

Western intervention increases instability in Somalia

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The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has issued a number of reports highlighting the plight of between 3,500 and 5,000 Somali refugees who are encamped around the town of Mandera in the northeast of Kenya. They have fled from Bulo Hawa in the Gedo region of southwest Somalia to avoid fighting between rival Somali factions.

Whilst Somalia has been without a central government and has been wracked by conflict between rival warlords since 1991, the escalation in fighting is the result of increased activity of the Western powers in the region, especially the United States, following the terrorist attacks of September 11.

Fighting in the Gedo region of southwestern Somalia in April and May was between forces loyal to local warlord, Abdurisak Issak Bihi, and a faction allied to the Somali Reconciliation and Restoration Council (SRRC). The SRRC is a loose coalition of southern Somali clan factions set up with the backing of Ethiopia in March 2001 and describes itself as an alternative government to the Transitional National Government (TNG), based in the Somali capital Mogadishu. Bihi is a supporter of the TNG.

BBC eyewitness reports from refugees speak of the direct involvement of Ethiopian troops in the southern region. Another report from a group of Somali soldiers who described the training they received from the Ethiopian army to fight the TNG.

The Gedo region fighting follows months of heightened tensions between Ethiopia and the TNG. The Ethiopian government claims that the Islamic fundamentalist group Al-Itihaad Al-Islamiya was still active within Somalia and had infiltrated the TNG. The Bush administration has long sought to link Al-Itihaad with Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. *Stratfor.com* reported on January 10 that the US had “encouraged

Ethiopia to act as its proxy in southern Somalia to combat terrorist groups associated with Al Qaeda.”

Whilst Ethiopia has denied reports that it is operating within Somalia, the growing number of refugees fleeing to Kenya confirms that it has stepped up its intervention. The UNHCR reports that it has made urgent appeals to the Kenyan government to allow the refugees to be moved from the Mandera refugee camp—also known as Border Point 1—to a safer area within Kenya. The camp is located only 500 metres from the border where the countries of Somalia, Kenya and Ethiopia converge and has been the main area of fighting.

On May 15, at least four refugees in the camp were killed and seven injured by stray bullets from the armed clashes. Since June 2, up to 17 people, most of them children, have died in the camp from starvation and disease. A UNHCR press release states, “All the refugees camping near the border were manifesting visible signs of starvation and malnutrition.” Local health workers report that contaminated water and lack of proper food has led to numerous cases of diarrhoea and conjunctivitis.

The Kenyan government has repeatedly blamed Somali immigrants for the deteriorating economic conditions and sought to whip up hostility against them. Refugees that entered the Mandera camp last month were forced to flee back into Somalia. According to a BBC report on May 21, up to 6,000 refugees from the camp returned to Somalia after being threatened and intimidated by the Kenyan police and told to leave.

Previous Western efforts to establish some stability within Somalia and the Horn of Africa have centred on peace conferences organised by the Inter Governmental Authority and Development (IGAD). Held in Kenya, these have attempted to establish a broad-based

government in Somalia. One such conference was due in April, but Ethiopia and Djibouti refused to put forward representatives and the conference was postponed.

The TNG was set up after months of talks organised by the United Nations (UN) in Arta, Djibouti in August 2000 and followed 12 previous failed initiatives. It has little power outside Mogadishu and does not even control all of the capital. Ethiopia refused to recognise it as the legitimate government of Somalia and resented intervention from the former French colony of Djibouti as a block on its own regional ambitions. According to a report by the International Crisis Group, Ethiopia has long viewed Somalia as a “stalking horse for Arab and Islamic domination of the Horn of Africa.” The Somali Ambassador to the UN representing the TNG has appealed for sanctions on Ethiopia and accused its government of seeking to create a “balkanised Somalia with small fiefdoms it can rule over.”

Ethiopia is also intervening in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland in the north of Somalia. It is backing Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed in his dispute with Colonel Jama Ali Jama over the presidency of Puntland. There is an ongoing military conflict between these warlords, with Jama backed by Djibouti and Libya.

Another part of northern Somalia is the Republic of Somaliland, which broke away in 1991 but has never received international recognition as a separate state. It is closely allied to Ethiopia and is opposed to the TNG. When the region was divided up between colonial powers, it formed British Somaliland.

According to *Stratfor.com*, the US has negotiated a deal with its rulers to use the port and airfield at its main city, Berbera. The deepwater port is said to be one of the best in the Indian Ocean and the airfield has one of the longest runways in North Africa.

In April, the Ethiopian-backed Rahanweyn Resistance Army (RRA) declared that it had created a new autonomous region—the South West State of Somalia—and announced that its leader, Colonel Hasan Muhammad Nur Shatigadud, was president. The RRA is part of the SRRC, although there are conflicts between it and other factions over its control of the Bay and Bakool regions of south central Somalia. In December, American security forces held meetings with the RRA in the city of Baidoa, supposedly

assisting them in the fight against terrorism.

Djibouti has become the site for the biggest mobilisation of German military forces since World War II and the coast of Somalia is patrolled by large numbers of naval vessels based at Djibouti and Berbera. Not to be outdone, the TNG invited a top-level US delegation to Mogadishu in April and has also pledged to assist against the terrorist threat.

A number of reports have dismissed the role of Al-Itihaad within Somalia and described its political influence on Somali politics as negligible. Specialists in Somalia have pointed out that Ethiopian forces routed the group militarily in 1997. Despite this, the US and other Western governments have continued to insist on the possibility of an Al Qaeda presence.



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