

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4904

February 13, 2009

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

For many years I have been deeply concerned about the ongoing crisis in Somalia and the potential for greater instability in the Horn of Africa, as well as the threat this situation poses to our national security. Over the last three years, I have consistently called on the executive branch to develop a comprehensive interagency strategy toward Somalia. In 2006, I wrote legislation, passed by Congress, requiring the administration to develop such a strategy. However, despite these efforts, the previous administration maintained a disjointed and short-sighted approach toward Somalia that was counterproductive and led to increased anti-Americanism in the region. As a result, the situation in Somalia has deteriorated, undermining our national security goals, including counterterrorism.

I was pleased to hear from Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Rice at their respective confirmation hearings that they understand the strategic importance of Somalia and that your administration is committed to developing a comprehensive strategy to address this crisis. I look forward to working with the State Department in this regard. Just as important, however, is the integration of all our national security resources, including those of the Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community, into one coherent strategy. Unfortunately, while the legislation passed by Congress requires an annual interagency strategy, the reports provided to Congress by the Bush Administration addressed only diplomatic activity.

In response, I sent a classified letter raising numerous questions about interagency coordination and strategy and requesting that these issues be included in classified annexes to the congressionally required report. The Bush Administration responded only by offering disjointed and incomplete briefings. As you seek a new and more effective way forward, I urge you to bring together all elements of the U.S. government in one coherent strategy and to do so in close coordination with Congress. In that respect, I look forward to working with you on the classified, as well as unclassified, elements of a comprehensive strategy toward Somalia and the Horn of Africa.

The need to develop and implement a new approach is urgent. The successful election of a new president by the Transitional Federal Government parliament is a major step forward for the Djibouti process and presents a significant opportunity. I believe expanded U.S. support for this process must be a central component of our strategy, and there exists a window during which high-level, sustained U.S. engagement could help Somalia overcome the many challenges to peace and stability.

I met President Sheik Sharif during my visit to the region in December and he expressed his commitment to an inclusive process to unite Somalia. Encouraging and helping him to deliver on that expressed commitment will be crucial if the process is to effectively translate into security on the ground and lead to the development of a functional government and the rule of law. As you well know, past attempts to form a unity government have failed because they were perceived—whether accurately or not—as favoring one clan or political constituency over others.

Finally, if we are to support the Djibouti process and pursue an effective overall strategy, it is essential that we deal directly with our credibility deficit in Somalia. The previous administration's approach has spurred widespread public resentment and mistrust toward the United States, which has led to increased suspicion about U.S. intentions. This mistrust undermines our ability to engage constructively with different parties. During the first months of your administration, I believe you have a unique opportunity to change this perception. To that end, I urge you to consider making a public, unequivocal statement that you intend to make a clear break from past policies toward Somalia. I believe doing so could make a tremendous impression on ordinary Somalis and greatly advance U.S. public diplomacy efforts in the Horn of Africa and across the Muslim world.

I appreciate your consideration of these suggestions and more importantly, your administration's commitment to address the ongoing crisis in Somalia. I look forward to working together to develop and pursue a comprehensive interagency strategy that brings stability to the region and advances U.S. long-term security interests.

Sincerely,



Russell D. Feingold
United States Senator

CC: The Honorable Hillary Clinton
Secretary of State

The Honorable Robert Gates
Secretary of Defense

The Honorable Dennis Blair
Director of National Intelligence