US policy threatens war in Horn of Africa

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The threat of a full-scale war erupting in Somalia is now a real possibility. Ethiopian troops are congregating along the Somali border, amid allegations that the so-called Union of Islamic Courts, which now controls the capital city of Mogadishu and a growing part of the country, is being armed by Eritrea. Ethiopia and Eritrea, headed by nationalist regimes that were originally allies, fought a bloody war in 1998-2000 in which tens of thousands died.

Although Washington led the United Nations diplomacy that brought the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea to an end, the Bush administration has since boosted Ethiopia as a regional power, conveniently ignoring violations of human rights committed by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's regime.

The Bush administration has made clear that it regards the Union of Islamic Courts' control of Mogadishu as a major threat in its "global war on terror." The US is backing the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), a squabbling group of politicians and warlords based in the inland town of Baidoa as the "legitimate governing body in Somalia," even though this body is little more than a front for Ethiopian interests in Somalia.

According to press reports, Ethiopian forces have been observed in several Somali towns, including Baidoa. A BBC report indicates the Ethiopians have up to 5,000 troops, including tanks, stationed on the border, whilst the *Economist* gives a figure of 25,000. A warning from the Brussels-based International Crisis group states that "Military and diplomatic observers in Nairobi believe Ethiopia is preparing to carry out a short, sharp strike deep into southern Somalia if it deems the Courts a sufficient threat."

In June, militias associated with the Islamic Courts gained control of Mogadishu after defeating a coalition of warlords known as the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism, or Anti-Terrorism Alliance, supported by Ethiopia. The *Washington Post* reported in May that the Alliance was also being secretly backed by the US, violating the UN arms embargo against Somalia.

Africa Confidential reported that CIA operatives flew into Mogadishu in early 2006 with thousands of dollars for the Anti-Terrorist Alliance. The US claims that Al Qaeda members are being sheltered by the Islamic Courts, one of whose main leaders, Sheik Hassan Dahir Aweys, is on an American list of wanted terrorists.

Since the setback in June for the Bush administration's covert operations in Somalia, an ostensibly more diplomatic approach has been developed. The US State Department in June cobbled together the Somalia Contact Group, made up of the US, the European Union and Italy, Britain, Sweden and Norway, with Tanzania as the token African participant. The African Union, Arab League and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (the group of neighbouring African countries with interests in Somalia) were given only observer status.

The Contact Group's first act was to call for an immediate end to the fighting in Somalia and for talks between the Transitional Federal Government and the Union of Islamic Courts. There have been no further talks after the first meeting between the Courts and the TFG took place in Khartoum. The Courts refuse to take part until Ethiopian troops are withdrawn from Baidoa.

Following the defeat of the of the Anti-Terrorist Alliance warlords, the US has felt obliged to warn Ethiopia and Eritrea publicly of the danger of triggering a regional war. US State Department official Jendayi Frazer told Ethiopia "not to get drawn into this provocation," obviously sympathising with the view from Addis Ababa that "Islamic terrorism" is the source of the problem.

However, the US has insisted that the TFG is the only body that can be internationally recognised and has continued to turn a blind eye to the presence of Ethiopian troops on Somali territory.

Over the past year, the Union of Islamic Courts has emerged as Somalia's strongest fighting force, and has received some popular support in a country ruled by warlords without an effective government for the last 15 years. The Islamic Courts are a coalition of Muslim groups and associated militias based mainly on the Hawiye clan, which is dominant in Mogadishu and southern Somalia. They are funded by businessmen desperate for some kind of law and order and have reportedly also received funding from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. In June, the Courts

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gained control of the main seaport and the airport, which has now reopened, as well as the former presidential palace and other government buildings in Mogadishu.

The popularity of the Courts derives primarily from the relative stability they bring and their clampdown on the criminal gangs and lawlessness that have beset the country since 1991, rather than from support for full-blown Sha'ariah law, which their more fundamentalist leaders seek to impose. The Courts' clampdown on people watching the recent football World Cup, for example, was deeply resented. There are 11 autonomous courts in Mogadishu, which at first concentrated on petty crime such as robbery, drugs and pornography, but by the mid-1990s had progressed to dealing with major crimes—thieves have their limbs amputated, and murderers are executed.

In August, the Islamic Courts took control of the port of Haradhere, 500 km north of Mogadishu, which had become a centre for pirates attacking shipping off the Somali coast. The Courts claim to have closed down the pirates' operations. They also took over the town of Belet Huen, to the north of Baidoa and near the Ethiopian border, so that they control most of the territory surrounding the TFG's base. However, they have so far been unable to get a base in the northern autonomous enclave of Puntland, the original base of TFG President Abdullahi Yusuf. The BBC suggests that Ethiopia would intervene if the Islamic Courts invaded Puntland.

There is also the possibility that the Islamic Courts will attempt to move into the Ogaden region, which was ceded to Ethiopia by the British in the colonial period and has a largely Somali population. Ethiopia and Somalia have a long history of border disputes. The Courts could also give support to the Ogaden National Liberation Front, which has been waging a guerilla war against successive Ethiopian governments since the 1980s.

The TFG was established with US and UN backing in 2004, and is the 14th "international" attempt to establish a government of national unity since the collapse of the brutal US-backed government of President Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991. The so-called transition government excluded representatives of the Hawiye clan and was regarded as pro-Ethiopian from the beginning.

Forty members of the TFG's cabinet resigned in July in protest at Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi's decision to deploy Ethiopian troops in Somalia in an attempt to prop up his increasingly impotent regime. The resignations followed Gedi's government narrowly surviving a motion of non-confidence over his failure to exert control in the country. After a visit from the Ethiopian foreign minister, Yusuf and Gedi are now attempting to put together another cabinet, but they are clearly totally discredited.

Washington's reckless policy towards Somalia is not determined by the presence of alleged Al Qaeda terrorists in Mogadishu, but by geopolitical considerations and the existence of considerable mineral resources in the poverty-stricken country. This was the central issue too in 1993, when 20,000 US troops were sent to Somalia in an undeclared war disguised as a "humanitarian" mission against Somalia's warlords. American forces shot down hundreds of innocent civilians in Mogadishu with helicopter gunfire. The city's population as a whole fought back, temporarily uniting even the warring clan factions, and the result was in ignominious humiliation and retreat for the US.

Somalia is strategically located in the Horn of Africa, which dominates the sea lanes of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the key corridors between the Middle East and Africa. A great many of the world's oil tankers pass by, particularly European and Chinese. Somalia has the longest coastline in Africa, stretching from Kenya in the south to Djibouti in the north (where a large US task force is now based).

In addition to its geographically critical location, Somalia has uranium, iron ore, tin, gypsum, bauxite, copper, salt, natural gas and potentially huge oil reserves. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* in January 1993 reported that tens of millions of acres, nearly two thirds of Somalia, were allocated to four American oil giants in the final years before President Siad Barre was overthrown: Conoco, Phillips, (now ConocoPhillips), Amoco (now BP), and Chevron. No doubt these corporations would like to reclaim their interests.

More recently, in February 2001, TotalFinaElf signed an agreement with the then-transitional government to explore for oil in the Indian Ocean off the southern coast between Merca and Kismayo, 120-500 km south of Mogadishu. In October 2005, Australia-based Range Resources acquired a 50.1 percent share of exclusive exploration rights in Puntland's natural resources. Prime Minister Gedi responded by warning foreign firms against signing oil exploration contracts with local officials, saying that such agreements were invalid, as only the TFG had the power to negotiate the sale of mineral and oil rights.

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