

US drops accusation that Somalis supported Al Qaeda

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At the end of August the United States Treasury Department removed three Somali individuals and three money transfer companies from a list of alleged supporters of terrorism and dropped all charges against them.

The individuals together with the companies that they owned were placed on the list—compiled in November 2001—and had their assets frozen, after being accused by the Bush administration of financially supporting Osama bin Laden and of channelling funds to Al Qaeda via the Somali financial organisation Al Barakaat.

The delisting by the US government has come in response to growing criticisms that there is insufficient evidence to support claims of links between Osama bin Laden and Al Barakaat.

The Canadian government refused to extradite a Somali-born Canadian citizen to the US, stating that the evidence produced linking him to the financing of terrorism was inadequate. Luxembourg also went ahead and unfroze the assets of an organisation that the US government said was connected to Al Barakaat.

One of those removed from the list was a Somali businessman living in the US, Hassan Hussein, who owns a money transfer company, Barakaat Enterprise Inc., in Columbus, Ohio. Hussein's lawyer, Kevin O'Brien, told reporters that there was no evidence to show that any money sent by Somalis back home to their families in Africa through the financial transfer system had been funnelled into the Al Qaeda network. He told reporters, "I wish the government would just come out and say 'we screwed up' and apologise. For 10 months we asked them to produce proof, and not once did they produce even a shred of information."

Despite no evidence being produced by the Bush administration to substantiate its claim of direct financial support from the Somali company to Al

Qaeda and the dropping of charges against a number of individuals that it accused of financing terrorism, the US Treasury Department has not shifted its position on Al Barakaat.

US Treasury spokesman Rob Nicols stated that the individuals involved had been removed from the list because they had taken "remedial action to disassociate themselves from the terrorist Al Barakaat networks" and went on to say that they had been "unwitting participants" in the financing of Al Qaeda.

The stance taken by the Treasury Department was contradicted by a statement issued by the Transitional National Government (TNG) of Somalia that stated: "After a thorough investigation of Al Barakaat and its related sub organisations by ourselves in collaboration with the United States we declare that there has been nothing wrong found against Al Barakaat which could have been suspected or could result from any sort of crime."

Ted Dagne from the Congressional Research Service in Washington, who is an expert on Somalia, called the US government's decision to close down Al Barakaat "a major blunder" based on "junk intelligence". Dagne stated that "last year's media depiction's of Somalia as a hotbed of international terrorism had been shown to be widely exaggerated."

In November 2001, the Bush administration claimed it had proof that the Al Barakaat company was providing as much as \$25 million a year in financial aid to Osama bin Laden. In press reports at the time, Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neil stated that millions of dollars had passed through the company's US office on its way to the Al Qaeda network and that the organisation had been exposed as a "pariah in the civilised world."

Other US government statements described Al

Barakaat as “the quartermaster of terror”, but almost one year on, no proof of these allegations has been put forward.

Before its closure by the US government Al Barakaat had been the major money transfer organisation in Somalia and was also the country’s largest private sector company, employing at least 3,000 people. Al Barakaat was also financially involved with the telecommunications, construction and transport industries in Somalia.

The company grew substantially after 1991 due to the intensification of civil war within Somalia after the ousting of dictator Said Barre. For many in Somalia—one of the world’s poorest countries where the economy has virtually collapsed and the country is wracked by infighting between rival factions—the money transfer company had become essential for the delivery of remittances sent from family members living abroad.

A statement issued last April by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) said that the “humanitarian impact” on the population of Somalia through the closure of Al Barakaat had “been great.” The closure also had a destabilising effect on the economy of Somalia—crippling telecommunications, transport and construction. Freezing the company’s assets had led to people who were used to receiving \$30 or \$50 from their relatives in other countries suddenly receiving nothing. The statement explained, “remittances provided 10 times what the aid agencies were able to provide for Somalia last year.”

A BBC report pointed out that up to 60 percent of the population in Somalia relied on the services of Al Barakaat.

The measures taken by the Bush administration against Al Barakaat amount to a political provocation against an impoverished country. Under the guise of a “war on terrorism”, its actions have further destabilised the Horn of Africa region.

The proposed peace conference brokered by the Inter-Governmental Authority and Development (IGAD), a western-backed grouping of the regional countries led by Kenya, has seen an intensification of fighting between rival clan factions as they vie for a stronger bargaining position at the talks.

Conflict has intensified with Ethiopia—encouraged by the US—actively backing a number of Somali factions

opposed to the TNG. Adopting the language of the Bush administration, Ethiopia claims to be pursuing its own war on terrorism, accusing the TNG of being infiltrated by Al-Itihaad Al-Islamiya—an alleged Al Qaeda offshoot. Despite thousands of reconnaissance flights by the US and other western countries over Somalia, and visits by dozens of western journalists, no such Islamic terrorist movement has been found.

A recent report by the United Nations states that a 10-year arms embargo placed on Somalia has not been enforced and that rival warlords are stocking up on arms ahead of the anticipated IGAD sponsored talks scheduled for mid October. The report also states that arms deals have been on the rise since late 2001. Ethiopia is mentioned as one of the largest suppliers of arms to Somalia, but the list of countries supplying also includes Eritrea, Yemen, Djibouti, Iran, Libya, Latvia, Poland and the United States.



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