



Mission vs Safety

OCHA Somalia and the Baidoa Raid

Epilogue

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) did not return to Baidoa on Sunday, July 26, 2009. In fact the agency did not return to the compound for almost three years.

After the aborted phone call between Mark Bowden, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia, and Hassan Derow, Al-Shabaab's regional head of security, on Saturday, July 25, Bowden received more discouraging news from Baidoa. Just after midnight on Sunday, two Somali nationals working for the UN in Baidoa were summoned to the office of the new Wali (governor) to receive a message about the humanitarian agencies. The message was that the Shura Council, Al-Shabaab's high executive council, had decided "not to invite the internationals of the agencies" to return to Baidoa "at this stage."

Al-Shabaab was in a "transitional period" involving a "reshuffle" of district leadership, the Wali explained. However, the Shura would permit the UN's Somali staff to carry on the work of the humanitarian agencies until Al-Shabaab could "finish the establishment of the regional administrations and ensure the security of the areas controlled." Some assurances for the safety of staff and security of equipment were also proffered.¹

It was unclear whether the Shura's decision was based on actual security concerns or was merely a way of keeping UN internationals out Baidoa.² Either way, Bowden was concerned. Bowden spoke with Sheikh Mukhtar Robow, a member of the Shabaab Shura Council and a key UN ally, seeking an entrée for new negotiations to return. While Robow was sympathetic, he said he had no authority over the matter and could no longer guarantee protection for the UN agencies.

By Monday, Bowden found himself leaning toward a no-go decision. He says:

¹ Based on an internal, unpublished document.

² Based on an internal, unpublished document.

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I'm all for managing risk, but I think we probably had reached the conclusion that we couldn't mitigate the risks that were there. We had no proper, no clear channel of communications. We had no protections that could be guaranteed, not with foreign fighters around, because Robow had already said he was powerless. In those circumstances there were no real security guarantees.³

On Tuesday, July 28, Bowden sent a cautious letter to the new Wali, with a copy to Derow.⁴ Saying that the raid on the compound was a "serious break in security agreements that the UN had made with Al-Shabaab," Bowden continued to press for "an agreement on how we can work in the future."

The response was cool. After asking for a phone conversation with Nairobi in early August, Derow refused to negotiate with the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) chief for Somalia, Jean Lausberg, because of his ties with the expelled agencies.⁵ UN operations in Baidoa were reduced to life-saving activities, principally health actions by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and food distribution by the UN's World Food Program (WFP). Somali staff were advised to work from home.⁶

By fall the Shabaab position had hardened considerably. In a letter issued on November 4, 2009, Al-Shabaab imposed 11 conditions on humanitarian agencies working in South-Central Somalia, including a demand for the dismissal of all female workers, a prohibition on the promotion of democracy, and payment of twice-yearly registration fees of \$20,000 to Al-Shaabad in exchange for operation permits.⁷

Though Bowden continued to look for openings to return OCHA to Baidoa, it was not possible to do so until March 2012, when a small group, including Bowden and the two OCHA field officers in the compound at the time of the raid, Cedric Petit and Birgitt Hotz, undertook a day mission to assess conditions on the ground. While acknowledging a serious loss of coordination and support to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the region, Bowden accepts the forced hiatus in OCHA's operations in Baidoa philosophically, saying:

As a humanitarian community, we have always accepted expulsions, on the basis that if we don't, we threaten the provision of humanitarian

³ Kirsten Lundberg interview with Mark Bowden, May 2, 2012, in Nairobi. All further quotes from Bowden, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

⁴ Based on an internal, unpublished document.

⁵ Based on an internal, unpublished document.

⁶ Based on an internal, unpublished document.

⁷ Agence France-Presse, "Somali Rebels Issue Aid Rules," November 6, 2009, reported on Al Arabiya New. See: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/11/06/90419.html>

assistance in other areas where the Shabaab have allowed other agencies to go.

“The challenge in Somalia ... is to keep hope alive,” Bowden said in 2011, when other parts of Somalia faced the worst drought emergency in decades. “When people give up hope, we have a far worse crisis on our hands, something that’s far more difficult to deal with.”⁸

⁸ UN News Center, “Interview with Mark Bowden, UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia,” *UN News Service*, November 28, 2011. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/newsmakers.asp?NewsID=45>