

Notes on Benadir Refugees

Introduction

- 1.1 Most Somalis belong to a single race, Cushitic, with the exception of the Bantu communities along the Shabelle and Juba rivers. Practically all Somalis are Muslims of the Shafi'ite school. In this regard, however, it should be noted that Benadirs are Sunni Muslims.
- 1.2. The Benadir region is one of the four sharply contrasting topographical zones which can be identified in the Somali peninsula. Southern, urban and on the coast across from Yemen, it contains the cities of Mogadishu; Merka, about 90 kilometers south; and still farther south, roughly 200 kilometers, sits Barawa (Brava). Kismayu, about 250 kilometers from Barawa, terminates the Somali southern urban coast and begins the Bantu cultures of coastal Kenya. Some anthropologists include the Bajuni islands off the coast of Kismayu as being part of the Swahili culture of East Africa.

Historical Aspects

- 2.0 Geographic proximity to the Arabian world has been an asset in that it has resulted in international traffic in commerce and ideas. There is historical evidence that the famous Arab navigator Ibn-Batuta was present on the Benadir coast in 1331. The area was then known as Hamar (latter-day Mogadishu), which was established in 1200 AD by Imam Fakrudin. The name "Benadir" has its roots in the Persian word "Bandar," which means a place where sailors seek refuge from the rough seas and are able to take water and provisions. Mogadishu is, apparently, also a Persian word that means Palace of the Shah.
- 1 The Benadir community consists mainly of the Shanshi, Asharaf, Morshe, Bandabo, Dabarweyne, Rer Manyo, Rer Faghu, Amudi, Bafadal, and Iskashato. In Kenya, the Benadir community has settled in a separate camp. Indeed, other ethnic groups who are also coastal people have similarly been sheltered by UNCHR in different camps: Jomvu (Bajuni) and Hatimy (Barawa).

Cultural Aspects

- 2) Benadirs are well known for their sedentary nature, in sharp contrast to the nomadic lifestyle of their fellow Somalis. An estimated two-thirds of the population of Somalia (of an estimated four million) practiced or continues to practice pastoralism as the principle mode of the economy. Urbanized nomads also managed to dominate the modern state of Somali. These were people who made huge influxes from the "bush" into the towns in the 1940s and 1950s, after the massive urbanization which took place in the British and Italian Somalilands as a result of World War II.

These so-called urban nomads have actually been held in disdain by Benadirs who regard them as "nouveau riche." The Benadir are exceptionally proud of their ancient culture and heritage and regard themselves as superior in the field of trade, industry, commerce, arts and the professions.

Conversely, the nomadic tribes have always viewed the Benadir as being established tradespeople. This perception of wealth has apparently been tinged with envy and jealousy over the years. The fact remains, however, that the Benadir did not involve themselves in the political arena, and neither did they take sides in the civil war that erupted in 1991.

Effects of the Civil War

4.0 The worst hit areas in Mogadishu were those where Benadirs resided. Old historical districts which had flourished over the centuries were indiscriminately destroyed; that is, Hamar Weyne, Shingani, Haman Jeb-Jeb, Abdulaziz and Dondere. As a result, the people found themselves destitute and homeless, their properties looted and destroyed or also illegally occupied by warring militias.

4.1 "The coastal people have been clearly singled out for especially harsh treatment by whatever Somali faction controls their region, and this is due to a longstanding ethnic antagonism between the Somalis and the coastal people. The armed Somali factions, made up mostly of young nomads, envy or resent the perceived wealth of this settled, commercial people.

For those who have succeeded in fleeing to Kenya and beyond, it is unfortunately unlikely that they will ever find a place with a Somali society. Armed Somalis have made it abundantly clear that historical evidence notwithstanding, they consider the coastal people to be foreigners." --Mr. Ken Menkhaus, International Committee of the Red Cross, May 1993.

4.2 The above quotation encapsulates the problems faced by the Benadir community. In a nutshell, their ancient culture and close commercial ties with Yemen, Egypt and the Far East resulted in the development of a district identity and culture which set them apart from the majority of Somalis.

UNHCR Recommendation and Assessment

1 The present population of Benadir refugees at Swaleh Nguru camp numbers approximately 9,000 persons. A recent survey indicated that over 800 families would qualify as Benadirs.

Since the establishment of the camp, they have maintained a separate identity, and rarely intermarried with other clans. The only incidents which have occurred have been those of incendiary attacks carried out by Somalis against them, resulting in considerable loss of personal property.

The group as a whole is well organized. The Elders' and Women's Committees have functioned well, coordinating activities and projects in the camp. There has, however, been some reluctance on their part to include refugee representatives from other groups into their committees despite the fact that they are residing in the same camp and share the same facilities.

Despite the above and through UNHCR intervention and mediation, some of these problems have been resolved amicably. Likewise the Benadir have not come into conflict with local authorities and have abided by the laws of the country: usually disputes within the community are dealt with through traditional mechanisms.

- 2 It should also be noted that the Benadir have never indicated any trend towards fundamentalism, and have on occasion themselves been victim to attacks in this regard.

Conclusion

- 1 Resettlement to a third country is seen as being the most appropriate durable solution to the problem of the Benadir refugee community. Voluntary repatriation is simply not a viable option as they cannot reclaim their properties or land that was looted in Mogadishu and other towns along the coast; and it is unlikely that they will be able to do so in the foreseeable future. Similarly, local integration within Kenyan society remains elusive given the present policy regarding (1) strictly enforced residence within the designated camps, and (2) relocation from the coast to the northeastern province where the Benadir would come into direct contact with the nomadic groups.

Given their propensity for trade, their independent outlook, and determination to rebuild their lives through education and the arts, the Benadir should make valuable contributions to the society in which they are eventually resettled.

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