

# This week in history: March 25-31

25 March 2019

## 25 years ago: US troops withdraw from Somalia

On March 25, 1994, the last US troops withdrew from Somalia. Initiated in 1992 under President George H. W. Bush and continued under the Clinton administration, “Operation Restore Hope” was advertised by the media as a humanitarian aid scheme to feed a starving population during civil war.

The real economic reasons for launching the intervention included Somalia’s untapped oil reserves, as well as its strategic coast along which passed much of the oil shipped from the Persian Gulf. Four major US oil companies held exploration rights in Somalia. Once the US opened the door, many other imperialist countries followed suit and sent their own troops—including Germany, which had not deployed troops overseas since the Second World War; and Italy, Somalia’s former colonial master.

After dropping all humanitarian pretenses, the intervention quickly evolved into imposing a new political structure in Somalia. Search and destroy missions were carried out in a manhunt to find the most powerful clan leader, Mohammad Farah Aidid. At least 10,000 people were killed during the course of the operation, reaching a height on October 3, 1993, when 1,000 Somalis were killed or wounded in a marketplace shootout in Mogadishu.

American commandos responsible for the massacre suffered heavy losses from Aidid’s fighters, creating a major political crisis for the Clinton administration. The debacle and widespread bloodshed on both sides culminated in the ultimate decision to remove the troops. Twelve other countries did the same following the US announcement.

Since the previous July, unwilling to risk further casualties, US and UN troops had pulled back into their compounds, effectively becoming prisoners in their own barracks until the final withdrawal date.

Reports of poverty-stricken civilians raiding and looting barracks as troops were leaving surfaced as armed Somali fighters openly walked the streets. Scuffles between troops and civilians broke out at the airport. Lieut. David Wolcott, who was in the last amphibious vehicle to leave, told the final remaining reporters: “We accomplished our mission, the safe withdrawal of all troops. I suggest you get out of here while you can.”

“The Americans and the UN came in with a kind of arrogance,” a senior United Nations official told the *New York Times*. “Their psychological operations were naive, their intelligence very poor. They didn’t speak the language. They met with few Somalis. This has damaged the credibility of the UN.”

## 50 years ago: Mine disaster in Mexico

One of the world’s worst mining disasters occurred in Barroterán, Mexico, on March 31, 1969. Out of the 156 workers in the coal mine at the time of the explosion, a total of 153 were killed. Some were killed by the initial explosion, however most died after being trapped underground.

Like many mine disasters, the Barroterán explosion was caused when a pocket of methane gas was ignited. The explosion caused all mine exits to become blocked, trapping the 153 inside. As gas continued to pour out, the workers suffocated.

The specific cause of the blast was unclear. But in most cases of a methane explosion the event is triggered when a new area of coal is tapped into without properly checking for a methane pocket or safely clearing the gas.

The explosion had caused the mine shaft to be filled with deadly gasses which had to be cleared before rescue operations could begin. Once the mine was ventilated, teams of workers immediately went down a second shaft to begin rescue operations. However, the process to properly ventilate the mine took nearly three days.

By the time the rescue teams could enter the mine there was little hope of recovering survivors. Families of the miners waited near entrance of the mine to identify their loved ones. When asked if she thought it possible for survivors to remain in the mines, Juana Velazquez the wife of one trapped miner said, “They’re all dead down there. We know that.”

Several rescue workers were injured during their operations. Even after the ventilation process, rescue workers who had re-entered the mine would come running out, choking on the gas. The Red Cross had to establish stations with oxygen tanks for the rescue workers after they resurfaced.

The disaster was the second worst mining disaster in Mexico's history. The largest death toll was the Rosita Vieja Mine disaster in 1908 where 200 miners, mostly Japanese immigrants, were killed.

### **75 years ago: Mass reprisals by Nazis in Rome**

On March 30, 1944 Italian youth, scavenging through the Ardeatine caves just outside Rome, uncovered an entrance to a section of the caves where 335 Romans, ages 14 to 75, had been executed four days earlier by the German SS in reprisal for a partisan attack.

Ever since British and American troops had landed on the Anzio beachhead south of Rome, Italian partisans had intensified their attacks against German occupying forces by destroying gasoline depots, ammunition dumps and military transport, and fighting German soldiers in the city's outlying areas.

On March 23 partisans set off a mighty explosion of TNT, hurled mortar shells and opened up with small arms fire on a column of 150 German SS soldiers along Via Rasella in central Rome, killing and wounding more than two-thirds of the German troops.

Hitler, enraged by the action, ordered 10 Italians to be executed for every dead Nazi within the next 24 hours. The SS quickly combed the prisons for Communists, Jews and spies, ultimately having to add nonpolitical prisoners and detainees to complete the list on time.

In a corridor of the Ardeatine caves, 10 prisoners were shot at a time in the back of the neck. The next group of 10 were forced to climb up on top of their dead comrades to be executed. When the pyramid of bodies reached a height of five feet, a new accumulation was started. By the end, the ghastly mass of bodies occupied an area of 160-square feet.

Pope Pius XII publicly charged the partisans as the "guilty parties" responsible for the 335 deaths, and not the Nazis. Despite early knowledge of the SS execution plans, the pope refused to intervene and oppose the massacre. He believed that to intervene might disrupt his negotiations with both Germany and the Allies for an orderly withdrawal of German troops from Rome and its occupation by Allied troops, which he saw as essential to preventing a revolutionary insurrection.

### **100 years ago: Mass rallies in New York City to hear Soviet envoy speak**

On March 27, 1919, the Central Opera House on 67th Street in Manhattan was filled to overflowing with workers who had come to hear Soviet representative Ludwig Martens speak. Martens, who had lived in New York until the outbreak of the February 1917 revolution, when he returned to Russia with Leon Trotsky, was a trade envoy from the

Russian Soviet Federated Republic.

The meeting was sponsored by the Socialist Party of New York County. Speakers included Ludwig Lore, the editor of the German-language *Volkszeitung*, as well as the editor of Russian-language *Novy Mir*, for which Trotsky wrote when he lived in New York, and the editor of a Hungarian weekly, *Elore*. Speakers denounced the imprisonment of Socialist leader Eugen V. Debs and demanded his freedom and that of all political prisoners in the US.

According to the *New York Times*, the venue was so full that over 3,000 people were turned away.

A second meeting at the Manhattan Lyceum on East 4th Street featuring Martens was held on March 31. The venue was also filled. The event most on people's mind was not only the resistance of the first workers state to Allied invasion and counterrevolution, but also the newly founded Hungarian Soviet Republic. The *New York Call*, the organ of the left-wing of the Socialist Party, reported:

"Louis Basky, an Hungarian Socialist, made a fervid address, both in English and Hungarian: 'There is only one way to help the Hungarian and Russian Soviet governments. That is to revolutionize America. You must wage an uncompromising class war against capitalism.' John Reed, Jim Larkin, Benjamin Gitlow, Sen Katayama, and others joined in the greeting of Martens and hailing the Hungarian revolution."

Martens told the audience: "Soviet Russia now has been in existence for almost a year and a half. It has left behind itself the preliminary stages of the revolution. It has become deeply rooted in the consciousness of the workers and peasantry of Russia. Its power within Russia cannot be challenged by any group of opponents on their own accord. The forces of the enemies of the people are badly disrupted. Only with the help of foreign bayonets is it possible for small groups of former exploiters of Russia to make a stand against the united forces of the working people."

The United States at the time had not recognized the Soviet government and had no official diplomatic relations with it. Martens had come to the US to found the Russian Soviet Government Bureau, which served as an unofficial embassy for the Soviet government and would primarily be concerned with trade relations.

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