SAVING SOMALIA

As the U.S. strikes al-Qaeda, a new government tries to restore order. Here's what it will take

By ALEX PERRY MOGADISHU

THE CENTER OF MOGADISHU IS AN awesome, ghostly monument to war. The streets are lined with rows of crumbling, freestanding Italianate façades sprayed with bullets, splashed by rocket-propelled grenades and showing clear blue sky where their roofs and walls used to be. Somalia's capital is less a city than a collection of tribal neighborhoods. Its back alleys lie under several feet of dirt and plastic bags, traffic is regularly held up by armed privateers demanding payments, and the air is thick with gunfire.

That's the sound of normality in Somalia. Nearly two decades of war have reduced this country of 9 million to chaotic destitution, making it less a failed state than no state at all. (The U.S. State Department lists the country's government type as "none.") The Bush Administration has long suspected that Somalia's lawlessness has made it fertile ground for terrorists, which is one reason the U.S. has stationed 1,700 troops in nearby Djibouti since 2003. On Jan. 8, a U.S. AC-130 gunship struck a suspected al-Qaeda target in southern Somalia, where the U.S. believes a number of operatives, including three men accused of carrying out the 1998 bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, have been hiding. On Wednesday, a Somali official said Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, a top al-Qaeda official, had been killed. "Somalia is one of those troublesome ungoverned areas—perhaps the worst in the world," a senior Pentagon official told TIME. "The U.S. has the authority to strike where it needs to there, and we did."

The U.S. raid came three weeks after several thousand Ethiopian troops, tacitly backed by the U.S., invaded the country to oust the Islamist forces that had seized control of Mogadishu six months earlier. Outgunned by the superior Ethiopian army, the Islamists deserted en masse, with a core group attempting to retreat into the thick forests near the Kenyan border. The Islamists' flight left them exposed, which may have helped the U.S. track their whereabouts and move in for the kill. Approval for the raid came from Somalia's Transitional Federal Government, which had held power for all of 11 days at the time of the Jan. 8 strike. "It's one of those places where even the State Department, which is usually very cautious about us acting, said, Hey, go ahead," said the Pentagon official.

But nailing terrorists is one thing; building a nation where none exists is another. "We are starting from scratch," the head of Somalia's new government, Prime Minister Ali Mohammed Gedi, told me in an interview in Mogadishu. Given Somalia's penchant for clan warfare and inhospitableness toward foreign armies—just go out and rent a copy of *Black Hawk Down*—it's tempting for Western policymakers to wash their hands and wish Gedi luck. But Somalia's strife has repercussions beyond its borders. The country is victim to the worst ravages of man and nature. Instability there has the potential to engulf the entire Horn of Africa in war, with neighboring countries Ethiopia and Eritrea jockeying for influence and pirates using the lawless coast as a base to launch attacks on the freighter traffic headed for the Suez Canal. Some of the Islamists have vowed a guerrilla war against the new government, which they deride as a puppet of Ethiopia and the U.S. On top of all that, a double disaster of summer drought followed by December floods has left more than 500,000 Somalis dependent on foreign aid for their livelihoods.

If any government is to succeed, it's going to need help. During my seven-day stay in Mogadishu this month, I caught a glimpse of the country's dysfunction. Somalia has atomized into its ancient form—