

THE CONSEQUENCE OF BRITAIN'S TREATIES WITH ETHIOPIA

By Ali Yusuf Issa

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Editor's Note: *Following is the second part of a series in which WardheerNews honors the late Said Samatar, Somalia's eminent historian. As he was also one of WardheerNews esteemed contributors, we believe that he would have liked that we honor him by reflecting Somalia's past and present by reflecting the historical misfortunes that his people experienced in the hands of colonial vultures. This subject, we believe, was his most cherished area of scholarship. This article, "The Consequences of Britain's Treaty with Ethiopia," by Ali Yusuf Isse, picks up where Mr. Roble's "Gucasho Wadaniyee, Gardaro Shisheeye, iyo Garasho-Xumod Soomaaliyeed," or "Reflections of a Nationalist, Foreign Impositions and the Absence of Somali Consciousness." Ali's piece looks into the final dismemberment of the organic Somali society which in 1952 prompted Farah Omar to wail with the following words in vain: "My country and people are too small to be divided." Ali's piece holds Britain responsible for crimes against humanity.*

"My country and my people are too small to be divided; we have been devoured, save us."

Those are immortal words of Farah Oomar, a Somali nationalist in a telegram he sent to the United Nations, lamenting the dismemberment of his country by Britain. Farah who abhorred the British colonial rule was deported and imprisoned in the Comoros Island administrated by Britain.

Today in the history, 28 February 1955 marks the 60th commemoration of Great Britain's transfer of a huge portion of the Somali territory known as Haud and Reserve area to Ethiopia without the consent and knowledge of the concerned Somalis. This article attempts to present an understanding of the events of the past that are still shaping the present history of the Horn of Africa.

Who are the wolves that devour his people? Somalis' past history was marred by tragedy and missed opportunities. Roots of this can be traced to the British colonial rule over the Somali land, and Ethiopia's stature as a black imperialist. By the turn of the 19th century, the Somali peninsula, one of the most culturally and linguistically homogenous region of Africa was divided into British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, French Somaliland and Ethiopian Somali land and what came to be called the Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya. The interests of the British Empire in the Horn of Africa were strategic and economic. Strategically, control of the Horn would have helped safeguard British World Power. As pointed out by Robinson and

Gallagher, the Mediterranean and Indian interests were a dividing wheel in the machine of empire, and the Horn of Africa was one of several lesser wheels connecting them. Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Horn of Africa, because strategic importance, became a competing theater for the contesting of the European colonial powers.

The dismemberment of Somali territory and the division of its people were effected in the last half of the century and the early part of the 20th century by the four expanding empires. Britain was the major player of the contest and in 1884 and 1885 concluded protectorate agreements with the coastal Somalis in order to fill the vacuum created by Egypt's precipitous withdrawal from the region. The provisions of that agreement with Britain concluded states, "no part or whole of their land presently inhabited by them or being under control can't be cede, sell, or mortgage, or otherwise give any portion of their territory to a third party". Did Britain heeded to its obligations? Or, did it honor the agreements? Trust of breach in part of Britain will be the focus of this paper.

Thirteen years after signing that treaty with the Somalis, in 1897 Britain unilaterally entered a secret agreement with the Abyssinian (Ethiopia) in Addis Ababa, in which it had transferred a huge portion of the Somali territory to Ethiopia. Ronnel Rodd the British envoy, who signed the transfer of the land to Abyssinia in a letter he sent to the British Government on May 1897, recounted "the Abyssinian king's claims to a country that is not his as nonsensical". He argued, "I cannot he give any consideration to your points; as history



FROM SOMALILAND. — Mr. Michael Mariano (left), leader of the Somaliland Protectorate delegation, and Sultan Bihi Momeen, from the Ogaden, photographed outside the Colonial Office yesterday.

records and according to international law, that part has always been inhabited by the Somali.” Such were the strong arguments of no other one but Ronnel Rod, the British envoy who had signed the treaty of the transfer of the land to Ethiopia. Ronnel recalls in the discussion on the need for accurate boundaries and precise maps, and he said; “Menelik feigned ignorance of such matters” as it is not a country he knows. It is clear here that both parties are ignorant or did know little on the Somali land carving up between them. More seriously, the treaty was affecting the lives of innocent people divided across artificial boundaries. It is worth to quote here the remarks on the delimitation of borders by Lord Salisbury, then British Prime Minister who said, “*We (the British and the French) have been engaged in drawing lines upon maps where no Whiteman’s foot ever trod. We have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediments that never know exactly where the mountains and rivers and lakes were.*”

The result of this exercise divided the Somali nation, bifurcate their political and social structures, and fractured their identity which eventually led to further dislocations, genocide and disorientation. The British are responsible legally, politically and morally for the whole catastrophe perpetrated by Menelik and his cohorts. The imperial past is far from being dead, on the contrary it is actually very



much part of the contemporary political history in the Horn of Africa. The issue of Ogaden that became the bone of contention between Somalia and Ethiopia and led deadly wars between the two countries in the 1960s and the later part of 1970s is the region’s most festering wound.

It is after that treaty; under Menelik that there took place that expansion eastwards which brought the Ethiopians into traditionally Somali country previously separate from Abyssinians and perpetrated genocide and dislocation. In 1884, the Egyptians had abandoned their Somaliland colony and withdrew their garrisons along the Somali coasts, including Harar. While Britain occupied the coastal towns of Somaliland, the rich, strategic and climatically attractive province of Harar was returned to its ancient dynasty, helpless in the face of Ethiopian expansion. How different it might have been in the subsequent history of the Horn if Britain had occupied Harar in the wake of the Egyptian withdrawal. What a missed opportunity for the

Somalis. Britain not only didn't occupy Harar but helped out the Ethiopians to occupy it. The fall of the city-state of Harar in 1887 was a disaster for the Somalis because Harar had been hitherto an effective "little buffer state" against the Abyssinian encroachments. Harar which in the past effectively repulsed the Abyssinian aggression could not this time stand against the outnumbered and well-armed forces.

According to H. G. C. Swayne visiting Harar in the spring of 1893, the dolorous plight of the Somalis in the face of Ethiopian aggression arose from the superior armament of the latter and the Ethiopia had availed herself of the preferential treatment accorded to her under the Brussels General Act of 1890 and had built up her armed strength to an extraordinary degree. All European rivalry powers, including Britain, generously supplied modern arms to Abyssinians, and also allowed to import large quantities of armaments from the Somali ports, while Somalis were denied any sort of arms. Swayne reports again that the Abyssinians import large quintiles of breech-loading small arms from Somali ports, while Somalis are only armed with spear and bows and arrows, and are not allowed to import fire arms of any sort whatever from their own coasts, which was administered by the British. Betrayal of act!

Somalis at various times desperately pleaded Britain for arms or protection from the Ethiopian evils but fell on deaf ears. Somalis clamored for help from the British against the Ethiopian onslaught and Somalis complained to Swayne: *"We are not allowed to import fire arms, the only effective weapons against the marauding Ethiopians, and we ask the British, who occupy our ports, either to protect us, or allow us import guns with which we can protect ourselves"*. Their plea fell on deaf ears! In the face of the well armed Ethiopian aggression, the Somalis were in a parlous state. Armed with spears and bows and arrows, Somalis helplessly watched their country swarmed by the invading enemies and their people get the torments of hell.

The transfer of the Somali land to Ethiopia by Britain had far-reaching effects on Somalis. In gruesome details, foreign travels account abounds of horror stories about the "trails of devastation" left behind by the murdering soldiers of Menelik of Abyssinia. The soldiers that captured Harar and marched beyond the Somali plain land were extreme brutes. Immediate neighbors of many Somalis like Bertire, Abaskul, Gari, Maalinguur and Issa had to bear the havoc wrought by the Abyssinian impoverished soldiers. To be an object of an Ethiopian raid was apparently undergo a terrifying experience for the civilian population of Somalis that arouse memory of pain and anguish.

In horrific details of foreign travels presented a vivid picture of insecurity, destruction and mass starvation in the Somali country. *"The army having halted in enemy country, i.e. Somalia was ordered to destroy and plunder flourished field of wheat, sorghum and maize, the producer of the toil of a rebellious tribes of Bertire and Gari Somalis in and around Jigjiga, and in the course of half an hour the soil being stripped of every acre of cultivation, there commenced a general*

scramble for the rafters and ribs of houses of which torched and razed to ground. Green field and smiling meadows quickly lost their bloom under the tramp of the steed” , he continued saying, “far and wide the country was laid waste, every vestige of human habitation destroyed under the torch.” Such, deeply disturbing readings are that of Swayne, an English agent who visited the country at the advent of the Ethiopian onslaught on Somalis. The exactions of the soldiers in the newly conquered Somali country and the plunder and pillages were greatly resented and often led to resistance and friction of all kind. Swayne in his Book “*Seventeen trips to Somali land and a visit to Abyssinian*” mentioned of Garad Mohamed Ahmed of Bertire who lost his dignity and sovereignty at the arrival of Abyssinia who came into his Bertire country like swarm of locusts when they took Harar, came to his camp and asked “the arrival of anybody in European shape, that would administer the country and save them from the Abyssinian”.

The murder, turmoil, and strife which characterized Menelik’s terror and vengeance did not end with his death, but Ras Makonen and his son Haile Selassie continued in the same mad pace. When no help came forward from Britain and their pleas went unrequited, the Somalis turned to their Sheikh (Mullahs) to lead jihad against both Britain and Ethiopia. In response, Seyyid Mohamed Abdulla Hassan preached to wage war against the infidels and in February 24, 1900, raided the Abyssinian garrison in Jigjiga to retrieve flocks of camels they looted from Reer Isaq of Ogaden tribe. Here, at this stage, Seyyid Mohamed’s jihad appeared to have been directed more clearly against the Ethiopians than the British. The camels were retrieved and many guns fell into the hands of the Dervishes. Under the leadership of Seyyid Mohamed Hassan, the Somali resistance against the British and Ethiopian occupation flared throughout the Somali territory that had left a trail of destruction and destitution. For a quarter of a century the Dervishes were a formidable force until they were heavily bombarded by the British Air Force. At the destruction of the Dervishes, both Britain and the Ethiopians moved into the hinterland of the Somali country and exercised their terror rules over the Somalis, until the Italians dislodged them.

The effect on the Horn of Africa after Italy’s entry was dramatic. The coming of the Italians and the collapse of the feudal regime of Ethiopia was a sigh of relief for the Somalis. Haile Selassie came to Harare 1935 to rally the Somalis against the impending Italian attack in the name of the Black race. In response, the Somali elders didn’t mince their words. “Why should they fight the Italians, one asked, when it is Ethiopians who abused and maltreated us” (Markakis, *The last Frontiers*).

Not surprisingly, the Italian invasion gave vent to acts of revenge and hopes of emancipation from the Abyssinian reign of terror and the Somalis fought alongside of the Italians and marched up to Addis Ababa. In 1935 the whole Somali lands fell in the hands of Italy, and revived the nation’s hope of reunification. For the first time in decades, Somalis incorporated as a family,

and freely moved across the Somali country, of course, without artificial lines restrictions, barriers and taxations. One of Italy's accomplishments was the construction of the road about 1197km that connects Mogadishu with Jigjiga and Harar passing through Somali towns of Qabri dahar and Dhagabour. Trade thrived, production boomed and Somali nationalism surfaced under the Italian rule.

Unfortunately, the Italian rule was short lived and lasted for few years from 1934 to 1940, and the British military administration replaced. This was a tragic history for the Somalis and Britain came with the same notion of Anti-Somali sentiments. On January 31, 1942 the British announced that it had liberated Abyssinia and drew up an agreement to which Somali territory will remain under the British military administration.

Given the frequency and virulence of the Ethiopian raids, it was natural that the first pan-Somali effort against the colonial occupation and for the unification of all territories in to one country emerged. Somali political organizations were formed; Somali Youth Club later SYL came into existence in 1943 and later rapidly spread throughout the Somali country. It had opened very effective branches in Jigjiga, Dir Dawa, Harar and all major towns in the country. Somali elders from Harar, Jigjiga, Dir dawa and other towns in Ogaden travelled to Mogadishu to meet the Four Power Commissions charged with the investigating the wishes of the inhabitants of the ex-Italian colonies to demonstrate their willingness to join their brothers in the South.

As a leopard never changes its spots, in January 1948, Britain once again betrayed the Somalis. Without the knowledge and consent of the Somalis, it had unilaterally ceded part of the Somali land, including my birth place, Jigjiga to Ethiopia. In a rare incident, 25 Somalis were killed and a number of people injured and thousands fled from the horror of the Ethiopian marauding parties to Northern Somalia.

History repeats by itself. Britain again, against all the wishes of the Somalis and against humanity, on February 28, 1955 transferred the last portion of the Somali land known as Haud, and reserve area to the imperial government of Ethiopia. Britain's betrayal of the trust put in it by the Somalis had been breached on other than Britain itself. This latest transfer enhanced the Somalis to yearn for freedom and reunification. Delegations were sent to the United Nations and to the Great Britain to lodge their complaints against the transfer and for the reunification of their country. An Organization called "the United National Front for Retaining the Reserved Area and the Haud (NUFRRH) was formed under Michael Mariano, a Somali Christian, and a veteran politician. The primary goal of the Front was the recovery of the lost Somali territories and the reunification of the Somali territory. A delegation led by Mariano, comprising Sultan Bihi of Awareh region, Sultan Abdillahi Dirriye and Sultan Abdurrahman Dirrie left for London and New York. Michael Mariano, on a visit to Britain, argued for the return of the lost Somali territories and described the actions of the British as making the Somalis "guests in their own

houses.” In London the delegation met with the then Secretary of State for Colonies in attempt to persuade the British Government to honor its 1885 Anglo-Somali treaties, which preceded the agreement with Ethiopia. Mariano referred TO articles of the agreement that stated the British undertook: “never to cede, sell, mortgage or otherwise give occupation, save the British government, any portion of their territory in habited by them.”

The delegation also presented their case to the British public through the press. In one news conference in London, Michael Mariano, the spokesperson of the delegation, bitterly complained of the British fiasco and stated, “Our land had been handed by Britain to Ethiopia on a plate”. His press conference was covered by the British papers, such as the Daily Express, the Observer, the Daily Mail and others.

The Daily Mail discussed the issue the date Great Britain hands over the Haud and Reserve area to Ethiopia (28 February). It stated that Britain was handing a “slice” of the disputed areas to Ethiopia and the Somalis were “protesting bitterly”. The daily Express referred to the “four men from a nomad land, Who came to London ‘with a disturbing tale’”? The result of the Anglo-Ethiopian treaties, ‘dishonored’ prior Anglo-Somali Agreements. The paper quoted the ‘envoy’ spokesman, 41 years-old Michael Mariano; who stated, “it is our intention to take this matter to the UNO (United Nations Organization) by any and every available means. We demand Justice and we intend to get it”. ‘The British people,’ the paper stated, “cannot be satisfied with the way Mr. Lennox-Boyd (colony secretary) has treated this appeal”; the paper concluded that Lennox-Boyd ” should give earnest and urgent reconsideration to the Somali protest... An unjust treaty is not something to be upheld but to be revised.” The Observe paper story, which was written by Colin Legume, related the now familiar story of the signing of the Anglo-Somali Agreements, and how eleven years later the British signed another with Ethiopia. The Anglo-Ethiopian agreement of 1897 was “invalid” because it automatically abrogated the terms of the Protocol Agreements of 1884-1885. Lennox-Boyd expressed to Laguna some ‘misgivings’ on the issue as it affects Somalis; nevertheless, he was unapologetic and unswerving to his decision.

The issue never rested there, it was also debated in the House of the Commons. The members debated over three main questions related to the petition of the Somali delegations: the legality of the Anglo-Ethiopian agreement, the reason for the British government signing an agreement with Ethiopia in 1884, and whether the British government would support the petition the Somali land delegation presented at the United Nations General Assembly to refer their case to the International Court of Justice. The British Foreign Secretary stated that Britain would oppose the Somali motion and he had already informed the Somali delegation of this and instructed his United Kingdom’s envoy in the UN to block any move of the Somalis. He further stated, “in view of the legal advisers, we are likely to be on weak ground if this question were to be referred to an International tribunal”.

The Somali delegation headed to New York in a bid to stop the British act of treachery of transferring their land to Ethiopia in hope that Egypt will sponsor them. Unfortunately, Somali attempt to present the case before the International Community failed after Egypt declined to sponsor it.

The transfer led massive protest and resistances, in Hargiesha the Somali male population wore piece of cloth on the head which symbolizes their grievances. Unfortunately, Somalis appeal to reverse the decision was never heeded by Britain.

The imperial past is far from being dead, for several decades the Horn of Africa has been the site of Africa's most endemic inter and intra state conflict as the result of the British unguided policy of the past. The newly independent country Somalia inherited a complicated and complex territorial dispute with its African neighbors that led to the deadly Ethio-Somali wars of 1964 and 1977 respectively.

Thousands of people have died, millions have been misplaced and an equal number, if not more, ended up as refugees, and many more were kept as petty hostages in their own country under an alien rule dictated by the British Colonial policy. In this case, Britain is responsible legally, politically, and morally for the predicaments of the Somalis in the hands of successful Ethiopian rulers.

The betrayal of Britain never end up there; in 1963 again it had transferred the Northern Frontiers Districts of Somali territory to Kenya despite a referendum in which the inhabitants voted unanimously to join the Somali Republic. The Somalis in NFD suffered consequential effects as a result of the transfer of their land to Kenya and have since remained in emergency rule.

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