

The Washington Times

www.washingtontimes.com

Curious case of Somaliland

By Richard W. Rahn

Published January 6, 2005

What is Somaliland? Don't be embarrassed if you don't know. Very few people know, and that is the beginning of the problem. Somaliland is not Somalia, but is a part of what used to be Somalia -- and it may or may not be an independent country. As you may recall, Somalia was the country in which the famous "Black Hawk down" incident (and later movie) occurred. Somaliland is on the Horn of Africa, surrounded by Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti and the Gulf of Aden.

First, a little history: In the days when Africa was controlled by European colonists, there were three contiguous Somalias: French Somalia now known as Djibouti; British Somalia now known as Somaliland (but only by the Somalilanders); and Italian Somalia, now known as Somalia. In 1960, British Somaliland was granted independence, and was immediately recognized by 35 countries. Five days after British Somaliland became independent, Italian Somaliland also became independent, and the two merged into the Somalia Republic.

The merger did not go well, but the country did hang together until 1969 when a military coup installed Gen. Mohammed Siad Barre as president. The Somalilanders chafed under the brutal rule of Barre, and they eventually developed an opposition movement to get rid of the Barre government.

A full-scale civil war developed by 1988 that resulted in the deaths of more than 20,000 people and great devastation in Somaliland due to government bombing. The Barre government fell in 1991. Somaliland declared itself independent, and the rest of Somalia came under the control of various warlords. The resulting conflicts and starvation led to the U.S. intervention during the Clinton administration and then hasty withdrawal because of unexpected U.S. casualties amid continued chaos.

To this day, Somalia remains a failed state whose government is only recognized by a handful of countries (all African). Anarchy is an apt description of the state of affairs in Somalia.

Meanwhile, Somaliland worked its way toward creating a real government and at least a recognizable (if not perfect) democracy. In 2001, Somaliland held a referendum that approved a constitution and reaffirmed its independence. Ninety-seven percent of the voters approved the constitution, and two-thirds of eligible voters participated.

There was a very close election in 2003 that the president only won by 80 votes (shades of Florida in 2000). The U.S. Independent Republican Institute (IRI), supported by the National Endowment for Democracy, has been assisting Somalilanders and their institutions in building a real democratic structure for the country -- even though the United States and all other countries have not recognized Somaliland.

Here we have a black African, moderate Islamic country with has a positive attitude toward the West, that protects women's rights, is willing to help in the war on terrorism, and is slowly building democratic and free market institutions, which is what we say we want. Yet, again it is important to repeat that no country has recognized Somaliland. How ironic.

What is the problem? Somaliland's population is about 3.5 million, which makes it almost as large as Ireland. Its land area is as large as England and Wales (or Tennessee). It has oil and mineral resources, some good agricultural lands, and a good port. The problem is geopolitical reality. The U.S. and Britain are

reluctant to recognize Somaliland before some of its African neighbors, because it is a breakaway state. Most African rulers are very reluctant to begin changing the borders of African countries because they fear where it might lead, even though they realize most of the borders were created arbitrarily by European colonialists. Though Somalia has no functional government, many Somalis argue Somaliland is part of Somalia.

The Somalilanders ask why they must remain part of a dysfunctional state. Before the colonial period, there was no Somalia state, and Somaliland was under British rule for 80 years. They argue their situation is not really all that different from the Baltic States or the now independent countries that made up the former Yugoslavia. Without diplomatic recognition, Somaliland cannot join international trade organizations and has difficulty attracting foreign investment.

The danger for the U.S., Britain and the other Western countries is their failure to recognize Somaliland will gain influence and power for radical Muslim elements there. Somaliland might be pulled back into the morass of Somalia, a terrorist breeding ground.

American diplomats by nature tend to be cautious and are reluctant to appear to be rewarding breakaway states in Africa. However, it is the judgment of some of the diplomatic "Africa hands," who know the situation best, that the benefits of recognizing Somaliland far outweigh the potential costs of continued nonrecognition. The Bush and Blair administrations should come together and immediately recognize Somaliland to reward them for pursuing a constructive path toward free market democracy. If we do so, I would bet that, within a year, most other nations will have followed our lead.

Richard W. Rahn is a senior fellow of the Discovery Institute and an adjunct scholar of the Cato Institute.