

When the Odds are Stacked Against You

Beatrice Spadacini (March 15, 2010)



Life is not fair. What can we do?

Khadra is from a minority group, lives in a settlement for displaced people in country that is formally at war, comes from a very poor family and at the age three was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. What do you think are her chances of making it to five years of age? Personally, I think they are pretty slim unless she gets immediate medical attention from a specialized healthcare facility, one that does not exist in this part of the world.



Khadra and her parents live in Somaliland, the northern part of Somalia that has declared itself an independent Republic in 1991 after the fall of Siad Barre's regime. Although this region of Somalia is now relatively safe—compared to South Central where conflict has been at the order of the day or to Puntland (the Westernmost tip of Somalia) where kidnappings have become frequent and so have pirate attacks on cargo ships—it has no international recognition and is therefore doomed to remain both politically isolated and economically stunted.

The international community sends humanitarian aid to Somaliland but cannot recognize it as a full-fledged nation. International treaties stipulate that the people of a country that wants to split up must agree on some form of secession and independence internally before they can be recognized by external states. Unfortunately, South Central Somalia has been unstable for the past 19 years and without a central form of government recognized by all. This makes it practically impossible to arrive to an internal agreement about Somaliland.

Then there is regional politics. Ethiopia is the only country that has a liaison office in Somaliland because they are in favor of secession and want to piss off Eritrea, which is against a broken up Somalia and is supportive of anti-government groups destabilizing the situation in South Central Somalia. Other nations prefer to stay out of this particular issue while putting pressure on different players behind the scenes. Khadra is a de facto hostage to a complex political situation that offers no concrete hope for a solution in the near future. She is also a hostage to the cycle of poverty.

Kadhra's family is dirt poor and there is no doubt about this. They live in a makeshift shelter made of wood twigs, plastic sheeting, used clothes and flattened out tin cans. These shelters are extremely basic and fairly standard accommodations for hundred of thousands of internally displaced people in Somaliland.

I met Khadra through a local organization called Gashaan Women and Development for the Internally Displaced People of Somaliland. The chair of this organization, a woman called Saynab, took me to the settlements to show me what she does when she collects information about human rights abuses and about the needs of internally displaced persons.

"I see many cases like Khadra's. I feel powerless because I can only document them but cannot really offer much help. It breaks my heart but if I don't come here and report these cases there is absolutely no hope for these people. I want you to help me find assistance for people like Khadra. Please advocate for the displaced people of Somaliland, please help us get our voice out there."

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