

Somali woman leader's peace call

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Asha Haji Elmi says Somalia needs a reconciliation process
[Elmi interview](#)

As Somalia descends again into vicious armed conflict a plea for a fresh approach has come from the country's leading woman politician.

Asha Haji Elmi founded her own party, the Sixth Clan, to represent women, since she felt that they were excluded from the existing five clans. And they won seats in parliament.

But like all of the country's institutions, the parliament is suspended in exile while war again envelops the country.

In a rare interview, she told the BBC's Newsnight programme that there will not be a solution until all of the parties are involved in the debate.

"The Somali solution is very clear," she says, "We need a comprehensive political solution and the proper vehicle for that is reconciliation - genuine, all-inclusive and serious reconciliation - dialogue, confidence building amongst the clans, trust building. We need all those positive practical solutions."

Frontline

But this sensible-sounding analysis currently has little support.

Somalia is one of those foreign policy situations where the parties involved do not even agree over what it is about. Ethiopia, whose tanks are now the most powerful military presence in the battle for Mogadishu, sees this as a frontline in the so-called war on terror.

They believe that the Islamic Courts Union, who held much of the country, and had pushed out the failing and feuding transitional government last year, were a front for Al Qaeda.

The US backs Ethiopia's military campaign, and amid the chaos has carried out its own air raids against suspected Al Qaeda sites this year, killing a number of Somali civilians.

Sharia law

There was another grim reminder of the complexity of what Ethiopia faces, when more than 70 people, including some Chinese engineers, were killed by rebels in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia this week. Ethiopia claims that the Islamic Courts Union are among the groups backing the Ogaden rebels.

Many Somalis though saw the Islamic Courts as the only stable government they have had for some time, and were prepared to put up with a stricter application of the Islamic Sharia law code in return for stability.

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Asha Haji Elmi

It is also unclear how strong the Islamic Courts still are in the battle for Mogadishu. Authoritative voices, including the International Crisis Group, believe that the most powerful clan in town have resumed control and taken their weapons back from the Islamists.

If that is true then Ethiopia is taking one side in a clan-based civil war, where the victims are not terrorists but Somali civilians.

Pretext

Asha Haji Elmi says that what is going on is genocide, and it is wrong to see it as a war on terror.

"People are using the war on terror as a pretext to provide political and financial support, and the reality is far from that. The people who were killed in Mogadishu - the civilians, the women and children, the innocent people, the elderly - are not terrorists."

In her Newsnight interview, she called for the international community to look at the situation through a humanitarian lens.

"This is the worst time ever - the critical moment in our lives. There is no food, no shelter, no water, no medicine and people are dying every day, children are dying every day. There's a kind of human tragedy in Mogadishu right now."

Several hundred people have died in Mogadishu this week, and hundreds of thousands made homeless.

Representatives of all the parties, including the Union of Islamic Courts, did meet in the UK in Leicester in March, but the peace process has stalled for now.

A national reconciliation conference scheduled for last week has been postponed until June.

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<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/6595573.stm>

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