EDITOR'S NOTE

To say the least, 2011 is bringing even greater misery to the denizens of the Horn of Africa than a year ago. The calamities are such that it is as if, to borrow from Arthur Schopenhauer, life in the region has turned into a "penal colony," in which the people of the area are being punished for their very existence. This is the case with Somalis. But before I offer further comments on this grave condition, permit me to share with you a few good tidings.

First, this past spring we celebrated the tenth anniversary of *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* in the context of the annual Macalester College Civic Forum, whose full program of activities is reproduced at the end of this volume. The proceedings, which contained commissioned academic presentations and discussions, interviews (in English and Somali), and musical performances centered on exquisite *oud* playing, were capped by an elegant and tasty dinner attended by about 120 invited professionals and distinguished seniors from the Somali-American community. They hailed from many parts of Minnesota, Seattle, Calgary, Kansas City, Chicago, Washington, D.C./Virginia, and Khartoum (Sudan). On our behalf, I would like to register our gratitude to my college, Macalester, and to President Brian Rosenberg in particular, for the generous budgetary contributions for the 2011 Forum and the steadfast institutional subvention for the yearly publication of *Bildhaan*.

Second, all of the back volumes have been available online on the Macalester College Digital Commons for some time. Our librarians, who keep monthly records of the number of downloads, report a pleasing rise in the demand for works published in the journal—many hundreds in certain cases each month.

Third, a new extremely timely and kaleidoscopic book that is bound to become of constitutive significance for Somali diasporic studies has just been released. It is edited by a formidable cohort of academics at the University of Maine: Kimberly A. Husiman in Sociology, Mazie Hough in History, Kristin Langellier in Communications and Journalism, and Carol Toner in History and Maine Studies. The title of the book is *Somalis in Maine: Crossing Cultural Currents* (published by North Atlantic Books of Berkeley, California). A product of "The Somali Narrative Project" at the University of Maine, one outside reviewer, Professor D. Soyini Madison of Northwestern University, writes in the front matter of the book:

> This is a precious and beautiful book that honors the power of 'small stories' in 'small spaces' that traverse time and place to touch us all with the urgency of their importance, the soul of their humanity, and the grand eloquence of their meanings. The stories of Somalia and the Somali Diaspora deserve our attention because, as this compelling book demonstrates, they contain and perform those universal, yet unique and poignant moments of culture, identity, and belonging in the making. This is a book of life and breath encounters—of the foreign, the familiar, and the in-between—told through the voices of Somalis and those who know how to listen with the heart and learn with purpose.

I urge each one of you to order your own copy as well as spread the word.

Now to some of the developments that add to our already overloaded sense of *naxdin* and *murugo*. As I pen this note, a cataclysmic drought, the worst in at least six decades, is ravaging the whole Horn of Africa region, with more than ten million people in the throes of starvation and a tormenting death. A large swath of southern Somalia and adjacent areas inhabited by ethnic Somalis are in the direst straits. As individuals and communities around the world rightfully rush in with food, water, medical supplies, and tents, these unavoidable questions must be raised: What are the main causes of the drought and subsequent famine? What is to be done?

This is not the space to attempt a thorough response. Nonetheless, let me identify at least seven factors that have contributed to the situation: (1) the legendary niggardliness, with regard to rainfall, and brittleness of the Somali environment, (2) nearly a century-long process of desertification typified by the enormous growth of charcoal for both domestic use and, contemporaneously, as a lucrative export commodity, (3) the effects of the accelerating global warming and climate change on the Sahel zone of Africa, (4) war, civic dissolution, and the demise of the national state and other public institutions, (5) the absence of visionary and competent leadership capable of resurrecting the national momentum and collective confidence, (6) the exhaustion, on the part of the global community, of solidaristic sympathy as a result of the endless Somali xenophobia, self-mutilation, and repetitive failure to chart an achievable national scheme for renewal, and (7) foreign interventions/interferences that calculatingly or inadvertently derail genuine Somali efforts to do the right thing.

Insofar as what must be done, I proffer these reflections: (1) genuine friends of the Somali people ought to continue to "egg on" those who

they can influence to contribute to the ongoing emergency relief and beyond, (2) these friends must press, whenever the opportunity arises, the Somali petite bourgeoisie to bring forth imaginative ideas, public standards of right, and civic goodness and action fit to effectively respond to the catastrophe of which this famine is only an ugly and cruel manifestation—such an attempt will include exposing the flaws and imperfections of Somali history and contemporary society as well as outside harm and manipulations, and (3) the Somali people, inside and outside of the country, must become actors in their own history by mobilizing themselves through new supra intersubjectivity or, in Durkheim's expression, "common conscience," that demands from the *lumpen* elite virtuous and efficient politics. Both categories of Somalis and their sympathizers will do well, then, to note the instructive words of the eminent economic historian Alexander Gerschenkron:

> To break through barriers of stagnation in a backward country, to ignite the imagination of men [and women]…a stronger medicine is needed than the promise of better allocation of resources or even the lower price of bread…What is needed…is faith—faith in the words of Saint-Simon that the golden age lies not behind but ahead…[this] requires a New Deal of the *emotions* [my emphasis].[1]

Each item in both lists requires a sustained and disciplined exploration—perhaps themes for future essays to appear in the pages of *Bildhaan* and other academic/public intellectual sites.

We begin this volume with two poems. The first is very brief but composed in the immediate wake of the recent horrid killings in Norway. It is offered in a spirit of combined sorrow and fellowship for a country renowned for its exemplary policy of disinterested benevolence toward many less fortunate others around the world. The second was handed to me in late December of last year, after I had just finished a lecture in a large and crowded room of young professionals and university students in Djibouti City. To this day, I have not been successful in finding the identity of the composer, but still believe that the poem deserves wide circulation. Perhaps if or when this happens, the composer will come forward and claim rightful proprietorship. Part two comprises an interview, an article on Somali media and another on foreign aid, followed by a piece on mental health. Part three covers immigration/citizenship/adaptation and various aspects that relate to education. The volume ends with the 2011 Macalester spring Civic

Forum program on the theme *New American Citizens: Opportunities and Obligations for Somalis.*

Belatedly, we would like to acknowledge *Arab World Geography* for permission to republish Abdi Ismail Samatar's article, "Debating Somali Identity in a British Tribunal: The Case of the BBC Somali Service," in volume 10 of *Bildhaan*.

Notes

1. Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962).