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Root Causes of Piracy in Somalia

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The root causes of piracy in Somalia could be attributed to the lack of a central government, unemployment, organised crime and terrorism. Assisting Somalia to rebuild its central government and re-establish the rule of law could help prevent and combat piracy.

Collapse of the Central Government

SINCE THE fall of the government of General Muhammad Siad Barre in 1991, Somalia has been without a central authority. In the north, regional power centres took the opportunity of the chaos to break away. Somaliland in the northwest, and Puntland in the northeast, established their own administrations. In the central and south, warlords took over and imposed their authority. State Institutions aimed at insuring the implementation of law and order disappeared.

To protect their interests and provide security to their constituencies, various groups created private militias. The collapse of the state in Somalia has led the country to gradually become not only a safe haven for groups or individuals linked to terrorists organisations, but also a place for private individuals and organisations to transact illegal activities.

Government in Transition

The lack of law and order in Somalia is a consequence of the limited authority of the new Transitional Government over the country. Apart from the main strategic areas in the capital city of Mogadishu, the rest of central and south Somalia is either under the control of anti-government elements, or is highly contested. Territory constantly changes hands between the government forces and anti-government elements.

Despite this, Somalia is still doing better economically than many countries in the continent, with the cheapest local and international telephone calls, exports of livestock and more than US\$ 2 billion worth of money transfers per year. With more than 4 million people in asylum, the Somali diaspora constitutes the main source of funding for the Somalis living in the country. However, the distribution of wealth is uneven and has led to increased poverty and unemployment among the local population.

This has led the youth to either join militias or conduct banditry and criminal acts such as roadblocks, hijacking of foreigners, smuggling of migrants and piracy.

The criminal nature of piracy in Somalia today is also evidenced by the flow of arms into the country, the presence of highly paid mercenaries from within and outside the continent and the money laundering activities in the region carried out by networks involving Somalis. The criminal activities and the insecurity in Somalia could be heavily funded and a more structured organisation could be involved. This could be deduced from the modernisation of the weaponry of the pirates; the recent bombing of the Office of the President and the UN compound in Hargeisa (Somaliland region); the increased number of ships hijacked in the region of Puntland; and the fighting in Mogadishu. In this context, pirates seem to have become workers of criminal organisations.

Challenges in Addressing the Problem of Piracy

The international community faces two main challenges in addressing the problem of piracy off the coast of Somalia.

The first is the restoration and strengthening of an effective central authority. The UN group tasked to monitor the implementation of the arms embargo on Somalia reported that many countries are violating the international embargo and that the flow of arms remains unimpeded. Arms shipments by interested allies and organisations, accompanied by the influx of mercenaries into the country, have increased the level of insecurity in Somalia. Some of the arms easily find their way into the hands of aspiring pirates including the youth who could be exploited by armed groups.

The authorities in Somalia could be provided with political, technical and financial support to help them address the problem of piracy. A strong central or decentralised authority could establish mechanisms to prevent acts of banditry inland. It could also implement counter-measures off the coast against potential pirates. The exchange of intelligence between the central government and specialised entities combating international crime could also be an asset in the combat against piracy and other terrorist attempts.

Strengthening the institutions of the current Transitional Government could also pave the way for effective government control over the security situation in Somalia. In its action plan, the new leadership proposed the building of security institutions and job creation for the youth. Should such a job creation programme win the support of the international community, one of the main causes of piracy could be addressed. Such measures would help take the youth and other citizens off the street, where they easily fall prey to recruitment by armed groups and those who perpetrate piracy.

The second challenge is the stabilisation of the security situation. The recent attempt by a coalition of forces to overthrow the Transitional Federal Government reflects the fragility of the current government. It also suggests the need for urgent action to strengthen the current institutions. The recent terrorist alert in Somaliland with the discovery of explosives indicates that Somalia is far from being a stable country. The involvement of Elders in the solution to piracy in Puntland suggests that the local authorities have limited control over the security of that region. The volatile security situation in Somalia is therefore conducive to the surge of the piracy menace both on land and offshore.

Way forward

The issue of piracy can only be addressed from a multi-dimensional perspective. The root causes of piracy and its accelerating factors lie as much on land as they do off shore. Solutions to the piracy problem can only be found if a comprehensive strategy is adopted.

The approach would have to involve concerted efforts to help stabilise the security situation and enable the authorities to establish and strengthen the security sector. Institution-building as well as training and exchange of information could be the positive results of this exercise.

In the short term, cooperation between shipping and insurance companies, on one hand, and the Somali authorities, on the other hand, could boost efforts to prevent piracy. There could be collaboration in the form of assistance through private and well-structured security companies. Lastly, the socio-economic dimension to piracy must be addressed. Jobs must be created for the youth.

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