

Ethiopian troops occupy Mogadishu

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Ethiopian troops staged a triumphal entry into Somalia's capital city of Mogadishu on Friday. Thousands of fighters loyal to the United Islamic Courts (UIC) were left slaughtered in the wake of a rapid Ethiopian advance. Opposition crumbled after the Ethiopians pounded the Islamic forces with tanks, heavy artillery and fighter aircraft.

The seizure of the capital was hailed by Ethiopia as the crowning moment of its US proxy war against Somalia. Bereket Simon, an adviser to Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, optimistically told the *Washington Post*, "This is a golden opportunity for Somalia. The extremists have been defeated. Our hope is the situation will quickly stabilize."

Ethiopia's stated objective is to establish the US-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in power. Its prime minister, Ali Mohamed Gedi, promised "a new life" for Somalis after he drove into the capital through flower-strewn streets to be greeted by cheering crowds.

A spokesman for TFG President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed was no less triumphant. He told the *New York Times*, "We always knew these Islamists weren't all they were cracked up to be. And now we are where they used to be, in control of Mogadishu." He added, more realistically, "as much as anyone can be in control of Mogadishu."

The apparent ease with which Ethiopia has been able to occupy Mogadishu has surprised many observers, who doubted the ability of the Ethiopians to take the capital. What seems to have happened is that clan leaders withdrew their support for the Islamic Courts movement when they saw the scale of the offensive they were facing.

Abdi Hulow, a leader of the Hawiye clan, told reporters, "Our children were getting annihilated. We couldn't sustain it." They ordered their militias home from the front and resistance collapsed. A few thousand leading elements of the United Islamic Courts have retreated to the southern port city of Kismayo, from where they have vowed to continue the war.

But even if the war doesn't continue, the Ethiopians and the Transitional Federal Government have been allowed into Mogadishu by the clan leaders. And it is they who have immediately benefited from the offensive. Clan militias seized weapons from Islamist armouries as the UIC forces retreated and began to reclaim their territories in Mogadishu by setting up road blocks.

The TFG is, in any case, made up of an unstable coalition of

warlords and may fragment if it suffers reverses. Its welcome in Mogadishu in no way implies that the hostilities of other clans have been overcome. Rather, the very fact that it is associated with a foreign occupation force and has US support may motivate other clans to unite against it.

The Ethiopians and the TFG may have occupied Mogadishu, but they are not in control of the city. They remain there on sufferance, and could at any time face the kind of united uprising that drove out a much better armed and trained American force in 1993.

Despite their confident words, the occupying forces clearly understand the situation. Gedi immediately announced that the government would establish martial law in the capital.

One of the first actions of the Ethiopian forces was to take control of the former US embassy compound. They are preparing for the honeymoon period to end very quickly, and expect to operate from defensive positions in the manner of the US forces in Baghdad. Nothing could be further from the actions of a legitimate government returning to its capital.

Before the US was ignominiously driven out of Somalia in 1993, its embassy in Mogadishu was the largest US embassy in sub-Saharan Africa. It was a key strategic base for covert military operations and intelligence in Africa and the Middle East. Its reoccupation points to Mogadishu once again becoming the centre of US operations in the region.

Officially, there are no US troops with the Ethiopian forces, although 100 US military personnel are involved in training the Ethiopian army. But the fact that the US embassy was one of the first objectives of the Ethiopian forces in Mogadishu suggests that either US personnel are involved in the Ethiopian advance or it is being conducted under extremely close US oversight. Emails leaked this summer indicate that there are private US security contractors working with the Ethiopians.

The Ethiopian invasion of Somalia seems to be the first fruit of a US reorganisation of its military in Africa. In August it was announced that a Unified Africa Command would be formed for the first time. Until now, responsibility for military operations in Africa has been divided between the European Command, Pacific Command and Central Command.

Central Command, which deals with Iraq and the Middle East, has pioneered the practice of using relatively small forward bases that are manned mainly by special forces. It has a base in Djibouti, the former French colony in the Horn of

Africa, known as Combined Joint Task Force—Horn of Africa, with 1,500 personnel. This is the proposed model for future military interventions in Africa. A series of such bases will act as “lily-pads,” according to Stanley A. Weiss, writing in the *International Herald Tribune*.

Weiss is the founder of Business Executives for National Security and was formerly chairman of American Premier Inc., a mining, refractories, chemicals and mineral processing company. These new bases, he writes, will “allow American forces to leapfrog quickly to future crisis zones.”

It was from Djibouti that a predator drone was launched to kill an alleged Al Qaeda operative in Yemen in 2002. General John Abizaid, head of Central Command, said of the Djibouti base, “This investment is one of the best our country has ever made.” It cannot be doubted that Djibouti was very much involved in the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia.

The reorganisation is an attempt to avoid the heavy casualties inflicted on US troops by the insurgency in Iraq. Somalia may be seen as a model for a post-Iraq US military policy, in which proxy and auxiliary forces are used alongside specialists and contracted mercenaries.

Last year, President Bush launched the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance program. This program operates in six sub-Saharan African countries, including Uganda and Kenya.

In Kenya, US forces have access to facilities in the port of Mombasa, in addition to airfields at Embakasi and Nanyuki. In Uganda, the US has two hangars at Entebbe airport for military equipment and troops. In North Africa, it used an airfield at Tamanrasset, in southern Algeria, as a base for US P-3 Orion aerial surveillance aircraft to gather intelligence on guerrillas operating against the Chad government. In West Africa, a base has long been under discussion to ensure US oil supplies from the Niger Delta.

The strategy has been under discussion for some time. Greg Jaffe of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote in 2003, “To strike faster at these remote hotspots—or prevent them from becoming hotspots—Mr. Rumsfeld is pushing US forces out of their big garrison bases in the US, Germany and South Korea, three countries that typically host more than 80 percent of the 1.4 million US troops. Instead, he envisions a force that will rotate through a large number of bases scattered throughout the world in places including Kyrgyzstan, the Philippines, Singapore, the Horn of Africa and Eastern Europe.”

Rumsfeld may be gone, but his policy remains intact. So far, it seems to have met with a certain success in Somalia. But it is a success that is likely to prove illusory.

Analysts such as Ted Dagne, an Africa specialist for Congressional Research Service, suspect that the UIC decided not to fight this time. But he warns, “This does not mean the UIC is finished. The UIC fighters simply changed their uniform to a civilian cloth.”

Ken Menkhaus, who teaches at Davidson College in

Charlotte, North Carolina, told the *New York Times*, “This could be the beginning of a new kind of war.” It could become “an asymmetrical war involving a combination of hit-and-run guerrilla attacks, car bombings, assassinations and possibly even selected acts of terrorism on other parts of East Africa.”

The warnings of these experts seem to be borne out by the words of Sheik Sharif Sheik Ahmed of the UIC, who told Al Jazeera, “We don’t want to see Mogadishu destroyed.” The UIC had withdrawn, he said, to avoid a bloodbath.

They have withdrawn to the southern port of Kismayo. From there they may be able to lead a guerrilla campaign and even cross over into Kenya, where many Somalis already live. The signs are that with the US-backed invasion of Somalia, the Bush administration is in the process of creating another zone of instability comparable to Iraq.

In anticipation that the situation will deteriorate, the US is preparing to send in troops from Uganda and possibly Kenya. Bush phoned President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda to urge him to send troops.

Uganda denies reports that it already has troops in Somalia. Museveni has indicated that he does not want to deploy Ugandan troops until the United Nations embargo on arms to Somalia has been lifted. His reluctance may have more to do with opposition at home. An editorial in the *Uganda Monitor* warned that he should not consider sending troops to prop up the TFG, which is made up of warlords who have no general base of support in Somalia beyond their own clans.

Bush’s strategy is also meeting opposition from within the US. Congressman Donald Payne warned in an article that was published by the *Uganda Monitor* that the Ethiopian invasion could lead only to “more suffering and instability in the Horn of Africa region.” He condemned the aggression and called for an immediate withdrawal of Ethiopian troops. Answering the Ethiopian claim that their invasion was defensive, Payne wrote, “The fact of the matter is Ethiopian forces are in Somalia and not the other way around.”

Payne, who is the Democratic representative for the 10th district of New Jersey, was careful not to indict the US for its part in the invasion, but he is clearly concerned that opposition to militarism is building up in the US population.



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