Somalia

(See also article ‘Horn of Africa’ chapter for additional background information, including information on social structures, for this region of Africa).

Somalia’s coastline forms the outer rim of the Horn of Africa on the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, through which passes much of the world’s trade including oil. Somalia borders Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. The population was estimated in 2008 at 9,558,666. (Note: population counting in Somalia is complicated by the large number of nomads and by refugee movements in response to famine and clan warfare.) The capital is Mogadishu, the largest town, with 1 million people.

No permanent national government existed in 2008. Instead, there was a transitional, parliamentary federal government. Despite these interim arrangements, current since 2004, other regional and local governing bodies continue to exist and control various regions of the country, including the self-declared Republic of Somaliland in north-western Somalia and the semi-autonomous State of Puntland in north-eastern Somalia.

There are fertile areas in Somalia, but much of the country is poor. Drought, inflation, war, flood, epidemics and foreign debt have devastated Somalia’s economy, which was based on livestock and agriculture. Sheep, goats, cattle and camels are raised. Camels are regarded as very important and provide milk, meat and transportation.

Major crops include maize, sorghum, beans, sugar cane, sesame, bananas and vegetables. There is fishing on the coast. From a world trade point of view, Somalia is one of the least developed countries in Africa.

Natural resources include uranium and largely unexploited reserves of iron ore, tin, gypsum, bauxite, copper, salt and natural gas. It is likely that Somalia has oil reserves.
Despite the lack of effective national governance, Somalia has maintained a healthy informal economy, largely based on livestock, remittance/money transfer companies, and telecommunications. Agriculture is the most important sector, with livestock normally accounting for about 40% of GDP and about 65% of export earnings. Nomads and semi-pastoralists, who are dependent upon livestock for their livelihood, make up a large portion of the population. Livestock, hides, fish, charcoal, and bananas are Somalia’s principal exports.

Life expectancy at birth is 49.25 years for the total population, 47.43% for males and 51.12 years for females (2008 est).

In 2007 there were an estimated 1.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in Somalia, including those displaced in the civil war after 1988, and those displaced by clan-based competition for resources over time.

**History of Somalia**

The Somali people may have come from Ethiopia after their conversion to Islam in the 14th century. Somalia became a single nation with a common culture. However, it suffered from the interference of superpowers, due to its strategic position. Somalia is an example of the difficulty in establishing borders and the way many borders between countries are arbitrarily created — boundaries which may serve the political purposes of world powers but cut off people of the same or similar culture and lead to continuing unrest and struggles.

In the late 19th century, Somalia became a British colony in the north and an Italian colony in the south. After World War II the Italian part became a British protectorate, part of which was returned to Italian trusteeship in 1950 by the United Nations. In 1960 Somalia became independent.
Following independence, problems became apparent which made peace and stability difficult to envisage for Somalia. One of the main problems concerned lineage segmentation, a characteristic of pastoral clan politics in which the interminable struggle for resources is based on fierce competition between countries, clans and even family members, during which alliances may be formed and broken at will.

Government forces and various guerrilla groups fought bitterly. In 1991 the government fell, leading to further great movements of refugees trying to escape starvation, persecution and death in the country’s struggle for political stability. It is hard to estimate numbers of refugees, or determine places where they are concentrated, owing to the nomadic tradition of many of the people which results in erratic movement of groups anyway. In 1992 it was estimated that there were 360,000 Somali refugees in eastern Ethiopia – including almost the entire Isaaq clan from northern Somalia, whose cities were destroyed by shelling in 1988.

Beginning in 1993, a two-year UN humanitarian effort (primarily in the south) was able to alleviate famine conditions, but when the UN withdrew in 1995, having suffered significant casualties, order still had not been restored. A two-year peace process, led by the Government of Kenya under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), concluded in October 2004 with the election of Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed as President of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia and the formation of an interim government, known as the Somalia Transitional Federal Institutions (TFIs). The Somalia TFIs include a 275-member parliamentary body, known as the Transitional Federal Assembly (TFA), a transitional Prime Minister, Nur ‘Adde’ Hassan Hussein, and a 90-member cabinet. The TFIs had a five-year mandate leading to the establishment of a new Somali constitution and a transition to a representative government following national elections. While its institutions remain weak, the TFG in 2008 was continuing to reach out to Somali stakeholders and work with international donors to help build the governance capacity of the TFIs and work towards national elections in 2009. In June 2006, a loose coalition of clerics, business leaders, and Islamic court militias known as the Council of Islamic Courts (CIC) defeated powerful Mogadishu warlords and took control of the capital.
The Courts continued to expand militarily throughout much of southern Somalia and threatened to overthrow the TFG in Baidoa. Ethiopian and TFG forces intervened in late December 2006, resulting in the collapse of the CIC as an organisation. However, the TFG continues to face violent resistance from extremist elements, such as the al-Shabaab militia previously affiliated with the now-defunct CIC.

Peoples of Somalia

Somalia is rare among African states in being largely a one-nationality country. It has a common language, Somali, spoken by almost all inhabitants, a common pastoral way of life for 70% of the people, and a common religion, the Sunni Muslim branch of Islam. There is a very small Christian minority. There are also people living in neighbouring countries — Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia — who see themselves as Somalis and desire self-determination or closer links with Somalia. One such group is that of the Ogaden Somali people in Ethiopia. There are also some Arab, Italian and Pakistani people in Somalia.

The population is estimated at 8 million. Most of the people belong to one of the four main clans of nomadic herders: Dir, Hawiye, Rahaweyn and Daarood, that are together known as Samaale. In the south there are two other influential clans of farmers, known as the Sab (Saab). Loyalty to clans is a primary loyalty. There is a Bantu minority of about 15% and very small Arab, European and Asian minorities.

Traditionally, three quarters of the Somali people live in rural areas and more than half of these people are nomads or semi-nomads. The nomads routinely cross neighbouring national borders into Ethiopia, Djibouti and northern Kenya.
Somalis in Victoria

The Somalia-born in Australia are a new community, mostly arriving since the onset of civil war in Somalia in 1991. Previously, there were only a small number of Somalia-born students in Australia. The peak period for arrival from Somalia was 1994 to 1998 when about 55% of the current (2008) Somalia-born community arrived in Australia, mainly as young adult refugees or through family reunion.

At the 2006 census, there were 2,626 Somalia-born persons in Victoria (60.8% of Australia’s total). Only 4.6% of the Somalia-born in Victoria had arrived in Australia prior to 1991.

The majority (86.8%) spoke Somali at home; 3.3% spoke Arabic; 1.6% spoke Italian; and 3.9% spoke English only. A significant proportion (15.3%) assessed themselves as speaking English not well or not at all. Most of the Somali-born were Muslims (96.2%). Over three-quarters (79.5%) held Australian Citizenship, compared to 67.5% for the total overseas-born population in Victoria.

Languages of Somalia

Somali (a Cushidic language) and Arabic are the official languages. In 1972, a modified Roman alphabet was adopted for the written Somali language. Oral language is extremely important culturally. Somalia has a strong tradition of oral poetry. Humour, which plays an important role in interpersonal relationships, is based on puns and on plays with words and meanings.

English and Italian are minor languages.

Probably only few Somalis will be able to speak English on arrival in Australia.
Religions of Somalia

Islam is the state religion and dictates the way of life. Most of the people are Sunni Muslim.

Education in Somalia

Using ability to read and write beyond the age of 15 as the criterion, 37.8% of the people were estimated to be literate in 2001: males 49.7%, and females 25.8%.

Nevertheless, education is highly valued in Somalia, and was given priority by the government in the last decade when primary education was made free; but present problems severely disturb education.

The national university is at Mogadishu. Higher education is for only a few.

Somali people coming to Australia, however, tend to be well-educated.

Somali women

Women are respected in Somalia although traditionally they have had few political and economic rights. They are excluded from public contact with men. Within the clans, all the male members of a clan meet and formulate decisions; women are excluded from these meetings although it is said that they exercise much informal influence.

Official policy now supports female literacy, the participation of women in government, and equal rights of inheritance and compensation. Some women in Somalia now work outside the home.
Somali families

Family bonds are strong. The nomadic family unit is often small, consisting of father, mother and children, and maybe one or two older dependents. The maintenance of culture and language is strongly emphasised within the family and children are taught strict forms of politeness and acceptable behaviour to which they are expected to conform, especially after their early childhood years. To indulge in unacceptable behaviour disgraces the family.

The child mortality rate has been one of the highest in the world, even before the famine and civil unrest in the last decade. Blood transfusions may be ruled out by religious belief.

Feeding babies and children

Children are breast-fed until 12 months of age. If breast feeding is not possible, the milk from goats or camels may be used, often mixed with honey. Cows’ milk is less common. Babies’ bottles are traditionally sterilised by heating or by smoking with frankincense.

Babies are introduced to solid foods between 3 to 6 months, being given some mashed vegetables such as carrots and potatoes mixed with a spicy sauce, and mashed mango or banana. For children under 10 years of age, popular drinks are milk and freshly squeezed fruit juices such as mango, lemon and grape. Tea and coffee are not recommended for young children.

Social values and taboos in Somalia

Elderly people, women and children (under 7 years of age) are respected. Children must always show respect to those older than themselves: for example, they do not sit where their elders usually sit, especially at meal times.
Patterns of greeting are an important way of showing respect. Children are expected to greet any elders by a kiss on the hand. Parents and relatives are kissed both on the hand and on the cheek. Women do not shake hands with men in public.

Children are socialised early into the distinctions between male and female roles. For men, high value is put on individualism, assertiveness, equality, loyalty to the clan, physical courage, and freedom. However, there is less emphasis on hierarchical authority roles, even for men, than in some neighbouring cultures, since all men take part in group decisions.

Guests are shown high respect in Somali culture, to the extent that sometimes a family will give up its house to a guest and move to other accommodation. Families lose respect and dignity if they do not show acceptable forms of welcome to guests.

The protection of face is important; blunt requests or refusals are avoided in favour of indirect approaches. Humour is often used to soften criticism or refusal, or to cover mistakes.

**Children’s games in Somalia**

Somali children play many traditional games. They are often very physically active and skilled at climbing, jumping and running. Somali men have shown their traditional running skills in international sporting events. Running is considered an important factor in children’s development and they are encouraged to develop the skill from 2 years of age. It is a survival skill in a society where families often have to flee on foot. Caregivers in Australia need to be aware of the Somali encouragement of running and other physical activity in young children, which explains why these children can seem to be ‘always on the go’ and perhaps difficult to settle down indoors. In program planning, special attention should be given to providing appropriate physical challenges and keeping in mind any cultural or family differences involving values of strong male assertiveness, and male dominance over women.
Yool yool is a running game like Australian ‘tiggy’ or ‘chasey’. Large objects such as wooden poles or big stones are chosen as markers; children must run between these and touch them, without getting caught, to gain a point in the game.

Shanood is a game of hand-eye coordination like ‘jacks’, in which players toss pebbles into the air and try to catch them.

**Clothing in Somalia**

Men and women in rural areas wear mostly white clothes. The popular clothing for women is a cloth which can be six to eight metres long and is wrapped securely round the body three or four times and tied at the shoulders. Men wear a lungi which is like a kilt, and two draped white sheets. In towns, Western clothing is worn by some.

**Celebrations in Somalia**

Somalis celebrate the Prophet’s Birthday; Labour Day; Independence Day; Id-ul-Fitr; and J’al Adha (Haj).

During Ramadhan, families fast between sunrise and sunset. It is also the special month for giving to others in need.

Foundation Day, held on 1 July, celebrates the founding of the Somali Republic (1960). (Note that the same event is celebrated on 26 June in Somaliland).
Time

Somalis use both the Western calendar and the Muslim (lunar) calendar. For official administration purposes they use the Western calendar. Rural families use the Muslim calendar. Telling the time is done traditionally by observing shadows of the sun, and this skill is passed on in families.

Somalian food

Somali families may eat meals together, sitting in a circle and arranged from the eldest to the youngest as a form of respect and discipline. Food is commonly eaten by hand. Guests are presented with a variety of foods and it is polite to try a little of each. Early childhood caregivers visiting Somali homes should be prepared to be welcomed in this way.

Milk is a very important food for Somalis and may come from goats, camels and, less frequently, cows. Camel milk is highly regarded, offered to respected people and used at ceremonial times. It is usually only rich families who own cows.

Somali women take the main role in food preparation. During the holy feasts, particularly during the holy month of Ramadhan, much time is spent preparing food. Many spices are used: onion, garlic, cummin and black pepper are common.

Oodkac contains small pieces of meat lightly cooked with natural ghee and spices. Seafood is popular in coastal areas but not in rural inland areas.

Somalis eat many grains. Soor is a type of kus kus (couscous) made of maize or corn and mixed with a spicy sauce. Processed foods are little used in everyday life; they may, however, be used for travelling.

Somalis are Islamic people and alcohol and pork are forbidden.
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