US backs Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia

Ann Talbot
28 December 2006

The Bush administration is openly backing Ethiopia's invasion of its neighbour Somalia.

Ethiopia is waging a proxy war on behalf of the United States. In the space of a week it has routed forces loyal to the United Islamic Courts and advanced to within 55 miles of the capital Mogadishu.

Ethiopian jets have attacked the international airport in Mogadishu and Balidogle military airfield in southern Somalia. The Red Cross has reported hundreds of casualties.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi stated that as many as 1,000 people died and 3,000 were wounded in fighting outside the town of Baidoa.

On December 26, US State Department spokeswoman Janelle Hironimus described Ethiopia's illegal attack as a response to "aggression" by Islamists and an attempt to stem the flow of outside arms shipments to them. Washington was also concerned about reports that the Islamists were using child soldiers and abusing Ethiopian prisoners of war, she added.

Ethiopia could not have carried out such an extensive assault without a green light from the Bush administration. The United States has a military base in nearby Djibouti and is able to monitor troop movements in the area by satellite. It would have known about the build-up of Ethiopian forces. The former US State Department official John Pendergast admitted, "We are now giving a yellow-slash-green light to Ethiopia's policy of containment by intervention."

Not only is the Ethiopian invasion an act of aggression, it is also an act of extreme recklessness. A conflict in Somalia has the potential to involve the whole region and to extend even beyond the Horn of Africa.

The United Islamic Courts (UIC) took control of Somalia earlier this year after they defeated US-backed clan warlords. Until the current Ethiopian offensive, most of the country was in UIC hands with the exception of Baidoa, the base of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The TFG was set up by the United Nations in 2004 and was heavily backed by the US and Britain, but it has little support in Somalia and never succeeded in extending its authority beyond Baidoa. It has relied on the support of Ethiopian troops.

Fighting between UIC forces and Ethiopian troops broke out around Baidoa on December 19. The following day the BBC reported that Ethiopian tanks were advancing into Somalia. On December 25, Ethiopian air strikes began and the UIC forces were reported to be in retreat.

Washington's proxy war against the UIC is bound up with the US debacle in Iraq and the losses suffered by the Republicans in the November elections in the US as a result of mass antiwar sentiment. Dismissing all calls for a change in policy in Iraq itself, the Bush administration has responded by preparing to step up its military offensive in that country. At the same time, it has escalated its sabre-rattling against Iran.

Now it has encouraged Ethiopia to launch an invasion against what it regards as a hostile Islamist force in the strategically vital Horn of Africa.

The US has consistently opposed European calls to establish a working relationship with the UIC, denouncing it as a terrorist front. One of the UIC's leading figures, Sheik Hassan Dahir Aweys, is on the US list of wanted terrorists. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Jendayi Frazer claims that the UIC is controlled by an East African Al Qaeda cell with links to the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Africa.

Washington is making it clear that it will not be satisfied with anything less than the installation of a client regime in Somalia.

The US and other imperialist powers such as France and Italy are politically responsible for the emergence of the UIC and its Islamic fundamentalist ideology in this impoverished country. Colonialism first created a patchwork of states in the Horn of Africa as elsewhere on the continent, which it was able to control and exploit. It then prepared the way for a series of internecine conflicts in the period after independence, when the region became a focus of Cold War struggles between the US and the Soviet Union for regional influence.

Washington and Moscow poured arms into the Horn of Africa as they struggled to gain control of the strategic region, which overlooks the sea lanes used for Middle Eastern oil shipments.

Somalia was a Soviet ally until the "Derg" military junta under Mengistu Haile Mariam overthrew Ethiopian Emperor Hailie Selassie in 1974 and the Soviet Union shifted its support to the new Ethiopian regime. The US government took the opportunity to form an alliance with Somalia, arming the regime there with millions of dollars worth of sophisticated weaponry.

The US supported the dictator Siad Barre despite his pretensions to "scientific socialism." During the late 1970s and 1980s, Somalia became the largest recipient of US aid in Africa. Most of this money went to military projects.

Under US patronage, Siad Barre created the conditions of famine and the militarization of society that led to the anarchy and civil war of the last decade and a half. He fomented the clan rivalries that have subsequently torn the country apart.

The UIC was able to come to power this year with its anti-democratic policy of imposing *sharia* religious law because the Somali population, in particular its business interests, were weary of the rival warlords' bloody battles for precedence.

When Siad Barre was overthrown in 1991, a unit of US Marines was diverted from the Gulf to evacuate the US embassy. A year later, the US returned in force under the pretext of a humanitarian operation. The reality was that the 30,000 combat troops, attack helicopters and warships deployed by the senior George Bush in Operation Restore Hope were sent to regain control of Somalia and consolidate the Middle Eastern gains that the US had made in the Gulf War of 1991.

The American intervention in Somalia was continued under President Clinton, but the US was forced to withdraw ignominiously in 1993 when two Black Hawk helicopters were brought down and 19 soldiers were killed in the capital Mogadishu. Since then, the significance of Somalia has increased rather than diminished, as the Horn of Africa has been identified as the location of important mineral resources, including oil.

Preparations for the present war began this summer when the UIC took control of Mogadishu. As the UIC rapidly extended its control over the rest of the country, the US began to work covertly through private military contractors to re-establish itself in Somalia. Emails leaked to the *Observer*

© World Socialist Web Site

and *Africa Confidential* in June this year revealed that Select Armor, ATS Worldwide and Special Associated Services—private mercenary corporations—had met with the CIA to discuss operations in Somalia. They were assisting Ethiopian forces in the defence of the TFG in Baidoa.

One email claimed to have United Nations agencies "on-side." UN personnel in Nairobi are said to have been told that the mercenary operation had full US backing. The UN certainly did not raise any objections to either Ethiopia's or the mercenaries' presence in Somalia, despite the fact that this intervention was in breach of a UN arms embargo. Its silence is evidence of its complicity in the war that is now unfolding.

The latest phase of the operation was likely discussed during the visit earlier this month of General John P. Abizaid, commander of the US Central Command (Centcom), to Ethiopia. According to the *New York Times*, Zenawi assured Abizaid that Ethiopia could cripple the Islamist forces "in one to two weeks."

Abizaid was well aware that an Ethiopian invasion would "create a humanitarian crisis across the Horn of Africa" according to Centcom officials. US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Frazer has also admitted, "If this thing goes to a military fight, it's a bloodbath."

UNICEF estimates that 8 million people, including 1.6 million children, are on the brink of starvation in the Horn of Africa. The area has been hit by severe drought and flooding. Aid agencies are already struggling to cope with half a million displaced people. Crops have failed and livestock has died. Malnutrition levels in southern Somalia are said to be acute, with one-fifth of children malnourished. Only a tiny proportion of those children are getting emergency food. The war can only make things much worse.

US-domination of the Horn of Africa and the rest of the continent is under threat from rival powers, particularly following the debacle in Iraq. As Chester A. Crocker, who was an assistant secretary of state for Africa under President Reagan, recently told the BBC, "Africa is in play again."

Crocker pointed out, "It is a more competitive playing field which gives greater influence to African leaders as well as to potential competitors or 'balancers' of US diplomatic leverage. It is not just China: it is Brazil, the Europeans, Malaysia, Korea, Russia, India."

"America still has a lot of influence," said S. O. Mageto, a former Kenyan ambassador to Washington, "But not like it used to."

Nowhere is this more evident than in Sudan, which despite sanctions has one of the fastest growing economies in the world and certainly the fastest in Africa, due largely to Chinese investment in its oil industry. "We learned that we don't need the Americans anymore," said Lam Akol, Sudan's foreign minister. "We found other avenues."

The US response is once again to assert its interests by force of arms. Britain and the US have also threatened to impose a no-fly zone on western Sudan and are considering the possibility of carrying out air strikes.

African leaders are falling into line to act as puppets of US imperialism. Ethiopia's Zenawi is already acting as a proxy for the US and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni is reportedly eager to send troops into Somalia.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met Ugandan Foreign Minister Sam Kutesa in Washington last week and told him that Uganda had a key role to play in the region. Museveni, who has already invaded Congo, has extensive regional ambitions and the oil-rich southern provinces of Sudan to his north are a tempting target.

The fighting that has taken place in Somalia over the last week may prove to be just the opening phase of much longer war that involves many more countries. According to a recent report by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia, the UIC is being supplied with arms and military training by Eritrea, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Syria, as well as Hezbollah of Lebanon.

The UIC is said to have surface-to-air missiles and second-generation anti-tank weapons. Eritrea has provided at least 17 deliveries of weapons.

The allies of the UIC cannot allow the Ethiopian advance to go unanswered. The UN monitoring Group report warned that Somalia could turn "into an Iraq-type situation replete with roadside and suicide bombs, assassinations and other forms of terrorist and insurgent-type activities."

Eritrea cannot afford to allow Somalia to come under the domination of Ethiopia, with which it fought a bitter war in which hundreds of thousands were killed between 1998 and 2000. Even Middle Eastern states may be drawn into the conflict.

The Arab Union has condemned the Ethiopian action. The African Union has apparently supported Ethiopia, but African states are divided. Ethiopia, Uganda and Yemen are supplying the TFG. Libya and Sudan may well line up behind the UIC.

More ominous still, while the US has tried to pre-empt its rivals by orchestrating the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia, it may only have ensured that the Horn of Africa becomes a focus for ever more explosive imperialist rivalries. European Union envoy Louis Michel was trying to negotiate a power-sharing deal between the two sides as Ethiopia launched its offensive. His diplomatic efforts are now in tatters.

France, China and Russia recently blocked a US-British attempt in the UN Security Council to empower neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda and Kenya to act as a UN peacekeeping force in Somalia.

Salim Lone, the spokesman for the UN mission in Iraq in 2003, described Ethiopia's actions in a column in the December 26 *International Herald Tribune* as "a reckless US proxy war." Warning of its implications, he wrote, "Undeterred by the horrors and setbacks in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon, the Bush administration has opened another battlefront in the Muslim world . . .

"The US instigation of war between Ethiopia and Somalia, two of world's poorest countries already struggling with massive humanitarian disasters, is reckless in the extreme. Unlike in the run-up to Iraq, independent experts, including from the European Union, were united in warning that this war could destabilize the whole region even if America succeeds in its goal of toppling the Islamic Courts."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site