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Somalia Inquiry's Damning Report

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. If only Prime Minister Brian Mulroney had not jumped at U.S. President George Bush's request to send Canadian troops to Somalia in 1992.

Somalia Inquiry's Damning Report

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. If only Prime Minister Brian Mulroney had not jumped at U.S. President George Bush's request to send Canadian troops to Somalia in 1992. If only the Canadian Forces' brass had not pushed for a higher-profile role in the mission in an effort to bolster the military's image. If only military leaders had listened to warnings that the members of one of their most elite units were poorly trained, undisciplined and ill-equipped for the job. Then, maybe, the whole sorry mess known as the Somalia Affair would never have occurred. And Canadians would never have been subjected to the woeful tale of military incompetence, duplicity, cowardice and brutality that the independent inquiry into the ill-fated mission laid out in such telling detail last week; or witnessed the sight of the federal government waging a relentless campaign against the commission, which concluded

MACLEAN'S

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SOMALIA INQUIRY'S DAMNING REPORT

THE SEARCH FOR ELUSIVE TRUTH

THE FACES OF SOMALIA

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that the nation's military system is "rotten to the core."

Seldom has a federal public inquiry been so blunt and unequivocal. The three commissioners called for a full-scale criminal investigation into the March 4, 1993, shooting by Canadian soldiers of two Somalis, one of whom died. They urged the government to look into possible perjury charges against senior military officials who, the commissioners said, lied on the witness stand. And they flatly concluded that without massive change in the military - including a purge of the top brass - a repeat of the African debacle is almost certain. "The sorry sequence of events in Somalia was not the work of a few bad apples," concluded chairman Gilles Létourneau, a Federal Court of Canada judge, "but the inevitable result of systematic organization and leadership failures, many occurring over long periods of time and ignored by our military leaders for just as long."

Yet the Liberal government's angry reaction to the report seems to stack the deck against real reform. The most controversial move came last January, when then-Defence Minister Doug Young decided to end the inquiry's hearings at a time when the commissioners insisted they would have no chance to hear critical witnesses or probe some of the most fundamental questions in the whole affair. And although Conservative senators vowed to hold hearings into what the Somalia inquiry did not have time to consider - the torture-killing of Somali teenager Shidane Arone - Liberal senators quashed their bid well before the June 2 election call.

Last week, the government - bolstered by polls showing that Canadians have generally lost interest in the Somalia debacle - adopted a combative stance. "There is no coverup," declared Prime Minister Jean Chrétien as he emerged from his weekly caucus meeting. Defence Minister Art Eggleton rejected outright the inquiry's 2,000-page report, instead attacking the integrity of commissioner Peter Desbarats, former dean of the University of Western Ontario's journalism program, who has signed a contract to write a book about the inquiry. "There is

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no evidence of a conspiracy," Eggleton told reporters. And, he added, "this happened four years ago. The time for pointing fingers is past."

In fact, there were several signs that the Liberals were interested in doing some finger-pointing of their own - at the commissioners themselves, along with members of the media. As with all major events, the government's public reaction to the release of the Somalia report was co-ordinated in advance by the Prime Minister's Office - on this occasion working in conjunction with Eggleton and his staff. Eggleton, said one Liberal, decided in advance that "the media were going to savage us no matter what was said, so he might as well fight fire with fire."

As well, some Liberals suggested that Eggleton felt it important to look especially decisive in order to win the confidence of senior officers. From the outset, the Liberals expected the report to be tough on them - and suggested, in part, that the commissioners were motivated by their frustration over the decision to end the hearings. "We gave these guys \$25 million and 27 months, and it still wasn't enough for them," complained one PMO official. "How much is enough?" The Liberals also claim that up to three-quarters of the report's recommendations have already been implemented, or will be. That includes a Defence ethics training program for personnel, a strengthened process of operational-readiness training programs and changes to professional development programs for officers. The intent, said the PMO official, "is to turn the page on this episode, but not to tear it right out of the book."

The Liberals privately appear to believe that few Canadians are interested in making the controversy part of their summer reading. "We saw in the election campaign how much people care about Somalia," said one senior Liberal scornfully - suggesting that the issue never became a factor. But some Liberals concede that there is a danger that Eggleton, through the vehemence of his remarks, made his own government appear simultaneously arrogant and defensive. "It was not,"

said one Liberal strategist outside the government, "our best communications moment."

The Somalia affair has already derailed several high-flying military careers, outlasted four national defence ministers and dogged former prime minister Kim Campbell in the 1993 election campaign. Then, Chrétien and the Liberals accused the Conservative government of attempting to cover up the scandal - and demanded a public inquiry to get to the bottom of it. Now, that inquiry's report - and the government's bid to bury it - will haunt the Liberals when the new Parliament reconvenes in the fall.

The roots of the scandal go back to 1992 and a telephone call from George Bush to his friend Brian Mulroney - known for marching in lock-step with the Americans. Bush invited Canada to join the U.S.-led relief mission to war-torn Somalia. Top Defence officials - including chief of staff Gen. John de Chastelain and deputy minister of defence Robert Fowler, who would emerge as two of the central characters in the ensuing drama - favored joining the mission. Their motivation, according to the Somalia commission's report: finding a prominent role in a high-profile mission to remove the memory of the minor participation of Canada's military in the Gulf War. "A role that was seen as secondary would not sit well with the troops, with me, with the government or with Canadians," the report quotes de Chastelain as cautioning Colin Powell, then-chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Instead of glory, Somalia brought infamy. With the army's resources stretched to the limit, the only troops available for the mission were the Canadian Airborne Regiment, a proud fighting unit with a lineage dating back to the heroics of Canadian paratroopers during the Second World War. But as the inquiry report underlined, the Airborne - trained for combat, not peacekeeping - was an appallingly bad choice for the African mission. In addition, it was undergoing inner turmoil: because of government military cutbacks, the Airborne had recently lost 200 of its 900 members. Adding to the confusion

was that, just weeks before leaving for Africa, commanding officer Lt.-Col. Paul Morneault - who had lost the confidence of his superiors - was summarily fired and replaced by Lt.-Col. Carol Mathieu.

As the inquiry's report makes clear, the frame of mind among certain Airborne members was well-known to military leaders - and worrisome. One group, calling themselves the "Rebels," acted as though they were a law unto themselves. Against orders, they repeatedly raised the American Confederate flag in their barracks at Camp Petawawa, 130 km northwest of Ottawa. They torched the car of a sergeant who raised their ire. And even by combat unit standards, some Airborne troopers showed excessive aggressiveness in the view of senior officers. Those concerns proved prophetic: among the most volatile troopers was Cpl. Clayton Matchee - also a Rebel member - who months later participated in Arone's torture and killing.

Preparation for the mission "fell far short of what was required," concluded the report. For one thing, the unit's rules of engagement, which outlined where and when to use deadly force, were never clear. In an interview with *Maclean's* after the release of the report, Létourneau pointed out that planning at headquarters in Ottawa was so bad that soldiers were deployed with equipment better suited for the Arctic than the African desert - heavy leather boots, thick sweaters and steel helmets made for colder temperatures, as well as metal canteens that left soldiers with hot water to quench their thirst in the desert heat. "They were told to bring their woollies," he quipped.

Just how poorly prepared they were became apparent when the troops finally arrived in Somalia in December, 1992. Spilling from their Hercules transport planes into the swirling sand, they encountered scorching 40° C heat - and an east African country with seemingly unsolvable problems. Divided along tribal lines, Somalia was dominated by bands of heavily armed militias who clashed endlessly in the streets and

countryside. Canadian soldiers were given the task of securing an area around the central Somali town of Belet Huen so food could be distributed to the starving citizens.

The report acknowledges that they started the mission with enthusiasm - tough paratroopers who, although ready for conflict, genuinely wanted to help the Somalis. But the zeal quickly wilted under the unrelenting hostility of the locals. The Canadians were harassed and threatened as they tried to rebuild bridges, roads and hospitals destroyed in the warfare. Once, they were pelted with stones while escorting a food convoy. Even more galling was the incessant stream of desperate Somalis sneaking into the Canadian compound at night to steal food and anything else they could scavenge. Nerves grew strained. The Canadians became increasingly frustrated about spending too much time routing out thieves and too little fulfilling their humanitarian mission. This deepening sense of despair, concluded the inquiry report, led to the fateful events of the night of March 4, 1993.

It was all very calculated. Using food and water as bait, a team of Canadian soldiers, including a sniper, lay waiting in the dark. Two Somalis crawled through a fence and grabbed the food. The soldiers ordered them to halt. When the Somalis turned and ran, the Canadians, equipped with night vision goggles, shot both of them in the back, killing one. Afterward, as the report notes, Canadian officers concluded that the troops were simply doing their job. But the commissioners disagree, writing that the deliberate trap was "a dubious interpretation of the rules of engagement."

That incident, and subsequent atrocities, might have remained unknown to the public. But on March 19, 1993, Jim Day, then a reporter for the small daily newspaper the *Pembroke Observer*, happened to be on assignment in Belet Huen and saw medical staff rushing Matchee by stretcher to hospital. "When I asked," recalls Day, now a reporter with the Charlottetown *Guardian*, "they were very abrupt and defensive." No wonder. Only 2 1/2 days before, the bloody, mutilated body of Arone, who had

been caught breaking into a nearby compound, had arrived at the same hospital. Arone had been in the custody of Matchee and other Airborne paratroopers, and according to court martial testimony the corporal went berserk - savagely punching and kicking Arone, and using cigarillos to burn the teenager even as the Somali pleaded "Canada, Canada, Canada," in a futile bid to halt the three-hour-long torture. Under custody in a temporary detention bunker, Matchee tried to hang himself with a bootlace, but a guard discovered him before he finished the job.

Impossible to hide, Matchee's attempted suicide sparked a chain of events that extended from Somalia to headquarters in Ottawa and even touching then-Defence Minister Kim Campbell. The following March, Pte. Kyle Brown was convicted of manslaughter and torture in Arone's death. (Left brain-damaged by his attempted suicide, Matchee was declared unfit to stand trial.) In January, 1995, a shocking videotape showing Airborne soldiers, among other things, being forced to eat urine-soaked bread as part of an initiation rite, prompted the government to abruptly disband the regiment. Then, in the spring of 1995, Maj. Barry Armstrong, a doctor who served in Belet Huen, went public with allegations that the Somali killed on March 4 had been shot in the back of the head at point-blank range. Shortly afterward, under intense pressure from the opposition, then-Defence Minister David Collenette reluctantly called the public inquiry.

At the time, the Liberals promised to get to the bottom of things. But last week, Létourneau told *Macleans* that he was dubious about the Liberal government's commitment the moment it appointed Anne Marie Doyle - a career public servant and close friend of deputy defence minister Fowler - as a member of the commission. Under intense media scrutiny, she was replaced. "I sensed from then on that the government was not committed to the inquiry," Létourneau stressed.

Once the inquiry convened in October, 1995, the commissioners ran into what the report termed "a wall of

silence." Officials at the department of national defence were slow to co-operate in the commission's search to gather relevant documents. When it was revealed that military officers had altered documents released to the media, the inquiry began a summer-long investigation that eventually followed the trail of the tampering to Gen. Jean Boyle, by then the new chief of the defence staff. To make matters worse, said the report, a number of officers who testified at the inquiry lied on the witness stand and tried to deflect blame to more junior ranks. And then came the government-ordered end to the hearings. "We were able to describe one situation in Somalia - and to a certain extent you could draw your own conclusions about others," maintains Desbarats. "But that is not the same as being able to look at everything."

The inquiry's abrupt end has left many unanswered questions. Did the military try to cover up Arone's death? Did military police fail to investigate allegations that two other Somalis were severely beaten in the Canadian compound on the nights of March 14 and 15? Did the military launch a concerted effort to discredit Armstrong's testimony? What did Fowler - the person Létourneau now says he would most like to question - mean when he told members of the high command at a meeting in early March, 1993, that they should keep a low profile because then-Minister Campbell was shortly expected to declare her candidacy for the Tory leadership?

Still, the inquiry heard enough to determine where the blame for the Somalia debacle lay: at the top. "The question was not who tortured Arone," declared Létourneau in an interview, "but how could this thing happen with officers standing 80 feet away." Overall, the inquiry concluded that the scandal stemmed directly from a failure of leadership by Canada's highest-ranking officers throughout the mission. And the report named names - fingering 11 officers for failing in the performance of their duty. The inquiry took de Chastelain to task for being more obsessed with winning political points than determining if the Airborne was really ready for the Somalia mission. His "benign neglect," the report said, was a bad

example for junior officers. Even Lewis MacKenzie, the hero of Sarajevo, was criticized for not paying enough attention to his duties.

Singled out as the most obvious example of the leadership problem plaguing the forces was Boyle, the officer viewed by the inquiry as the driving force behind a concerted effort to mislead the commission. Before becoming chief of the defence staff in 1996, Boyle was in charge of liaison between the military and the inquiry - a power he retained after his promotion. The commissioners dismissed his claim that he knew nothing about the documents that were altered before being released to the media. And they called his readiness to pass blame onto subordinates unbecoming for Canada's highest soldier. Even acting chief of defence staff Larry Murray, not mentioned in the report, was criticized by the commissioners in their news conference.

The people at the centre of the scandal went into defensive formation last week. Murray, who has the support of the government, rejected the inquiry's view that the military command is in disarray and that generals tried to cover up the mess. De Chastelain, deemed a "failure" in the report, told *Maclean's* that "I wouldn't have told the government the Airborne could go if we weren't capable." He added: "They say the warning signs should have been seen. They may be right, but being able to look back now is a great thing." When contacted last week, retired admiral John Anderson - now Canada's permanent representative to NATO in Brussels and chief of the defence staff at the time of the Somalia killings, said, "I've always felt confident in my actions as chief of defence staff."

The status quo is not enough, in the inquiry's view. Sweeping change, the report says, is the only way "to recapture lost faith in the Canadian Forces and to restore honor to our traditional role as international peacekeepers." It made a total of 157 specific recommendations to turn the military system around. Among the most sweeping: a complete overhaul of the military

justice system, including the removal of military police from the chain of command and the use of civilian courts to try soldiers; the creation of a new ethics program to better prepare soldiers for cultural differences overseas; and promotions based on competence rather than seniority.

Is anybody listening? Last week, Chrétien, who went out of his way to praise the military, said the government will examine the inquiry's recommendations and "act accordingly." But he added that many reforms are already under way. And he hinted that the inquiry's calls for further investigations - and perhaps even criminal charges - will likely go unheeded. "These incidents occurred five years ago," said Chrétien. "People were taken to court, those who were there, and were found guilty."

Guilt, of course, is a complicated thing. So far, only lower-ranking soldiers have paid the price for what happened in the blistering haze of the African desert. If the Somalia inquiry proves anything, it is the near-impossibility of finding absolute answers for the ghastly events that took place there - particularly when Ottawa seems so bent on burying the truth. But the aftermath of the report may underline something else for the Liberals: there is simply no silencing the ghosts of Somalia.

The Search for Elusive Truth

In the spring of 1993, Somalia also was at the top of the news - only then it was Brian Mulroney's Tory government and high-flying defence minister Kim Campbell at the centre of the storm and Jean Chrétien and his Liberals on the offensive. At issue was the question: when did she hear that Somali teenager Shidane Arone had been beaten to death by paratroopers, one of whom then tried to take his own life? The Grits, screaming "coverup," claimed she knew the details of the case from the very beginning. But Campbell, who had just launched her bid for the Conservative leadership, said that while she actually

learned of the Somali's death two days after it happened, it took another two weeks before she heard it might have been murder.

Why the delay? Campbell's theory is that senior officers and officials in the department of national defence intentionally kept her in the dark. Either way, the issue faded from the headlines during Campbell's disastrous federal election campaign, which saw the Tories lose all but two seats in the House of Commons. When the Liberals took over, they acted to put the scandal behind them - moving chief of the defence staff John Anderson to a NATO posting in Brussels and sending deputy defence minister Robert Fowler to the United Nations in New York City. But the issue heated up again in January, 1995, with the well-publicized video of the Airborne's hazing rituals and Maj. Barry Armstrong's accusations two months later that an earlier killing of a Somali by Canadian soldiers was, in fact, an execution.

Campbell, who is now Canada's consul-general in Los Angeles, condemned the government's January decision to shut down the inquiry, claiming she wanted an opportunity to clear her name. That desire grew more intense when the commission made public a November, 1994, memo written by naval captain Fred Blair, a senior legal officer in the department of national defence, which stated that Campbell's office knew details of the Arone killing five days before she claimed. That prompted John Dixon, a former aide to Campbell, to call Blair's claim an "utter and complete falsehood." Hard truths, though, have proven elusive.

The Faces of Somalia

From politicians and top military brass to doctors, enlisted men and journalists, the Somalia affair has involved a wide and varied cast of characters. A look at some of the people who have played a role in the unfolding drama:

LARRY MURRAY

When the vice-admiral, Canada's acting chief of the defence staff, testified before the inquiry six months ago, his appearance was highlighted by a series of heated disagreements with commission chairman Gilles Létourneau. The inquiry later described his behavior as "near contemptuous." Following the departure of disgraced chief of the defence staff Gen. Jean Boyle, the government named Murray to the post as an interim replacement. But the Somalia scandal, which continues to dog him, seems to make his permanent appointment as Canada's top soldier unlikely. Remarked inquiry commissioner Robert Rutherford last week: "He is not the best man for the job."

KIM CAMPBELL

Former prime minister Kim Campbell was defence minister at the time of the killings in Somalia - and preparing for her ultimately successful run at the Conservative leadership. She was caught badly off guard by revelations that one of the deaths looked like a murder and that a Canadian soldier had attempted suicide - and she has maintained that senior Defence officials misled her about the nature of the deaths. Ten months after being soundly defeated in the 1993 election, Campbell accepted an appointment as Canada's consul general in Los Angeles. Outraged when the inquiry was cut short in January - denying her a chance to testify - she has since grown silent on the issue, declining to talk to *Maclean's* last week and further fuelling speculation that the government has told her to keep quiet.

DOUG YOUNG

As David Collenette's successor in the defence portfolio, the New Brunswick MP was seen as a tough guy. His no-nonsense attitude was too aggressive, some critics say - and he was roundly condemned for his refusal to extend the

inquiry's deadline. Badly defeated in his New Brunswick riding in the June 2 election - a loss attributed mainly to his changes to the Employment Insurance system during his previous job as human resources minister - he announced last week that he is hanging out his shingle as a strategic planning consultant or, in simpler terms, a lobbyist, in Ottawa.

JIM DAY

The killing of Shidane Arone and other aspects of the Somalia scandal might not have come to light without Jim Day. In 1993, he was working for the Pembroke Observer, an Ontario daily in the small town 130 km northwest of Ottawa with most of its readers among soldiers based at nearby CFB Petawawa. Anxious for media coverage, the Airborne invited Day to Somalia to write stories on the Canadian mission. On March 19, Day saw medical personnel rushing a soldier on a stretcher to hospital. Within hours of the Observer publishing the story at the end of the month, the news of Arone's death and Clayton Matchee's attempted suicide had spread through news outlets across the country. Day is now a general assignment reporter for the Charlottetown Guardian - and says he feels like a footnote in history: "It overwhelms me when I think about what has happened."

DAVID COLLENETTE

The Chrétien government's first defence minister quickly found himself in the hot seat after the 1993 election. Enduring constant questioning in the House of Commons, he finally established the Somalia inquiry in March, 1995 - and championed the January, 1996, appointment of Boyle as chief of the defence staff. In October, 1996, Collenette was forced to resign after writing an improper letter for a constituent to the Immigration and Refugee Board. At the time, critics suggested that the government used the offence as a convenient excuse to remove Collenette from the spotlight. A Chrétien favorite, he returned to cabinet as transport minister after the June 2

election.

ROBERT FOWLER

The career civil servant's role as deputy minister of defence stands as one of the great unanswered questions in the Somalia affair. Létourneau says Fowler is the one person he most regrets not being able to question because the inquiry was shut down. Specifically, Létourneau says he wants to know what Fowler meant when he told members of the high command at defence headquarters during a meeting in early March of 1993 that they should keep a low profile because the Tory leadership campaign was about to heat up - and then-Minister Campbell was likely to be a candidate. In 1995, the Liberals appointed Fowler, whose sister Diana is married to Gov. Gen. Roméo LeBlanc, as Canada's ambassador to the United Nations. Last week, a press aide did not return *Maclean's* calls requesting an interview.

CLAYTON MATCHEE

The Airborne paratrooper who was involved in the torture-murder of Arone never stood trial for the young Somali's death. The reason: his failed suicide attempt left him too brain-damaged to stand trial. Matchee is now in the psychiatric ward of a hospital in North Battleford, Sask., where he can walk with some difficulty and is capable of slurred speech.

KYLE BROWN

Brown, who served three years for the manslaughter and torture of Arone, still contends he was innocent. Although he acknowledges that he was present during the fatal beating, Brown has always maintained that had he drawn his weapon to stop Matchee, his superior, from abusing the Somali he would have been court-martialled. Now living in Edmonton, he spends most of his time promoting *Scapegoat*, the book he

wrote with journalist and author Peter Worthington. In it, Brown maintains there was a concerted effort by army higher-ups to ensure the Somalia convictions were limited to the lower ranks - and that he, in effect, took the rap for officers who stood 80 feet away listening to Arone's screams.

JOHN de CHASTELAIN

The general was chief of the defence staff when the decision was made to send the Airborne to Somalia, and during the early stages of the mission. According to the inquiry, de Chastelain was too anxious to ensure that Canadians took part in the mission - and too ill-informed about whether the unit was up to the job. After a brief tenure as Canada's ambassador to the United States, he was brought back to Ottawa near the end of 1993 to again serve as chief of the defence staff, replacing Adm. John Anderson. In 1995, he accepted a post in Northern Ireland as one of three international observers to negotiate the disarmament of terrorist groups on both sides of the Irish conflict.

JOHN ANDERSON

The admiral was appointed chief of the defence staff by Campbell in early 1993. He raised eyebrows when he visited troops in Somalia before the Arone killing and warned them to strive to avoid embarrassments because their minister was considering a run for the Tory leadership. Furthermore, his alleged role in the delay of information to politicians surrounding the deaths in Somalia is still under question. After the defeat of the Tories in 1993, the new Liberal government, striving to distance itself from the scandal, fired Anderson. Soon afterward, he was appointed Canada's permanent representative to NATO.

BARRY ARMSTRONG

A medical doctor deployed in Somalia, Maj. Armstrong gained national prominence in 1995 when he told the media that the Somali who died on March 4, 1993, received a point-blank gunshot to the back of the head. That revelation finally forced Collenette to call a public inquiry into the Somalia affair. Army colleagues came forward trying to discredit Armstrong as unstable. But he refused to back down. The inquiry report said it found no evidence to refute Armstrong's accusations and Létourneau called him one of the heroes of the affair. Armstrong, who is no longer in the army, lives in Dryden, Ont., where he works as a general practitioner.

JEAN BOYLE

The retired general, a former fighter pilot, rose quickly through the ranks and was appointed chief of the defence staff at the height of the scandal in 1996. During his six days before the commission, he endured steady fire from commissioners for his selective memory and unwillingness to share the blame for the 1995 tampering of departmental documents. Within weeks, under intense opposition and media scrutiny, he submitted his resignation. Shortly afterward, he accepted an executive post with aircraft manufacturer McDonnell Douglas in Toronto.

ERNEST BENO

The brigadier-general was the brigade commander at CFB Petawawa at the time of the Airborne's Somalia mission. He was responsible for the removal of the unit's commander just weeks before its departure. He struggled on the witness stand during his testimony in 1995, and was chastised by Létourneau for his evasiveness. Beno filed a series of legal actions, claiming Létourneau was biased against him, and trying to block the publication of his name in the final report. None succeeded. Close to retirement, he is now working at defence headquarters in Ottawa.

Maclean's July 14, 1997