



**BIG-POWER BANDITRY, SMALL-SCALE PIRACY:  
TOWARDS A DEEPER DISCUSSION**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

It is a fundamental Kawaida contention that one of the greatest powers in the world is the capacity to define reality and make others accept it, even when it's to their disadvantage. This is why Min. Malcolm insisted that a people truly committed to freedom must liberate their minds, think freely and counter the logic of oppression with a logic of liberation on every essential issue. He reminded us that the capacity of oppressors and rulers to define reality is overwhelming and often difficult to resist and reverse. In fact, they can, thru the power of the media and hired associate academics, "turn victims into criminals and criminals into victims". And so it is now with the people of Somalia and the emerging uninformed twitter and patriotic call for "all hands on deck" to deal with a new-found focus of national hate and horror called piracy.

Indeed, as the country and world were becoming weary of the tiresome talk of terrorism around every corner and convenient designation, we now learn piracy is still alive and we must rush to the rescue on the high seas. The corporate media and narrow mind like labeling and belligerent line-drawing because of the simplicity and sense of certain knowledge it seems to offer. It is a quick and convenient way to exalt the U.S. and its allies and to indict enemies and dismiss others. But the narrative of piracy is a larger more complex one in which the U.S. and the self-designated big-power "victims" have a more primary and provocative role.

In 1991 when the dictator of Somalia, Siad Barre, was overthrown by a combination of militias, the state collapsed. Civil war ensued and remains ongoing in various forms. The U.S., always recognizing the strategic importance of Somalia and the Horn of Africa region, attempted a "stabilizing" intervention under the cover of providing aid, but was

forced to withdraw in 1993. However, it continued to intervene to disrupt and destroy what it considers a "haven" to radical Islam and Al Qaeda. Thus, it gave support and cover for the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia to overthrow the former Islamic Courts Union government and install the tottering Transitional Federal Government friendly to it and Ethiopia.

The absence of a state to protect and provide for the Somali people made them vulnerable to internal and external forces. Internally, the civil war destroyed the economy, invited lawlessness, laid the ground for famine and increased the suffering of the Somali people on various levels. The U.S. and its allies pursue their own interests with alternate gestures of aid, advice and attack. And it is in this situation of instability and vulnerability that European countries began a deliberate dumping of industrial, toxic and even nuclear waste in Somali waters producing, according to a UN assessment team, high levels of medical conditions associated with radiation poisoning: ulcers and bleeding of the mouth, respiratory and unusual skin infections, abdominal hemorrhages, etc.

In addition, larger European and Asian fishing trawlers arrived to rob the Somali people of one of their most available and vital resources—their sea life and food supply. Without a central government, the people had no structural capacity to enforce their right to their own resources and to regulate traffic, trade and other activities on their waters. Indeed, the big-power bandits attacked and blocked Somali fishermen, and crushed their boats. The Somali were thus faced with a choice of accepting this injustice and dangerous threats to their lives and livelihoods or resist. They chose to organize and resist. In the face of overwhelming odds, they dared to use the meager ways and means they had to assert

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their rights and protect their natural resources. Thus, they formed a Volunteer Coast Guard composed of local fishermen with sea knowledge, former militiamen with military knowledge, and professionals with knowledge of technology.

It was, then, because of big-power banditry, i.e., the pillage, pollution and depletion of the marine environment, attacks on the people, and the devastating effect of this on the health, lives and livelihood of the Somali people, that the people took up arms in resistance and defense to tax the violators, interrupt their activities and prevent their ability to arrogantly seize and sail safely at the expense of the Somali people. And it is from this beginning resistance that lumpen elements got involved and began to engage in hostage-taking for ransom that we now call piracy. Some of the monies received in ransom have gone to relieve the suffering of the people, to create jobs, businesses and revive towns. Moreover, the hostages are treated humanely and have always been returned after the "tax" or ransom was received. But obviously much of the monies go to lumpen elements who, like those criminal elements in so-called regular armies and law enforcement structures of the world, engage in illegal activities for their own benefit.

Thus, there's no need or interest in justifying small-scale piracy and certainly not big-power banditry masquerading under the deceptive banners of "avenging victims", guardians of order and justice, and other self-anointed and innocent-sounding names.

Rather, my interest is in revealing the root causes and evolution of the piracy, reaffirming the right of resistance to oppression, and opening space for a deeper and more fruitful discussion about where to go from here to relieve the suffering of the Somali people and address other concerns.

Thus, in respect for the humanitarian and national interests of the Somali people and in consideration of the rational and ethical redefinition of U.S. interests in this strategic area, a policy of mutual respect and partnership could be pursued along several key lines. These include: (1) discontinuing attacks on the Somali people and country; (2) massive humanitarian and economic aid for the Somali people to rebuild their lives, livelihoods and economy; (3) stopping the dumping of hazardous waste in Somali waters, and providing monies and means for clean-up, compensation and prevention of future violations; (4) recognizing and respecting the Somali people's right to their own resources and halting illegal fishing and over-exploitation of the marine life; and (5) working together with various political groupings to restore the Somali government on a democratic foundation, using the auspices and expertise of the African Union and the UN.

This is just a beginning, for the work of peace and justice is difficult, demanding and long-enduring. But as a Somali proverb says, reaffirming faith in the possibilities of unity with mutual respect, good will and hard work: "if people (really) come together, they can repair a crack in the sky".

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