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Somalia – Chaos or Anarchy?

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The United States Marines have landed on the shores of Somalia. This is the third invasion carried out by the Bush administration. In each case the people of the U.S. have been subjected to sophisticated propaganda campaigns via the media to elicit popular support for these imperialist adventures. The invasion of Panama was justified as part of the “war on drugs”; the war on Iraq was supposed to punish aggression by “a fiend worse than Hitler”; now, in Somalia, the enemy is chaos and anarchy and the goal is a humanitarian one – to feed the starving masses.

But, hold on. There’s something wrong with this picture: since when is the U.S. military a humanitarian agency? Those guns aren’t there for show, they’re for killing. Of course, only those who resist U.S. beneficence will be blown away.

The propaganda campaign that has accompanied the Somali operation has been slick. Pictures of starving children counterposed with those of drug-crazed gun slingers could do nothing but elicit sympathy for the victims and hatred for the victimizers. How could any decent human being oppose the use of force in such circumstances?

Sure, the U.S. shares responsibility for the disaster. For a decade U.S. arms and food flooded Somalia in order to shore up the Barre dictatorship and subsidize his war with Soviet-backed Ethiopia over the Ogaden region. This “aid” destroyed agriculture in Somalia leading to the current famine. The fall of the Barre dictatorship in 1991, and the clan-based civil war that followed in its wake, has led to the current relief crisis. Surely the U.S., as the world’s cop, has a responsibility to step in and put an end to this “anarchy.”

How could any decent person oppose the U.S.’s “humanitarian” intervention (and be assured that this is a U.S. operation, albeit behind a United Nations veil)?

Now, nobody likes to see people starve to death and some way has to be found to get food to the people, and no one could possibly sympathize the gun thugs who are stealing food and selling it on the black market (that’s capitalism at its rawest).

But there are reasons for opposing the invasion. The most compelling reason being the precedent it sets for future interventions in the third world, both foreign and domestic. Liberia, Bosnia, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Georgia, and other areas that are torn by civil strife have already been mentioned as areas that require the use of military force to shore up the nation-state against the disintegrating effects of ethnic strife. Strife that very often disguises class conflicts.

Our own domestic third world, the inner cities of our metropolitan areas, could also become candidates for even greater military occupation in the name of the “war on drugs.” No less a propagandist for the ruling class than Ted Koppel, in his first report live from Mogadishu, let the cat out of the bag when he made a comparison between the drug-crazed teens with guns terrorizing the streets of the Somali capital and the gang-bangers of the U.S. inner cities. The inference should not be lost here: just as military force was necessary to clean up the gangs in Somalia, it may also be the only viable solution to the gang problem in the U.S.

The para-military operation of Darrel Gates' "operation clean sweep" in Los Angeles or the calls for the use of the National Guard to clear the gangs out of CHA housing projects in Chicago will now be made more palatable by referring to "operation restore hope." Another example of how a militaristic foreign policy inevitably rebounds on the domestic front.

Much has been made of the "anarchy" that currently reigns in Somalia. But what exists in Somalia is not anarchy but chaos, engendered by the collapse of a central authority and the competition between rival gangs to fill in the power vacuum. What is needed in Somalia is not a central state authority but grass-roots organizations that can reorganize the economic life of society.

Where are these organizations going to come from? Certainly not from the U.S. military or the UN. These bodies are interested in only one thing: restoring the national state known as Somalia, an artificial legacy of European colonialism. For the U.S. it's a question of restoring a stable client in the strategic Horn of Africa as an asset in its ongoing quest to control the world's oil supply; for the UN it's a matter of upholding the very idea of the nation-state, its very reason for being (for without nation-states, why would you need a "United Nations"?).

But, are a people on the verge of starvation capable of creating the necessary organs for survival? This is the crucial question for anarchists and, frankly, this writer doesn't know. All we do know is that the statists do not want such self-organization to come about and will do everything in their power to prevent it. We also know that the absolute dependence into which the Somali people have fallen makes for passivity rather than activism.

The lesson in all this, for anarchists, is the absolute necessity to prepare grass-roots organizations: unions, cooperatives, agricultural collectives, self defense groups, etc., in advance of any revolutionary crisis brought on by war or any other disaster so that the people will have the infrastructure of a new society in place before the collapse of the state comes about.

It may be too late for the Somali people, their neo-colonialist subjugation appears inevitable. Perhaps the survivors will, at some future date, take up the struggle for freedom again. But for anarchists, particularly those of us in the U.S., the task is to point out the truth — that the U.S. is not a humanitarian agency, and its military adventure in Somalia is not for the benefit of the Somali people but to serve the long-term interests of the U.S. ruling class. U.S. get out of Somalia and North America!