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NEWS FROM AFAR!

An Interview with Amb. Abdillahi Said Osman

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Editor's Note: Somalia is a nation of duality, markedly characterized with extreme highs and lows. Whereas the majority of its society is deprived of any chance for education, a handful of its urban community members have a world class education and diplomatic experiences.

Ambassador Abdillahi Said Osman, often known as Ambassador Osman in the diplomatic community, is one of those highly educated and diplomatic personalities. WardheerNews is pleased to introduce to its esteemed readers Ambassador Osman and his distinguished career in diplomacy and world politics.

Ambassador Osman has held numerous impressive positions where he contributed to governance, conflict resolution and institutional capacity building in Africa. The latest office he held was the Assistant Secretary General of the OAU (Organization of African Unity), now called African Union (AU). In his tenure at the OAU, Mr. Osman has played an important role in helping establish the democratization process that is taking root in Africa today. Among some of the projects he directly supervised includes the setting up of the legal instruments for the establishment of the AU Peace and Security Council.



Abdelkarim A. Hassan has conducted this interview with Osman for WardheerNews.

WardheerNews (WDN): Ambassador Osman, can you briefly tell us about your background?

Ambassador Osman: First I would like to thank WardheerNews for their tireless effort of bringing issues that are of interest to the Somali people wherever they may reside. For the consistency in providing quality news that keeps us informed about the current state of affairs and for providing a positive forum for exchange of ideas.

I was born in Berbera, I completed my primary and secondary education in Somali schools (Berbera and Amoud respectively) in 1959 and after passing the GCE exam, I was granted a government scholarship to the UK for my higher education to study law. I pursued my studies at the University of Hull, Faculty of Law Yorks, England and was awarded a Law Degree LLB (Hons.) majoring in Public International Law and Mercantile/Corporate Law. I served as Secretary of the University Law Society and won the University Law Prize in my class. After passing the prescribed Bar exams, I was called to the English Bar and qualified as Barrister-at-Law 1963. I am a member of the Honorable Society of the Middle Temple and had my professional legal training at the Beans Chambers Temple, London under the supervision of Mr. Patrick Mayhew (QC) Northern Ireland, who became the Attorney General of U.K. and later Secretary for Ireland during the 80s. I also completed a graduate Master's Degree at Long Island University (New York) during my tenure as UN Ambassador in New York. My thesis was on: The Refugee Crisis in Africa and The Role of International Organizations.

Having completed my education, I returned home and joined the Somali Public Service in April 1964 in fulfillment of my national obligation to apply my education in the service of my mother country. I had a very interesting and exciting professional career in the Somali Public Administration (1964-1990) during which I held a number of senior level positions including:

- Ambassador/Permanent representative to the United Nations, New York (1984-1990);
- Ambassador/Permanent representative to the UN office, Geneva (1976-84);
- Chief State Counsel (Avvocato Generale dello Stato) (1970-1976) Permanent Secretary;
- Ministry of Justice (1968-70) Director, Legal Department (1965-68) Legal Counselor of the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, (1965);
- Secretary to the Prime Minister (1964).

During my public service, I had the opportunity to Chair a number of legal and technical commissions particularly in the area of codification and legal integration.

At the international level, I attended many conferences and meetings held in different parts of the world under the auspices of the UN, OAU, Non-Aligned Movement and League of Arab States. I was adviser to the Somali delegation at the Ministerial talks on the Ethiopian/Somali dispute held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 1988, and later in Mogadishu. Earlier in 1967, I was a member of the Somali delegation at the Arusha Summit on the Somali/Kenya relations. During my tenure as the Somali Ambassador to the United Nations in New York and Geneva I served several times as chairman of both the Arab and the African ambassadors at the



United Nations. I was also elected the Vice President of the General assembly of the United Nations in 1984.

In June 1991, I was elected OAU Assistant Secretary General by the African Summit held in Abuja, Nigeria, for a four year term and was later appointed OAU Senior Advisor till 1999. For the past five years I have been involved in a number of UN/AU assignments related to conflict resolution, legal and development issues. I have recently been appointed as Deputy Cluster Leader/ Consultant on Governance and Rule of Law for the UN/World Bank Joint Needs Assessment (JNA) on Somalia based in Nairobi. I am currently a Diplomat in Residence at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University and Advisor on Africa.

WDN: How did you get interested in Law; and is there any role model in your early career or educational pursuit?

Ambassador Osman: As a student in the Secondary School (Amoud), I was interested to read about court cases and admired the skill and performance of lawyers in book stories. In particular, I was inspired and impressed by the writings and speeches of the famous leader Mahatma Ghandi who was a Barrister-at-Law. However, it was Mr. Robert Shaw of New Zealand, former Attorney General of Somaliland Protectorate in the 50s whom I consulted in choosing my professional career. Since I did well in the GCE exams, he advised me to take up law though he cautioned me of the difficulties and challenges of British legal education. I should, however, pay special tribute to my supervisor as a law student, Mr. Patrick Mayhew who was always a great supporter in fact,; my mentor and role model during the crucial period of my legal training at the Temple in London. What impressed me about him was that he was a professionally competent lawyer, smart and well dressed and above all he had unique talent of advocacy and sense of persuasion in the presentation of his case at court proceedings. He was a dynamic, courteous and charming person who was highly respected and admired by his colleagues in the Bar ssociation. I will never forget the professional guidance, counseling and advice he consistently used to give me during my legal training in Chambers.

WDN: Ambassador Osman, you have a distinguished career in diplomacy. Africa is blessed with resources that could feed the world, yet it is lagging behind the rest of the world in every aspect of development. Some argue that the core problem facing Africa is due to lack of good leadership, good governance and conspicuous corruption. What are your thoughts on this topic?

Ambassador Osman: I agree that Africa is lagging behind the rest of the world particularly in terms of socioeconomic development. Years of colonial oppression, civil wars, disease, and natural disasters etc. had significantly contributed to the African crisis. It appears that the shadow of the painful history of the past still lingers over the Continent.

The major factor, however, is the lack of good governance, mismanagement of the economy, poverty and political instability caused by civil wars and internal conflicts. There are also

external factors such as foreign interference, the heavy debt burden and the impact of the current inequitable international economic order.

WDN: The heads of African states convene a yearly meeting, where often the same faces appear year after year for decades at a time. Was there any effort from the organization of the AU to strengthen democratization of the African States?

Ambassador Osman: It is true that in the past there were African leaders who remained in office for many years, some for decades, few others even declared themselves Presidents for Life (e.g. Idi Amin, Jean Bukasa).

After the establishment of the OAU in 1963, autocrats who assumed power by Coup d'état or through fake elections ruled many African countries. With the end of the cold war however, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, African countries were left to resolve their own problems themselves without foreign interference and they adopted the concept of self-reliance, African solution to African problem as a guiding principle. In response to the challenges facing Africa after the cold war, and following pressure from the international donor community, African leaders endorsed two important resolutions, one on democratization and respect for the rule of law, and, the other, on the issue of unconstitutional change of government (or Coup d'état).

In 1990 African heads of states and governments adopted a formal declaration by which they committed themselves to the respect for democratic principles, human rights and good governance and in 1996 African leaders denounced the change of government by unconstitutional means.

During my tenure of office in the OAU, dramatic political changes were taking place in Africa as many countries were transitioning from dictatorship to democratic system of governance. Many countries adopted in their constitutions new provisions, which called for limiting the period of presidency to no more than two terms. The unconstitutional takeover of an elected government was considered illegal and denied legitimacy and recognition by the OAU. Regimes that defied this established rule were subject to threats of sanctions and isolation by member states. For example, in 1995 the military junta which toppled the legitimate government of Sierra Leone was condemned and denied recognition; similarly the A.U. rejected the recent attempt by a group of officers to install an unelected leader (the President's son) for the Republic of Togo after the death of President Eyadema which was considered to be unconstitutional and subject to sanctions. This was a historic and bold development in Africa, which needs to be commended.

With the wind of change blowing over the Continent, many African Heads of State, or the so-called Big Men lost power and were replaced by younger dynamic, democratically elected leaders. Most of the aged OAU founding fathers are gone and new faces have now emerged to lead Africa for a better future.

WDN: One incident that has tainted the OAU in a most negative way was the vicious killing of the former president of Liberia William Tolbert who was the chairman of OAU at the time. Can you share with us about the incident and what position the OAU has taken to discourage such acts?

Ambassador Osman: The murder of William Tolbert, the former President of Liberia and a great African Statesman, was a shock to Africa and the International Community at large. On April 12th 1980 an army master sergeant named Samuel Doe led a group of soldiers into President Tolbert Presidential Palace and assassinated him. President Tolbert was at the time holding the eminent office of Chairman of the OAU to which he was elected by the OAU Summit held in Monrovia in July 1979. I attended that Summit as a member of the Somali Delegation. The OAU expressed indignation and strongly condemned this heinous criminal act. This was the first time that an incumbent chairman of the OAU was killed while in office, but the tragic irony of the incident was that the killer, Samuel Doe and his regime was later recognized by the OAU and members of the Assembly of African Heads of State. This was a disgrace to the image of the African people in the eyes of the world.

Drawing lessons from past experiences such as the murder of Mr. Tolbert, African leaders adopted specific provisions in order to prevent similar tragic incidents from happening again in the future. Article 4 of the Constitutive Act of the African Union sets out prospect for the sanctity of human life, condemnation of political assassinations and rejection of unconstitutional changes of government as fundamental principles to be scrupulously observed by all member states of the African Union.



WDN: The Organization of African Unity has adopted a new name calling itself the African Union. What was the purpose of such a change? Was there a change in ideological philosophy between the old and the new?

Ambassador Osman: The reason of changing the name of the Organization to AU was not ideological but essentially institutional. The OAU, which was established in 1963, was outmoded and became irrelevant to the current realities of Africa and the contemporary world. The OAU was created at a time when many African countries were under racial and colonial domination and those, which attained their independence, were mainly preoccupied with the domestic problems of nation building. In the international front, the liberation of African countries under colonialism and apartheid were accorded top priority in the OAU Agenda.

Since African states were concerned about the protection of their hard won independence, the principles of sovereignty and noninterference in domestic affairs of the state were given special emphasis in the OAU Charter.

With the advent of the new millennium, Africa needed a new institution that would effectively address the current realities and challenges in the continent that should focus more on the needs and aspirations of African peoples for democratization, good governance, human rights, economic, integration, humanitarian, and environmental issues. In order to deal with these priority issues, a new Organization had to be established with a set of objectives and principles and a new political direction. This was indeed a major historical achievement. It was basically the pressing need for change, which led to the birth of the African Union.

WDN: What are your thoughts on the future of Africa and the challenges facing the continent today such as the Aids epidemic, famine, civil wars, and corruption amid globalization and high technology era?

Ambassador Osman: Despite the challenges of Civil War, AIDS pandemic, famine, etc. to which you referred, I am optimistic about the future of Africa. Africa is a huge continent of 54 independent states and represents a major segment of the world population. It is rich in mineral and other natural resources and abundant in skilled talented human resources. What Africa needs is good leadership and effective institutions. Leaders like Mbeki of South Africa and Obasanjo of Nigeria as well as others have already done a lot and to some extent contributed significantly to the cause of peace and socioeconomic development.

Since its inauguration in Durban South Africa in 2002, I believe that the African Union has made good progress in establishing the appropriate institutions at continental level. A number of important bodies like the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) have been set up and are now functional. The Peer Review Mechanism on governance is also in place. The Pan African Parliament, which held its inaugural session in South Africa last month is an important institutional organ which can reinforce the work of the AU Commission in conflict resolution, democratization, human rights and economic integration in Africa. Of particular importance is the creation of Peace and Security Council which replaced the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention Management and Resolution. The establishment of a secure and peaceful environment is the key to socioeconomic development.

As a former Chairman of the African Union, President Chisano of Mozambique said, the AU would make a valuable contribution to reversing the current mood of despair and marginalization and bring more self-esteem and dignity to the people of Africa. • For me, it was an honor to have made some modest contributions to the institutionalization process leading to the adoption of the Protocol for the establishment of the AU Peace and Security Council.

WDN: You had recently served as a consultant for the UN/World Bank Joint Needs Assessment (JNA) Project for Somalia. Can you briefly discuss the mission of the JNA Project?

Ambassador Osman: The objective of the JNA was to undertake an in-depth realistic assessment of the rehabilitation and transitional recovery needs to serve as a basis for the preparation of a Development Reconstruction Plan for the next five years. It is coordinated jointly by the UN and World Bank supported by the donors and carried out in cooperation with the Somali authorities.

Assessments were conducted extensively throughout the whole country under six main Clusters including governance and the Rule of Law, macroeconomic policy, infrastructure, social services, productive sectors and environment. The assessment exercise has now been concluded and the Final Report is due to be submitted to the Somali Authorities for approval and validation in June/July 2006. Later in the year, it is expected that the JNA Report will be submitted to the International Pledging Conference in Rome, Italy.

WDN: It was reported that some individuals voiced concern against the mission of the JNA as it related to Somaliland issues; could you share with us what was the concern and how it was addressed?

Ambassador Osman: Before responding to your question, let me say that the JNA Assessment mission to Somaliland on 15th January 2006 was well received by the Somaliland authorities and it successfully achieved its main purpose. Contrary to unfounded rumors, there were no problems or setbacks and the work of the mission went on smoothly as planned. The JNA consultation workshop was held in Hargeisa as scheduled (15th-19th January 2006) in a congenial atmosphere at Mansoor Hotel with the full and active participation of the representatives of Somaliland authorities, civil society leaders, traditional elders, intellectuals, women organizations etc.

The briefing/ consultative sessions of the workshop covered a wide range of issues under the main items of the JNA work plan including governance, safety and the rule of law; macroeconomic policy; infrastructure, social services, productive services, etc. The workshop was concluded with a positive note and adoption of recommendations, which would be reflected in the JNA Report.

In reference to your specific question, I am informed that certain individuals reportedly voiced some concern against the JNA mission through the local media. However, since their concerns or complaints were not raised during the formal proceedings of the workshop, I need not comment on them. All that I can say is that the workshop participants were fully supportive and in favor of the of the JNA process which they strongly endorsed.

WDN: For the forty-six years that the Republic has been in existence (from 1960 to present), Somali had been more or less in turmoil. What can you tell us about the state of affairs in Somalia and how we can break the vicious cycle of clan polarization?

Ambassador Osman: As you are aware, the Somali people suffered for so long from repressive policies of the past Somali regimes, which were the main causes of institutional disintegration and state failure in Somalia. The ensuing clan based civil war fueled by powerful warlords and their associates in the South further aggravated the situation and resulted in anarchy, devastation and humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions. How to move forward from such a cycle of violence and clan polarization? This is not an easy question. In my humble opinion the continued clan conflict is fuelled by the warlords, merchants and other interest groups particularly in the South. It would be difficult to successfully tackle this problem without the reestablishment of administration and the fundamental institutions of governance at the central and local levels.

Democratization, human rights, rule of law and good leadership are essential requirements for promoting social harmony and understanding among various segments of society. Clan affiliation is in-built in the fabric of Somali custom and tradition and cannot be eliminated or uprooted but its negative and sometimes destructive manifestations could be addressed and perhaps successfully managed through awareness campaigns, debate and interaction with the involvement of various segments of civil society, community elders, religious leaders, youth and women. Promoting an action oriented program of dialogue and reconciliation conducted at grassroots, district, regional and national levels can also help bring the people together to establish a common front against the evils of clan based hatred, discord and division.

WDN: In light of the recent political developments in Mogadishu and the South, coupled by what is called the contact group and its communique what advice would you give to the TFG?

Ambassador Osman: The establishment of the Contact Group (CG) on Somalia is a timely positive initiative on the part of the international community and should be supported. The ousting of the warlords by the Islamic Courts is also a significant development to be welcomed. The establishment of the CG and the ousting of the criminal warlords are both important events which could provide new opportunities for positive change in Somalia and contribute to the restoration of peace and stability in the country. I believe the TFG should now work on ways of consolidating its authority at the domestic level and develop and promote a strategy based on dialogue, reconciliation and consensus building mobilizing community elders across clan lines to reach out to all segments of society. At the Regional and international levels TFG should continue cooperation with the UN, AU, IGAD & LAS and urge these institutions and member states concerned to abide by their commitments under various Resolutions on Assistance to Somalia.

WDN: What is your view of the role and contribution that the diaspora community can play in the reconciliation and nation building in Somalia?

Ambassador Osman: Like other Diaspora communities Somalis in North America and elsewhere should demonstrate a sense of commitment and solidarity in support of their great nation at this critical hour of need. They can play a pivotal role in peace building and reconciliation processes as well as render an advise and guidance in other areas of national concern. A year ago, a good friend of mine, Ismail Ali Ismail (Geeldoon) wrote a very interesting article under the title of “Warrlordism, oralism, and Murky waters of Somali History” In his well-written and lucid presentation Ismail made a strong case for Somalis to make an effort to write their own history for the benefit of succeeding generation. This is pertinent and valid suggestion; well-presented and forcefully argued and I commend Ismail for that. The article has been a wakeup call for Somalis in the Diaspora and as well at home.

But apart from the need to put on record our past experiences, I believe we could also do more for the motherland particularly in national institution building and reconstruction at this crucial period when the UN and the international community are actively engaged in a multi-faceted program of peace building, economic recovery and reconstruction.

I am very optimistic about the future of our beloved country and I am confident that durable peace and stability can be achieved thanks to the ongoing reconciliation efforts conducted under the auspices of the, Arab League and with the support of the UN , AU and the international community My very best wishes for the success of this commendable initiative.

WDN: Thank you

Ambassador Osman: You are welcome Abdelkarim