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Interview with Puntland President, Col. Abdullahi Yussuf Ahmed

By: Khalif Hassan Ahmed, Information and Documentation Officer, Novib Somalia, Nairobi.

The *Novib Discussion Platform* met with Puntland's president, Col. Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed and discussed several issues.

Question: Your Excellency, what was the purpose of your recent trip to Europe, Africa and Asia?

Col Abdullahi: The visit involved personal, business and political matters. Except London, which was exclusively for medical reasons, the rest had either political or business purposes and were in response to official invitations from those ends. After London, I went to Italy and stayed for a day at the invitation of the Italian Foreign Minister. The consultative meeting with the Italian officials was centered on the Somali peace conference and the desire of the Italian government to realize a successful conclusion to the process. I then proceeded to Malaysia for discussions on trade investment into Puntland. Malaysia is industrialized and has much to offer while we have the peaceful environment for investment. On the basis of that, the mission in Malaysia culminated in the signing of an agreement between both sides. Finally, I flew to Libya where I met with my friend and colleague, H.E Muammar Al-Gadafi who supported us in the fight against the regime of Siad Barre. However, in the last five years, I have not had a chance to visit Libya because of differences in opinion over cooperation with the TNG. We did not condemn them for their line of thinking and remained silent on that business. In light of that, I found it necessary to break the silence and seek their support for the ongoing reconciliation conference. My argument in all the areas visited rested on an appeal for support to the current peace conference and its outcome.

Question: You also went to Djibouti and met President Ghelle and it is public knowledge that tension existed between Puntland and Djibouti. What was the purpose of the visit: mending the differences or the reported power sharing where you met Abdiqassim Salad of TNG?

Col Abdullahi: I know journalists spy on everybody and my visit had nothing to do with power sharing. I did not meet Abdiqassim neither did Djibouti officials raise such an issue. My intention was to improve the relation on both sides that had soured since the Arta process. Earlier on, Djibouti, in our opinion, was inclined to one side of the Somali political divide and the unity of purpose being demonstrated by the IGAD member States now is a show of seriousness and asks for the same from our end.

Question: As a veteran politician in the Somali political scene and one of those who spearheaded the creation of the SRRC, what is your take on the Somali ownership stressed by IGAD Ministerial Facilitation Committee?

Col. Abdullahi: Well, the unity of IGAD was an important factor and for sure we would be able to run the process and manage it according to our desires. However, this does not include logistics and other related issues.

Question: Some argue that you are a very tactical leader when it comes to issues of your interest, given the challenges of clan criteria and in particular to your Darod clan with leaders of opposing views with you, do you think that is manageable?

Col. Abdullahi: My tactical approach is not based on injustice and I am sure we will overcome because the reality is not the reported rumours about Somali leaders. The Darod leaders met today in a Nairobi Hotel and we reasoned together and agreed to work for the common cause. There is nothing to fight about as everybody will go to his respective sub-clan and that is where the determination lies. From Monday we will be meeting and our efforts will not be limited to Darod but will extend to other brotherly Somali clans. Again, we will meet the Darod Traditional Leaders. The objective is that all of us play our role effectively to implement the commitment before 21st June 2004.

Question: Some see your meeting and growing efforts as an arrangement of convenience and an attempt to fight the traditional leaders so that political leaders can regain their previous role as the main deciding factor. Is that true?

Col. Abdullahi: We are not against the traditional leaders and personally I am friendly to both the political and traditional leaders. I believe it is worthy to leave the distribution of Darod Clan seats to the traditional leaders.

Question: At the adoption of the charter on 23rd February 2004, you were one of the leaders who insisted that article 30 (1) was ambiguous. Is it clear now and can you proceed?

Col. Abdullahi: Since IGAD is now fully united and will not divide us we can overcome this article and its problems for the benefit of the Somali people. Otherwise we cannot form a government in the background of continued differences and clashes.

Question: It is true to say that the concession came from the unity of IGAD and not from Somalis?

Col. Abdullahi: Those who were rejecting participation are now fully with us and somehow their advisors change of approach influenced their previous stance. We understand that sticking to this article would risk the overall goal, which is not to the advantage of any of the stakeholders.

Question: Can you meet the deadline of 31st July 2004 proposed by IGAD Ministers and supported by AU and EU?

Col. Abdullahi: I hope so.

Question: Despite your utter opposition to the last regime because of its injustice, some people fear that if you became president, you would be strong and encourage injustice; is that so?

Col. Abdullahi: Well, I opposed Siad Bare even though we were friends before he took over power in Somalia. People who define me as such are unfamiliar with me. I am a proponent of democracy and would work with the wishes of the population. Siad Bare was a military dictator because the environment at that time supported him, whoever tries such tendencies now, would end up in a pitfall. Those legacies are gone and left us with the existing pain and miserable circumstances. We need strong and democratic leadership for the time of the transitional period only, after that there will be elections and the people will exercise their freedom and elect the person of their choice. In that case it is not necessary to be afraid of me or any other person because there are chances for reflecting on achievements in the respective regions.

Question: In another argument, you are seen as not being after money and could have the potential to rebuild Somalia but when it comes to fighting your opposition, you are generous with all your resources and hit back as an enemy. Do you agree with that argument?

Col. Abdullahi: Well to be generous is not bad; it depends on the situation. When it is necessary to be strong you have to be strong and when it is necessary to be generous and reasonable you have to do so. But all depends with the situation and the national interest. Maybe I am generous and many people believe that, but strong because I have tendency of dictatorship: this is not true, absolutely not true.

Question: What is your view of Somali civil society?

Col. Abdullahi: Civil society is the majority of the Somali people, so I have nothing against the civil society. In fact we are working together; they cannot do anything alone, we political leaders cannot do anything alone without the civil

society and therefore we are compelled to work together for the benefit of our country and people.

Question: What is your relationship with the genuine traditional leaders of Puntland?

Col. Abdullahi: Genuine traditional leaders of Puntland are mainly friendly with me and I don't have anything against them.

Question: Are they coming to the Peace Conference now?

Col. Abdullahi: Well, anyone who comes is welcomed and we will work together. Otherwise there is no reason for us to be here if that relation does not exist. Also, why are we coming here unless we are not working together in agreeing on important issues the like selection of the parliament and making a government for Somalia? We represent them and they represent us is the right description of our relationship.

Question: Is it true that you stopped their participation to conference?

Col. Abdullahi: No, absolutely not true. Anyone who wants to come is welcomed. I invited them, wrote letters to them and even phoned them. Many of them do not want to be meddling their name in politics.

Question: As you seem to be conciliatory would you mind reconciling with Jama Ali Jama?

Col. Abdullahi: Well, I have nothing against Jama Ali Jama and he is just running away from us. We fought each other but now is a different time with a different situation. So, he is welcomed among us.

Question: A journalist once asked President George W. Bush if he ever made a mistake but he did not give satisfactory response. I would like to put this to you; have you ever made a mistake?

Col. Abdullahi: Why not? We are human beings and of course yes, but during this conference I don't think I made a mistake because I was always determined and focused to see its success to restore Somalia to its place among the nations of the world.

Question: What is your message to the people of Somalia?

Col. Abdullahi: Appeal for their cooperation with the emergent government from Mbagathi in all fields; disarmament, reconciliation, unification and reconstruction to give Somalia its previous face of prosperity.

Question: What is your message to the Somalis in the Diaspora?

Col. Abdullahi: I recommend them to come back to their home country to participate in its reconstruction. If they stay outside then they will only serve their personal interest and forget their motherland, which I think is not good for them.

Question: Lastly, your message to IGAD and the international community?

Col: Abdullahi: IGAD is alright now, they are united, and in my judgment, there is no problem with them for now. I wish to appeal to the IPF/ international community to continue supporting the conference financially in this crucial stage. In a period of almost a month the delegates have gone without food and some have abandoned their hotels due lack of money. While thanking them for the assistance they gave to the process so far, I hope the IPF members will continue to financially support the conference and project sustainable resources to enable its early conclusion as well the outcome of the conference.

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