



My Sister

Where are you heading

In the desert

Day and night

With all your kids

Your little one

Piggybacking

On the other one

My dear sister

Your stare tells me

You are scared

Of those men

Who have lost

Their sense of care

Except

Talk to you

With the barrel of a gun

My sister

Let me ask you

What is a country for?

© Lemlem Tsegaw, February 5, 2010 dedicated to all Somali's women and children

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Meeting Somalia's al-Shabab



Al-Shabab fighters control much of southern Somalia

By Andrew Harding
BBC News, Buale and Dusamareb

Southern Somalia is a dangerously unpredictable place.

We flew into the region, unsure what reception we could expect from the commanders of al-Shabab, the radical Islamist insurgent group, viewed by some as al-Qaeda's proxy in the Horn of Africa.

Our plan was to stay overnight in a town called Wajid - until we learned that al-Shabab had just publicly beheaded three men in the area and shot dead a community leader.

We changed our schedule fast.

We were travelling with the United Nation's World Food Programme, which, despite operating in one of the world's most dangerous environments, is managing to feed some 3.5 million Somalis.

"It is very, very difficult," said WFP's deputy country director Denise Brown.

'Pakistan militants'

Four of their staff have been killed since August last year.

But she acknowledged "a level of pragmatism" in al-Shabab and "a recognition that humanitarian help is needed. We don't negotiate [with them]. We discuss".

We flew into Buale region, on the banks of the wide, green Juba river.

A senior al-Shabab commander agreed to talk to us on condition of anonymity.

Bearded and apparently jovial, he confirmed an influx of foreign jihadists to the region - many thought to be from Pakistan - and welcomed their presence.

"We're all fighting for the same religion," he said. "We know we are hated by the international community, but al-Shabab has its own structure and strict rules.

"We apply Sharia law to everyone. We don't oppress people and [that's why] it's peaceful here now."

'Sold out'

He bitterly condemned the head of Somalia's transitional government, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, who is clinging to power in Mogadishu, protected by more than 4,300 African Union troops.

"He is far from Islam," he said. "He's sold out his own religion."

In Buale, no-one we spoke to was ready to criticise, or even discuss, al-Shabab, and its strict interpretation of Sharia law.



“ We don't oppress people and it's peaceful here now ”

Al-Shabab commander

[Mogadishu's lost innocents](#)

[Justice - Islamist-style](#)



Moderate Islamic group Ahlu Sunnah is bitterly opposed to al-Shabab

Local elders said there had been no amputations or stonings in the area, but politely told us it was best not to talk about politics. Recent rains have eased some concerns about food shortages in Buale.

But further north, the United Nations is warning of yet another humanitarian emergency.

We flew to the central Somali region of Galgadud, and the drought-stricken town of Dusamareb, its population swelled by civilians fleeing the latest fighting in the capital, Mogadishu.

Sitting with his family beside their makeshift tent in the dry plains outside town, Abdi Nasir said he had escaped from Mogadishu with no possessions and was now scraping a living by collecting and selling firewood.

“ Al-Shabab are not even humans ”
Sheikh Omar Sharif Muhammad
Government-allied Ahlu Sunna
[Rage at grave desecration](#)

"I'm waiting for change," he said.

"If there's a proper government in Mogadishu, then I'll go back, but right now I think things are just getting worse."

Dusamareb is the headquarters of a moderate Sufi Islamic movement, Ahlu Sunnah, which is bitterly opposed to al-Shabab. Significantly, Ahlu Sunnah has just signed a formal agreement to co-

operate militarily with the embattled government in Mogadishu.

'Somalia, wake up!'

Guarded by several dozen young fighters, Ahlu Sunnah's chairman Sheikh Omar Sharif Muhammad said he hoped the alliance could defeat al-Shabab.

But it badly needed international help, he added.

Sheikh Omar denied receiving any support from neighbouring Ethiopia, which recently temporarily sent a small number of troops back across the border. "Al-Shabab are not even humans," said Sheikh Omar. "They're desecrating our culture, and destroying our sovereignty and our religion.



Hundreds of thousands of Somalis have fled their country

"They're very dangerous and must be driven out. They recruit young, innocent children to become suicide bombers. Islam does not allow that."

Although Ahlu Sunnah's "thousands" of fighters have had some success in blocking al-Shabab advances, the most likely scenario in the short term is probably a military stalemate.

Outside Sheikh Omar's headquarters, a small crowd gathered to mark Somalia's independence day.

Children, women and heavily-armed fighters all stood together under a dazzling blue sky.

"Somalia, wake up! Lean against each other," they sang - some wistfully, others with cheerful determination.