

Turkey tries out soft power in Somalia

MOGADISHU - In a sprawl of plastic refugee shelters and mortar-blasted buildings in Mogadishu, a mud-caked Turkish engineering team monitors the drilling of a new borehole while their armed guards chat lazily under a tree, guns across laps.

These government contractors are on the frontline of a huge Turkish development effort in one of the world's most dangerous cities - one which U.N. agencies and international charities prefer to deal with from the safety of neighbouring Kenya.

Across the Somali capital, a bombed-out shell after two decades of fighting, residents say Turkey has done more in eight months to shatter the perception that Mogadishu is a no-go zone than the international community has achieved in twenty years.

"Our government likes to help anyone in crisis so we came here without thinking anything," said the lead engineer, Mehmet, who asked Reuters to use a pseudonym because government employees are not authorised to talk to the media without permission.

The retreat of al Qaeda-linked rebels from the city in August ended the daily street battles and shelling between the militants and African troops, and offered a rare chance to ramp up aid as a famine gripped central and southern Somalia.

Some 500 Turkish relief workers and volunteers poured into Mogadishu's bullet-scarred wastelands, unleashing a wave of humanitarian aid as the militants struck back with a string of suicide bombings and roadside blasts.

"Of course it is dangerous but we don't think about those things. Inshallah, nothing has happened to us. If we are afraid, we can't operate," the engineer said.



A Turkish volunteer doctor checks a Somali man in Mogadishu (Reuters)

Turkish flags - white crescent moon and star on red background - flutter in the coastal breeze and billboards marking out Turkish reconstruction projects dot the capital, where potholed streets are lined by rubble-strewn ruins and mountains of garbage.

Turkey's "Arab Spring" forays into Middle Eastern diplomacy, have drawn much attention on the international stage. Its launch into Africa, however, has gone little noticed by a world more focused on China's involvement in the sub-Saharan region.

A hotspot in the U.S.-led war against militant Islam, Somalia offers Ankara an opportunity to bolster its image as a soft power on the global stage.

There may also be rich trade pickings for Turkey's thriving economy in the energy, construction and agriculture sectors; but first comes the most basic rebuilding.

Beneath Mogadishu's gutted parliament building, Turkish medics perform surgery in a packed makeshift field-hospital.

"We come here with our hearts, not for money," said one doctor scanning between the inflatable tented wards.

"COVER FOR WESTERN INVADERS"

While security rules restrict foreign U.N. staff and diplomats to fleeting visits beyond the military-protected airport in armoured troop carriers, Turkish aid workers move freely in vests adorned with the national flag.

Their access, it seems, has nothing to do with religion. The Islamist al Shabaab militant group has denounced Muslim Turkey's involvement as a "cover for the Western invaders" and has targeted Turkish interests.

A suicide truck-bomber in October killed 72 people, many of them students applying for Turkish scholarships. Two months later a car bomb blew up metres from Turkey's newly re-opened embassy but caused no Turkish casualties.

Turkey's Ambassador C. Karin Torun, on his first ever diplomatic posting, described it as a question of political will.

"Our aim is to show a different model can work in getting help to the people," said Torun, Turkey's first ambassador in Somalia since civil war erupted in 1991.

Istanbul has just hosted an international conference on Somalia, focusing on improving infrastructure and security.

"MAKE SOMALIA'S VOICE HEARD"

Turkey is among a growing number of non-Western donors bringing funds, a fresh mindset and their own experience in managing natural disasters to the global humanitarian aid scene.

Addressing the Istanbul conference on Friday, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan urged the United Nations to intensify its operation in Somalia, and called on other countries who wanted to help to establish a greater on-ground presence there.

"We have really struggled to make Somalia's voice heard, to make those who do not see or feel what's going on in Somalia, see and feel," he said. In August, he became the first leader from outside Africa to visit Mogadishu in nearly 20 years.

Privately U.N. officials said they admired the ability of Turkish charities and government employees to work in areas of the Somali capital seen by Westerners as too risky.

Mogadishu's central Hodan district was at the epicentre of a protracted battle between

Islamist rebels and African Union (AU) forces deployed to the coastal city to prop up the U.N.-backed government. Now building sites are mushrooming.

Late last year, the charity Doctors Worldwide Turkey converted a building formerly used as an ammunition dump into Mogadishu's most hi-tech hospital, doing it in just two months.

"I'd never seen anything like it before," marvelled Dr Osman Abdirahman Mohamed, who left Somalia during the war to train and work first in Pakistan and then in California. He returned to Mogadishu in 2010.

The charity has trained thirty of the hospital's doctors, nurses and midwives in Turkey. Turkish specialists still visit on rotation, part of an effort to counter a haemorrhaging of local medics from the Horn of Africa country.

Turkey has fixed up Mogadishu's crumbling airport, built schools and sent hundreds of Somalis to Turkey on scholarships, installed street lighting and cleared mountains of garbage.

Behind the counter of his well-stocked pharmacy, run from a metal-sheet kiosk, Mohamed Nur lauded Turkey's "visible projects".

"Other governments say they will come but they are not serious. The Turkish government said it would come and it started operating immediately," Nur said.

SOFT POWER, HARD CASH

Turkey, a rapidly growing economy and multi-party democracy that has applied to join the European Union, is widely regarded as a model for Muslim and other developing countries. It has also raised the flag over trail blazing construction projects across former Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus region.

Erdogan's government has ratcheted up Turkey's diplomatic presence in Africa, opening a string of new embassies and flexing diplomatic muscle on issues from Darfur to the Arab Spring.

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Turkey tries . . .

Turkey, analysts said, wants to be seen as the quintessential soft power.

"Prestige maximisation is a key part of Turkey's foreign policy. It is trying to portray itself as an indispensable power beyond the confines of its immediate neighbourhood," said Fadi Ilakura of the London-based Chatham House think-tank. While the risks are high - mightier foreign powers have tried and failed to mend Somalia - so too are the potential trade rewards.

Erdogan's government is closely linked to Turkey's powerful business interests, especially the "Anatolian Tiger" small companies in the country's conservative heartland that thirst for new markets.

In the shadow of Mogadishu's former polytechnic college, a skeleton of a building still scarred by mortar rounds, Bilal Celik watches local labourers manually sieve sand, smash giant concrete slabs and grapple with iron bars. Celik is reluctant to call himself a construction boss. Instead, he says he has set up a not-for-profit group which has secured six school renovation projects worth \$30 million.

"Soon we will bring in masters of electrics, water systems, tiling. After twenty years of civil conflict, there is now very little skilled labour in Mogadishu," Celik said.

By September, Celik said, the four-storey building will be transformed into a vocational training school, fitted out with IT and science labs. Everything will be shipped in from Turkey.

Turkey's exports to Africa leapt to \$10.3 billion last year from \$2.1 billion in 2003, with iron and steel, mineral fuels and machinery among the most exported items, according to Turkey's Ministry of Economy.

"So business and diplomacy go hand in hand," Chatham House's Ilakura said.

"CHANGED THE LANDSCAPE"

Privately, some western aid officials question what deals Turkish aid and reconstruction groups might be cutting to operate with such apparent speed and ease in Somalia.

There are concerns among the Nairobi-based aid community that Turkish funding that ends up lining the pockets of power-brokers, business tycoons and warlords.

Torn between frustration and envy, one aid worker in Nairobi said Turkey had "cut all the corners we cannot cut", but that its achievements were making others look like "fools".

Inside Mogadishu's corridors of power, Turkey is flavour of the month.

At his heavily fortified residence, where armoured plates cover the windows, Somalia's Prime Minister Abdiweli Mohamed Ali said Turkey had "changed the landscape in Somalia".

"They are the sponsor we have been looking for the last 20 years. They are the Holy Grail for Somalia," said Ali, who returned from the United States in 2010, initially taking up a ministerial job in the fractured and graft-prone government.

Ali is fiercely critical of the United Nations, which he accuses of dealing with Somalia at arm's length and squandering aid worth hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

"The truth is they (Turkey) are there to help us succeed. No more, no less. If anyone else has issues with it, I don't care, that's their problem," Ali said.

If Ambassador Torun has a weakness, diplomats in Nairobi say, it is that he is politically naive in Somalia, a country where the political

kingpins and clan warlords have masterfully duped international actors for twenty years for their own gains.

Turkey's mounting sway comes at a time when Somalia's political leaders are up against an August deadline to usher in a new parliament and president and adopt a new constitution that redefines the relationship between Mogadishu and the regions.

At stake, then, in a country where politics is driven by feuding clans battling to safeguard their interests is a handle on power and the resulting financial spoils. The worry among some diplomats is that Turkey will pick a favourite.

Horn of Africa analysts point to President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed's efforts to hitch his star to Turkey.

"The Turks haven't got their heads around the politics yet," said one Nairobi-based diplomat.

Traditional donors are frustrated about what they call foot-dragging over the political reforms.

While some including the European Union have threatened to punish perceived spoilers, Turkey has been less critical.

Some Somalia-watching diplomats feel the Turks could use their newly-found influence in Mogadishu to be tougher against the trouble-makers and speak up more strongly to achieve a successful end to the transition.

Ambassador Torun dismisses suggestions that extending the interim government's mandate would suit Turkish interests. "Whoever they select, we will work with them," he said.

The best way to persuade Somali citizens to buy into the political process and end the cycle of violence, he said, was to offer an alternative to aid and the war economy.

"(Somalis) can't support it if you only talk in five-star hotels and then put up roadmaps. It doesn't work," said Torun.

"People should see something is going on. Then they get hope and support the process." (Reuters)