US continues covert action in Somalia

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27 September 2006

Copies of emails leaked to the *Observer* newspaper and *Africa Confidential*, presumably by British diplomats or intelligence operatives, show the United States is continuing its covert operations in Somalia.

Washington is attempting to prop up the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) led by President Abdullahi Yusuf. The discredited regime that the West tried to put together in 2004 is now based largely in the town of Baidoa in opposition to the Islamic Courts Council based in Mogadishu, which now controls the capital and much of the south of Somalia.

Emails dated from June of this year contain communications between US private military companies involved in undercover mercenary operations in Somalia backing the TFG. One email from Michele Ballarin, chief executive of Select Armor, based in Virginia, claims to have met a CIA operative on June 15 in New York:

"My contact whom we discussed from the agency side requested an in-person meeting with me."

Ballarin's email was sent to a number of people, including Chris Farina of the military company ATS Worldwide, based in Florida. It included the comment:

"Boys: successful meeting with President Abdullay Yussef [sic] and his chief staff personnel in Nairobi, Kenya on Tuesday...where he invited us to his private hotel suite flanked by security detail.... He has appointed is [sic] chief of presidential protocol as our go to during this phase."

According to Ballarin, "a number of Brit security firms" want to get involved in the operations. *Africa Confidential* says that as well as Select Armor and ATS Worldwide, a company affiliated to Select called Special Associated Services, led by a Canadian, General Douglas Eaton, was cited as handling wire transfers of funds to back the operations.

The emails make disparaging remarks about "the f—ks" in the United Nations. However, Ballarin claims to have all UN agencies "on side" in their military support for the TFG, and to have secured meetings with UN representatives Colonel Harry Haen and Sidi Zahab. *Africa Confidential* states that UN personnel in Nairobi were told the operation had full support from the US government.

Ballarin claims that Select has carte blanche to use three military bases in Somalia. Given that military backing for the TFG has been provided by Ethiopia, the US's proxy in the region, such facilities could only be secured with the agreement of Washington.

The duplicitous role of the United Nations is evidenced by its silence on US-backed operations in the region. This is despite a UN arms embargo being in place in Somalia and with UN official support for the truce between the TFG and the Islamic Courts recently negotiated in Khartoum, Sudan.

According to *Africa Confidential*, Select Armor started its planning for military operations in Somalia in Kampala, Uganda, only weeks after the Islamic Courts' defeat of the so-called Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism, or Anti-Terrorism Alliance. This was an alliance of warlords, backed by Ethiopia, that the *Washington Post* revealed in May to be secretly backed by the US. Subsequent news reports stated that CIA operatives had flown into Somalia to give large amounts of cash to the Anti-Terrorist Alliance.

In June, there were reports showing that US diplomats in Nairobi had serious concerns about the CIA operations. The *New York Times* quoted one US official saying, "They were fully aware that they were doing so without any strategic framework." He continued, "And they realised that there might be negative implications to what they are doing."

However, an unnamed official close to the Bush administration was quoted defending the CIA actions: "You've got to find and nullify enemy leadership."

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The leaked emails show that the US administration is continuing the policy of removing the leaders of the Islamic Courts, whom it labels as “terrorists.” This is despite the risk that it will ignite an all-out war in the region, with Ethiopia and other African countries backing the TFG and Eritrea and some Arab states supporting the Union of Islamic Courts.

Select Armor is basing its operations in Kampala, a long-time centre for CIA-backed operations in Africa. The emails suggest that Uganda will secure arms supplies for the mercenaries, supplying its own end-user certificates to provide a cover for the illegal use of weapons in Somalia. Farina of ATS Worldwide writes to Ballarin of Select Armor with concerns about funding from the US:

“We may have to focus our efforts in the US among the DOS [State Department] and the DOD [Defense Department] to bring any forward movement to this effort.”

Farina also expressed caution to the more enthusiastic Ballarin, saying that a “forced entry operation [into Mogadishu] at this point without the addition of follow-on forces who can capitalise on the momentum/initiative of the initial op will result in a replay of Dien Bien Phu” [the ignominious defeat of the French forces in Vietnam in 1953].

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