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Time for Somaliland and the Dhulbahante to Talk

Somaliland's army and Dhulbahante militias are fighting for control of the town of Las Anod. The Dhulbahante want to join Somalia rather than be part of Somaliland's state-building project. The two sides should agree to a ceasefire and prepare for overdue talks on the Dhulbahante's administrative status.

The Somaliland army and militias associated with the Dhulbahante people have been fighting for control of Las Anod, capital of Somaliland's Sool region, since February. The conflict began after the Dhulbahante said they wish to join Somalia rather than be governed any longer by Somaliland, which declared its independence in 1991. As leaders on both sides double down on warlike rhetoric and recruit new fighters, the violence could spread throughout Sool, putting Somaliland's hard-earned stability at risk. The belligerents should commit to an immediate ceasefire to allow delivery of humanitarian aid. Once they reach a truce, they should prepare for talks about Sool's future administrative status. To ensure that both sides have credible representatives at the table, the Dhulbahante should appoint an inclusive leadership team for these negotiations, and Somaliland should hold its overdue presidential election to restore local legitimacy to its governing elite.

In 1991, Somaliland proclaimed independence from Somalia after years of rebellion led by the Isaaq clan, which continues to dominate the country's politics. It based its claim to statehood largely on the argument that its history as a British protectorate set it apart from the rest of Somalia, which was under Italian colonial rule until the two territories merged into one in 1960. The colonial-era borders, which placed Sool on Somaliland's side of the line, remain central to Somalilander identity. But the majority of Sool's population is Dhulbahante, a people who belong to a non-Isaaq clan family, the Darod. They strongly resisted British colonialism and generally fared better than the Isaaq under Somali dictator Siad Barre, who ruled from 1969 to 1991, leading most of them to favour the idea of being governed by Somalia. They largely reject inclusion in Somaliland's state-building project, which they view as serving the Isaaq clan's interests.

Uneasy with the Isaaq clan's ascendancy in Somaliland, the Dhulbahante have long **searched** for an alternative administrative arrangement, such as joining Somalia's federal member state of Puntland, where their family ties through the Darod/Harti clan are deeper, or creating their own separate member state within Somalia. Not all Dhulbahante have the same vision for the future, but **many** want to break with Somaliland.

Authorities in Somaliland's capital Hargeisa have long struggled to stamp their authority in Sool.

As a result, authorities in Somaliland's capital Hargeisa have long struggled to stamp their authority in Sool. Somaliland forces took control of Las Anod only in 2007, after troops from neighbouring Puntland – who had moved in four years earlier to claim the area – withdrew following a local dispute. Since then, Hargeisa has taken steps to placate the Dhulbahante, including offering posts in regional and national government to community elites and promising to devote 2 per cent of Somaliland's budget to developing Sool and the neighbouring Sanaag region. But it has also missed opportunities to improve relations, feeding Dhulbahante perceptions of exclusion. President Muse Bihi refused, for example, to honour a power-sharing **agreement** that his predecessor Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud "Silanyo" made with prominent Dhulbahante politician Ali Khalif Galaydh in 2017. Dhulbahante leaders also allege that the government's efforts to develop their region have been lacklustre, bearing little fruit.

Against this backdrop, a Somaliland opposition member from the Dhulbahante was assassinated on 26 December 2022 in Las Anod, setting in motion the events that led to the fighting. Unexplained killings of Las Anod's civic leaders are all too frequent: residents estimate that gunmen have shot some 120 prominent members of the community dead over the past thirteen years. Protesters gathered in town after the December assassination, complaining that the Somaliland authorities' efforts to stop the killings have been inadequate. Police moved in to disperse the demonstrators, using excessive force. The protests then rapidly grew into an uprising, prompting Hargeisa to pull its security forces from large sections of the town on 5 January.

This partial retreat was the catalyst for the Dhulbahante to cement resistance to Hargeisa's rule. They nominated a 33-strong committee to represent the community, while Dhulbahante garaads

(or elders), many of whom had left when Somaliland troops marched into Las Anod in 2007, poured back into town (to its credit, the Somaliland government did little to prevent their return). In early February, the Dhulbahante organised a conference to discuss their future, including representatives from the smaller Hawiye/Fiqishine clan. Then, on 5 February, they declared that the Dhulbahante and the areas where they live fall under Somalia's writ. They called on Somaliland to withdraw its troops from Dhulbahante territory.

As the conference drew to a close, Somaliland security forces and Dhulbahante militias came to blows, with each side subsequently blaming the other for starting the skirmishes. Since then, the tug of war over Las Anod has killed over one hundred and **displaced** at least 150,000. Fighting has raged on the outskirts of the city, which is now under Dhulbahante control, with observers also reporting indiscriminate **shelling** of houses and other buildings. Though confrontations appear to have slowed in recent weeks, the two sides are reportedly enlisting new fighters and procuring fresh supplies of weapons. More recently, the Dhulbahante committee banned commercial traffic from Somaliland, blocking the main road to Hargeisa and complicating the delivery of humanitarian aid to Sool

Hargeisa shows its disregard for the Dhulbahante's deep-seated grievances by blaming the conflict on a range of outside actors.

Hargeisa shows its disregard for the Dhulbahante's deep-seated grievances by blaming the conflict on a range of outside actors, such as Mogadishu and Ethiopia's Somali region, which lies south of Somaliland. It also accuses Puntland of sending soldiers to the area, a claim that both Puntland and the Dhulbahante deny – although Puntland soldiers on ostensible leaves of absence have reportedly established a non-uniformed presence in Las Anod. Hargeisa has also sought to frame the conflict as driven by the Islamist insurgency Al-Shabaab.

Thus far, the allegations of external support seem for the most part to be overblown. The Dhulbahante are indeed receiving money, equipment and fighters, but primarily from allied Darod/Harti clans in Somalia. More substantial backing may be in the offing, however: Puntland President Said Deni recently committed to rapidly "liberating" Las Anod, a rhetorical escalation that could be portentous.

Silencing the guns has proven difficult. Hargeisa declared a unilateral ceasefire in the conflict's early days, but neither side respected it. Elders from Somaliland and Ethiopian government representatives have tried to broker a truce, without success. At the time of writing, clan elders from Somalia were pushing for ceasefire negotiations, but although President Bihi allowed them to visit Hargeisa and meet elders from Somaliland after they travelled to Garowe and Las Anod, they will likely have difficulty forging a truce as elites in Hargeisa may push back against meaningful involvement from Somali actors. The Dhulbahante say they will stop fighting only if Somaliland removes its soldiers from all Dhulbahante-inhabited areas. But while Somaliland had offered to

reposition its forces 30km outside Las Anod, it says it will not withdraw from all the territory where the Dhulbahante live. More recently, Somaliland conditioned consideration of a truce on Puntland pulling all forces Hargeisa associates with it from Las Anod.

Complicating matters further is the fact that the Dhulbahante are increasingly referring to Somalia's government as their legitimate representative. Mogadishu has thus far eschewed direct involvement in the crisis, likely because it wants to avoid getting sucked into an intractable conflict at a time when it has scaled up its military **operations** against Al-Shabaab.

There are worrying signs that the fighting might escalate. Local sources tell Crisis Group that both sides are recruiting additional fighters. In recent weeks, both Somaliland security **officials** and **Dhulbahante** elders have said they are determined to go on the offensive. In addition to the alarming prospect of further urban warfare in Las Anod, clashes may spread to other Dhulbahante areas in Sool. If the conflict drags on, morphing from a Somaliland-Dhulbahante dispute into a confrontation between the Darod and Isaaq clan families (or even the wider Dir clan family of which the Isaaq form a part), unrest could ripple into other parts of Somaliland or into Ethiopia. Still another concern is Al-Shabaab. Evidence is scant that the insurgency has been involved in Las Anod to date, but prolonged disorder might offer the group an opportunity to insinuate its fighters into the conflict or otherwise exploit the crisis to extend its influence in the region.

Somaliland's pursuit of international recognition revolves around its efforts to build democratic institutions and secure long-term stability.

Somaliland has much to lose from a protracted conflict in Las Anod. Somaliland's pursuit of international recognition revolves around its efforts to build democratic institutions and secure long-term stability. It has put significant effort into cultivating supporters in the U.S. Congress and UK parliament. Yet the Las Anod conflict threatens to undermine these endeavours, particularly when coupled with electoral **delays** relating to the forthcoming presidential poll. Politicians have thus far failed to reach consensus on the timing and sequencing of either that election or another vote to licence the three parties that will be allowed to participate in the country's politics for the next ten years. President Bihi has overstayed his mandate – he is operating under an extension that the opposition does not recognise – and the political parties' term limits have expired as well. The one-two punch of fighting in Sool and electoral uncertainty appears to have had a chilling effect on Hargeisa's external engagement. It **appears** that foreign government contacts with Somaliland have already diminished, particularly with regard to opportunities for security cooperation with the U.S. and UK.

While there is no quick solution to the Las Anod dispute, an immediate ceasefire is of the highest priority. As a first step, Somaliland should consider gradually withdrawing its troops farther than the 30km from Las Anod that it previously floated on the condition that Dhulbahante militias do not attack them while they are moving away. The next step would be for the Dhulbahante to start

sending non-Dhulbahante fighters from the Darod/Harti clans in Las Anod home to Puntland or other points of origin, in order to answer Somaliland authorities' concerns about external forces. The two sides should then commit to maintaining the truce until an agreement has been reached. The Dhulbahante committee should meanwhile reopen the currently blocked road to Somaliland to commercial traffic in order to let in food and humanitarian aid from that direction. Given the lack of trust between the parties, progress may need to be monitored from the outside. An international organisation like the Intergovernmental Authority on Development or the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia could be a candidate for this role.

Once a ceasefire is in place, the two sides need to select delegations to sit at the negotiating table. The Dhulbahante leadership, including the 33-member committee and traditional elders, should designate an inclusive team that can authoritatively represent them in negotiations with Hargeisa; the leadership should make special efforts to consult women leaders (who are not traditionally part of local power centres) about the group's composition. While the Dhulbahante appear united in rejecting Somaliland's governance, they have to balance various power centres, ranging from Las Anod's 33-person committee and the garaads to militia leaders, the diaspora and youth protesters.

For their part, Somaliland's politicians need to agree on a roadmap for the presidential and political party elections to ensure that Hargeisa is represented by someone who has the full backing of Somaliland's elites. As noted earlier, the government and Somaliland's political parties have outstayed their original mandates, leaving President Bihi on shaky footing. Additionally, even if Bihi manages to reach a settlement with the Dhulbahante, it may be difficult to guarantee implementation after elections, should the government change. The presidential election may require months to wrap up, but that time can be well spent arriving at a truce and allowing the temperature around Las Anod to subside pending the accession of a new team in Hargeisa to start long overdue discussions about Sool's administrative status. Once talks between the Dhulbahante and Somaliland get under way, the parties can work out the required coordination with Mogadishu regarding the Dhulbahante's future.

The Las Anod conflict has brought the fraught relationship between the Dhulbahante and Somaliland into the open, and a return to the status quo ante is unlikely. Given that the two sides have incompatible visions for the future, negotiations are likely to be long and complicated. Unified pressure from international partners like the U.S., the UK, the European Union, the United Arab Emirates, Djibouti and Ethiopia will be crucial for keeping both sides committed to finding a peaceful solution to this complex problem. As leverage, partners can emphasise the range of economic investments they are prepared to make in Somaliland, and particularly in Sool, that will be lost absent progress. The urgent first steps, however, remain ending the cycle of destruction around Las Anod with a durable ceasefire and getting Hargeisa's delayed elections on the calendar.

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