

# SHABAB 'CAN SURVIVE FOR 30 YEARS'

**NAIROBI:** On a Sunday afternoon in late February a car exploded outside a crowded restaurant in Baidoa, Somalia, and moments later a suicide bomber blew himself up among fleeing survivors. At least 30 people died in the attack, the latest by the Shabab, a Somali-led Al-Qaeda group in East Africa that continues to defy repeated predictions of its demise. Two days before the Baidoa bombings 14 people were killed when two bombs exploded outside a hotel and a public park in the capital Mogadishu.

One was a 200 kg homemade bomb, only the second time Shabab has used such a large device. The first was in July and the explosion tore the side off a six-storey hotel. Five weeks earlier, 19 were killed in a bomb and gun attack on a restaurant on Mogadishu's Lido Beach. It is not just civilians who are targeted. On Jan 15, Shabab fighters overran a military outpost in El-Adde, southern Somalia, manned by up to 200 Kenyan soldiers deployed as part of the African Union peace-enforcement mission, AMISOM. Kenya has refused to say how many of its soldiers were killed in the attack.

Matt Bryden, director of Sahan Research, a Nairobi-based think tank, described the first such attack, on a Burundian forward operating base in Lego last June, as "a threshold operation". Its success meant that assaults on isolated company-sized AMISOM units became their "standard operating procedure". AMISOM's effectiveness is hampered by suspicion and jealousy among the



**MOGADISHU:** A man looks at the dead body of a person killed during an attack in the center of the Somali capital on Feb 26, 2016. — AFP

main troop contributing countries and a lack of coordination, funds, focus and will. It is also struggling to adapt to a rural counter-insurgency after its eventual success in urban combat pushed Shabab out of Mogadishu five years ago.

"AMISOM is fighting the wrong war," said Stig Jarle Hansen, a Norwegian academic and author of a forthcoming book on jihad in Africa. "AMISOM watches their own back, they are in their garrisons, they go out patrolling once a week and the rest of the week the Shabab is on top of

things." By enforcing local support, "Shabab can survive for 30 years," said Hansen. The heavy losses inflicted on the Burundians in Lego, the Ugandans in Janale and Kenyans in El-Adde have cowed AMISOM, which has retreated from some areas and hunkered down in others. "Since AMISOM is not in an offensive posture, Shabab has plenty of space to think, plan and prepare," said Bryden.

Hitting AMISOM makes sense for Shabab because in the absence of a functioning national

army, the 22,000-strong force is the only protector of the internationally-backed government the jihadists are committed to overthrowing. Similarly, the killing of civilians serves to undermine confidence in the government. "They are attacking signs of normality," said Hansen by shooting up a beachside restaurant, turning a public garden into a slaughter ground or blowing up football fans. The message is clear, said Cedric Barnes, Horn of Africa director at the International Crisis Group research organization: "Shabab is saying, 'There is no normality, no security, it's not Somalia Rising, who are you trying to kid?'"

## Shabab Reborn

With a change of government due later this year, the tempo of Shabab attacks appears to be rising in an effort to undermine the already-shaky legitimacy of the process, said Barnes. The style of attack is also shifting, said Ken Menkhaus, a professor at Davidson College in the US. "Shabab is launching more spectacular attacks, looking for maximum bang for its buck," said Menkhaus. The city attacks also underscore Shabab's continued infiltration of government areas and the ease with which it can use corruption and sympathetic insiders to subvert security arrangements, moving truck bombs through roadblocks or - as in a botched plot in February - placing a laptop bomb on a plane inside an airport that is supposed to be the best-protected place in the country. — AFP

# 'SOCIAL CURSE' OF DEBT RAISES WORRIES IN QATAR

## SOME CITIZENS LIVING BEYOND THEIR MEANS

**DOHA:** Credit cards on the limit, huge bank borrowings and a struggle to repay loans: these are the personal debt problems of some Qataris despite the Gulf state's reputation for fabulous wealth. Generous government salaries and free healthcare, funded by vast natural gas reserves in a country with only about 300,000 citizens, do not always translate into healthy bank balances for ordinary Qataris.

Instead, they can come under intense social pressure to live way beyond their means, spending lavishly on everything from the latest smart phones and designer fashions to family weddings. Now their problems are deepening as diving global energy prices mean even the Qatari welfare state is becoming less generous.

Many are borrowing enormous sums from local banks to finance lifestyles they cannot afford, according to a study by Qatar University. "The idea of Qataris being a small, lucky, happy few - it's a myth," said Laurent Lambert, of the university's Social and Economic Survey Research Institute. "Many do not have the income to match the lifestyle and a small percentage are significantly poor by local standards and struggling to make ends meet."

Widespread personal debt, while familiar throughout the Gulf where loosely-regulated banks and extravagant living are commonplace, does not yet appear to threaten Qatar's overall financial system. Of the 75 per cent of Qatari families in debt - most owe more than 250,000 riyals (\$68,700), according to a 2014 Qatar National Development Strategy report - only a handful default on their loan payments, an offence punishable by prison. But recent layoffs of some state employees and petrol price increases - reforms hastened by the sinking energy market - have refocused attention on indebtedness and the problems it could present to social cohesion if citizens start to press their relatives and the government heavily for help. While Qatar has a total population of 2.5 million, most are foreign workers who have less access to the cheap loans available in a country where a conventional banking system operates alongside - but separately from - Islamic financial institutions. Likened to a "social curse" by Qatari commentators and a "fever spreading from house to house", over-indebtedness among the much smaller local population is a raising national concern.

Radio talk shows air interviews with distressed civil servants who complain of becoming mired in debt after borrowing from banks without understanding the costs of repayment. In Friday sermons, Muslim clerics rail against those who finance holidays to Europe and

lavish wedding parties with loans that can devour salaries and lead to depression and divorce.

Part of the problem, some Qataris say, is that the country's economic boom during the era of high energy prices that lasted until mid-2014 rapidly pushed up standards of living - and expectations of what it means to be both wealthy and successful. "You cannot have a bad watch on your wrist, a second-hand car, or an old telephone. You need to have the latest models so as not to appear 'poor,'" said Mohammed al-Mari, a former traffic policeman who works in the charity sector. "People end up pretending they have money just to keep up. There is this social pressure."

Al-Mari said that while he has managed to pay off debts and save money during his career years, he knew of a recent university graduate who was struggling. "He buys the latest iPhone because his peers have it but then, at the end of the month, he sells it back to pay his bills," he said. Al-Mari recalled how a Qatari woman had recently flown to neighboring Dubai to purchase a counterfeit designer handbag. "Her friend had bought a bag that she wanted but couldn't afford," he said. As well as a culture of extravagance and conspicuous consumption among some, others decry Qatar's "welfare syndrome" that has led a generation to believe it can live carelessly and be bailed out by relatives or a paternalistic government.

## Spreading Wealth

Part of a strategy by Gulf Arab governments to distribute some of their newly-discovered wealth, loans were extended to citizens in the 1960s and '70s and again in the early 2000s to help them buy shares in the state's multi-billion dollar energy enterprises. Liberal lending by local banks, flush with funds from a fast-growing economy, was later extended to households wanting for instance to build a holiday home or buy a new car. These were handed loans, often several times their annual salary, with virtually no collateral.

"It was a free for all. Anyone could borrow basically as much they wanted," said Mohamed Al-Kubaisa, a Qatari sociologist and newspaper columnist. After concerns grew about the proliferation of loans and of Qataris unable to pay them back, the central bank imposed in 2011 a cap of two million riyals on consumer credit secured only against borrowers' salaries, with a maximum repayment period of six years. Later that year, as Arab Spring protests spread across the region, the government raised state employees' salaries by 60 per cent and by 120 per cent for military personnel. — Reuters

## News

in brief

### Israel demolishes West Bank homes

**JERUSALEM:** Israeli forces demolished dozens of structures including a school in the northern West Bank this week, leaving 10 families homeless, the UN said yesterday. The demolitions took place on Wednesday in the village of Khirbet Tana, south of Nablus in the northern West Bank. In total, 41 structures were destroyed, displacing 36 Palestinians including 11 children, the UN's humanitarian body said in a statement. COGAT, the defence ministry body responsible for coordinating Israeli government activity in the Palestinian territories, put the number of structures at 20. It said demolition orders were issued in advance. Nikolay Mladenov, UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, said last month the number of such demolitions has tripled on average since the start of the year. "Since the beginning of 2016, Israel has demolished, on average, 29 Palestinian-owned structures per week, three times the weekly average for 2015," he said.

### Turkey car bomb attack kills 2 police

**DIYARBAKIR, Turkey:** A car bomb and rocket attack by Kurdish militants in Turkey killed two police officers and wounded 35 people in the southeastern province of Mardin yesterday, security sources said. The bomb blast, blamed on Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militants, caused significant damage to a traffic police station and neighboring housing in the town of Nusaybin, near the Syrian border, the sources told Reuters. A clash broke out between police and militants after the explosion, which occurred around 6 a.m. (0400 GMT). Security force reinforcements, along with ambulances and fire engines, were sent to the area, the sources said. There was no immediate claim of responsibility. Two soldiers were killed in a clash in the Idil district of the neighboring province of Sirnak, which borders both Syria and Iraq and has seen some of the heaviest violence, the Dogan news agency said. It also said Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had arrived in the province for a brief visit.