H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Helen Fogarassy**. *Mission Improbable: The World Community on a UN Compound in Somalia.* Lanhan, Md.: Lexington Books, 1999. xxi + 319 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0020-2.

**Reviewed by** Lidwien Kapteijns (Department of History, Wellesley College)
**Published on** H-Africa (May, 2003)

In March 1994, the United Nations hired Helen Fogarassy to direct part of the media operations of its mission in Somalia. She stayed in the besieged U.N. compound in Mogadishu for nine months, during which time the mission was gradually closed down. In this book she presents her reflections on the experience.

One major theme of this book is the description of life and work in the compound. Given the insecurity of its surroundings, this compound was, in military jargon, "fully secured," and thus a virtual prison for all those who lived and worked there. This led to a climate of fear, deprivation, boredom, and–as it became clear that the mission would be called off before accomplishing its objectives–a deep sense of futility. Work was dominated by inane, untransparent, competitive, and counterproductive bureaucracies and hierarchies. Cultural stereotyping and misunderstandings were rampant and individual behavior was often egotistical, petty, and mean. Compound life also could be an equalizing factor, Fogarassy reports, and created moments of fraternization and togetherness. In her opinion, individuals from the Third World, who formed the majority of U.N. personnel in the compound, held up better than those who hailed from the developed North.

Of course, the compound could not do without Somali labor of all kinds, from cleaning women to building contractors and journalists. Somalis were treated condescendingly at best, Fogarassy reports, and were at times humiliated and mistreated. For her the Somalis who worked on the U.N. publications she oversaw (*Maanta* and the *Weekly Review*) were a breath of fresh air. They were virtually her only connection with the society outside of the compound and she found them interesting, kind, courageous, and stoic in the face of hardship, poverty, and death. Since she found them also largely incompetent at the tasks of journalism, she had to give them writing lessons. The Somalis in the compound were also greedy and rapacious, mostly, she suggests, because their families were in dire need and had no other source of income. To her mind, they also had an impeccable sense of justice. When they discovered that U.N. employers planned to lay them off by locking them out of the entrance gate instead of giving them proper notice, they took group action and threw up a roadblock inside the compound. Fogarassy was struck by Somalis' insistence on their humanity and equality with other peoples of the world, even when international interest and commitment dwindled to nothing.

The description of the U.N. media operations Fogarassy oversaw constitutes a second broad theme. This too was a story of bureaucratic obstacles and impossible personalities. Fogarassy is convinced that the U.N. mission was not a total failure and that the publications she directed had a positive impact when they began to publicize local successes rather than fights and failures. Reporting on the small successes, she contends, magnified their impact. Had the international media done the same, she argues, and not focused exclusively on the sensational acts of the 5 percent of the Somalis who engaged in violence, peace might well have been restored. Fogarassy is convinced that Somalis would have been able to put the final touches on the peace process, if the top echelons of the United Nations had not been culturally incapable of giving them the scope and time to do so.

A third major theme is the author's personal growth and the evolution of her own thinking about peacekeeping and nation-building missions such as UNOSOM. Her harshest criticism, as we saw above, is directed at the international media, which, as she puts it, picked Somalia up and dropped it without any sense of commitment or care. By reporting sensational violence and ignoring the steady progress made, they actively undermined any chance for progress. In Somalia, Fogarassy also came to a new consciousness of the complete inadequacy of international aid. A little charity and missionary condescension, she contends are a direct legacy of colonialism and racism, and cannot fix the problems of the African continent. She reports how she caught "the Africa bug"

in Addis, while on a short vacation from the compound; whoever catches that bug, she says, can no longer stay uninvolved and inactive in the face of such glaring global inequality.

While this book is instructive about the organizational and human nightmare that was called the U.N. Mission in Somalia, it is also, unfortunately, extremely poorly written and organized. The omnipresence of run-on sentences, a high density of jargon, and a repetitiveness that results from the lack of a clear chapter structure make this book very hard to read. How the editors at Lexington Press could allow this manuscript to go to press in this form boggles the mind. However, beyond its flawed form one can discern a perceptive and ethical observer, who sketches a humanistic portrait of the last months of the U.N. mission in Somalia.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

**Citation:** Lidwien Kapteijns. Review of Fogarassy, Helen, *Mission Improbable: The World Community on a UN Compound in Somalia.* H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. May, 2003.
**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7579

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.