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CRAZY WITH FOOD

Very few policy makers understand what famine is. They think it means there's no food. . . . Famine is a failure of the market. And you can't fight an economic problem by giving away food.

—Fred Cuny

Chris Cassidy wasn't like most young college graduate aid workers who want to do good, give it a shot for two years, see some of the contradictions of aid but decide to get on with their lives rather than deal with them. For them, aid is a phase to be passed through, a rite of passage on their way to law school or business school, something to be forgotten except for those stories that can be told over and over again over beers in evenings far away. And Chris wasn't like the ones who fall in love with the aid life. They stay in it, become part of the system, and only resist it on occasion. They cling to the idea of aid. Aid redeems their lives and uplifts the lives of the poor. To them, the contradictions all stem from the West's not understanding or helping enough. Their answer is always *more* aid, bigger budgets, another project.

Cassidy identified the problem. It was political. He kept pointing to it. His tragedy might have been avoided, but his entanglement in local politics and the local authority's resentment of him would not have been otherwise. He was dedicated to his job, not to his career.

My story is different from Chris's in many ways. Both of us still wrestle with the contradictions of aid. I sometimes write about it; he still practices it. I once thought I might have a career in the aid business, but Somalia changed all that for me. It made painfully clear to me the full extent of aid's failure.

When USAID hired me to go to Somalia, I felt that I'd been called up by the big leagues. For a young man looking for advancement in the development world, this was as good an opportunity as ever came along. In the scheme of the development universe, USAID was a donor, up there with the World Bank or Britain's ODA (Overseas Development Administration). All the NGOs received their funding through the big guys. In Somalia USAID was calling the shots. The UN was there with all its agencies—UNICEF, UNHCR, UNDP, WFP, FAO—and all the European countries were represented, but everyone knew who was in charge. I was playing a minor supporting role in the organization as a personal services contractor, PSC. I had no diplomatic status and was on six-month contracts.

I was a food monitor until my title was upgraded to food assessment specialist. But I was only twenty-five, and I had time. The money was great. I had my own four-wheel-drive vehicle and a house on the beach in Mogadishu. Most of the time, however, I was in Beledweyne, a town on the Ethiopian border about 200 miles from Mogadishu. I was in the middle of a group of refugee camps that had been set up along the banks of the Shebelle River, where it was all happening in Somalia. The future looked bright.

My job was to make sure that the food sent from the docks of Mogadishu reached the refugees in my region. When the food didn't arrive, I was supposed to find out what had happened to it. Most of the time I felt like a cop. People were actually afraid of me. I could sit down with military men and accuse them of stealing food, and there was nothing they could do about it. I worked for USAID. A food monitor working with Save the Children, on the other hand, was badly beaten by thugs in a refugee camp.

The job didn't require a lot of detective work. On my first few days in the region, I saw military vehicles leaving refugee camps loaded down with bags of food. I saw merchants' warehouses filled with bags bearing the USAID handshake logo and the words "Donated by the People of the

United States of America, Not for Sale." Over the next few days, I saw military warehouses packed to the ceilings with refugee food.

After checking ledgers at refugee camps, I figured that most of the relief food being sent to the region—probably about two-thirds—was being stolen. Some disappeared from the docks in Mogadishu. Some disappeared from the trucks along the way to the camps. Sometimes entire trucks would leave the port and vanish forever. Most of it, it seemed, disappeared from the camps, sold by camp commanders, who were usually Somali military men, or were just taken by the soldiers or by the guerrillas, who were members of the Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF). Along with the food, the WSLF also raided the camps for able-bodied young men, unwilling conscripts for their murky guerrilla war across the Ethiopian border in the Ogaden desert.

Soon after I arrived in Beledweyne, the town began to fill up with NGOs. Each group rented a walled compound with plenty of room to park Land Cruisers, and with houses large enough to house the expatriate staff. Everyone hired a watchman and a cook and a maid.

I rented a room at the UNHCR compound. It was a small stone house surrounded by a wall. The dining area was outside on a patio covered with a thatched canopy. A second patio served as an outdoor living room. The shower was also outdoors. A 55-gallon UN-blue drum was mounted on a platform above a shoulder-high stall. Water would be hand-pumped into the barrel in the morning. After baking in the sun all day the water was perfect shower temperature.

Behind the compound was open desert. Peering above the wall in the evenings provided magnificent sunsets and the sight of camels moving in and out of town as nomads came across the Ethiopian border to trade animals and milk. Across the street was a German NGO primarily doing water engineering. Oxfam and a religious British group called the Tear Fund, which did medical work in the refugee camps, were a short walk away. Save the Children moved in, along with two separate teams of Italian doctors. In a refugee camp outside of town was an American group called Medical Volunteers International. The French group Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) showed up eventually.

Why so many NGOs? There was money available from donors, so they came. The Somali government loved it as well. More NGOs meant more headquarters in Mogadishu. Most of the major landlords in the city were relatives of the president or other high government officials. Even in towns such as Beledweyne, homes were rented from government officials at preposterous rates. The government was pleased to have all the NGOs they could get. So, in addition to the NGOs permanently camped out in town, we had a steady stream of itinerant charities that came through looking for projects and things to do.

A Canadian group arrived one day looking for orphans. They checked into the local office of the National Refugee Commission and were given permission to collect whatever orphans they found. Of all the problems that had sprung up in the refugee camps, I was never aware that orphans was one of them. The tight-knit clan structure meant that every child had a relative around somewhere. If no one closer could be found, a third cousin would gladly take and raise a child. But nonetheless thirty or forty children were gathered together and loaded onto a truck and carted off to an orphanage in Mogadishu, while their clan's elders protested.

Other NGOs came prospecting for projects. They would spend a day and then submit a project proposal to USAID in Mogadishu. When I'd get back to the capital, my opinion would be solicited. I always recommended that the projects not be funded. They were never well thought out. For example, one NGO sent a recent graduate from a forestry program to look into planting trees in Somalia. She had no practical experience in Africa yet submitted a proposal for more than $100,000. Later I brought her out to the site near the Shebelle River where she proposed to plant the trees. I pointed out to her that in much of the area the subsoil was limestone, and even if trees *could* be made to grow in part of the area, nomads normally brought their cattle to that spot, and the trees would be munched up in no time unless she proposed stationing armed guards around the area for the next four years.

And it wasn't as if the refugees were urbanites forced to live in tents. These people were nomads who'd spent their entire lives outdoors. For the most part, they could handle themselves.

In the evenings, when I could stand it, I'd get on the radio and talk to Mogadishu to find out what trucks had left and how much food they were carrying. The reception was so bad, nearly every word had to be spelled out using the Alpha-Bravo-Charlie-Delta alphabet. Passing along information could take hours.

My days were spent looking at registers and counting bags of food. I'd walk down to the local NRC office and sit down with the head, Abdullahi Jama. It was obvious that he was mucking with the books to hide the food. The numbers never matched. Abdullahi would shrug and smile. He was about thirty, and well educated. He had a bearded face that was marred by his crooked, *qat*-stained teeth when he smiled. Abdullahi Jama had a career in front of him. The NRC was becoming a powerful organization in

Somalia by virtue of its control of the programs that were bringing foreign money into the country.

Then I'd go and try to find out if the right amount of food had come in. Monitoring was impossible. I'd do spot checks at warehouses in the camps. If bags were short, they'd tell me that they had distributed them. Unless I stood there for an entire distribution, there was no way I could tell where the food was going. In addition, there were many camps with multiple distribution sites in a vast area to keep track of. I was sure that a lot of theft was going on, but I couldn't rule out every excuse for missing bags of food.

My trips to the NRC office became a bit of theater. I'd barge in and demand to see the books. I had to be forceful without humiliating Abdullahi in front of the people who worked for him. Sometimes I had to let him throw me out of the office. Usually he would instruct someone to fetch the ledgers, and I'd complain that records weren't being well kept. Abdullahi would blame it on the infrastructure. They didn't have chairs or desks or pencils, he'd complain. Then he'd ask me if he could borrow some of my pencils.

Most of my time was spent wandering around the camps and talking to refugees: They would tell me that everything was fine. If I asked where the boys and men were, I was always told that they were around or would be back soon. (In fact, they were back in the Ogaden with their herds.) I was regularly told how the Cubans and Russians bombed their cows. The stories were identical and clearly untrue. Obviously there was a movement afoot in the refugee camps to make sure that the refugees presented a united front to the foreigners. By my side on all these trips was my translator, a nervous man named Abdi, whose English wasn't very good. At first I kept him on because I felt sorry for him. Later I learned that Abdi reported every day to the National Security Service in Beledweyne. When I confronted him, he told me that it was true. He had no choice. He told them who I talked to and what I'd learned. Abdi apologized and begged me not to fire him. I fired him. A feisty young Somali woman named Faduma replaced him. I thought she might help me get information from the women in the camps.

There was a great deal of surplus food; even with the amount being stolen and disappearing, there was plenty of surplus food. Food was everywhere. Despite this, journalists still seemed to find emaciated children to write about. They'd hear from NGOs in the capital about how many lives they were saving, then they'd come out to the bush and probably not see much. Sometimes NGOs would lead them to hospitals and small pockets where children were suffering from dysentery or other debilitating diseases.

But they got these diseases from being in the camps in the first place. And back home NGOs continued to raise money by advertising that people were starving in Somalia.

At the center of the problem was this: The million and a half refugees who were allegedly in Somalia didn't exist. The Somali government liked to say 1.5 million. Journalists liked to say 1.5 million. It sounded good and added a weightiness to their stories. Several press reports even took the liberty of pushing the figure up to 2 million. I saw official reports from UNHCR and USAID that put the number at less than 400,000. And my own rough estimates from time spent in the camps made me suspect that even the 400,000 was generous. The camps were filled mostly with women and children and old men.

While I was monitoring the situation in Hiran District, my colleague and friend, Doug Grice, was doing the same job farther south in Bardera and the region along the Kenya border. Once a month, I'd make the five-hour drive to Mogadishu, and we'd meet in the house we shared on the Lido, across from the beach clubs. We were given a week or so to prepare our reports, maybe meet with the ambassador, get a hot shower, catch a movie or a videotape at the American compound. We'd sit on our roof deck and cut into our rations of whiskey and beer from the diplomatic shop. We'd chew *qat* and watch the ships in the harbor, or try to spot sharks off the coast. And we'd exchange stories about the refugee camps. Separately, we'd arrived at the conclusion that the relief program was probably killing as many people as it was saving, that Somali soldiers were supplementing their income by selling food, and that the WSLF was fueling their attacks into Ethiopia.

We'd then dutifully submit our reports and head back to the countryside to start monitoring the food all over again. At one point a State Department delegation came to Somalia because (I presumed) of all the reports back home about stolen relief food. In the field I spoke with one of the delegates, who started asking me questions, questions that I and other food monitors had answered a hundred times in our reports. "Haven't you read the reports?" I asked. She'd seen reports, she told me, but they were not mine. They were executive summaries compiled by the USAID mission. The detailed reports I'd written had remained in the files in Mogadishu. It was then that I became aware of what my real role was: I was writing reports because the Food for Peace program regulations said that reports had to be written. The food monitor was a requirement built into the law, but what I actually reported was meaningless. No one really cared what we had to say.

In June of 1981, CARE, the American NGO, was hired to distribute food. They were experts at it. In fact, it was practically all they did. Even today, nearly half of CARE's budget comes from the distribution of surplus U.S. commodities. USAID had insisted that CARE distribute the food in order to keep track of it. They entered into a contract with UNHCR and Somalia's National Refugee Commission. The resulting organization was called ELU/CARE (Emergency Logistics Unit).

To run the program, they brought in people from India—hard working, meticulous, efficient, and most of all, cheap. They seized the ports and began trying to keep records.

Within a few months the record books looked better. The reality, however, was that the WSLF and the army still ended up with the food. The National Refugee Commission was still pocketing millions of dollars, and there were still far fewer refugees than food was being supplied for.

I was no longer concerned with where the food was going. The more time I spent in Somalia, the less it seemed to matter. I was more concerned with what the food was doing.

In Beledweyne I spent more time talking with Abdullahi Jama. I stopped pestering him about the records and the food. I figured CARE could worry about that now. The streets of Beledweyne became more and more crowded with Land Cruisers as more NGOs showed up.

At night the expats would gather and drink whiskey and smoke cigarettes. The conversation was monotonously the same. Talk was about the refugees, the stolen food, the corrupt camp commanders, and the idiotic projects. Oxfam was teaching refugees to grow onions and cabbages and peppers in the refugee camp. The two Oxfam agriculturists discussed their dilemma nightly: The idea behind their project was to make refugees more self-sufficient. But if the refugees were going to return to their nomadic way of life, these skills wouldn't be very useful. And if they were going to settle down and become farmers, they'd need to know a lot more about agriculture than how to grow just a few cash crops. And there was very little incentive for them to learn. They could eat fine on their rations and sell the surplus for whatever pocket change they needed. The Oxfam team drank their whisky every night and wondered aloud why they were doing what they were doing every day.

One evening during the Islamic month of daytime fasting, Ramadan, I went to Abdullahi Jama's house to chew *qat* and break the fast. We talked about the refugees. He didn't seem to care much about them, but he was starting to feel that things might be turning against him politically. Then he started telling me about the food being stolen. The conversation was strictly off the record at that time. It was two friends talking.

He explained to me that the people around Beledweyne were from the Hawaadle clan, related to the large Hawiye clan that dominated the area. The refugees were mainly Ogaadeen, from the Daarood clan, relatives of Siyaad Barre. At first the Hawiye welcomed the refugees, but now they'd been there for three years. The refugees were getting rich. They were getting rations. (The word *ration* is now part of the Somali vocabulary. It refers to any kind of free food.) The local people were getting nothing and starting to resent it. And many people were starting to say that the purpose of the refugee camps was to replace Hawiye with Daarood.

Abdullahi Jama didn't buy that, but the talk scared him. He was from another Daarood subclan, the Majeerteen. After the Ogaden war, a Majeerteen leader, Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf, had split with Siyaad Barre and, with the support of the Ethiopians, had begun a low-key guerrilla war against the Somali government. His group was called the Somali Salvation Democratic Front, or the SSDF. Jama wasn't sure who his friends were anymore. He knew that much of the stolen refugee food went to the Western Somalia Liberation Front, which claimed to be fighting the Ethiopian government for control of the Ogaden. In reality, they were fighting the SSDF. And as an employee of the National Refugee Commission, he was feeding them—feeding people who were killing his own clansmen.

Abdullahi Jama was not a man inclined to view the world through the lens of clan. He was a modern Somali, a nationalist. But suddenly he was thrust back into the clan-centered world of his ancestors. Siyaad Barre was using foreign aid to manipulate ethnic rivalries, and Abdullahi Jama was being forced into the dangerous politics of clan.

Many years later, I would learn that Abdullahi Jama had been somewhat naïve about clan politics. Siyaad Barre was indeed using the refugee crisis to displace clans whom he viewed as his political enemies.

I was in the town of Boosaaso in 1994 at the Hotel Ga'ate, where I thought I might find some answers to questions I'd had in 1981. The Ga'ate could almost be a motel in Miami Beach. Low, white buildings perched on the edge of the sea surrounded a courtyard where old men, retirees, sat and drank tea. The sand was pure white and the ground was covered with small, round white stones. But these weren't any old men. The first person I met in the parking lot was Mohammed Jibril, former head of the feared NSS, now an overweight and sickly man who leaned heavily on an intricately carved cane. I approached him and asked for an hour of his time. He told me he'd be happy to talk. We set up an appointment, but I

never saw him again. A few yards away I ran into General Gani, the man who bombed Hargeysa to dust. It struck me that Hotel Ga'ate was a rest home for war criminals. It also became the unofficial seat of the Northeastern Somali government in the years after the fall of Siyaad Barre. In the hotel lounge a group of men were glued to CNN watching *Larry King Live*. One of them, a large man with crooked teeth and an imposing beard, was Abdullahi Boqor Muusse. Boqor is a title meaning king. Abdullahi Boqor is widely known by his nickname, King Kong. As king of the Majeerteen, Abdullahi Boqor was also king of the Daarood.

In traditional terms Abdullahi Boqor's father, Muusse Boqor, would have been considered Siyaad Barre's king. Siyaad didn't always appreciate this and alternated between tossing Muusse Boqor into jail and inviting him over for dinner. Siyaad always tried to stay on good terms with his political prisoners. Abdullahi Boqor spent three years in isolation in one of Barre's prisons from 1976 to 1978, where he was beaten and tortured. Barre tossed him into jail eight other times on various offenses.

One time was punishment for something his father did. Abdullahi Boqor explained: "In 1983 Siyaad called the Harti* elders together at Villa Somalia in Mogadishu and told them about a plan for the Daarood to control the country. 'If we put half a million Ogaadeen in Beledweyne the Hawaadle will be a minority,' he told them. It was his plan to move the Ogaadeen into all the strategic areas. The Warsangeli and Dulbahante agreed to go along with Siyaad, but my father refused.

"He refused because the Majeerteen are friends with the Hawiye. We do business with them. The Warsangeli and Dulbahante don't have anything to do with the Hawiye. My father had many meetings with the elders of the Hawiye. He wasn't going to betray them."

Siyaad was furious that a traditional leader would so brazenly rebuke him. At the time, Muusse Boqor was old and sick. Putting him in prison wouldn't have been very satisfying to Siyaad so he took his revenge on Abdullahi, Muusse's eldest son and heir to the leadership of the Daarood. Once again Abdullahi Boqor was tossed in jail and tortured.

Boqor Abdullahi wandered back to the CNN room. General Gani squeezed over on the couch and made room for him. There they were, the torturer and the tortured. Gani, the ultimate Siyaad Barre loyalist, and Abdullahi, his victim, sitting and watching NBA highlights on CNN.

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*The Harti are a subgroup of the Daarood which includes the Majeerteen, Dulbahante, and Warsangeli subclans. The Marehan and Ogaadeen clans—Siyaad's family groups—are not included. The Harti are considered by some to be the upper classes of the Daarood.

The scene reminded me how little I had understood in 1981. But Abdullahi Boqor's brief explanation put a lot of what I had seen into perspective. And it showed me how the events placed into motion thirteen years earlier had resulted in the present chaos in Somalia.

I had seen young toughs starting to throw their weight around, a foreshadowing of the role the *mooryaan* would later play in Somalia. Under normal conditions, survival for Somalis is a precarious and delicate balancing act, requiring the wisdom and guidance of the elders. The society was solid and intact. But with food arriving on trucks every day, traditional wisdom and guidance were no longer needed. Kids with guns were king.

I thought it was my job to report these developments, but I soon learned that this was exactly the type of information my bosses in Mogadishu did not want in field reports. They wanted the tonnage of food received, and the tons missing; plate numbers of trucks seen driving off with food and names of camp commanders who weren't cooperating. Still, every month Doug Grice and I would write the reports and tack on our observations about the state of the refugees and of our growing doubts about the wisdom of the relief program.

Our boss, Robert J. Luneburg, the Food for Peace officer, would storm back with the reports and say, "You guys know you can't write this stuff. Stick to the facts as you observe them." So we'd retype the reports and head back to the bush.

Thus confined by the USAID report format, I sat down at my typewriter in the dusty heat of the afternoon in Beledweyne and wrote a personal memo to Luneburg. It would be my last memo to USAID:

> At the risk of being labeled politically naïve, I submit the following. I cannot in good conscience leave Somalia without expressing these opinions to the U.S. government in writing.
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> My experience in Beledweyne during the last few months has confirmed my growing suspicion that the Somali government is deliberately taking part in the diversion of refugee food, has deliberately inflated refugee figures in order to facilitate these diversions, and is now simply humoring donors by submitting itself to the impotent inspection and monitoring of the donors.
>
> Our involvement in the refugee relief operation is participation in a political ploy to gain support for an unpopular military government. I do not presume to influence the policy of the American government in this regard, however I believe that the situation should be recognized for what it is. Our continued support for the refugees makes possible continued activity of the WSLF in the Ogaden, which in turn results in more refugees.

I realize that you have much more information than I do about the actual situation in the Ogaden, however I have made a point of speaking with refugees about the situation there until I was "warned" by the NRC early in July to desist. When I didn't, I was confined to my house for four days and denied access to the records of food deliveries.

I believe that the refugees have been coerced as to the manner in which to answer questions pertaining to the Ogaden. I know that there are individuals living in the camps known as "politicians" who instruct the refugees in political rhetoric and in how to answer these types of questions. I have been struck by the consistent similarities of their answers to the basic questions of "Why did you come here?" and "What was life like under the Ethiopians?" They all report that Cuban and Russian pilots had bombed their cattle and killed their relatives.

There is a festering resentment among the general population toward the expatriates and the refugees. An old man stopped me on the streets of Beledweyne and demanded to know why he was not entitled to rations and health care just because he had decided to settle in the town instead of in a refugee camp.

A man with four children working in Beledweyne for 800 shillings a month (an extraordinarily high salary) could not supply his family with the amount of food the refugees receive for free.

Many of the town people have solved that problem by keeping a residence or a part of their family in the camps. Sigalow camp [near Beledweyne] is indistinguishable from the mud-house back streets of Beledweyne which have now reached the borders of the camp and are joining it to the town.

There are other issues that make our involvement questionable. Such as the recruitment by the WSLF and Somali Army in the camps. This activity takes place in all the camps in Hiran. Some of the camp commanders are WSLF officers.

PVOs are now submitting hundreds of proposals to improve services to refugees. Expanded services to the refugees will only aggravate the problem by encouraging them to stay, and more refugees will arrive. It will spread more thinly the resource base, leaving the door open for a real emergency situation in the future.

The future for refugees in the camps holds only years of relief. The efforts of the international community should be aimed at solving the problem—getting the refugees out of the camps.

USAID and the U.S. government weren't interested in what I had to say, and, for the most part, neither was the press. Reporters seemed content to write about stolen food, starving babies, and heroic aid workers. I handed some of my memos to the only reporter who seemed interested in what I thought was the real story in Somalia. The story by Richard Ben Cramer was published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in the fall of 1981. It wasn't until fourteen years later that I heard of any fallout from the article.

I was in Nairobi visiting with Mohamed Abshir Waldo (not to be confused with SSDF leader General Mohamed Abshir Muusse). Born in the bush and a camel herder, he ended up at Columbia University during the student uprisings in the late '60s.

He became Information Minister for the SSDF and briefly head of the organization in the 1980s. From his home in Nairobi he was still active in the SSDF and in the running of the Majeerteen area in northeastern Somalia. He was explaining why the SSDF had turned down food aid from the UN. Though the 1992 famine in Somalia did not affect the northeast region, food and aid were still offered.

"If 10,000 tons of food arrives it will be sold on the black market and the proceeds used to buy arms," he said. "It becomes an arms race. It means war. If food comes we lose our ability to control the peace and the stability of the region. Everybody will want to have a share, but that's not possible. It's been three years since there was any food aid and three years since there was the hijacking of a truck. The only trucks that are hijacked are the ones carrying food aid. No private truck with private cargo has been hijacked.

"We had meetings about this in Djibouti and in Garowe," Abshir continued. "I met with Mohamed Abshir Muusse and with a number of elders and we discussed how any form of aid whether it was food or tents would cause problems. For example we had about 300 family-sized tents to be used exclusively for people who were living in public premises after the war: schools, hospitals, regional, administration offices, ports, shops, police stations. They were a Swedish church donation. They caused problems the moment they arrived. Those who were off loading the plane wanted to take some for themselves, and people immediately began fighting over them. The Red Cross also supplied quite a substantial number of people with kitchen utensils as an incentive for them to leave those places. The people took everything and never left the houses. This created a conflict between the administration and the people. And our relationship with the donors also gets spoiled because we've taken the gifts and haven't done what we were supposed to do.

"So if we had accepted the food we knew it was going present these problems of instability in the region and attract bandits. There was very

good trading going on; livestock, hides, and fish were exported. Commodities were imported. People were trading. You know, things were normal. Nomads were breeding the animals for sale, but if you have the food even the nomad will leave the animals to have a share of this food.

"On the other hand, we could not say we did not want food. We wanted the food to buy arms. The donors were giving food to our enemies and they were buying arms. We did not even dare not to protest very loudly for aid because otherwise the population would say, why are we not getting our share of the food? And secondly, what do you do about the liquidity that the food will bring in, the selling of the food, realizing money, and then buying arms?"

"It's like a mini arms race fueled with food. If your enemy does not buy arms you don't have to be armed yourself. Or if you rearm and get the finance and so on, then you need to rearm also, to balance. Just like the big powers were doing.

"So we decided to minimize the damage. What we actually did—why we had peace—was to give 90 percent of the food straight to the militias. That was not what the donors intended, but the donors were giving it to our enemy. What would you do?"

Abshir left the room and returned with some pamphlets from when he was in charge of propaganda for the SSDF in the mid-1980s. He showed me that the SSDF leadership had come to terms with the military uses of food aid from watching the Siyaad Barre regime manipulate food aid for years.

"We've known for a long time about the damage caused by food," he said pointing to a pamphlet entitled "Somalia Under the Dictatorship of General Siyaad Barre." At the bottom the pamphlet it said Printed in Mogadishu, August 1994. In reality it was printed in Ethiopia, but Abshir explained with a laugh that they were just trying to piss off Siyaad. I flipped through the pamphlet until something caught my eye.

> *Feeding on the Hungry of Somalia*
>
> "Profiting from misery" From "Good Intentions gone sour." a series of reports published in the Philadelphia Inguirer, USA by Richard Ben Grammer, the staff writer, in 1981.

They hadn't gotten the name of the paper exactly right, and the writer's name was misspelled. Close enough. I read on.

> Famine is not the issue in Somali Refugee camps. The huge international relief effort has succeeded to this extent: Food has poured into Somalia . . . The relief effort was spurred by a fraud. The theft, the false population count, the fraudulent nature of the emergency are all common knowledge in Somalia. The army of relief workers talks of little else. But nothing is said publicly because the relief business is big business, and no one can afford to derail the gravy train—not Somalia, not the donors, not the relief workers, Specially not the refugees because they are hungry.
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> A food monitor for the US AID programme, Mr. Michael Maren said, "sixty percent of the food for the refugees is stolen. Sixty percent or two thirds. A third of the food that is loaded on trucks never gets to the camps, and half the food that does get through is stolen in the camps."

I showed it to Abshir. "You were quoting me before you knew me," I said.

> "As a US civil servant, I am not free to criticize the UN agencies. You can do what you like, of course, using this information . . . I am not surprised it's all screwed up out there, food going every way," pointed out Mr. Michael Maren."

I looked at Abshir. "I didn't say this. You guys just made it up. I never said anything of the sort."

> "The theft was not possible to be the work of a certain individual. He had to have certain support within the system. We shared our reports with the Somali Government. Relief business is like other business: there are careers and organizations to protect," concluded US relief expert Mr. Michael Maren.

I hadn't said that either, not exactly, though it was inferred from other comments I'd made to the paper. All these years, unbeknownst to me, my name was being used against the government of Siyaad Barre. Abshir smiled mischievously. "Thanks," he said.

The refugees never left the camps. The "temporary" camps, set up allegedly to shelter refugees from the Ogaden war are still there, more than ten years after that war ended. As I and many of the other critics of the 1981 relief effort predicted, the residents of those camps are still dependent on relief food and still have no way to earn a living on their own.

Several months after I sent my final memo, Grice participated in a study of the Somali economy. It found that the relief industry accounted for two-thirds of the country's economy. There was no way Siyaad Barre could afford to let the refugees go.

And the private relief agencies couldn't let them go, either.

When I was back in Mogadishu in 1993 and 1994, I decided to try to find out what happened to the Ogaadeen refugees from the camps in the Hiran region. I found groups of them in Mogadishu, where they had settled in open spaces, on the grounds of deserted public areas, in school compounds. They were in the same thatched huts living, it seemed, much as they had lived in the camps. The difference now was that there were no NGOs there working with them and supplying food and medical care. The children whom I had seen running around in the camps in 1981 were now young adults, and there were hundreds of children who had known nothing except refugee camps in their entire lives.

In Mogadishu in 1993, these Ogaadeen were nonpersons. The city was controlled by various factions of the Hawiye clan, who were fighting among themselves for power and loot. The Ogaadeen hadn't had any particular problems with the Hawiye, since they had nothing worth stealing. The young Hawiye gunmen were not looking to avenge the wrongs of the past. So the Ogaadeen in Mogadishu did as they had been doing for the past fifteen years: They sat. They waited.

A small group of men quietly gathered around me, looking almost embarrassed at their predicament. We met under a tree just outside their encampment, but as we were making our introductions, children came over and began shouting. Unable to hold the discussion, we moved indoors to what was once a Save the Children health center. It was a cavernous cement structure with cartoonish drawings on the walls showing fat, healthy children, children being weighed, inoculated, fed.

Then one of the elders spoke: "We are known to respect and welcome our visitors. If we had the resources we would have killed a goat. Since you came here, we have been trying to obtain even some cups of tea. But poverty does not permit us."

They were surprised that I was interested in history, and shocked that I knew anything about the refugee camps at Beledweyne and Jalalaqsi. Everyone in this group had been in those camps and fled to Mogadishu ahead of the advancing rebel force. They fled toward the protection of a government that was crumbling, a government that had long before deserted them.

Did they know they were being used? I asked. A young man named Ahmed Sheikh Osman spoke up. "I was told that as a refugee I would have the opportunity for further study. It was a program through UNHCR. I filled out the documents. But then I realized there wasn't any chance of that. It was the children of government officials who were getting those scholarships; they were claiming to be refugees. How could these foreigners possibly know the difference?"

An older man, Mohamed Mohamoud Aden, joined in. "We are putting the blame in UNHCR. They didn't care who used the food and the money for the refugee children. Food was diverted and so were the funds the government was getting for the refugees. Refugee children were supposed to study but couldn't. So we wanted to go back, back to the Ogaden. We had our documents ready for repatriation [in 1988], but the civil war came. The rations grew less and less. When the fighting started, they left us holding our forms for repatriation. We hear UNHCR is supposed to help people. They just abandoned us. Now they don't think about the people they left behind in Jalalaqsi."

Two men left the room and returned with six blue plastic ration cards on a dirty string: a big hole punched in the middle of the cards for the refugees who chose to stay in Somalia; three little holes in the middle for those who wanted to be repatriated. They regarded those three little holes as a promise, Mohamed explained, and they are still holding on to those cards in the hope that something will come of it. But those cards are from 1988, another era. They are from another humanitarian crisis ministered to by a different group of NGOs spending different funds from long-expired government contracts. Those cards mean nothing, but they are all the refugees have to hold onto now.

Ahmed Sheikh Osman said, "I would have gone back to the Ogaden in 1986 if I had been given the chance. As a student willing to pursue studies, I sent a letter to UNHCR. What happened to the letter for scholarship? They never replied. That's when I wanted to go back."

As we were talking, the children once again gathered around and started shouting. Some of them came into the room and ignored the demands of the adults to leave.

"When a child has been a refugee, he loses his manners," one of the men offered. "He has no loyalty to his parents. We were seated under a tree; why did we have to leave? Before, children would never come to where the elders are. We are living so close together here. If you send them somewhere, they object. They refuse." He shook his head and then looked up at me as if to apologize.

Abdi Ahmed Yusuf is a small, wiry man of fifty-nine with a tight gray beard, pasted unevenly across his face. He was a herder in 1974 when the first famine hit the Ogaden. His cattle died and he went to refugee camps established in the Ogaden by the government of Ethiopia. I met with him

later that afternoon in another part of Mogadishu. He and his family had found a structure that looked as if it had once been a garage. It had three walls and a corrugated iron roof that kept the sun away. Every day he went around the hellish streets of Mogadishu and somehow returned with scraps of food for his children.

We sat on a pile of rubble beside his shelter. "Once I had a good life," he told me. "I had seven children and a wife, fifty cattle and forty goats. I was eating *ghee* and meat and drinking milk. I didn't need to ask for permission to sleep anywhere. I was not asked Where are you going? The children went to Koran schools. There was peace in the bush, and Somalis never wanted to kill one another. Water was easy."

Then came a drought in 1974.

"My animals started dying. I didn't sleep for many nights. Hyenas would eat them. I had to run around trying to put more energy into the goats so they could escape. Sometimes I would take just their skins and sell them. I would bring a few animals into the *boma* [compound]. I saw my wife holding both hands to her face; the woman was demanding some things I could not afford. We began to ask Allah for rain.

"I would take the prayer boards with the Koran written on them and put them over my head and pray for rain. We called that the 'cow death' year. Twenty families lost all their cows and goats. When there were only seven cows left, it was time to move to town. I put the *hori* [shelter] onto a donkey. I put children who were well onto the donkey. I had one camel for transporting water in the *haman* [intricately woven water-carrying containers]. We started trekking. I was very strong and I could carry some of the children on my back. It was the worst time in my life. On the way to the town we saw people dying. People shit their rectums out and died on the path.

"We settled in a camp near Korahey, a baked, dry place with no trees. The Ethiopian government took us there and established shelters. We were given food by the Ethiopians. The government encouraged us to learn agriculture. We were brought to a project and taught to farm. The government would take the produce and bring us money. We didn't mind because we were hungry. We started growing fat again. We got blisters on our hands until we got used to the hoes."

Then, in 1977, Somalia invaded the Ogaden.

"We were having a good life until the bullets started coming," Abdi said. "First the Ethiopian troops were there. Then the Somali army came with tanks. I captured three Ethiopian soldiers who were not armed and

brought them to the Somali commander. I told him that they should not be killed. The Somali commander was a good man, brave and understanding. But we were sad at the loss of so many Ethiopians."

While we were talking, a friend of Abdi's wandered over and sat with us. His name was Aden Farah Mohamed. He was in his late fifties, and had a long beard dyed red with henna. Together they looked like two respected elders of the Ogaadeen clan, and under different circumstances they might be enjoying the fruits of their years, relaxing with other elders and presiding over the affairs of the clan. Instead, they were scavengers in the urban wasteland. He listened as Abdi told me how some of the Ogaadeen had fought alongside the advancing Somali troops. Then he added, "Many of us helped the Ethiopians. Many of the Ethiopians had to come to the Somalis for water. They wanted to flee back to Addis Ababa with their families. We helped them because they were our friends.

"Then the Somali troops came to us with trucks and sent us to Beledweyne. We were told, 'you will get medical care, food, and water.' Some of us were taken to Jalalaqsi, down the road from Beledweyne. Others were put into camps near Beledweyne. People were given knives and pots and kettles. The food was very little but we were told that we would get farming land."

I stopped him. "Do you mean that you were sent back to Somalia before the Ethiopian counteroffensive drove the Somali army from the Ogaden?"

"Yes," they told me. The Ogaadeen had been sent back across the border into Somalia even as the Somali soldiers were advancing.

I had been under the impression that the first wave of Somali refugees had crossed into Somalia fleeing the Cuban-Ethiopian counteroffensive. The truth was that the Somali government intended to settle at least some Ogaadeen in Somalia from the beginning. It was ironic. Somali culture is deeply rooted in nomadic culture. Nomadic lore is venerated by people generations removed from that existence. And most Somalis say that the Ogaadeen are the keepers of the true culture.

Abdi told me how from Beledweyne they were asked to move to camps in Jalalaqsi. At first they refused, but the government took him and some of the elders to the campsite there and showed them around for four days. "We saw the river and the farming area and everything. It was good. Then they said, 'Sign here and say it's good and you can live there.'"

Aden ended up in Qorioley. "I had no choice. I wanted a place to live in peace and we were just taken there," he said. "I opposed the Somali government encouraging the people to come this way. 'We promise you we are

taking you to a land where there is a big river and good pasture. Food. Shelter. Medical help.' I said No! But we were taken there in government vehicles."

Abdi picked up their story in Jalalaqsi. "First the Somali government was bringing the ration, and then CARE came with cards and started giving rations.

"We were made crazy with food. I became rich from food. I was able to marry another woman, a second wife who I call CARE wife, and then I married another woman, a young one who has many children who are starving now."

"How did you get rich on the refugee food?" I asked.

"We were getting too much food so we would take the food and sell it to buy soap and cloth and kerosene. Several refugees opened shops in Jalalaqsi town and started selling the food. It was cheap, so the people were buying it. And it was cheaper than in Mogadishu, so merchants from the city came to buy the food.

"I was an elder on the committee in the refugee camp. Because we were respected, we were given a bonus in food from the camp commanders. So I could sell that food and with the money I would buy the rations from others in the camps. I opened a big shop in Jalalaqsi. Wife number one and daughter took care of the business. I was buying food from the refugees at a good price and selling it in Jalalaqsi town and returning with food, fuel, and watches that I would sell back to the refugees. Soon I was bringing food to Mogadishu directly and making a lot of money. Then I married CARE wife. I was happy.

"One day I woke up and said my prayers. I was sitting on my mat when I saw a group of people coming carrying the Koran. They came into my compound.

"Salaam Alechem."

"'Alechem Salaam,' I said. We shook hands. I knew the first man. He spread mats. We were talking about the Koran and life. I told CARE wife to prepare tea, and quickly. She was eighteen years old and a beauty.

"What can I do for you?" I asked the men.

"We are here to propose that you marry the daughter of this sheikh."

"This was the biggest honor. I had earned this. A man would not have offered his daughter if I was a bad man.

"I said, 'Thank you. I want to be engaged now,' so it took place there and then. A goat was brought and slaughtered and we had a feast of rice and goat meat. I gave the elders a gift of an *imamad*, a cloth turban. And then I paid the bride price of 2 million shillings."

I was astonished. That was a lot of money in 1986. But Abdi was proud. "She was the daughter of a sheikh," he told me again. "And that is nothing compared to the camels and guns and horses that would be expected of me when I was a nomad. I would have given 100 camels.

"I had three wives and life was blessed. Later the NGOs came and advised people to farm, but there was no reason to. When the NGOs would tell us this or that, we would try to make them believe we were serious. When they would leave, we would just laugh at them.

"Anyone who was seen doing that work was seen as someone who is poor, someone with no camels and no goats. A man of that sort cannot marry a girl whose father has camels. A man of that sort cannot marry the daughter of a sheikh.

"We became richer than the Hawiye people who lived in the area, and they used to approach us for food help.

"At first we had good relations with the people. We were sharing and helping each other and doing business. Then the Siyaad Barre disaster fell on us. Around 1985, he started saying, 'These people are Hawiye and these people are Ogaadeen.' We started getting the first ideas of what Siyaad Barre was up to.

"First there were the rumors," he said, tugging on his ear. We'd start to hear that this person was from this clan and this person is that clan. There were people in the camps who were watching and listening. We were afraid."

Abdi paused for a moment. We could hear the sounds of children crying in the distance. He looked around at the broken buildings. "Every problem that takes place in this world comes from top officials from the big city," he said softly. "Our problems started when Siyaad started handling his own people with his right hand and the others with his left hand."

Siyaad Barre had succeeded in turning the Hawiye and Ogaadeen clans against each other. Young Ogaadeen, convinced that the Hawiye, Isaaq, and other clans were their enemies, began joining the armed forces in record numbers.

"Do you think Siyaad Barre was using the refugees to protect his clan against the Hawiye?" I asked Abdi.

"First we were ignorant about it. Later we discovered that it was the intent of the Siyaad Barre regime to use refugees for his selfish ends." He paused. "I never thought a foreigner would ask that question. . . . We discovered that when the war started. Had I discovered it earlier, I would have done something."

"What?"

"I would have been the first to leave."

"And you didn't know."

He looked at me sternly. "You are a foreigner. You are writing many pages, but I trust you. You will go abroad and you may go and publish anything. What you are writing may harm me. If I know now that you are going to harm me, I would not talk to you.

"If I had known earlier, 2,000 lives would not have been lost in the Shebelle River. Women and children were put in the river to flow with the current.

"I myself was rescued by a Habar Gidir [Hawiye] man. I buried my brother and my daughter with my own hands, in Jalalaqsi, 1990. This is the foundation Afweyne [Siyaad] laid. Now I have the whole picture.

"There were people in the camps who said they were 'politicians.' They would lecture us: 'This is your government; the leader, Siyaad, is your relative. Without him you wouldn't have gotten all these opportunities. He has brought CARE with the food. We expect you to follow the way of the government.' Then they would leave and give the elders more money and tell them to talk to the younger ones. We were afraid."

I had known some of this from Abdullahi Jama and learned more when I was working with Faduma in the refugee camps, but overall, they seemed to have kept it all hidden very well. "Were you told how to deal with the foreigners?" I asked Abdi.

"Siyaad Barre planted some people in the camps called *the eyes of Siyaad Barre*. We knew who they were. They were armed with pistols, and they were everywhere in camp. If foreigners came to the camp and wanted to speak with refugees, the guys from the government would arrange a meeting of stooges. And even if you don't give the answers they want you to give to the foreigners—if you raise your voice or go away from the point—you will be jailed.

"If foreigners come and ask if we have trouble with local people, we were to say, 'We don't have a problem with the locals. We are brothers.' If they asked about government propaganda, we were to say, 'This is a refugee camp; we are free from politics.' If they ask about tribes, just say, 'We are all Somali.'

"If foreigners asked about rations being stolen, we had to say, 'Nothing has been stolen. We get our fair share of what has been given.'"

It was true. I'd heard all those responses thirteen years before.

I turned to Aden Farah, who had been listening silently. He had been sent far away to Qorioley. "When we first got to Qorioley," he said, "Save the Children gave us hoes and seeds. We were told that we should go and plant and then eat the food. The people were angry. 'What are we, slaves?' we asked. There was a big confrontation. How can you ask us to dig and plant?

"'We know you're not slaves, but don't you want to be self-sufficient? Now you have to be given food. We've done everything for you.' We said that we were living on meat and milk before. They said, 'You have left the milk and meat behind. You are refugees. How do you expect to survive now?'

"The people who knew about farming started to plant. The nomads waited to see what would happen."

Aden Farah recalled how an American man with a blond beard stood before them one day after the harvest and, pointing to the farmers, said, "This man is rich and you are poor. He was not too proud to work in the soil."

"People started going toward the farms. Everyone turned toward farming. I planted onions, and soon I had some money and bought a plot of land from another refugee who didn't want to farm.

"I still own the land," he said, quietly, plaintively. "But now all the land that was allocated to the refugees, including the land I have bought there, has been taken over by the people who were living in Qorioley, and I can't use it anymore."

As it turned out, some of the land given to refugees in Qorioley actually belonged to other people. When the government of Siyaad Barre fell, some of those people returned to reclaim their land. And some of the land was taken over by General Mohamed Farah Aydiid's militias. Most of the Ogaadeen refugees fled. Aden said he thought the ones who stayed had been killed.

"There are none left now," he said. "It's too dangerous. If people know you have land there, with documents, they will kill you. The people there take everything, and if you say that you have documents, they say, 'We don't care about the former government and the documents.' They say, 'The government was wrong to settle the refugees here in the first place, and we will not listen to anything you have been given unlawfully.'"

In 1990, the Hawiye-based United Somali Congress, led by Mohamed Farah Aydiid, started fighting its way from the center of Somalia toward Mogadishu. Their route to the city took them through traditional Hawiye areas along the Shebelle River southward from Beledweyne. It was along this very route that the Somali government had located the refugee camps, including Jalalaqsi.

Siyaad Barre expected that his Ogaadeen relatives in the camps, grateful for years of relief food and assistance, would help him battle the rebel army. In some cases they did help. But usually they fled. Barre had failed to terrorize them into loyalty. They feared him as much as they feared the rebels. The camps at Jalalaqsi were the closest to Mogadishu, and by the time the rebels were approaching, most of the inhabitants had heard stories from other refugee camps: Those who resisted were killed.

Abdi and the elders at Jalalaqsi decided not to resist. But then word came to them that Siyaad was sending a shipment of arms to the camp and they were expected to mount a defense against Aydiid and the USC army. The NGOs fled, and the rebels learned that the refugees at Jalalaqsi were armed—even though very few weapons had actually reached the camp. Most had been seized en route by the rebels.

With the Jalalaqsi camp in a panic, the local population from the rebel-allied Hawaadle clan began to attack in advance of the rebel army, which was composed mostly of fighters from the Habar Gidir clan.

"They came through the camp and slaughtered people like goats, and they were thrown into the river," Abdi said. "There was one month of serious fighting every morning.

"One morning after prayers, while I was just having my cup of tea, the Hawaadles came toward the camp." Abdi began to halt. His eyes moistened. "They were using APCs [armored personnel carriers] with big guns that they were firing. We had only light arms, but bullets from an AK are nothing compared to the big guns. There were casualties, and we were all rounded up. We were told to surrender the guns, and we gave them up. And they went to each and every house and looted everything—men, women, and children herded like animals into the town center.

"The Hawaadles knew the refugees well and vice versa. The bad people were known. Those who sided with Barre were known. Some people were put on trucks by the USCSNA [United Somali Congress rebels] and taken toward the Ogaden, taken out of town. Some were massacred on the river in Beledweyne.

"I stood with my arms folded while they took everything from me—clothing, mattresses, beds, 1,000,710 shillings. A married daughter of mine was trying to stop one of them from going into the house. I saw her shot to death in front of me, and I could do nothing.

"I had a Haawadle friend who was a driver. He rescued me and my family and brought us to Mogadishu, where I am today. I lost everything. Everything. Even now I'm afraid."

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I spoke with Abdi and Aden over a period of days, while Mogadishu rocked around us with clan violence. After every night of fighting, I went back to visit them, and they were glad to see me. I met CARE wife who apologized again and again that she had no tea for me.

Abdi understood what the aid had done to him. He knew that it had made him greedy and enticed him to abandon the life he would give anything to return to now.