

AL-QAEDA AND THE FAMINE IN AFRICA

Only a few people know in the Western countries that on the evening of July 11th 2010, while Spain and Netherlands were playing the Football World Cup final, two blasts by al-Qaeda in a restaurant and in a club in Kampala (Uganda's capital) killed 74 people who were enjoying the match. The attack killed mostly Ugandan, Eritrean, Ethiopian and Kenyan people, but also killed an Irish, an Indian and an American men (six American missionaries were also damaged) but, back in those days full of euphoria by the sport heroism, no media dared to distort the image of security and harmony that Africa was trying to give to the world.

One year after that attack, in the night of July 8th 2010, the scarce security forces of the TFG (Transitional Federal Government) of Somalia shot by chance a man pulling a pistol at one of the security check points in Mogadishu. Some days later after the killing, the FBI took samples of the corpse and later confirmed that it was Fazul Abdullah Muhammad's, al-Qaeda's number 1 man in the African continent, Yemen and Saudi Arabia, the one behind past year's above mentioned blasts, the one behind the 1998 attacks against the American Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and the one behind the bloody attacks in 2002 in Mombasa. The African leader of al-Qaeda took the left

instead the right way in his late night arrival at Mogadishu, and he ended up meeting the federal soldiers instead his fellow fighters of al-Shabaab (*The Youth*). When those federal soldiers killed him they were unaware of whom he was.

Although all Western citizens heard and read the chronicle of Osama Bin Laden's execution (fair or not; legitimate or illegal), they were not informed that just a month after the death of the most wanted terrorist in the world, the most wanted terrorist in Africa and one of the strong men of al-Qaeda, was also killed by Somali forces supported by the US and the UK. No matter how minimally the news was given, it is a really important one that *The Economist* blog Baobab has described as "the beginning of the end of the epoch of the war on terror. The end will not be tidy (...) In their weakness the jihadists in Somalia are even more likely to strike Kenya, Ethiopia or perhaps South Africa and Europe" (14-07-2011).

The media are lately displaying another type of news about Somalia. Apart from the fact that it is a big exporter of sea pirates that often hijack cargo ships, what now focuses the attention is Somali population's terrible famine. We are being told that the cause of the worst famine in the last 60 years is a drought. Viewers in the rich countries have spent a week watching conscience-knocking images of

spectral, still alive children, being devoured by flies -TV images that the viewers became familiar with in the 80s-, and have learnt that 10 million people are about to die soon in the horn of Africa.

Thus, much attention is being paid to the famine in the area, especially Somalia, but nothing has been said about food hoarding, which has risen the prices up to 240% in less than a year, even in places where there has been plenty of rain and bumper harvests (in some Kenyan regions, for example). Since no food hoarding -which makes it impossible for most of the people to buy their basic food- is being blamed, the cause of the food hoarding is completely silenced. Media talk about famine in Somalia, but media fails in explaining what *is Somalia*: a so called umbrella "country" under which five separated, independent, rival areas have been fighting in the last 20 years.

Mohammed Hamed Tarsan, mayor of Mogadishu, summarizes the reasons why the international community does not pay any real interest to Somalia and has therefore forgotten it: "They think we are cannibals and that we should be left alone to devouring each other". If anyone tries to walk through the ruins of the city that once was the "white pearl of the Indian Ocean", escaping the unending rain of bullets shot by the snipers of al-Shabaab, will probably come out with the same conclusion that pains Mr. Tarsan.

To say Somalia is, therefore, to say long civil war. There is an extremely weak government, the TFG, striving to rule over the ungovernable central areas of the country (in Mogadishu the TFG only controls the surroundings of the presidential palace; it also controls intermittently a port and the airport), areas that are separated by some regions under the Islamic Courts Union; there is an autonomous region, Puntland, in the north; and along the Gulf of Aden Somaliland, a self-proclaimed independent country, self-administered without any international aid, with an outstanding political and fiscal success by politicians who remain unrecognized by the international community.

All this taken into account, it is not difficult to understand that the heartbreaking humanitarian emergency of the Somali population is not the simple consequence of an unfortunate meteorological phenomenon -after all, a drought is quite common in that part of the Earth-, but that it has more to do with a catastrophical human intervention.

Since the media tend to land the trending topics with some sort of "happy ending", after the general commotion caused by the mortal famine of the Somalis, the Western viewers have started receiving somehow hopeful news: UK's Disasters Emergency Committee, DEC, is in charge of the situation and a few days ago launched a successful appeal after severe drought in the Horn of Africa. The initiative has moved

many countries to give some help to Somalia. The problem, then, seems to be *in good hands*.

Were the political circumstances completely different, the coordinated aid to confront the famine would be a great initiative, but in the current situation it is very unlikely that the aid reach the population: When al-Shabaab gained foot in the center and south of Somalia, it banned any Western organization to operate in the country, accusing the UN, Oxfam, NGOs, Somali men who stood for human rights, women who shook hands with men, people who listened music or danced... accusing mostly everyone of espionage and treason. No matter how much money and food is delivered to Somalia, there will be no chance to assist the population in areas under the control of the terrorists.

Just after having been declared the humanitarian emergency by the UN, al-Shabaab announced the lift of the ban to foreign agencies in order to alleviate the sufferings of the population. This very same group, that since 2009 has destroyed and paralyzed the construction of the agricultural infrastructures of the country, made an announcement that was surprisingly taken seriously by the international community. Nevertheless, the ban was soon re-imposed.

Given the circumstances, it is clear that the prevention of future food shortages in Africa relies not only in the

Western charity, but mainly in the contribution to the security in the areas where al-Qaeda is easily gaining control. In the words of the president of the TFG, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, it is essential to "establish law and order".

The experience of the almost independent Somaliland in the north of the country (still a legal part of the Somalia designed in 1960 by Italian and British colonial authorities), clearly shows that an African community equipped with a strong government and a safe population compromised with their prosperity, and of course equipped with agricultural infrastructures, cannot be dramatically affected by any droughts.

The preventive solutions have been woven for a while, although it is not easy to find their traces in the media. More than a year ago, before Somali famine was even a topic, Mr. Sharif visited British Prime Minister in London and convinced him that a good way of stopping al-Qaeda's expansion in the horn of Africa was supporting the TFG. The Somali president also got two substantial compromises in favor of his difficult ruling task.

First of all, the UK publically announced its total support to the TFG because of the concern that, "without more international support the war-torn country could become a safe haven for al-Qaeda"(Channel 4 News, 9-03-2010). The UK

also destined two aid packages for the Somali government, one consisting of £5.5m to improve Somalia's security, and another of £7.5m for humanitarian support. And the Home Secretary banned al-Shabaab in the UK, making membership a criminal offence, a crucial step that proved UK's realization that this branch of al-Qaeda was finding supporters among the big Somali diaspora that lives in British soil.

On the other side, the US provides guns to the presidential forces of Mr. Sharif, while American planes and agents oversee the country. It was the FBI who analyzed Abdullah Muhammad Fazul's DNA samples that were contrasted with samples taken from the terrorist's children in 2007.

This cooperation between the UK and the US with the TFG is obviously showing good improvements in the fight for the control of the communities under al-Qaeda. The killing of Fazul is the most important of those improvements, at least the most symbolic. The African Union, whose fighters come mainly from Uganda and Burundi and is supported by the two Western countries, is becoming successful in pushing al-Shabaab back to the fringes of Mogadishu, a deed for which British Minister for Africa, Henry Bellingham, has "compensated" the coalition with recent commercial agreements in the head quarters of the Union in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The answer of al-Qaeda to these substantial achievements in the pacification of Somalia has been the killing of TFG's interior minister, Abdishakur Sheikh Hassan, who has just died in a suicide attack by her own niece. This macabre crime gives an idea of the deep penetration of the Jihad principles in Somalia.

In the end, all of these data, scattered without any apparent link among themselves in a few press releases, highlight the fact that Somalia is one of the places where a few actors are deciding some of the key points of next years' international politics. Famine and piracy are only the symptoms of a crucial and bloody fight for Africa's future stability and security.

And it has been only in the last year that some Western countries (the US and the UK) have strongly realized it.

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