

# War clouds darken Africa

“Who cares about Somalia!” That’s what three friends who keep up with the news told me recently when I mentioned that I was avidly watching civil war engulf one of east Africa’s least-known nations, a place with more camels than people.

They are wrong. I predict we are going to be paying a lot of attention to Somalia and to the rest of the war-torn, politically chaotic and very strategic Horn of Africa.

As this column goes to press, rebel forces in Mogadishu, Somalia’s fly-blown, dusty capital, are closing in on President Siad Barre, who is holed up with his tribal bodyguards in a heavily fortified bunker by the airport.

In recent days, savage fighting in Mogadishu has left hundreds dead. It looks like Barre, one of Africa’s nastiest dictators, may be nearing the end of his 21 years of misrule that have turned this former Italian colony into an economic ruin.

Barre managed to stay in power for so long by playing off the score of tribes that make up Somalia’s 6.2 million unhappy people. Two and a half years ago, however, two of the largest, the Hawiye and the Isaak, who control, respectively, the centre and north of the desert nation, rose up against Barre’s regime.

It all sounds like something out of an Evelyn Waugh farce, but the outcome was enormously bloody. The Somali air force and army razed rebel villages and towns. The large northern city of Hargeisa was virtually destroyed. More than 200,000 Somali refugees actually fled to neighboring Ethiopia to escape Barre’s army, which was largely made up of his own Marehan tribesmen.

During this period the Barre regime was financed and supported by the U.S. in return for a secret deal to use the strategic Somali air and naval base complex at Berbera. After Barre’s troops massacred more than 200 protesters in mid-1989 and murdered the Catholic bishop of Mogadishu, the U.S. cut off aid. This left Somalia’s former colonial ruler, Italy, as the sole supporter of Siad Barre, who was starting to look like the Papa Doc Duvalier of Africa.

The crafty Italians have been supporting all

ERIC  
MARGOLIS



sides in Somalia’s tribal war, figuring they would maintain their economic and political influence in Somalia no matter who won. Britain, which used to rule the north as British Somaliland, has not so far gotten involved.

As Somalia faces collapse and chaos, its neighbors are in equally bad shape. Next door, Ethiopia is gripped by civil war between the ruling Amhara and armies of Eritrean, Tigrean and Oromo (Galla) rebels. Tigrean forces are now only 70 miles north of Addis Ababa, where Africa’s bloodiest tyrant, Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam, is fighting for his life.

Up in Eritrea, the rebels have bottled up 200,000 Ethiopian troops in besieged Asmara and captured the vital port of Masawa. If Asmara falls, Mengistu may not survive unless the Israelis, who have recently intervened on his behalf, can save him.

Somalis fear that Ethiopia, with whom they have already fought one bitter war for control of the Ogaden border region, may attack again, this time with the help of Israeli arms and advisers.

Ethiopia’s neighbor, Sudan, is also on the verge of total collapse. A two-decade old civil war has devastated the huge nation. On one side are Christian Dinka and Nuer tribesmen of the south, secretly supported and armed by Israel and Christian aid groups like Oxfam and Caritas. On the other are northern Muslims, led by a shaky military regime of Gen. Omar el-Bashir that just executed 38 officers after an attempted plot.

The junta is pro-Iraqi, pro-Libyan and backs anti-Mengistu rebels. As a result, the U.S., Egypt and Ethiopia have joined in covert efforts to overthrow the Bashir regime.

While all this political skulduggery goes on, millions of peasants in drought-stricken Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia are starving. War and politics have prevented distribution of food. The Mengistu regime has long used starvation as a weapon to crush dissent. Now, the mighty U.S. propaganda machine is claiming that the Sudanese regime is doing the same to rebellious southerners, though it appears that war and internal chaos rather than government malevolence are the real cause of starvation in southern Sudan. Add to this huge mess growing political instability just to the south in Kenya, whose north is claimed by Somalia.

What all this adds up to is a lethal combination of tribal wars, border disputes, famine, pestilence and massive population displacements spread over almost a quarter of Africa’s surface. If Ethiopia or Sudan splinter into pieces, double the trouble.

Which means that Somalia and the rest of the strife-ridden Horn of Africa may be very much front page bad news this new year.