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NEWS FROM AFARI!

AN INTERVIEW WITH KENYAN WRITER AND PHOTOJOURNALIST RASNA WARAH

By WardheerNews
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Editor's Note: *Rasna Warah, a Writer and Photojournalist, is a Kenyan of Indian decent and the author of numerous books including Mogadishu Then and Now (2012), and her most recent book, UNSilenced: Unmasking the United Nations' culture of cover ups, corruption and impunity (2016). WardheerNews had an in depth interview with Rasna about her books and her interests about Somalia. Abdelkarim Hassan conducted the interview for WardheerNews.*

WardheerNews (WDN): Rasna Warah, we are delighted to welcome you to WardheerNews.com. Before we delve into the bulk of the interview, could you please share with our readers a brief background about yourself?

Rasna Warah: First, I would like to thank WardheerNews for the opportunity. I am a Kenyan of Indian descent. I was born in Nairobi but now live in the coastal town of Malindi with my retired husband. For about a decade, I worked as an editor and writer at the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). I write a column for the *Daily Nation*, Kenya's leading newspaper. I have also written five books, two of which are on Somalia.



Abdelkarim and Rasna

WDN: When did you first realize you wanted to be a writer, and who are some of the authors that have inspired you and what are the most challenging parts of writing a book (s)?

Rasna Warah: As a writer I have been inspired by writers who have challenged the *status quo* and introduced ideas that have had a revolutionary impact on their societies. My all-time favorite author is James Baldwin who dissected race relations in the United States in a profound and meaningful way. I also admire Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who helped me understand the devastating psychological impact of colonialism on African societies. When I was a young woman, I was influenced by writers such as Nawal el Saadawi, whose book *The Hidden Face of Eve* had a real impact on me, and the American author Marilyn French, a pioneer in the feminist movement. Among the younger, newer writers, I have been impressed with Arundhati Roy’s deep intellectualism. I have recently also become a fan of Elif Shafak, a Turkish writer whose novel *The Forty Rules of Love* is an ode to the Sufi saint Rumi.

I am a writer of non-fiction, so for me the biggest challenge is always the research, which takes the longest time. So, for example, my book *War Crimes* was the culmination of more than two years of research. Once I have done the research, the task of writing doesn’t take me very long. *War Crimes*, for instance, took me about two months to write.

WDN: You have immense interest to write about Somalia as you have written many books and articles about Somalia. What led you to write about the complex issues of Somalia and where does your interest originate?

Rasna Warah: I had no interest in Somalia until I visited Mogadishu, quite by accident, in November 2011. When I got there and saw the scale of destruction in the city, I realized that there was a story about Somalia that was not being told. I saw all these once-beautiful buildings and wondered why it was that no one talked about the vibrant urban culture that characterized Mogadishu in the 1950s and ‘60s and even earlier. In the public imagination, Mogadishu was this wild and violent wasteland, and yet there were once cinemas, parks, cathedrals, theatres and football stadiums there.

Why, I wondered, had few journalists reported that one of Africa’s most historic cities had been so utterly destroyed? How had Somalis and the world allowed this level of destruction and devastation to continue for more than two decades? When I came back to Nairobi, I met several Somalis who had lived in Mogadishu during the pre-civil war era who told me of all the good times they had in the city when they were growing up. The book *Mogadishu Then and Now* was a result of that first visit.

Another reason why I felt I needed to tell the Somalia story was because I was very disappointed with how the Kenyan media was reporting the country, especially after Kenya invaded southern Somalia in 2011. There was no nuance in the reporting, and very little understanding of

Somalia's history. After the Al-Shabaab terrorist attack on the Westgate mall in Nairobi, Kenyans became infected with Somaliophobia. People, including some journalists, started using the words "Somali" and "terrorist" interchangeably, and yet many of the Al-Shabaab terrorists who have struck terror in Kenya have been non-Somali Kenyans.

WDN: In your book, [*Mogadishu Then and Now \(2012\)*](#), you succeeded in linking the city's rich and variegated history and its present decay. Can you share with us how the idea of your book came about, and did you notice any signs of recovery given the immense challenges ahead?



Rasna Warah: When I came back to Nairobi from Mogadishu, I wrote a pictorial article for the *East African* newspaper that showed the scale of destruction in the city.

Shortly afterwards, Ismail Osman, an American-Somali based in Columbus, Ohio, contacted me and told me that he knew someone called Mohamud Dirios who was once the director of the Somali National Museums in Mogadishu and who had spent the last two decades collecting images of Mogadishu before the civil war. He sent me some of these images and that is how the idea of doing an exhibition and a book titled “Mogadishu Then and Now” came about. We curated the images and held very successful exhibitions in Istanbul, Nairobi and Mogadishu.



When I returned to Mogadishu in 2013 to launch the book, I noticed significant improvement in the infrastructure, though many old historic buildings had still not been reconstructed. There were several new buildings that had come up, and some semblance of normalcy was returning. However, the task of rebuilding Mogadishu is going to be huge and it may take years before Mogadishu becomes a “normal” city.

Apart from rebuilding the physical infrastructure, however, there is also a need to build viable institutions in Somalia. Somalia is still very much an unregulated, informal economy. There is no functioning Central Bank, no revenue collection authority, no proper ministries, no national curriculum for schools etc. All these institutions have to be built from scratch.

WDN: You have likened Mogadishu as "Kabul on the beach," with a glaring exception. What does this mean? What struck you as the difference between the two capitals?

Rasna Warah: I went to Kabul in February 2002 when US forces had liberated the city from the Taliban. My first impression of the city was exactly the one I had in Mogadishu when I first went there. Here was a city that was once very beautiful but whose buildings and infrastructure had been completely devastated by the many wars it had endured. Like Mogadishu, Kabul had also experienced two decades of war. The Taliban, like Al-Shabaab, emerged out of the chaos and anarchy. So the histories of Afghanistan and Somalia are quite similar. The obvious physical difference between Kabul and Mogadishu is that the latter is a coastal city, while the former is mountainous. Mogadishu’s architecture also has strong Italian and Omani influences, thanks to colonialism and the Omani Sultan of Zanzibar who “owned” Mogadishu in the late 19th century. Kabul has been the site of many invasions, from Alexander the Great to the British; the architecture there is more influenced by Central Asia and to some extent by the Russians who

invaded Afghanistan in 1979. In Mogadishu many of the bombed or abandoned buildings were until recently occupied by internally displaced people, so large parts of the city looked like IDP camps whereas in Kabul, displaced people lived outside the city or in low-income informal housing along the slopes of the many hills in the city.

WDN: You have been critical of Western journalists who write about horror stories of Mogadishu in the comfort of posh hotels in Nairobi and without setting foot in that city. Have you recently noticed any changes of perception toward Mogadishu or Somalia in the Western media?

Rasna Warah: Yes, actually I have. I have noticed that there is a lot more reporting from Somalia, though it still tends to focus on the same clichéd subjects – terrorism, famine etc. The reporting has also become more nuanced. So, for instance, the BBC’s Andrew Harding just recently published a book called the *The Mayor of Mogadishu*, which entailed making several visits to Mogadishu and interviewing the former Mogadishu mayor Mohamoud Nur “Tarzan”.

WDN: In your book [War Crimes: How Warlords, Politicians, Foreign Governments and Aid Agencies Conspired to Create a Failed State in Somalia \(2014\)](#), can you share with our readers, who may have not read your book, the story behind the book and its title?

Rasna Warah: This book was partly motivated by a desire to fill the gaping holes and omissions in the Somalia story and put into perspective the role that the international community plays in sustaining the conflict in the Horn of Africa. What started as an article about a Somali whistleblower ended up being a larger narrative about how failed states are created and sustained.

I do not pretend to be an authority on Somalia; there are many Somalia experts and scholars who have studied and written about this country for far longer than I have and who have much more in-depth knowledge about Somali society than I will ever possess. I wrote this book because I wanted to examine current events in Somalia beyond the lenses of terrorism, famine, piracy and conflict, which have come to characterize Somalia in the popular imagination. I wanted to show that Somalia, like all fragile war-torn states, was suffering from a deficit in visionary leadership, and that the violence witnessed over the last two decades was the result of myopic politics and manipulation by foreign forces. The book is a journalistic, not an academic, perspective on recent events in this war-torn country that gives a voice to those who are not usually heard. It focuses mainly on the period between 2004 and 2013, a decade during which Somalia experienced major political and social upheavals that have been fraught with political intrigues, radicalization and militarization.

This book also tries to show how foreign governments and aid agencies have, consciously or sub-consciously, kept Somalia in a permanent state of under-development and conflict, and how Somali politicians, clan-based fiefdoms, religious leaders, warlords and terrorists benefited from

the ensuing chaos and anarchy. It offers some insights into why a failed state colluded in its own destruction and why the international community did little to stop it. It shows who benefited from the anarchy and lawlessness, and who paid the price. Specifically, this book looks at how various foreign and domestic forces inadvertently – or perhaps, deliberately – prolonged the conflict in Somalia and ensured the country’s continued instability; the book is about these “war crimes” committed by these various entities.

WDN: Do you believe the UN and International Communities or organizations committed war crimes against Somalis? How did you come to that conclusion?

Rasna Warah: I don’t think UN and humanitarian agencies deliberately committed what I call war crimes in Somalia. But I do believe that, thanks to the lack of a functioning government in Somalia, the “Somalia Project” became an extremely lucrative enterprise in whose name millions of dollars were raised, with little to show for it. It also became a money-earner for suppliers and service providers based in Nairobi who benefitted from the chaos in Somalia. Reports by UN monitors have shown that some UN staff routinely colludes with so-called “implementing partners” in Somalia to divert or steal food aid. Some of this aid ends up in the hands of warlords, who put it up for sale in Mogadishu’s markets, so aid has become part of Somalia’s war economy. Some of these implementing partners also pay “protection money” to Al Shabaab to gain access to Al Shabaab-controlled areas, an act that carries civil and criminal penalties in the United States as it is construed as funding a terrorist group. The international community’s intentions might be noble, but I think Somalia is a testament to how aid can actually hinder development in a failed or fragile state.

WDN: You talked about the famine as “godsend” for humanitarian agencies. What made you believe that those agencies have ulterior motives other than helping starving people as a core cause for their existence?

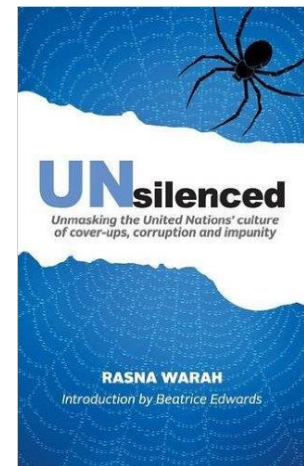
Rasna Warah: In the book I try to show that the figures issued by the UN during the so-called famine of 2011 were not based on any real evidence, and that some of them might have even been fabricated. Because there was little or no UN presence on the ground in southern Somalia – which the UN said was worst hit by the famine – it was difficult to assess whether or not people there were really starving. At that the time the UN announced that 3.7 million people in the country were in danger of starving to death. Yet when I scrutinized the figures I found that the actual number of people experiencing famine was much less. The UN could also not adequately explain how it had managed to get these figures considering that Al Shabaab controlled much of southern Somalia and had banned UN agencies from working there.

It is very common among UN agencies to make a situation look worse than it is so that they can make an appeal for donations. Much of the money raised for Somalia isn’t used to buy food but is spent on logistical and administrative costs, including security. You also have to remember that food aid is big business. All food donated by the United States, for instance, has to be

purchased by law in the US and at least half of it has to be transported on US-flagged vessels. American ship owners and America's highly subsidized agribusinesses are therefore key beneficiaries of the US food aid policy.

WDN: Many argue that the UN mission and its principles are lost through a web of complex bureaucracy and inefficiencies. In your Book [*UNsilenced: Unmasking the United Nations' culture of cover ups, corruption and impunity*](#) (2016), you write "UN- Habitat charged with the responsibility of helping governments to meet the slum target of improving the lives of 100 million slum dwellers.. I was to learn, the majority of my international colleagues had never set foot in a slum". Can you elaborate more on this statement and the UN culture that allowed for such practices?

Rasna Warah: Most people will find it hard to believe that many UN staff are not motivated to do good in the world, but to hang on to their cushy tax-free jobs for as long as possible. Many who claim to work for and with the poor have never actually set foot in a poor person's house. In 2002, when I was collecting information on slums in Nairobi for UN-Habitat, I realized that the majority of my colleagues had never been to a slum, even though the organization was mandated to improve the lives of slum dwellers worldwide. It came as quite a shock to me. The UN is a kind of ivory tower, which has lofty aims, but because the way it is structured, shields UN staff from real people on the ground. UN staff in Nairobi, for instance, work in a heavily guarded compound. In refugee camps such as Dadaab, UN staffs are instructed not to mingle with the refugees and to travel in armored cars. How can you help people when you are so afraid of them?



WDN: What is your take on the role of the Diaspora in the country and the role they play as returning saviors of the poor or are they there to serve themselves and contribute to the demise of the chaos?

I think it takes real courage to go back to a country that is still reeling from conflict and where the risk of being killed by Al Shabaab is very high. Many well-meaning people from the diaspora have lost their lives in Mogadishu. However, I think that like many Somali politicians, some of them may be going back because they view it as an opportunity to make quick and easy money.

WDN: How about the role of the Somali women and youth, amid the enormous challenges that face them?

Rasna Warah: I really regret not speaking to more women when I was researching *War Crimes*. My feeling is that they have been completely silenced by Somali religious and political leaders, and face an uphill battle in getting their voices heard. Young Somalis I meet are fed up of the chaos and corruption in Somalia and yearn for normalcy. Women and youth have been betrayed

by Somali leaders. I hope they will one day find a way to fight the system and claim their place in Somali society.

WDN: In your writing did you observe the role of women in power? Some Somali women are heavily involved with the UN as they run IDP Camps and some Somali women politicians were blamed for the corruption that exist in the Somali Government. What is your take on this?

Rasna Warah: I don't believe that your gender makes you corrupt. I believe that people create conditions where corruption becomes a way of life. When people face no consequences for their corrupt deeds, then the corruption becomes endemic, as it has become in Kenya. Many of the people implicated in corruption scandals in my country have been women.

WDN: Throughout the many years of writing about Somalia and the UN, what are the lessons learned, any surprises you have encountered, and what can you tell us about any books in the pipeline?

Rasnah Warah: As I have been “peeling the onion” that is Somalia, which, as trauma expert Hussein Bulhan would agree, leads inevitably to much anguish and self-doubt (and tears) I became acutely aware of how deeply traumatized Somali society is. Most Somalis, even those who have no personal experience of the civil war, and who were born in foreign, more peaceful countries, grieve the fall of their homeland and suffer from what the Swedish-Somali blogger Mulki Ali calls “unprocessed trauma” – pent up frustration and pain that is bottled up, and often denied, and passed on from generation to generation by people “who just want to wade through the confusion of a post-war Somalia and find a safe spot where they can wait out the rain of blood washing over people”. Unless the world and Somalis themselves understand and acknowledge the Somali people's collective and individual traumas, there is little hope that the country will heal properly and move forward. What constantly surprises me about Somalis though is their inherent optimism and resilience. Despite all the years of civil war, most Somalis still believe in – and love – their country.

My experiences of writing about the UN have showed me that the UN is impervious to criticism. Despite the myriad scandals of corruption and cover-ups that have plagued this organization since it was established in 1945, business-as-usual continues at the UN. I believe that one of the reasons for this is that international UN staff members enjoy immunity from prosecution, which means that they cannot be taken to court even if they commit crimes such as theft, sexual abuse or fraud. UN whistleblowers have suffered severe retaliation for exposing these crimes and most lose their jobs. It is ironic that an organization that purports to protect human rights violates the rights of people who expose wrongdoing within it.

WDN: Finally, tell our readers where your books can be purchased?

Rasna Warah: Rasna Warah: My books are sold on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and Authorhouse.com but can also be purchased through orders at Barnes and Noble in the US and Waterstones in the UK. In Nairobi, Bookstop at Yaya Centre, Prestige bookshop and [the online bookstore Magunga](#) also have them in stock.

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