

CLOSE-UP

# A Farewell To Arms

Rappers perform in Somali POW camp, hoping to show child soldiers an alternative to extremism

**L**AST MONTH SAW THE STAGING OF THE MOGADISHU Music Festival in the war-torn capital city of Somalia. Local musicians were joined by artists from Kenya, Sudan, Afghanistan, the Philippines and the U.S. Despite the fact that the event could not be widely promoted for fear of reprisals from extremists, over 2,000 people attended the six concerts. Lead producer – and regular RS contributor – Daniel J. Gerstle explains that the festival was launched “not for music’s sake, but because we firmly believe Somalia’s war cannot be brought to an end purely through military and humanitarian means. Cultural forces must also play a role in persuading the country’s lost and troubled youth not to join extremists, not to destroy, not to kill. Will they continue to fight, languish in qat dens, sniff glue in the rubble, or live on the

street where only extremists, rebel recruiters, and gang leaders will help them? Or will they discover something meaningful to devote themselves to where they can build something of their lives?” To emphasize that message, one of the concerts took place in a POW camp housing former fighters and child soldiers – many of whom are now looking for a route out of extremism. Somali hip-hop artists, including Dikiriyo Abdi and Lihle Muhdin, performed and gave the kids a chance to rap with them. “At some point,” says Gerstle, “the rest of the global community must learn that ending a war is not only about fighting and aid; it’s also about helping the lost, locked-out youth imagine that they could live a brighter future in a peaceful, open society than they could by dying for another man’s dream of a cruel and unforgiving god.”



PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL J. GERSTLE