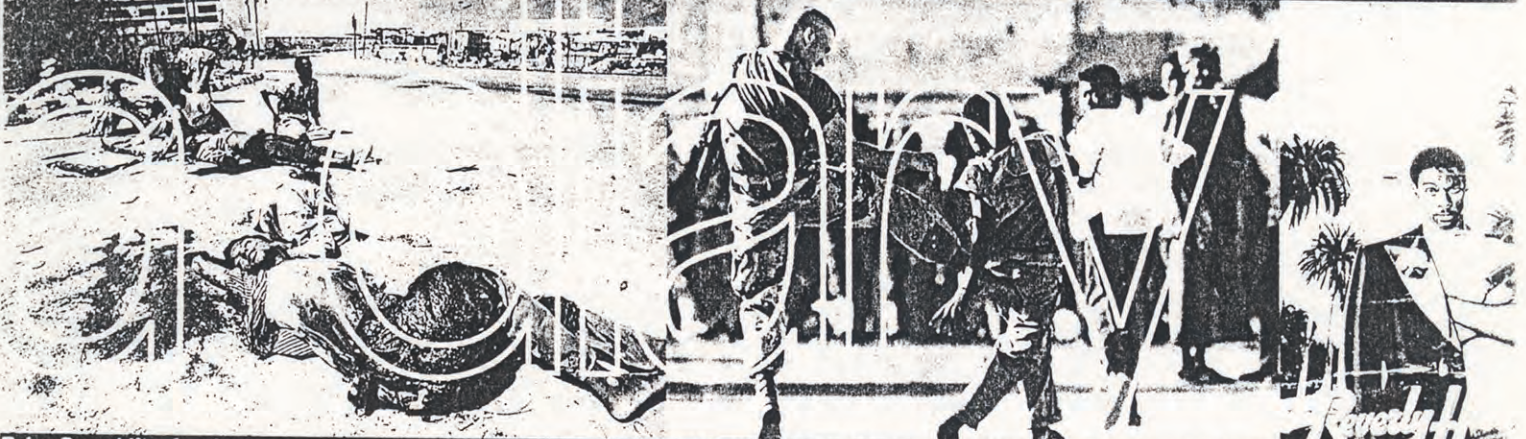




December 1992: Somalis welcome their American 'saviours'. Six months later: the relationship begins to sour. One year on: mutual hatred. Above right Yankees interrogate



Below Snowdrifts of useless money in the wake of a toppled dictator; heavily outnumbered US soldiers cower under the media onslaught. Above The AK-47, weapon of





'skinny'. Below left UN forces win friends and influence people on Mogadishu streets



choice for fashionable young Somalis. Above and below Scenes from the time of famine



LUL LOWE/NETWORK • POPPERFOTO • DAN ELDON

Reuters correspondent Aidan Hartley was there when UN troops went into Somalia and he was there to see them leave. He watched as their initial goodwill turned into impotent rage, and saw their efforts to impose democracy end in fiasco. It cost the UN billions of dollars. The cost for Hartley was the loss of one of his closest friends

**M**ogadishu has been "liberated", and I'm standing ankle-deep in money. Millions of soiled banknotes are spilling out of Somalia's blasted central bank and into the streets, where they gather in drifts like brown autumn leaves. A gentle breeze wafts blue, green and pink sheets of paper out of abandoned and ransacked ministries. A teenager with an AK-47 on his shoulder emerges from a building, flinging photographs of the ousted president into the air.

It is January 27, 1991, and across Africa dictators are being toppled. We can't quite fathom why this is happening, but it's the biggest thing since the old empires collapsed. Our stories are full of "the second liberation". What started with the fall of the Berlin Wall has now spread to the streets of this remote African capital. Young men are going to work on the bronze statues of mounted heroes, saving them off their marble plinths at hoof level.

My father worked here once. I remember poking my head through the iron railings on the balcony of our room at the Croce de Sud Hotel, watching a parade of men in Russian uniforms goose-stepping down the avenue. Mohamed Siad Barre had just come to power, and Somalia was supposedly on the brink of becoming a model Marxist-Leninist state. I would soon be playing ping-pong against pasty-faced Soviet commissars in frontier hotels while my father wandered the wilderness with the nomads. President Barre, like most scientific socialists, would soon become an absolute dictator, decreeing literacy campaigns, five-year plans and the jailing of dissidents and poets. And now President Barre has finally gone, fleeing southwards in an armoured convoy loaded with his many wives. Another small war in Africa is over.

On my first night in free Mogadishu we sit in a circle drinking grapefruit juice next to an empty swimming pool into which all the sunbeds and parasols have been thrown. An Ugas, or Somali clan elder, is telling us that the victorious militias of the allied anti-Barre clans will soon hold elections. "Of course you will," murmurs one of the correspondents. We write it down anyway because it spells hope. We have seen the corpses in the streets, the wounded in the hospitals, the starvation.

On the way back to the airport next morning I notice little holes in the road where looters have been digging up the metal telephone and electrical cables. The militia men on the runway wave as we take off, but on the way back down the desert coast I see white flashes on the ground and it looks like somebody is shooting at us.

A year later. We're speeding across a plain of acacia scrub with not a soul in sight on the road. Chattering in my ear is Gille, my translator, a former policeman who knows how to shoot straight with an AK-47. My four bodyguards lounge in the back, cheeks bulging with khat and weapons poking out of the windows.

Four hours out of Mogadishu, I get a blurred glimpse of crouched figures in the shade of some acacia trees – brown rags, slack breasts and callused feet. People have gathered here in the hope that food will come down the road, but few convoys are willing to risk crossing the bandit-infested plains. Thousands of emaciated figures rise out of the earth and come tottering towards us, raising dust that reeks of dried shit and woodsmoke. All we can do is slow down to make sure we don't run anyone over.

When I see a prone figure on the roadside ahead, I say OK, that's enough, we're stopping. The guards rouse themselves from their khat stupor as I kneel beside a sun-blackened man whose head seems impossibly huge in relation to his body. His breath is coming in short, crackly sighs. His eyes are rolling back into his head. Gille and the guards are shouting at each other in a language I can't understand, but I gather the gunmen want nothing to do with it. So Gille and I lift the starveling out of the dirt and drag him to the car. As he's folded onto the back-seat floor, the guards raise their feet to avoid touching him, and glare at me disgustedly.

My gunmen are from one of Somalia's most powerful clans, the Habre Gedir. They carry their family trees in their heads like a kind of poem to be recited, tracing the bloodline back through generation after hard-bitten generation, wandering the wilderness with camels and goats, skirmishing over scarce pasture and water holes. The dying man on the floor of the car is Rahanwein, from the fertile region between the rivers Jubba and Shebelle. In the estimation of the Habre Gedir, a Rahanwein is a rather lowly creature.

The Rahanwein lost their ferocity somewhere along the line when they settled on the black soil to farm sorghum and fat red-speckled cattle.

When civil war erupted, their land became a battlefield. Their granaries were plundered by Siad Barre's militias, drawn from the great Darod family of nomadic clans. Then the Habre Gedir swept in and looted what was left, and the Rahanwein started dying.

The first Somali civil war was fairly easy to understand: persecuted clans who had been excluded from power took up arms against the kleptomaniac elite around President Siad Barre. After the dictator's defeat, Ali Mahdi Mohamed of the Abgal clan declared himself president in Mogadishu. This was unacceptable to the Habre Gedir, who pledged fealty to Mohamed Farah Aideed. Aideed sulked for a while, and then launched an all-out war for control of the capital's harbour and international airport. Whoever controlled these had the power to plunder incoming aid, or stop it going through at all. Meanwhile, the Darod were fighting the Hawiye, the Isaaq had launched a campaign of secession, and a man had breathed his last in the back of my car. We place his body in a mortuary truck, and pushed on to cover "the story".

Mahmoud Afrah was our agency's stringer in Mogadishu, an occasional correspondent paid for what he telexed to Nairobi. He was an African journalist of the old school, a silver-haired man who spoke newsroom slang, wrote lyrical English and hated what was happening to his country. Like many urban Somalis, he had long since forsaken clannism, but when the fighting began it was prudent to take precautions anyway. He kept a vintage Tommy gun in his living room, an old Italian carbine beside his bed. His son had an American M-16.

Mahmoud was born in the Abgal clan. Some time after Barre's fall, the Habre Gedir militia parked a tank outside his home and

blew it to pieces. The old man buried his son at the front door and fled to the beach with a bag of Somali shillings. He sent no more stories and we feared he was dead.

A few months later, our Nairobi bureau was holding a buffet lunch in honour of a visiting manager. Waiters in starched white uniforms were serving canapes and chilled white wine. The conversation was genteel. Then the door opened, and there stood Mahmoud, staring at the food and drink like a man surfacing from a nightmare. He took some canapes from a passing tray and started telling us about the world he had come from. He'd been living in the sand dunes in a hut made from sheets of plastic, scavenging for food. Each morning, the Muezzin would call the faithful to prayer even as the mortars and Stalin Organs started booming; by sunset, the streets would be strewn with bodies. As the tale unfolded, he turned into a ventriloquist from hell, imitating the "suf, suf, suf" of an incoming mortar, the "dagga-dagga-dagga" of machine guns, the pop of small arms fire. Flecks of foam appeared in the corners of his mouth. The suits clutched their wine glasses and stared at the carpet.

Clan war was an alien sickness to Mahmoud. He felt as if his life had turned into something out of *Anne Frank*. One day he told one of the gunmen, "There are too many Hitlers in Somalia today." The boy replied, "Who's Hitler?"

August 1992. Somalia has no seat in the UN, no secondary schools, no banks, no services, no telephones or international dialling code. The office blocks of downtown Mogadishu look like the ruins of an ancient civilization. Residential houses are patterned with floral mortar bursts and scrawled with militia graffiti.

There are no street signs anymore. You just drive through the district and when the guards click off their safety catches you know you're passing into another clan's turf. One minute there are crowds at roadside teashops and traffic

jams. Then there's nobody except for groups of languid boys swinging their guns around. Sometimes they fire a couple of rounds over the roof of your car, and the fear makes you see with a beautiful clarity. You want to race on, but your guards leap out, yelling and jabbing their AKs, so you have to talk your way out of a gunfight.

To calm a Somali, you gently stroke his chin and talk him down. Then you get back into the car, make a couple of jokes at your own expense and drive off fast. You try to disappear into the back of the seat. You try to seem cool, because, hey, your driver is laughing his head off.

By the time the car drops me off at the gates of the aid agency where I stay, I stink of neat adrenaline. After the story's filed, Dan Eldon and I set up a pile of khat on the balcony and talk each other down. Dan's a white African, raised in Nairobi, devilishly good-looking and aged 21. He wanted to be a photographer, so I said, come up to Mogadishu. On his first day in town he nearly got us killed by taking pictures of a guy with a rocket-propelled grenade on the Green Line. Now he's into it, collecting Somali daggers, wearing sarongs and spitting out Somali obscenities like a local.

Redemption was hard to find in Somalia at that time, but Dan looked for it, while all too often I dwelt on the misery. The Somalis in their ruined city guffawed with laughter when Dan showed up in a T-shirt of his own design, featuring an AK-47 with a red line through it and the caption: "Thank you for not looting." He flirted with veiled Somali women and got the guards to teach him phrases like, "Your father fucks with camels", which he then used against astonished militia fighters. Most foreigners were terrified of Somalis, but Dan and I had grown up in Africa, and our eyes were capable of discerning a certain glory in their madness.

## We set up a pile of khat on the balcony and talk each other down

At the same time, we were mainlining testosterone every time we ventured onto the streets, pushing deeper into unknown territory in ourselves. Those khat sessions inevitably turned into free-form confessionals in which we tried to assess what it was doing to us, this prolonged exposure to anarchy and terror. Like prophets who had wandered in the wilderness, we wanted to return to the world saying we had seen the truth, even though we had to kill off something in ourselves to bring you this. It was a dangerous game, and we knew that sooner or later, someone was going to die.

Willy Huber is an ex-Italian policeman who has looked tired ever since I met him. An ethnic German with dark hair and a gold chain around his neck, he chain smokes, drinks espresso and pours scorn on aid workers, even though he's one himself. An aid worker with a difference, though – the only white man who stayed in Mogadishu throughout the fighting which overthrew Siad Barre. Now the situation has become intolerable. Rival clan militias are fighting mortar duels in the heart of the city. At night, the sky is illuminated by the flames of burning dockside warehouses and fuel depots. The supply of food and medicine entering Somalia has slowed to a trickle.

One day, on a flight out of Somalia, Willy says he has a plan. He wants a foreign power to create a safe haven within the city, guarded by neutral troops. Civilians could bring their sick and wounded here. Food could enter the country unhindered, and clan elders would be able to negotiate on neutral territory. We're journalists, but what's happening in Somalia is unbearable, so we cross the line and help Willy draft a proposal for military intervention. He sends it off to the king of Saudi Arabia. Nothing happens.

"Be realistic," says John Fox from the US embassy in Nairobi, nibbling through a lunch of tuna and octopus sashimi. "Nobody's going to risk a single damn thing for Somalia."

He has a small surprise in store.

December 1992. I'm sitting on the sea wall near Mogadishu harbour, reciting lines from *Apocalypse Now* for my Somali guards, when flares start blossoming in the darkness above us and bullets begin to whistle over our heads. Helicopters are swooping about; the lights of warships loom on the horizon. As dawn breaks, soldiers of Fox company come wading out of the sea, soaked with spray from their ten-mile journey in Zodiac dinghies. They take one look at our rabble of dodgy-looking reporters and armed Somalis and decide to arrest us. I find myself lying on my back, staring up the barrel of an M-16 and yelling questions at the camouflage-painted face behind it.

What's your name? Where you from? How does it feel to be here? "Lance Corporal Eric Chavez. Aztec, New Mexico. We're just here to get the people fed, and it feels great! Now place your hands on the ground in front of you, Sir!"

Equally farcical scenes are playing out elsewhere along the beach. The first SEAL scouts to crawl ashore were set upon by battalions of cameramen and hounded across the dunes. The first American casualty was a soldier wearing night vision goggles; someone shone a halogen lamp into his eyes, and he was temporarily blinded.

We are the Marines' first prisoners. They search our cars and take our guards' guns away. When they let us go, we just tag along behind them. They shout a lot and crawl around in the dirt on elbows and knees. The path of their invasion is occasionally obstructed by banks of live satellite link-up equipment and technicians in Hot Tuna T-shirts.

By sunset, the New World Order seems to be working. Marines are handing out candy to Somali children. A large sign made of flashing light bulbs near the K4 roundabout says, "Well Come USA". Aideed's supporters have festooned their sector of the city with portraits of their leader shaking hands with President Bush.

This was day one of "Operation Restore Hope". It all seemed so



Dan Eldon and friends parody Somalia's warlords



Most foreigners were terrified, but Dan saw glory in the madness



Off-duty hacks and the tools of their trade, Mogadishu 1992

perfect; the Americans rumbled into town, and within hours the situation seemed to stabilize. The warlords suddenly looked like naughty schoolboys. Their rag-tag armies vanished. UN planes started landing grain at the airport, from where it was transported unhindered into the famine-stricken interior. In Baidoa, it was as though a siege had been lifted. For a time, I don't know how long, I believed Somalia had been saved.

"We had one up here last night and she fucked two of us on the floor right here. Come up tonight and we'll drink some of this." Blond crewcut, white zinc on his nose, stripped down to a pair of shorts and cradling the bottle of whisky I've just given him in trade for a pair of military desert boots, the marine is pumping his hips to the beat of the song on his boombox at the airport beach. He is on lifeguard duty. Bikini-clad girl soldiers with M-16s saunter along the white coral sand. Sunburned grunts play ball or fool around with tyre tubes on the turquoise waters. From the lifeguard's shack on top of the dunes it looks like something out of a weird California beach party movie. The war and the famine are a million miles away.

1993. An army of technicians is building a vast complex that will soon earn the nickname "MogaDisney". This is the headquarters of UNOSOM, the UN Mission to Somalia. The roads are already tarred. They're installing a water-borne sewerage system to process the waste of the 15,000 soldiers and civilians living inside the perimeter. There's a swimming pool, tennis court, pizza parlour, duty-free shops, a radio station, hospital, ranks of air-conditioned barracks with flower beds in front.

Around 12,500 of the inhabitants are Blue Helmets – troops from the US, Italy, Germany, Nigeria; any one of 28 nations. The rest are elite UN civilian employees on fat salaries inflated by danger pay. The men dress in elegant white safari suits, the women in high heels and city dresses. Clutching walkie-talkies and files, they drive from one office to another in air-conditioned Land Cruisers, writing reports and memos that will be sent to New York via satellite. Messages return through the ether, and the uncomprehending Somali public is presented with outlandish edicts. Local councils shall be gender-balanced, with seats reserved for members of the despised Bantu minority. The clan militias shall be reconciled. Seminars shall be held on the conduct of elections. Somalia will become a western-style democracy by March 1995. The mighty New World Order has so decreed.

Throngs of ordinary Somalis sit in the dust beyond the barbed-wire perimeter, sifting through the foreigners' trash and watching their curious doings. Violence has abated somewhat since the Marines came in, but the threat is still there, still simmering. The Somalis are watching, waiting. From time to time, hotheads take a pot shot at a passing UN patrol, just to prove they remain undefeated. On one occasion, they slay 24 Pakistani soldiers in an ambush.

The upshot of these nasty little incidents is that most UN bureaucrats are too scared to travel the streets they came to save. When its time to leave, helicopters descend in clouds of dust and ferry them to the airport, two miles away. Each trip costs \$3,000, but no one seems to be counting. The UN is spending a staggering \$40 million per day.

July 12, 1993. My friend Dan's career has taken off. He's had pictures in the news magazines and all the great western newspapers, but he's not entirely happy. Mogadishu is wearing him down. He's sitting in the Hotel al-Sahafi, "hotel of journalists", feeling lonely, thinking about a certain girl. His partner this trip is Hos Maina, a quiet Kenyan who seems to be blessed with an extra sense. One night in the Sudan, Hos saved my life by refusing to let us enter a beleaguered town even though aid workers said it was safe. The town was taken at dawn, and everyone in it was massacred.

Around 11am, emissaries of Aideed arrive at the al-Sahafi, saying, come with us, bear witness to this atrocity. Maybe Hos's psychic antennae aren't working today. Maybe he and Dan feel they've no choice other than to go, because God knows, this is a big story. So they round up some other hacks, form a small convoy and follow their guides to the home of Qabdid, one of Aideed's closest advisers, and a man the Americans blame for organizing many of the cheeky attacks against them.

Earlier that day, elders of Aideed's clan had gathered in Qabdid's compound to discuss a UN peace proposal. Sometime after dawn, a flight of Cobra gunships appeared in the sky above them and

opened fire. The shooting continued for up to an hour, and when it was over, the Americans deployed soldiers with video cameras to film the dead. Hospitals put the toll at more than 50.

By the time the foreign correspondents arrive at the killing ground, it's seething with grief-crazed Somalis. Two African reporters melt into the crowd and make a harrowing escape back to the hotel. The others are not so lucky. A circling US helicopter pilot sees the whole thing, four reporters beaten to death, their broken bodies stripped naked. Dan's corpse is left lying just outside the compound. The bodies of Hos and two others are found in an alley close to Bakaaraha Market where Somalis are said to have set them as bait in the hope of luring UN troops into an ambush.

I was in Croatia at the time, and came home to a week of funerals and sad stock-taking. I saw my friends' deaths as a sign of impending breakdown in the American-led mission to Somalia. UN attempts to foster democracy had become farcical. In the absence of clearly defined objectives, the Americans became obsessed with capturing Aideed, even though they had no idea what they'd do with him once that was accomplished. There was nothing to be gained from the assault on Qabdid's house in strategic terms. It was a revenge attack by US officers whose crisp uniforms and clipped language did not stop them from fighting dirty. If innocents died, so be it. It was all part of transforming Somalia into a democracy.

Their leader was a fundamentalist Christian named Admiral Johnathan Howe, a former Polaris submarine commander who would occasionally appear in the press centre to deliver a briefing. One day, reporters were dumbstruck when Howe interrupted what he was saying to allow a throbbing combat helicopter to pass overhead. Then he said: "How I love the sound of freedom in the air."

A month after the killings, I returned to Mogadishu. The pointless hunt for Aideed continued. On October 3, eighteen US Rangers died in the battle of the Olympic Hotel, and Clinton announced that his forces would soon be leaving. Other western powers indicated that they would follow suit.



The first Marines ashore are attacked by battalions of cameramen

## Bikini-clad girl soldiers saunter along the beach. The war is a million miles away

I moved into Dan's old room at the al-Sahafi. There was a pair of his boots in the cupboard, and pictures of a girlfriend. Monsoon winds blew down the corridors at night, and when a passing helicopter woke me, I wondered if there were such things as spirits.

I'm standing in the blazing sun outside the UN compound, interviewing angry Somalis. They want to tell me about the sandbags. One man says he heard a helicopter overhead. And then a sandbag smashed through the tin roof of his shack. That's why he's here, shouting at the soldiers; he wants compensation.

In the next several days, I will hear this story from several different sources. By now, the Americans have abandoned nocturnal street patrols in favour of a 24-hour helicopter-borne surveillance mission called "Eyes Over Mogadishu". It seems that grunts have taken to loading sandbags into their Blackhawks and heaving them out onto the city to which they had come with promises of food and salvation. Their goodwill has turned to insane, impotent rage.

The Americans finally left in March 1994. The Marine colonel who handled the final pull-out had seen it all before; turns out he was aboard that last Huey chopper to lift off the roof of the US embassy in Saigon in 1975, desperate refugees clinging to its skids. The Somali pull-out was a defeat of a smaller order, but a defeat nonetheless, and the knell of doom for the UN mission. With the Americans gone, policing Somalia fell to an exclusively African and Asian force. The soldiers were under-armed and overstretched. The Somalis thought they were weak, and weakness was contemptible. "You see those guys?" a Somali said to me, pointing to a detachment of apprehensive-looking Indian troops. "Soon we will take all their weapons and kick them out of here."

February 1995. I am back in the al-Sahafi to cover the end. All the veteran hacks have flown in for the last gathering, like members of a cult awaiting the onset of the apocalypse.

We sit on the roof of the hotel at dusk, drinking beer and gazing over the scrofulous city. Somewhere out there, vast swarms of locusts are moving across the arid plains, devouring everything in their path. The price of guns is rising in Bakaaraha Market. MogaDisney was abandoned three weeks ago and comprehensively looted. Now the last UN soldiers huddle inside a tiny enclave around the harbour, waiting for landing craft to take them off to American warships. After two years, thousands of deaths and the expenditure of at least \$4 billion, this is what the United Nations intervention has come to: absolutely nothing.

The UN mandarins have already exonerated themselves of responsibility for this expensive fiasco: they came with good intentions, they did their best, they failed. For the rest, blame will be laid at the feet of Somalia's warlords, evil men whose only ideology was plunder, and whose followers were said to be no better than bandits. When the Americans were hunting Aideed, they claimed to be up against a hard core of perhaps 250 loyal militiamen from his Habre Gedir clan. Beyond that, the warlord was said to rely on a force of hooligans in flip-flops and sarongs who had to be paid to carry out hit-and-run attacks. The subtext was that most Somalis were nice people who yearned for law and order, democracy, police and taxes.

There are elements of truth in this analysis. Aideed is widely regarded as an unscrupulous gangster; most Somalis seek peace. And yet it leaves several critical questions unanswered. I spent a great deal of time in Somalia during the UN caper, and visited every corner of the country. Every UN outpost I saw was surrounded by trenches and barbed wire. Every political officer I met lived in fear of his life. There was not a single town where UN forces were not harassed or shot at, or a single clan whose young

men were not implicated. When US Rangers launched their ill-fated attempt to capture Aideed at the Olympic Hotel, sworn enemies came racing to his aid and sacrificed themselves in gales of American machine-gun fire. Next day, the hospitals were full of wounded young men from clans that were supposedly dire foes of Aideed's Habre Gedir. Could it be that when the chips were down, the Somalis were actually one clan united against the invaders?

In the scrubland of northern Somalia there is a godforsaken town called Galkaayo, which means, roughly translated, "The place where the white man ran away". It marks the spot where Mohamed Abdille Hassan, a great guerrilla leader nicknamed "the Mad Mullah", defeated a British army early this century. A massive force of European-led troops spent two decades pursuing the Mullah, but the rebellion only fizzled out when he died of the flu. This was a story the UN might have considered before embroiling its forces in a war with Somalis. They might also have considered the following proverb, which sums up the Somali's political nature:

*My clan against the enemy*

*My family against the clan*

*My brother and I against the family*

*Me against my brother.*

How do you govern such a people? How do you render them sufficiently docile to turn the territory into a modern nation-state? British and Italian imperialists found it virtually impossible. In the early Sixties, they ceded power to Somali nationalists, whose own experiment in western-style democracy turned into a bizarre fiasco. After that came Mohamed Siad Barre, who tried to govern according to the gospel of Marx and Lenin, only to fail more fulsomely

and bloodily than any of his predecessors. And now the UN has been humiliated, too, the latest in a long line of would-be reformers and saviours brought low by the Somalis' refusal to cooperate.

Could it be that these people are sending the world a message, loud and clear: "Get lost! We don't want

your kind of government, your rules and regulations, your laws, your courts, your taxes. We want institutions rooted in the culture and psyche of our own people. If the clans fight, as they might on occasion, our elders will chew it over in their own sweet time, which is more time than you can spare. So leave us alone, or we'll slit your throats."

I went down to Bakaaraha Market the other day, and found myself contemplating a libertarian or anarchist's fantasy. Old men sit cross-legged under canvas, dealing in yen, dollars and Deutschmarks, fixing exchange rates without government intervention. You can buy almost anything here - camel meat, computers, satellite dishes and khat - and it's all dirt cheap, thanks to the absence of customs inspectors, taxes and import duties. Ray-Bans cost \$10. A brand-new Isuzu is about \$3,000. You can make a satellite telephone call to the USA at better rates than AT&T. Welcome to the world's first totally privatized state, but watch your back, because there is a price to pay for this delirious freedom: no law, no police to call when the shooting starts. The other day, gunmen allied to rival banana companies started duelling with anti-aircraft guns in the street outside the al-Sahafi. All the owner could do was pray.

A US Cobra pilot once told me about a lone Somali who decided to bag himself a helicopter. He stood in the open, raised his AK-47 and started firing into the sky. The Cobra swooped down to destroy him, but he stood his ground, and spent the last seconds of his life emptying his magazine into an invincible hi-tech death machine. The American shook his head in disbelief. So did I. These people are either insane, or noble pioneers bent on building a strange new society in a wasteland of their own creation. The next few years will tell. ☺

## The Somalis thought the UN soldiers were weak, and weakness was contemptible