they have damaged the reputation of the Somali people. They have damaged the livelihood of the Somali people. They have written a history with which the Somali people are not pleased.

One of the things that resulted from the collapse of the central government was the refugees and displaced people who need today to receive urgent humanitarian assistance. In particular, the condition in Somalia now, there is malnutrition. Cases of malnutrition started showing up because the economic system has collapsed. There have been droughts for a number of years. The

constant insecurity, the challenges that are faced by humanitarian organisations coming from these terrorist organisations - all of these have conspired to make the humanitarian situation in Somalia more difficult.

That difficult situation in front of us in Somalia, as a government it is our plan to do something about the security situation and ride along with that, the humanitarian services that would be made possible, the rebuilding of the institutions, public services.

As you know, the government does not have sufficient resources to address all of those issues on its own. All the officers of our government, despite our meagre resources have started providing services to the public. We started services at hospitals, renovating some hospitals, some are under way. Some schools are being renovated. Also the port and the airport of Mogadishu have seen expansions. Similarly, the parliament is undergoing renovations.

With regard to orientation and educating people, the government has spent a lot of effort, and the return of Radio Mogadishu to the airwaves in Somalia was a very important success and has contributed to changing the thinking among the Somali people. Our plan is to raise the quality of this service. The other private television stations and radio stations are also expected to follow suit because this responsibility is collective for all of us. It is important that we do not think about only the profit and the business they're involved in, but what will help the country and the people.

Since the world community is interconnected, the transfer of these ideologies and the persons carrying them is so easy, as we have seen, and how easy it is for these deviant people to utilise materials that are readily available to do damage. It's important to raise the capacity of the security services. There is no doubt that these elements also increase their sophistication so it is important to have a system that will allow us to confront them at all times.

As you know, the young people who are participating in fighting today do not all share in their agreement with the situation they're in. Some are in there for economic reasons, some are in there for being misled about the religion of Islam. So raising the level of awareness of these people is part of the solution.

Among the other areas that the government started working on early on is reconciliation and as a result of these efforts, many groups have joined the government. So some people have left these groups and joined the government. This effort continues well. We are also hoping that more will abandon this wrong thinking and join the government.

Since Somalia has been at war for a long time, the issue of reconciliation for the government is a strategic option. On the 12th of this month, we are expecting to sign an agreement between the government and Ahl ul-Sunnah Wa al-Jamma (ASWJ). The purpose of this agreement is to further enlarge the support that the government enjoys and to reinforce the reconciliation process.

If I may look back once more on the issue of conflict between tribes in Somalia, today it is ideologies that are in conflict. People who want a government, they are from all Somali groups, and there are people who do not want statehood and are only involved in killing and terrorism. So there is no choice for the Somali people and the international community other than to strengthen the government.

If the government succeeds in its plans, there is no doubt that the current difficulties will end. Of course, many people like to see everything resolved quickly and everything to be the best way it can be. But there is a significant difference between theoretical eloquence and doing something about it on the ground. A country that has been in destruction for 18 years, to change that situation and solve all its problems requires a lot of effort.

But we say that to start the movement requires a lot of effort, but once that ball is rolling it is easier to push it along. I am very confident that we will move forward and that it will reach success. For the Somali people in the diaspora have a lot of knowledge and experience and wealth outside the country, and there is a great need inside Somalia by the people and the country to benefit from these people. It is common for all the people in the diaspora to send remittances to their families, but it is necessary for us to think collectively to find a solution to this problem.

I am confident in the Somali community in the diaspora, that their support is crucial for the success of the government, whether that is in the security sector, in reconciliation, in reconstruction, in humanitarian assistance. It is important that we find both the government and the people in the diaspora to deliver aid to the people with full transparency that one can see that all these assets are reaching their intended recipients. Because if we take the responsibility and stand for this important work, it's our duty.

The differences in thinking between the different Somali groups should be something that brings progress and development for the country, and not a hindrance. It is impossible for all people to share an exact idea, and this did not happen, but nonetheless there must be a way to take advantage of these different opinions. I mean, there are different responsibilities for different

groups and everyone should take their responsibility seriously and they should be helped with it.

On the political front, which may be the most important issue, if we don't all work on a system to bring peace to Somalia, it would mean the continuation of this problem. I am confident that we can find a shared system that we can all participate in finding peace and all can reach their goals. The plan of this government is to bring the country to peace and stability, a peace and stability that would allow every Somali to participate in free and fair elections and bring back law and order, and to find a way for all members of the society to participate in bringing this project to fruition.

It is possible that people may think this is a tall order, but to the contrary I believe that we can reach this. We have great opportunities: the feelings and sentiment of the Somali people, how prepared they are to support their government, and the readiness of the international community towards the issues in Somalia, and the determination of the government to implement its programme. The programme of the transitional government also includes going past the transitional phase and getting an elected government in place. And the bad reputation that now is clear for the groups opposing the government in the eyes of the people.

I am not minimising the danger of these people, but at the same time I am confident that they can be defeated. Most people who thought well of them are now convinced of their ways. You know this government has approved the application of Islamic law and this was in part to prevent the people who were misusing the name of the religion for bloodshed.

The application of Islamic law, maybe when we're here, may be seen in different ways. But the implementation of Islamic law is something that is very easy, that causes no harm to anyone. It's possible that the first thing that comes to mind is chopping people's hands off and similar things. But the religion of Islam is good customs, it's mercy, it's justice. When one says that we should apply this in Somalia today, we have to first stop the bloodshed, we have to assist the people who are suffering, we have to find solutions to existing disputes.

If there is a good understanding and good intentions, there's no doubt this can lead to a solution. Since the people who are claiming this law have their own agenda, it is hard to bring it all together in the same direction. Therefore it is necessary that the government take the responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen, this difficult situation that Somalia finds itself in should not discourage us from the task in front of us. Every one of us has a

responsibility and can take a good role in this work. It is my hope that we will all participate in the solution, and that the Somali people will get past the difficulties they went through and be an equal to other countries. It is a great opportunity for me to be here with you today. I hope that your questions and comments will be productive. Thank you very much.

Question and Answer Session

Question 1:

Thank you very much, Mr President. You offered a very inspiring address, where you touched on the challenges of reconstruction. Could you very kindly highlight some of the specific areas of the Somali economy where you see the greatest potential for foreign business cooperation?

HE Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed:

This is an important question. Somalia, as you know, is a country that is rich with a good environment, the longest coast in Africa, livestock, the most camels in the world, the second in cattle... I'm not sure where we are on goats and sheep but we're at a good number! 75 per cent of Somali land can be cultivated and we have many other natural resources that are not tapped yet. The marine resources, we have 250 different kinds of species.

The Somali people are considered to be good businessmen, very enterprising and have been doing this for a long time. During the war in Somalia, commerce has reached its peak. There is an investment opportunity in every aspect of Somalia and the people are prepared and good with commerce. I hope I answered your question.

Question 2:

Essentially, will you respect the rule of law if you are sincere in ending the rule by the gun? Will Somalia emerge as a democratic society? And the reason for this is because you're currently in breach of your own charter, the charter of the Transitional Federal Government, specifically Article 2. The territory of Somalia, including the continental shelf life is inviolable and indivisible. The memorandum of understanding which you signed with the Kenyan government is unconstitutional because it breaches Article 2 by

seeking to break, damage, or cause doubt about Somalia's territory. It is undemocratic by your lack of popular mandate.

HE Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed:

First, what we had with Kenya was an understanding and not an agreement, and the parliament has rejected that. So I really don't see whether this was a good or bad agreement because it was nullified by parliament. The other issue with regard to war - we are not instigating war. The government has taken the decision to avoid war. For the year and a few months that we have been there, we could have been at war, but we have chosen to sell the peace. That is what we will continue doing. Thank you.

Question 3:

My company is interested in business in Somalia, and specifically the provision of a possible coast-guard development project. I just wondered on your views on that. I had spoken previously with one of your ministers about just how that might work for you in the specific region of Puntland, where of course some might argue they have their own agenda and the difficulties, being further south, and whether you might support that.

HE Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed:

We need anybody who would give us assistance in patrolling our coast, we would welcome no doubt anyone who is prepared to do that. An agreement is reached after people sit down and talk, so we welcome you. The government is here, you could talk to some people here or come to Mogadishu. We're very pleased that you have such feelings towards Somalia.

Question 4:

First, I will, given my question. Which form or version of Islam is in Somalia now? You said Islam is peace, you explain it to us and say there is a form of extremism. Which form of Islam did you apply in Mogadishu in 2006? If that was the peace version of Islam, why has it been destroyed by your friends now? What has changed other than the form of Islam?

HE Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed:

This is a good question. What we have done in 2006 came under circumstances. There were many problems in Mogadishu and as you know the Islamic courts, whether it is those that are in the government or those that are opposing the government, not a single hand was cut in 2006. Why did that happen? Was it Islamic Shari'a? No, Islamic Shari'a does not allow such a punishment to be delivered under the current circumstances, because people are angry, the political situation is not stable, the justice cannot be implemented. So it is called doubtful, times like this. And if there is a doubt, you cannot implement these things. So, all courts agreed that these could not be implemented.

Now, what is happening, look, people are hungry and they're still cutting hands. The other point that's important is that in Islam the authority to do these things is to be delegated to the authorities. Who represents the people of Somalia today? It is the parliament. The parliament has chosen some leaders, so who should enforce the law is the government and the others should listen to the government, and as it says in the Koran, 'listen to the leaders chosen by the people'.

So, no, I haven't changed my position and I had the same Islam I had yesterday. So I think you have a second part to this question and perhaps you should complete.

Question 5:

Mr President, you mentioned that on the 12th of March there will be an agreement signed by the government and ASWJ. Why is this happening in Addis Ababa and not Mogadishu?

HE Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed:

I don't know the problem you see in holding this in Addis Ababa. This is a neighbouring country and they're helping for this to happen, to be implemented. The idea is for the Somali people to have reconciliation and so for anybody who is helping us with this, we should welcome it. The question is, is it in our best interests to reconcile? Yes, wherever that happens, I think good thinking would say there is no problem with this.

The other important issue, the work is run by the government, so to have no faith in the government and to talk after every step it takes is not healthy.

They know more than you know and they're considering a lot of things, so when you hear these things you shouldn't jump to your feet with questions.

Question 6:

Thank you Mr President. You spoke about the Ethiopian government supporting you. Can we talk now about the government in Eritrea, which is destabilising you. We haven't seen that evidence yet. I know that you've given evidence to the EU and the UN and we don't know where that ended up.

Question 7:

Your Excellency, thank you very much for your representation and I wish you all the best in your endeavours to have a united Somalia. Last December, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions against the government of Eritrea for allegedly supporting those against the TFG. Eritrea denounced this, saying that it's all fabrication. Could you shed some light on this conundrum?

Question 8:

You touched briefly on reconciliation, I wonder if you could expand on specific projects of reconciliation you embarked upon, which is obviously incredibly important in a country like Somalia.

HE Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed:

I'm afraid you want to start a war here. We like to be at peace with our neighbouring countries and we welcome any country who will give us assistance in finding peace. Eritrea has a long relationship with the Somali people. What we would have liked was for Eritrea to give assistance to the Somali people so they can get past their difficulties.

Unfortunately, the government of Eritrea came with something very different than what we expected of them. The issue of the sanctions against Eritrea, it is difficult that the African Union would be convinced and then the United Nations Security Council without any evidence. So the government provided evidence that was convincing and based on that the sanctions were put into place.

But on our side, we're always prepared for peace and normalisation of relations. And we were forced to take this step. Of the 53 states in Africa, it is

only Eritrea that is opposing us. We were hoping frankly that they would be the first to support us. I think the first two questions have the same answer and that will suffice, let me go to the reconciliation issue.

The reconciliation effort is not limited to the one being signed on the 12th, it is a continuous programme that includes reconstruction, new administrations to be set up, security services to be set up. Of course, the government is not able to implement all of these at once. But it will do what it can, it will work with the international community and the Somali communities in the diaspora to participate in this. Thank you very much.

Question 9:

Mr President, why didn't you complete the building of your government? Why didn't you have administration set up in some of the regions instead of being limited to a small part of Mogadishu, so you can have more support?

Question 10:

Nearly 18,000 civilians lost their lives since you became the leader of Islamic Union up to now. Now you are the president of Somalia. I would like to ask, who will take this responsibility of the civilians who lost their lives?

Question 11:

I'd like to ask what sort of tangible plan do you have to deal with piracy on the coast of Kenya, and what plans for sustainable future do you have for the people that live in the coast of Somalia?

HE Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed:

Let me start with the 18,000. Who has verified that 18,000 people died? And if they died, who was responsible for this? The responsibility should be with those who caused it. We all know that Islamic courts were there to save the Somali people. The government was built to save the Somali people. Therefore, who is responsible for this? There is no doubt that the armed groups that are against finding a government in Somalia are responsible. On day 1, we have called for peace and reconciliation, today we are calling for peace, and the same tomorrow and the day after.

Let me go to the issue of piracy. We believe in the Somali security institutions, without building them well, we cannot find a solution. We have started the rebuilding of the Somali coast-guard and they have reached a good point. Parallel to that are the other forces that will help them on land.

The second part has to do with the livelihood of the people on the coast. We have prepared some projects developing the livelihood of the people on the coast line, to make them more productive. But it is only a plan, and not implemented yet. Thank you.

Question 12:

Mr President, we welcome you to London. My question is, you mentioned that there will be an agreement signed on the 12th of March. While you are in opposition, Ethiopian government have killed a lot of people in Mogadishu and they have been in mass graves. What are you going to do about this?

Question 13:

Mr President, the government before you was known for brutality and known to squash all opposition. On the other side, you always welcome anybody who's interested in reconciliation since the people who are opposing you are terrorists who are connected in Afghanistan, is it possible that your government will once and for all destroy them?

Question 14:

Can you tell us specifically what international support you want from the international community, particularly from the British government, and how do you risk the international support being interpreted and exploited by your enemies as some sort of imperialist or infidel attempt to influence the outcomes in your country?

HE Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed:

It is the government's plan to reconcile with everyone. My plan is to save the living people, so I need your help with this. The other question: is it possible that you would forcefully deal with the opposition? It is our preference that no blood is shed and that peaceful reconciliation is found. But it is the responsibility nonetheless of the government to bring back peace into the

country. On the last question, it is easier to come to the things that Somalia doesn't need rather than counting the things that Somalia needs.