Mvemba Phezo Dizolele:

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to this conversation with His Excellency Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, president of the Federal Republic of Somalia. We are delighted and honored that the president can join us here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. My name is Mvemba Phezo Dizolele. I’m the director and senior fellow of the African Program.

Somalia is an important country. It’s important by its location, right at the tip of the Horn of Africa. It’s important because of the role it plays in the geopolitics of the subregion. It’s also important for all the other issues that the world cares about – security, food security, climate change, and so on.

So today, as the president joins us, we are eager to learn from him the purpose of his trip to Washington, how he envisions the region, the security issues with al-Shabaab and co-related insurgency, the issue of peace, the issue of climate change, and many other issues. We know that the president met with the secretary of defense yesterday. We know that he’s going to meet with principles at the State Department today. So our thirst, Mr. President, to hear about the purpose of your trip is pretty big.

I will invite his excellency to come to the podium and make his opening remarks, 10 to 15 minutes, and then we will engage in a conversation, a Q&A, where he will expand on his views of the region. Your Excellency, welcome. (Applause.)

Hassan Sheikh Mohamud:

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, it’s truly a great honor and privilege to be delivering what I hope will be a strong and persuasive argument that shows that the policies of containment and degrading of terrorism are no longer enough, with a view of convincing you that we can all only truly be safe by comprehensively defeating terrorists and terrorism in any means possible.

Where better to make this important and timely case than the internationally renowned Center for Strategic and International Studies right here in Washington, DC. It is indeed a pleasure to be back at CSIS. I last participated in this forum in January 2013, where I spoke of the future of governors of Somalia. At that time, there was no al-Shabaab in Somalia.

Today, like 2013, my argument is simple. Somalia has become a long way from a period of state collapse and lawlessness, yet we still have farther to go and still face many challenges as we strive to once again stand tall and firmly on our two feet. One cannot imagine how proud the Somali people are, and how throughout our rich history we have sought to stand firm and tall against all others – even if it meant turning on each other, which we now deeply regret what we have done in the recent past.
Somalia’s most important challenge today to achieve its political and social economic ambitions is to end the repetitive saga of international terrorism on our soil, which has now been dragging for over 15 years. Fifteen years of firefighting and uncertainty is just too long and strengthening Somalia’s security and that of the wider region and the world requires fresh new thinking and strategies to end this scourge of terrorism.

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, our government and like some others in Africa is on the front line combating international terrorism within some parts of our country. Al-Shabaab, which is one of al-Qaida’s most successful affiliates, and ISIS, are actively attempting to violate and criminally undermine the beautiful development aspirations and efforts of the Somali people.

While ISIS is relatively new and small in Somalia, the fundamental question that we must ask ourselves is, why after 15 years of the fight against terrorism, with billions of dollars spent and countless lives tragically lost, and even more sadly wounded, traumatized, is al-Shabaab still alive? Let us just pause for a moment and think. Fifteen years of war against international terrorism. Billions of dollars spent. Countless lives lost. And this is despite the Somali government actively fighting al-Shabaab for the full 15 years and now fighting against ISIS, too, with the same ferocity and commitment.

What is it that’s missing from our national and international security strategies? Where have we gone wrong? How do we fix this untenable situation that we were in for the last 15 years? Having survived three attempts on my own life by al-Shabaab, I do reflect on the matter of this vile group’s survival regularly and seriously.

We must all do the same, too, because repeating the same old policies and strategies against an ever-evolving, agile terrorist enemy is not only a waste of time, resources, and effort; it will continue to expose us and the wider world to even greater danger which threatens our life and our nations.

The policy of containment – keeping al-Shabaab inside Somalia so that they will not spill over to the neighboring countries and to the outside world – was one of the policies that have been used for the last 15 years. We have been arguing that this is not good policy for a long time, and recently, it has been proven that al-Shabaab cannot be contained within the boundaries of Somalia because al-Shabaab is an organization based on ideology, and ideology has no border and has no citizenship. Recent attacks to neighboring countries proves that the containment policy does not deliver what it was supposed to deliver.

Then there was a second policy used, which is degrading al-Shabaab in terms of military, in terms of capability. This was much better than the
containment policy. But itself, Shabaab, has developed a coping mechanism. When you destroy today a training camp, in a few weeks’ time the training camp is there intact again. When you kill a leader within the Shabaab ranks – he is replaced by another one who is more extremist than the one we eliminated.

So it’s not delivering the ultimate goal for the degrading of al-Shabaab. In that line, so we need to think now. Yes, it has been difficult to countries, states, governments, nations, to change its strategies, to change approach. We go through a very difficult process where many of our political leaders might not see the same way that some of us see. So it is an uphill battle that requires to be fought.

So now, after 15 years, we are advocating a change of paradigm shift for a new strategy, new policy. We will take whatever we see was useful in the containment policy and in the degrading policy. Containment policy and degrading policy, they have one pillar that is common – one pillar or variable that’s common among the two.

The two policies, they were only military based – fighting with al-Shabaab, their sophisticated arsenal and technology. So that’s important still. I will not say this is not useful or we don’t need it. Yes, we need it.

But what I’m arguing is that it’s not enough. We need to up the equation and other variables so that something new comes and then we have to have the capacity to be agile and change our tactics easily. Otherwise, they develop coping mechanism, and they will react and it will not harm the way we want it to harm. So we need to be very mobile in terms of fighting al-Shabaab and ISIS as well.

We add the equation the military we’re still using, and it’s the most important pillar in the fight against al-Shabaab as of now. But what we add is there are two more dimensions, which is ideological war, since the Somali people, we are one ethnic group, we have one language, and we have one religion: Islam. In ethnicity, yes, we are Somalis, one ethnic group, but we are divided within the ethnic itself. We are clans, subclans, sub-subclans, and we have loyalty or association to the clans and sub-subclans more than the nation or the national level. So, although we are homogeneous in that level, then we are divided within. But the faith – Islam – we are not divided. We all are Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Shafi’i school of thought. We all are common adherents.

Yes, we have a problem since we lack a government that protects the religion from external ideas like the one of al-Shabaab and ISIS. We have some interferences here and there. But that is the only factor that makes the Somali society stand up and sit down. So that’s where they target.
Now, in our fight against them we have ideological war telling them what Shabaab is propagating is not a true Islam, is not the right version of Islam. Islam does not kill the people, does not kill in masses, does not humiliate, does not loot their property.

Principally, that’s the essence of Islam and that’s what they all do everywhere. But what we need is that we need to tell them we aren’t aliens. We are robust adherents. Those who refuse that idea, now the Somali government has put a strategy in place. We are telling the people, showing the people that al-Shabaab is a group of mafias surrounded or covered with Islam. And we need to remove that cover and show the people how mafia they are. And that’s what they are doing right now, destroying the water wells, the water catchments, kidnapping the kids from the villages, burning the village to punish those who say no. And that’s, of course, anti-Islam. In the 21st century, that has nothing to do with a modern way of life and with Islam.

So that’s the new front that was not there before. It has its own media strategy. It has its own communications strategy. It has another – besides Islam – another element of patriotism. Somali belongs to the Muslim, but it belongs to Somali Muslims, not every Muslim. So this is our country. We need to tell our people that Abu Saleh, Abu Ubaidah, Abu Atan has nothing to do with Somalia. This is a land for Jama’ah. (Applause.)

So this is a new front that was not there before. And the third dimension that we want to add is the economic side. Al-Shabaab is collecting a huge amount of money from the Somali people, exclusively rule the rural area where 65 to 70 percent of the Somali population are living. They extort money, livestock. Farmer produces everything. They call it zakat. They call it a contribution to the jihad. They call it tax. They call it so, so, so, so. And all the year, every two, three months, they collect a huge amount of money from the rural people, who are fed up now.

The same they do is in the – in the towns and the cities. They collect it wherever there is an exchange of money in the hands. Some buys, someone sells, so there is an exchange, there they take money. They are in the public notary and they are in many other places in the markets. They terrorize the people. And if you resist it, you are dead the next day. If you refuse to be, your business, they will put a car in front of your business and they blow up, and the whole building collapses. They were asking you maybe few thousand dollars, and now you have to build the whole building again, a couple of hundreds of thousands. So people all, logically, they said, why do I go through this hassle? Take your few thousand dollars. Leave me in peace.
That’s how they corrupt everywhere. So they have huge amount of money. And the proof of – there are traces that al-Shabaab send money to Mozambique and to Nigeria. Very clear. This is a rich country. Now they expanded. Five to 7,000 man who was their forces. Now we’re talking about 15 to 18,000 forces. And this has been proven how many people they sent to Ethiopia to fight there on the border. And because of the internal war now is going on has diverted them, but they were also planning to go to other neighboring countries as well. So that is because they were not having that capability before. So what we are trying to do is to cut off all the money that comes through different types and areas. So this is the third front, which is new.

In all of this work together, are we going to end al-Shabaab with the power of the gun? We believe that al-Shabaab will not end with the barrel of gun, but they are not ready to negotiate. So we have to take them to a place where they prefer to negotiate and put down the lethal tactics that they are using right now. We have a lot of collaboration with our friends at the regional level and the international level. Among the major ones who really tangibly contributed to the fight against al-Shabaab is the United States government. Expertise, equipment, training, knowhow, all, we are getting support. And we are here to ask more. That’s the nature, because we cannot keep another 15 years or another 10 years al-Shabaab to be there. We need to close that chapter at the earliest possible turn. I don’t want to discuss about the timeframes, but we have a timeframe that we want them to be out in the fight or in a peaceful manner if that’s what they get convinced after long struggle.

This is where we are at since this, and I’m very glad to be here with you today and share with you where we are and what we are willing to do as a future aspiration. Challenges are too many, but opportunities are also too many. Wherever there is a challenge, there is an opportunity. There are a lot of missed opportunities. What we are struggling now is we need to avoid another missed opportunity again. Today, we have the backing and the support of the Somali people. Out of federal member states in Somalia, the people in three states are already fighting. Another one is preparing. They are in the preparation stage. And the fifth one is mainly their territory is not – al-Shabaab is not there. Few ISIS are there. And we are going to help them even to eliminate the ISIS from their part as well.

This is the situation, the overall picture of Somalia, and Somalia has the potential to be a peaceful and stable country with a lot of experience in fighting the terrorists throughout the world. I thank you very much. (Applause.)
Mr. Dizolele: Mr. President – (coughs) – excuse me – thank you very much for your remarks. They actually lay out the foundation of our conversation today.

First, I would like to talk about security, which you focused quite a bit on. This is the second time you are leading Somalia, so you are, I think, the most knowledgeable person about the issues that your country faces today. Al-Shabaab insurgency continues to really affect every dimension of life in Somalia. You focus a lot on the kinetic side of things, military operations. You also mentioned ideological war, the ideology war that you want to take to them. But we still have a few questions for you, one being that from your vantage point, having led the Federal Republic of Somalia before, how do you see al-Shabaab and the issue of security change since you were in office last? What lessons have you drawn from your experience and having stepped away for a little bit and coming back? And the other question is: How – you know, in these kinetic operations that you’re undertaking now, herders and a lot of the communities have been really engaged in fighting al-Shabaab. How do you intend to protect them?

President Mohamud: Thank you very much. What I was saying and discussing right now was something based on past experience. I was there in 2012-2017, and that was the policies that we have been applying those days. We’ve liberated al-Shabaab from many districts throughout Somalia, and still those districts are free from al-Shabaab when it comes to the town or the city. But, because of the resilience, because of the coping mechanism they developed that I was telling there, and because of their occupation in the rural area, you cannot move between the towns. They are there in the jungle, putting mines in the roads, making ambushes. So the people cannot move. Goods cannot move. Only goods will move where they want. So people are leaving. In many places you can reach only by air; very difficult to reach by land. Or in many other places you can reach only by sea; you cannot reach by land. This is the reality as of now.

Before, when I was leaving office in 2017, yes, there was al-Shabaab fighting, but many of the areas were accessible. Now they developed these techniques, and they brought new techniques of this, and they are there. It’s not easy. So what we have realized is that the only way out is to cut the head of the snake. You cannot convince them. You cannot threaten them totally. You will never miss two, three boys who just come and plant explosive on the roadside or who just ambush the cars passing there and create that type of terror and fear and calling the people: Don’t go there. Don’t engage that. Don’t work with the government. Don’t work with – and if you say no, you are dead. That’s the thing.

So what the only option that we had is – and we have been, of course, degrading them for many, many years. What is now option we have is to sweep geographically the whole area as possible. And what makes possible
that is the community. The community now is fed up and they say, enough is enough, go. There are conferences that are going to come right now in certain geographic locations in Somalia where clans are declaring that, guys, you leave us or we’ll fight.

And they don’t have the leisure of moving around freely now. They cannot move around free. Three of them, two or them, five of them were moving everywhere before and crowding everyone and catching and threatening the people. Today, they cannot move in many places. Still, there are other places they still have the freedom to do that, like in most of these three states geographically. Their territory is squeezed and getting lesser and lesser and lesser.

So that – what we are doing right now, which is mobilizing ideologically against them, mobilizing the society patriotically, and closing the financial tabs and telling the people. I met with most of the businesspeople, and I told them that this is a new front and we are going to come. You cannot help them. Yes, you are under threat, but let us know; we will help together. Bad things can happen, but we will do everything possible to do that. So that’s where we are right now.

Mr. Dizolele: OK. How is – you mentioned, Your Excellency, the use of technology.

President Mohamud: Yes.

Mr. Dizolele: So, obviously, people don’t have the move for the threat to move, for the threat to expand. They can communicate through technology platforms. Are you engaging them in that space?

President Mohamud: Shabaab, the issue of financing – financing the terror is an issue. We developed a center called FRC, Financial Reporting Center, which is a financial interagency unit. We put a law in place, and we are putting more laws that exposes the movement of money to their government. So these institutions, they are working very hard. They are working with the banks, with remittance companies, and with anywhere that money is involved.

But you know, money is involved in the whole life. It’s not only few banks and few remittance companies. It’s everywhere, notary, customs, markets. Money is moving everywhere. So what we need is that we are emphasizing now for the first time in Somalia putting the PIN – personal identification number – which was not there before. We’re establishing the agency. We’re establishing the laws and establishment acts of that agency. We are staffing. The World Bank is supporting. And now we hope soon there will not be someone who got a phone and who can just transfer mobile money and nobody knows him, or someone who opens an account in the bank and he
opens with a different name here and another different name there. That will not happen. That’s where we are going to use the technology.

Mr. Dizolele: Very well. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

Military operations have limitations, and your country – the insurgency that you’re grappling with is peculiar to your country but is not unique. Countries like Mali and Afghanistan have dealt with jihadist insurgencies before, and in those situations there have been – there have been calls –

President Mohamud: Yes.

Mr. Dizolele: – for all the other options.

President Mohamud: Yes.

Mr. Dizolele: One option, of course, is to talk to the “enemy,” quote/unquote. Do you have plan to engage with al-Shabaab and the affiliate for peace in peace talks and as a way to move the country forward? Because, after all, just from your remarks, it’s clear that they’re very integrated in various parts of your society.

President Mohamud: Of course, we don’t want these negotiations of Afghanistan and where it ended up, that’s not the one we advocate, but our doors are always open. We have a lot of defectors who left al-Shabaab, senior ones, and some of them are even promoted to ministerial level now. Some of them they are security officers.

Those who prove that they denounce the ideology, and they prove repentance then it’s possible that they, after going through rehabilitation program for some time, they can be part and they can join the ministry.

So, our doors are open in that terms, first of all. We are not only getting the gun and that’s the ultimate tool. No, we have other peaceful tools as well. As I said, we have a cabinet minister who was one of the founders of al-Shabaab and a major leader in al-Shabaab, and there are so many senior – so many officers – I will not say senior – officers in the security sector as well who’ve proven to be very, very efficient and very useful to the overall security by providing information, by exposing the techniques they use.

So, we have that one, and we are open to talk to them even, but we talk to them the two of us. We are not – maybe time will come when that’s possible, but we are not fan of third party.

Mr. Dizolele: So, at this point you’ve not created the platform or any venue for you to engage with them in a formal manner, not just for the defections?
No, that communication channels are not open at all.

They are not open at all?

They are not open because they don’t want to talk. We are ready to talk to them. We have sent them messages and some of them because of that message they defected. Some of them are there. But the organization as such, they don’t want to talk as of now. We hope they will talk one day.

Mr. President, what did they present as their grievances and why they don’t want to talk if you extended your hand to them?

The top elite and the top leadership of al-Shabaab I don’t see that they are there for grievances. They are there for ideology.

But there are people who joined them because they have certain grievances. Their clans were oppressed by bigger clans, or they have been given a hard time by the government security forces, or by – so many different people are there who has grievance who joined al-Shabaab because they have grievance. But the top leadership they are not there for grievances, they are there for ideology.

Al-Shabaab there are three people. The top leadership who is small in number who are there for ideological reasons, and then, there is another group next to that who joined al-Shabaab because of grievances they have – either from the government security forces, or from other clans, or whatever reason. And then there are bulk of the force who just joined al-Shabaab to get 50, 70 dollars by the end of the month. Poverty, unemployment, lack of alternatives – this is what, when people get frustrated and they see that they cannot provide a cup of milk for their kids or their brothers and sisters, they join. Economic reasons. And these are – that are the bulk of the fighting forces. But that three categories are within al-Shabaab.

So, al-Shabaab is able to exploit some of these economic grievances from the population at large?

Well, economic grievances, the poverty, yes, yes.

Those who join –

Those who join for the sake of, yeah, salary, yes.

So, you did mention investment – your program for investment. We'll come back to that in a minute.
But to go back to the exploitation of grievances from the population at large, you mentioned the ideology war that you’re going to wage. How is that working?

President Mohamud:

Well, what we have been advocating is – and this is how we have dealt with those who defected and came back to address the – if someone tells you that I have this grievance, then you can address those grievances – either you can give compensation, you can give promises, you can give alternative opportunities that he can do it.

Also, there was a 10-year civil war in Somalia. Everybody was killing everybody. So, there are a lot of grievances which are not settled here: political grievances, revenge, economic grievances, property grievances – people lose their property, and the property – they feel that someone else is still holding. What we are advocating right now, and we’re establishing a special envoy and a committee, is the reconciliation. We need the people to come forward and tell their grievance. Then the government – it’s the responsibility of the government to address those grievances in one way or the other, whether it is bringing people together or whether it’s making conversation, giving back the property, or at least giving acceptance of their grievance. Whatever means possible, we are ready to solve.

But what we want is that – 30 years is a long time. And most of those grievances that were there for 20 years, 25 years ago. So what we need is that – because of this mechanism now we’re establishing under the leadership of a very prominent figure in Somalia, we want the people to come out to them, to come forward and tell the grievances that they had. If it’s economic grievance, poverty, unemployment, that’s true for all. We have massive youth who are unemployed, but who didn’t join al-Shabaab. But they are risk group.

Mr. Dizolele:

OK. Speaking about al-Shabaab still, the Biden administration recently announced that it was redeploying forces to Somalia and resuming kinetic strikes in your country. How is this presence and the strikes viewed by the Somali people? And do you believe that they are the best or most effective response to the threat posed by al-Shabaab?

President Mohamud:

The partnership with the United States is important for two major reasons or areas. One is, United States is a powerful country, who has all the means and facilities to support. Whether it’s equipment, whether it’s advice, whether it’s training, whether it’s financial support, whatever. That’s one.

There is another area that United States is important to partner. Being a partner with the United States, you are going to have more other partners that just join us because the United States is there. The credibility and the influence of the United States, particularly in our region today, is still very
important and influential. In the Horn of Africa and in the Gulf states, all. So United States have proven to be a very reliable partner for Somalia. And we are very much confident that we will further improve this partnership.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you very much, sir.

So let’s talk about peace. We talked about security and kinetic affairs, let’s talk about peace because that’s a different side of the equation. So observers, analysts across the board, they’re not – we are not politicians. We are not leaders of countries. But we analyze. And a lot of the analysts believe that there are more limits to kinetic military operations then leaders like you and your partners in the West are willing to accept. So, therefore, there’s a resistance to engage with the other side.

But we are curious to know what your views are in terms of – you mention Somalia being a homogeneous country, even though there are crime and other challenges. So that’s – in many ways, is a low-hanging fruit in terms of building national unity, in theory, right? In theory, imagine Somalia being like Norway. Everybody speaks the same language – (laughter) – they have just different regional perspectives. So we are curious to know about your plan to promote reconciliation.

You referred to reconciliation a few moments ago, but what is your plan? And as a culturally, and linguistically, and religiously homogeneous country, your national unity is actually a tremendous asset, as it should be in any other country. So why has it been hard for Somalia to achieve national unity? What initiatives and programs is your administration going to put in place?

President Mohamud: Well, going back to my background, I was involved in peacebuilding at the researcher level, the program level, and different hats. I was involved in negotiations and peacebuilding throughout Somalia. There are 92 districts in Somalia, and 70-plus districts I have visited. By talking to the people, asking them just to know what are their grievances, how would they want to rebuild their communities peacefully? How do they reconcile?

What we have identified – what we have identified is that the Somali society, as I rightly said, is clans and subclans and sub-subclans. Those are very localized area and each localized area or district or whatever has its own traditional rules which works for them. That’s one area.

Another area is the reconciliation that’s needed at political level. So what we need is that reconciliation is not possible unless we build a mechanism that makes the reconciliation happen, and then when it happen it makes a follow up to make sure that it’s sustained.
Otherwise, it's going to – we have seen in many times – some of my colleagues sitting here were part of that – we worked the reconciliation of a particular area for six months. We were there in the rural area and many times we risked our life by people fighting over us. So we resisted and we stayed there for six months to make those communities agree.

We succeeded. We bring them together, negotiation after negotiation, getting one after the other. At the end, we – after six months we succeeded, that they reconciled. All the issues, all the grievances within, has been resolved and agreed at the major level. And then we left while people get back together. They are using the same water wells. They are grazing together in the grazing lands. So everybody was very much comfortable. We left.

After two, three months – I remember exactly when it was, around two, three months – a young boy – while he was feeding his camel in the water well, he saw the man who killed his father. He killed the man as a revenge. In that stage, when there is functioning state institutions the killer is called a killer, a murderer, and he is taken and put into a court of law and then that issue is resolved through legal means.

But when there is no such court of law, where there’s no state institutions in place, it doesn’t become so and so is a criminal. It becomes clan X killed clan Y, and immediately everyone is going to say: How can we – how can we be killed by so and so? And the whole thing erupted again. More people died. People, again, separated.

So and, again, it was that kind of firefighting and in many places still it is. Although experience has sometimes people gain it and elders have got some experience. In some areas the rule of law is rigid, but the rule of law is not rigid all over Somalia yet.

So that’s the social reconciliation, the society among them. What I envision is that we need to put structures within the local government system that continuously involved in reconciliation, bringing them together. Whenever firefighting is necessary, fire fight.

But after that, bring the people together. Make sure that they go. Make sure that the government guarantees the peace agreement that has been locally agreed, and all the community signs and accept this, and then the government enforces those peace agreements. At least no one can come and any person can do that.

So that’s what’s needed. And we established it so far some local governance, but we keep continuing building local governance and incorporating mechanism for reconciliation.
What’s more complex is the political reconciliation. Somalia was a state – functionally, a state, whatever. It was dictatorial, whatever we call it, but there was a state that gives law and order, that gives instructions every – all of the Somali. So after the civil war and after the collapse, the people who were – the state brings people together and they all are part of the state. They work for the state and the state works for them.

But when there is a civil war, people, they just leave each other, disintegrated, and everybody goes back to his clan territory. That’s what’s happening. And that’s why we are experiencing today a federalism system based on clans. Today, we know that in state so-and-so there are 10 clans who agreed to build that state, in state so-and-so there are 15 clans who agreed to build this state, to sign it and put it – but now the national level is the question.

The national level, the platform for the reconciliation is the constitution. For the last 10 years, we have a provisional constitution. That provisional constitution, there are certain contentious issues that we are unable to agree. But at least the good thing is that the contentious issues are identified. We know: power sharing, resource sharing, justice federalizing. We know the issues.

So now I see this is a time now we established the National Consultative Council among the leadership of the federal member states and the federal government to deliberate on those issues and agree. And once we, among the top leadership, agree, then we’ll take it to the federal member states, to the federal parliament. And then, again, we say it’s going to be a big process, but this time is the time that, based on our past experience, we are going to finalize the constitution.

We have one unique issue that might be a bit difficult for 100 percent finalization of the constitution, which is a different issue – an issue called Somaliland, which is separate, but the rest of Somalia, if we make them agree on a constitution then it’s easy for us to negotiate with Somaliland and show them the constitution, if they agree, they can vote whatever they want in there. So it’s a process going on.

**Mr. Dizolele:** Your Excellency, thank you. But one issue is the last one, Somaliland. Somaliland has been working hard to get recognition for their own independence, particularly in Washington. And they – I think this is a dividend for them because of peace and stability on that side of that region. So what is your position for the future of Somaliland? And are there steps that you’re taking to recover this national unity?

**President Mohamud:** Well, you’re right. There is a – as I said earlier, there is a very serious issue of Somaliland. It’s a national issue. And it has been there for all this part. There
was no focus there. And still there are – we are diverted by the house in flames already in the south. So, but in my last term when I was in power, we have started negotiations and we have two, three negotiations. Which was good, to be sitting together and dialoguing, but the results were very limited.

Now Somaliland is in transition. There are elections that have proven a little bit difficult. Elections that did not take place when they were supposed to take place. So there are still – there’s no fighting, or there is no violence or war. But there’s a disagreement in the political process of Somaliland now. So we want to give them space. But once that is ended, we will kickstart again the negotiations that we had with them.

Mr. Dizolele: Are you fully engaged in negotiation with them now?

President Mohamud: Not now, because it’s still, as I said, they are in transition. We talk to them, the leaders, the sitting leaders and the opposition leaders. We have channels of communication. But still, we are not negotiating officially, yeah.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you, sir. So on your foreign policy – I mean, you are here, obviously. This is foreign policy. It has been reported that Somali forces have been trained by Eritrea. And some of them have been prevented from returning home. President Isaias has been accused of regional meddling, especially in Somalia, over the years. And one of your first trips as president was to Eritrea. Can you describe that visit and the relationship with the neighborhood, with Eritrea particularly?

President Mohamud: Look, when you are hungry or thirsty, anybody who’s going to give you a cup of water will be a friend at that moment. Isaias have orchestrated 5,000 of our boys and he’s equipping them. And we are bringing them back. I was there in Eritrea, sit with those boys. An operation like that, there is always mishaps here and there, but what we have seen there is a good intention and forces that were trained.

We went, in the last couple of years, a difficult political transition. And Isaias, he refused to send those boys to Somalia because of that political turmoil that was there. He said, let Somalia settle itself down, and then take its boys. And that was why I went there, sat with the boys, sat with him. And now we are involved on the ways and the means we want to bring them back. We requested the United States to support us. And soon we will bring them back. And I’m sure they will contribute in the war against al-Shabaab.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you very much, sir.

Your neighbor to the south, Kenya, has just elected a new president, Mr. Ruto. How do you see your future relationship with that country over issues
of security? They’re very complicated issues, economics and also humanitarian situations.

President Mohamud: Look, our neighbors – our immediate neighbors, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti – we don’t have any choice other than to have a very good relationship with them. And that’s what we are working, as a matter of principle. Besides that, Somalia’s foreign policy is to have a principle – one of its own principles established already is zero enemy outside. We don’t want to have any enemy outside Somalia. Someone can see Somalia as an enemy by its own reasons, but for us we don’t have enemy outside. We want all the world to deal with us in a peace. That’s all.

Our neighbors – Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti – they are contributing in the fight against al-Shabaab and the liberation of our country. Their boys are dying there. And the most precious gift that one can give is his life. These countries, they are giving the life of their boys just to see Somalia safe, which is in the interests of Somalia, as well as their interest as well. Because the terrorist organizations, they can move everywhere.

So we are – in my last term, I had very good relationship with the government of Kenya, as well as with Ethiopia and Djibouti. And as I come now, I have the same relationship still. And I’m building more engagement, economic engagement. Somalia’s going to join the East African Community soon. We have a very good relationship, commercial relationship, trade relationship between us and Ethiopia, as well as – and Djibouti is a very brotherly country that we have also. Djibouti’s a small country, but it is contributing our cause more than its capacity. So we have very good relationship with all our neighbors. And we want to maintain that good neighborly, yeah.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you very much, Your Excellency.

So much also has been said, especially in a town like Washington, D.C., about great and middle power competition across Africa. And the Horn is one of the places. Djibouti, of course, is one of the epitomes of great power competitions. Much has been said also about the investment that UAE and Turkey have made in Somalia. Can you comment about this, and how –

President Mohamud: Well, one thing. UAE has invested in parts of Somalia, like Somaliland and Puntland, and they are investing more now in southern Somalia. We have new agreements with them for investment, for supporting our security. So UAE is one of among our major partners. For us, we take the policy that we don’t want to politicize the development. Somaliland, however, they say we seceded, we are a separate country, we’re all this.
We don’t want to use our diplomatic muscle for the development in Somaliland, for the trade in Somaliland. Infrastructure was built there. We are very happy. We write a letter to those governments who are supporting. We requested whatever they need. We give all the necessary documents from our side as a sovereign state. We don’t want to politicize the development at all.

So UAE, whether it’s making investment in Somaliland, or in Puntland, or in Jubaland, or in Hirshabelle, and whichever part of Somalia, most welcome, with limited restrictions on that. Yes, there are certain legal obligations that we need to go through, but there are no – we don’t want to put obstacles on the way forward. And we see the Somali people, too – because poverty is one of the major reasons that we are fighting al-Shabaab, complicated by the climate change, environmental issues. We don’t have a choice to say someone who is bringing investment why you are bringing it.

Mr. Dizolele:
One last issue before we conclude is the drought.

President Mohamud:
Yes.

Mr. Dizolele:
This is – the entire world is watching and some of them are helping. What is the situation with the pending famine? This has been the fourth- or fifth-worst in a generation drought that the region is experiencing. What’s the situation on the ground? What should the world know? And how can the world help?

President Mohamud:
When I came to the office first, I appointed a special envoy for the drought victims in Somalia, before even appointing a prime minister. So that special envoy is working, working very hard raising the awareness at the international level and the local level as well.

So the drought is very serious in Somalia. Right now, we are fighting the drought victims to move the next state, which is famine. We are in a famine-prevention stage right now. And, yes, it is a bit difficult, but it’s working. In certain geographic locations of Somalia, the risk is very high to announce a famine. Announcing famine or declaring a famine itself is a very difficult situation. That does not affect the famine victims only, but halts the development and changes the perspectives and everything.

So there is – Somalia is a major recipient of the environment problem. We are a victim. We do not contribute to the environmental disaster in the world, but we receive the largest share of the consequence. Throughout the year, either we are in a flood situation where the territory – the agricultural land is flooded or we are in a drought situation where there is a scarcity of water. So we are – because of lack of infrastructure development, the lack of flood-control mechanism not in place, lack of all this put together – as you
rightly said, four consecutive years the rains were not there and the fifth are now predicted that it will not be a good one.

So we are fighting that type of fight that it – that the drought victims should not go into a famine stage. But it’s a serious matter.

Mr. Dizolele: Mr. President, it’s a pleasure to have you. It was an honor. Thank you for taking the time to share with the world your thought and how you envisioned the Republic – the Federal Republic of Somalia.

President Mohamud: Thank you.

Mr. Dizolele: This concludes our session. We’d like to thank our audience and everybody who joined us today. Thank you.

President Mohamud: Thank you very much. (Applause.)